

REALM RAIDERS



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Welcome to Realm Raiders!

Our story is a collaborative venture, written by nine different authors.

A project which began life as a challenge created by members of the Creative Commune – a social network of British and Irish authors. We meet regularly to share ideas, provide support and chat about writing, publishing and the meaning of life.

We are deeply grateful to the kind folk at Spotlight Indie for hosting our serialised webstory - that is how this story began life. Now, Realm Raiders can be read in its entirety. We hope you enjoy it.

The legal stuff

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*Evil is ready to change the world.
Every world.*

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The Prologue by Phil Parker

The flame spoke to him. A flame. A piece of fucking fire and it was telling him things. Things that made no sense. All they did was convince him he was going mad. Except the voice told him his sanity wasn't in question. It would do that though. If you doubted whether you were crazy, you didn't go around asking fucking flames. For a time, he assumed he was dreaming but his fiery friend told him that wasn't true either, he was awake.

He stared at the flame, needing it to make sense. There were times, as it flickered and guttered, when a face appeared. At least, eyes and a mouth. The mouth looked like it moved when he heard the voice. He wanted to stick his fingers in his ears, to find out whether the voice was real or just in his head. He didn't. That would look stupid. A grown man staring at a flame with his fucking fingers in his ears. Good thing he was on his own.

'What do you want?' he hissed at the flaming face.

'For you to pay attention,' came the reply. The flame flashed hot and bright yellow, momentarily blinding him with its brilliance.

'Sorry,' he said. He was apologising to the fucking thing now. If this wasn't insanity or a dream, what was happening? The frightening possibility, that genuinely scared him now, was that this was all real. That meant he was dealing with some form of magic.

Shit.

'I need you to carry out a few rudimentary tasks. Your lack of intelligence is even greater than I'd anticipated, given your background, but beggars cannot be choosers. I work with what I'm given.'

Great. Now the flame was insulting him too. 'What tasks?'

'I need you to deliver a document to eight other individuals. It must be done with absolute secrecy, they cannot discover your involvement, they need to find the document and read it. Once they've done that, I can proceed to the second stage of my plan.'

'What people? What document?'

'I will provide you with names. I will also give you their locations and where you can find the documents. There will also be a purse with enough money to facilitate this process.'

Money. Things were looking up.

'Don't be so stupid as to try to steal the money. You will use it for the express purpose I have just explained. To do otherwise would be foolish and exceedingly painful.'

The flame burned blue; the face scowled at him. He believed it. The task didn't sound too onerous. He was to deliver a document to eight people. He could do that. Despite his apparently limited intelligence. Yet, nagging at him, chewing away at his fading grasp on reality, was the fact a magic flame was the one giving him orders. Nothing good even came from magic. Not that he'd had that much to do with it. He'd heard stories though. None of them ended happily. Or painlessly.

The flame had gone back to flicking hues of orange.

He looked around the hovel he was temporarily calling home. The candle's light made shadows dance, this late at night, little stirred apart from the rats in the wall space. With so little work, he had to agree with the flame, beggars couldn't afford to be choosers. Even so, one comment from his erstwhile employer gave him enough courage to ask a question. That mention of working with what he'd been given. There was no one else. If any of his life experiences had taught him anything, it was that a limited supply tended to push up prices.

'What do I get out of all this?' he asked.

'Ah, there we are. I was beginning to think I'd come to the wrong person,' said the flame, its mouth curled into a grin.

He smiled back. A compliment. That had to be good.

‘The documents you deliver will set in place a series of events which will lead to me being able to grant you enormous power and wealth. I sense that is important to you.’

‘Oh yeah!’ The offer lacked specific details but he didn’t care. Power and wealth meant he would have far more than he had now. He’d always been poor, money slipped through his fingers like water. Suddenly his doubts melted into the darkness around him. ‘So, we’d be sort of life, partners then?’

A spark jumped out and burned the back of his hand. ‘Ow!’

‘That’s a little reminder to remember your place in the grand scheme of things. You will do what I say. You will do it readily and without question. Do you understand?’

He rubbed the back of his hand, disgruntled but ready to hide his resentment. ‘I understand.’

‘Good. Now we understand our working relationship, I appreciate you will carry considerable responsibility for our mission and I will reward it, handsomely. You are a creature driven by greed, unlike your ancestor who was a man of honour. But time and ill fortune guide destiny, those forces shape and mould individuals into specimens like you. I am confident your eight peers may not be all that different but you appeared to be the easiest to corrupt. I hope I have not offended you?’

‘No. Not at all.’ He’d been called far worse, frequently, loudly and usually accompanied with a beating.

‘What do I call you?’

‘You don’t. Our contact will be minimal. I will appear to you at such times when I will need you to report your progress. Understood?’

‘Understood.’

‘Good. Now, you need to obtain the documents I mentioned. You know the statue in the centre of town? The memorial to your society’s ancient heroes?’

‘Yeah.’ As a kid he’d been forced to accompany his mother to give thanks on Memorial Day. He’d never been all that clear what everyone was giving thanks for.

‘The documents are to be found in a hidden cache at the base of the statue. The money will be found there too. Now go. I will meet you there.’

The flame vanished, plunging the space into ink-black darkness. Stunned by the experience, now it was over, meant considering everything he’d heard – and felt. He rubbed the burn mark on the back of his hand. If he had any doubt about how real it all was, that pain offered a vivid reminder. That was magic for you, a means for some ruthless bastard to make others suffer. Except, on this occasion, so long as he did as he was told, he wouldn’t be one of them, he’d have wealth and power.

He stood up with a grin. After years of ball-aching misery, things were about to change.

A warm breeze blew, moonlight provided him with enough illumination to navigate his way through forest and fields, to the city. He marched along happily imagining what he’d do with his earnings. He wasn’t sure what power his magical employer had in mind for him but that hardly mattered. Wealth did that for you. He’d buy the Lusty Wench for starters. The tavern would be a good source of income, when managed properly, unlike Frinkl, he wouldn’t drink away the profits. He’d buy up most of the shops too, especially the dress shop where all the prim ladies went. He’d raise prices so high, they’d have to drop other things to pay him. He’d own the town, become its mayor. That would be real power.

The city was deserted. By the time he reached the memorial statue, pink and purple strands of dawn streaked across the sky. In the cupped hands of one of the heroes, water rippled strangely. He peered into its depths, only to squeak his surprise when a face gazed up at him. It was pale, lined and with eyes so fierce he instantly felt afraid.

‘You’ve taken your time.’

‘Sorry. It’s a long way.’

‘Place a finger in the water.’

He did as he was told. A burning sensation, like acid, made him moan and bite his lip. He pulled his finger out instinctively. ‘Ow!’

‘Now place that finger beneath the bowl, you will find a recess. Push your finger into the hole.’

‘Will there be more pain.’

‘Just do it.’

He did. There was. It hurt even more.

At the base of the statue, he heard a grinding noise.

‘Take out the documents, a parchment scroll and the money. You have twenty-four hours from now to locate the eight people on the scroll. Fail to do this, you die.’

‘What? Die? How?’

‘Poison has just penetrated your skin. In twenty-four hours, you will experience terrible pain. Six hours after that you will be dead. Complete your task before that time, I will provide you with the antidote. Then you will be ready to understand your next part of the mission.’

The face in the water vanished.

‘Next part of the mission? There’s been no mention of any more tasks. But he didn’t have time to argue. He had eight people to find. To deliver a document to them without their knowledge. He felt ever so slightly guilty at whatever waited for them. It had to be worse than what he was suffering. Poor bastards.

He read the scroll with its names and locations. If he hurried, he might just make it.

He picked up the documents, there were nine, not eight. He shrugged away such insignificant detail and read one of them.

My name is unimportant. My purpose just. My imminent death, unavoidable.

I know this. Evil exists. It lurks in corners darkened by its malevolent stain. It waits - to be found by the greedy, the ambitious and the immoral.

Defeated long ago, its corruption remains. Its physical body may be imprisoned but its energy is too primal to be contained.

It is restrained in a spell which must be renewed every five hundred years. You are my descendent, as such it is your responsibility to complete this task.

By reading this incantation, you will acquire the knowledge needed. Locate the three items, use them to renew the spell.

Locate the gold found in a verdant glade

Hidden in sunlight is the righteous blade,

To complete the ritual, open the door,

Defeat the Evil with tooth, blood and claw.

Before – by Simon Kewin

Tam's small fists were clenched so tightly his arms were shaking, though he did his best to hide it, to smile, to keep moving forwards. As he knew he must, because today was his seventh birthday and his parents had brought him to stand before Vouring. After waiting all day, The Tormentor of Worlds, Dragon of the Abyss and Eater of Light, was just moments away.

The queue to reach him was enormous, snaking around the squares and streets of the Citadel in wide loops, more people than Tam had seen in his whole life. Young and old, man and woman, ailing and hearty – all waited in line. Because, of course, everyone made the journey from their own realm to the Citadel at least once in their life. A duty and a pilgrimage, a chance to stand, to wonder. To remember. And because not to do so was bad luck.

A visit on your birthday was especially auspicious.

The bright sun clashed down on Tam's head, weighing heavy on him. His mother passed him the flask of meltwater the village wise woman had given them. It had seemed a strange gift up in the cold and snow of the mountains. It simply hadn't occurred to Tam that it was possible to be short of water. Now he was grateful a thousand times over.

"Drink as much as you want," his mother said once again. "It won't run out."

Tam nodded. He sipped the near-freezing stream water, almost too cold in his parched mouth. The chill of it made the bones of his head ache for a moment, but he didn't mind. He drank four mouthfuls then returned it to his mother's outstretched hand.

Squinting, he peered up at the bright walls and towers of the Citadel: white and gold and blazing red. They were approaching an arched gateway, finely carved with scenes from the Edain, the saga of the war against Vouring. Tam ran his fingers over the smooth stone, touching the figures of the nine ancient heroes as they battled the Beast. He knew the stories by heart. Everyone did. The realms were peaceful, more or less, but no one forgot the calamities that had nearly enslaved or destroyed them twelve centuries previously.

Tam took another step forwards, the shiny cobbles worn as smooth as mirrors by the passing of so many feet over the centuries. And then, looking up through the gateway, he finally saw into the central courtyard around which the Citadel had been built. There in the centre, held for all eternity by his magical bonds, stood Vouring.

The sight of the god made Tam gasp. His father placed a reassuring hand onto Tam's shoulder. Vouring was vast, three times the height of an adult, his monstrous body huge and muscled, his flesh red. Blood-red, fire-red. The seven seals that held him were black against his skin: one on each of his four arms, one on each leg, and one around his chest, chaining him for all time to the outcropping of white rock at the centre-point of the Citadel. The bonds looked insubstantial, easily broken, but Tam knew well they were more than mere steel. They were bonds of deep magic, wrought by the spellsmiths of old to contain the Tormentor for all eternity.

Vouring's eyes, of course, were open. Unkillable, he had been placed there alive, to experience every moment of his unending torment as punishment for his crimes. Tam had lain awake at night shaking at the prospect of standing before Vouring, but he hadn't expected the Tormentor's eyes to be the worst of it.

Because Vouring was watching him, his gaze boring into Tam as he was admitted by a guard into the central courtyard. The sight nearly made Tam turn and flee. Vouring's mouth, too, was moving, uttering syllables through his sharp teeth that no one could hear or understand. The scholars of the realms had tried to understand what Vouring was saying for centuries, but had never succeeded. In Tam's nightmares, they were words of welcome to Tam. Whisperings of Tam's own evil, his own fallen nature.

Tam's heart thundered in his chest. Despite the heat of the day, the still air of the courtyard, he felt an extra heat burn in his cheeks. He looked away, to the nine statues set in a ring around Vouring: the ancient heroes of the Edain. They were frozen in the moment of their triumph in which they had finally weakened the Tormentor enough to capture and restrain him for all eternity. They were not, it was said, merely stone: in some of the stories, the ancient spirits of those heroes lived on in those statues, watching over their foe until the end of days.

Tam hoped it was so. He looked to their beautiful faces, seeking some reassurance, some guarantee his awful dreams would never become real. He had told no one of his darkest fear: that he, somehow, was tied to Vouring. He didn't know why it might be true but everything in his young heart told him it was. All the bad things that happened, the cruelties and agonies of the world, they were his fault. Guilt crushed him and yet the evil creature had been captured long, long ago. It made no sense for him to feel such a strong connection, and yet he did. He had studied his own flesh for hours, fearing to see some tint of red there, some clue that Vouring's blood ran in his veins. That Vouring was whispering across the Aether to him. He had admitted his fears to his mother once, but she had only smiled and told him not to worry. It was normal to have such dark and unreasoning worries. There was nothing to fear. There was no evil in Tam.

'Take the blade, boy.'

A guard held out the knife to Tam, handle first. Here was the moment that Tam had feared the most: the moment of contact between him and Vouring. It might only be through the medium of the thrust blade into the Tormentor's flesh but it threatened contact. He worried about the possibility such a powerful being could use that interaction for its own evil purpose. He would be to blame.

Tam looked up into the impatient guard's eyes, there was nothing he could do about it. Everyone did this. This was a part of Vouring's punishment. Each person came to skewer a ceremonial knife into Vouring's flesh, another wound to add to the millions inflicted over the centuries, another agony to repay the Tormentor. Vouring had no choice but to suffer each blow. The god healed rapidly; always there was enough skin for the people in the endless line to find a place to cut a mark of their own.

The handle of the blade was warm in Tam's hand. He wondered how many times the bright steel had sliced into Vouring. No matter. He would do this thing quickly and be away. He and his family could leave the Citadel, return to their own realm, never to return. This searing, fearsome day would be only a memory.

Tam stepped forward; the blade held high as his father had shown him. He chose his location: the smooth curve of the Tormentor's leg. There were ten or twenty other wounds there, dribbling red blood like so many ruined mouths. There were whispers coming from them, too – either that or he was imagining it. Whispers telling him to strike, telling him to fulfil his destiny, as if Vouring somehow wanted Tam to inflict this wound.

It made no sense to Tam. He just had to get this over with. He felt his arm flinch as he practised the blow in his mind one more time. Ignoring the bone-deep belief that something about this moment was very, very wrong, he struck before his own fear stopped him. The blade sliced into Vouring's flesh and muscle, an extra heat pulsing through Tam's hand as the connection was made.

Visions flashed through his mind: screaming faces, burning buildings, a lightning-cracked sky. Tam stepped back with a shout, leaving the blade buried in Vouring's body. For a moment, it seemed as if no one moved, as if the world were frozen. Oddly, a shadow passed across the sun, a rare cloud on the bright hot day.

He heard laughter: deep, rumbling and malevolent. His wide eyes met the gleaming darkness of The Tormentor's gaze, Tam finally listened to the screams of his instinct and fled the square.

Chapter One

In which the first team of heroes set out to find gold in a verdant glade

Damien Larkin

Of all the shitty cities in this shitty country, filled with shitty stupid morons, the nearest Roseline just had to reside in Ordshaw. It turns out, all the bullshit my parents fed me about legends of battling Vouring, were true and we, the descendants of ancient heroes had a destiny to fulfil. To add to my growing list of troubles, I had to keep Yas the human flashlight, and Nicky the so-called necromancer, alive. Herding drunken ferrets would've been an easier task.

'Are we there yet?' Nicky said fiddling with the ridiculous rubber duck mascot she brought everywhere. 'My feet hurt. You never said there'd be this much walking, Damon.'

'Put that thing away,' I said, shaking my head.

Nicky held up her rubber duck and pouted. 'His name is Bill. Bill the rubber duck.'

'Can we stop for a kebab?' Yas asked, eyes lighting up at the prospect. 'My treat!'

I rubbed my temples at recalling the countless hours I spent with these morons as children, along with the rest of the malcontents. It was as if the only true power they'd harnessed with Vouring rising was to become more annoying. At least I brought value to the table. As a Pathfinder, I could open portals between worlds and track anything and anyone. Right now, we needed the Roseline portal to transport us to a nexus world to fulfil our mission. My power-infused instinct flared to life.

'Will you two idiots shut the fuck up?' I hissed and glanced behind me. 'We're being followed.'

I pushed Tweedle-Dumb and Tweedle-Fuck-Face down the nearest alley, halted, and drew my gun. After checking the magazine, I chambered a round, flicked off the safety and edged along the wall. We'd received warning that someone might try and stop us reaching the Roseline. As part of our mission to prevent Vouring's resurrection, we needed to fulfil our part of the prophecy and retrieve gold from a verdant glade. Whatever the fuck that meant.

Two men, dressed in long black trench coats, switched from a leisurely pace into a full-blown jog. Guns tucked into their belts, eyes darting from left to right, seeking us out. I didn't have time for this shit. Not with the most ineffective human beings on the planet in tow.

'This way,' I said, pointing down the alley. 'Move quick. I'll pull up the rear.'

'Sounds like something my ex would say,' Nicky said with a smirk.

'So, we're agreed on kebabs?' Yas said.

'Will you two stop babbling like deranged maniacs and fucking move!?'

For once, they listened. Weaving around the rubbish-strewn ground, they raced down the alley while I herded them onwards. I peeked back and spied the pursing goons pause, then change course to pursue us. They broke into a sprint, pistols in hand, no longer concealing the façade.

Bullets ripped out and barely missed Yas. I pushed the women around the corner, aimed and fired three times. The goons hugged the walls and shot back. With only twelve rounds left, this gun fight wasn't going to last long. I needed to lure them close. Even up the odds a little.

'You two, over there,' I said, pointing at an overflowing dumpster. 'Stay out of sight. If anything happens to me, run like hell, and don't look back.'

Nicky and Yas opened their mouths. One angry glare silenced them, and they did as commanded. I slipped my gun into my belt, pressed myself up against the wall and waited for the men. Their footsteps slapping against the grimy concrete echoed louder. Breathing deep, I tensed, and readied to strike.

A gun emerged from the alleyway, sweeping left to right. I pounced, grabbed the arm and launched my forehead at the first gunman. More by luck than technique, I connected with his nose, shook his pistol free, and tried to trip him. His colleague leapt, landed a punch on my jaw, and I tumbled backwards.

They hesitated. Probably thought I wasn't a threat on the ground. One kick to the first goon's ankle proved I wasn't out of the fight yet. Roaring, he crashed backwards against the wall, and I scrambled to my feet. The second gunman swung his weapon to pistol-whip me. I blocked and kned him full force in the groin. I turned to deal with the other one, but he sucker-punched me with enough force to knock me to the floor again. Pain rushed through my body as they landed kick after kick into my gut. My vision blurred and despite the agony, all I could think of was how much it would suck to die in this godforsaken city.

The beating stopped and something heavy crashed onto my legs. Blinking my eyes clear, I forced myself to sit upright. One of the thugs lay on my legs, face down, blood trickling along the back of his head. The other stretched prone on the filth with a gash on his forehead. Between them, Nicky stood with a rusty metal poll, which she tossed away and extended a hand to help me up.

'I told you to run if things went south,' I said and winced from the newly forming bruises across my torso.

'We're not going to leave you, Damon,' Yas said, and patted my shoulder. 'It's not like we can save the world without you.'

'Get off me,' I said, whipping my arms away. 'The Roseline's this way.'

Simmering with rage, I wiped my bloody nose and walked. The last thing I needed was those damned airheads getting themselves killed. I had the situation under control. Battered and woozy, I pulled my hipflask free and downed a large mouthful of whiskey. Yas arched an eyebrow and reached out. Ignoring her, I replaced the cap and continued limping towards our destination. My insides pulled me to it, like a moth to flame. A testament to my nascent power growing under the shadow of Vouring's re-emergence.

'Here,' I said, pointing at a random section of grimy wall.

I sensed the raw power emanating from behind those graffiti-laden bricks. Not from the building itself, but the site it was built over. An ancient portal once used to traverse worlds. For the first time in over two decades, the resentment against my parents faded slightly. Those countless hours reading ancient tomes, participating in pointless rituals that never produced anything, finally made sense. Legends of our ancestors battling Vouring, no longer tales I thought they had made up, the pathetic actions of deranged adults.

I kicked aside two overflowing bins and dropped to a knee. Like I'd practiced countless times as I child, I drew a semi-circle on the ground with chalk and traced it further up the wall. I closed my eyes and for the first time, sensed the outline of an actual Roseline. Of its own volition, my hand continued marking the border of this ancient portal. I started chanting, echoing words of a long dead language and reprinted symbols on the ground etched into my memory.

Unseen energy intensified around me with every uttered syllable. Raw power swelled in our presence. My mind cleared until all that existed was the waking portal and me. Energy poured into me as my body acted like a conduit. Without conscious thought my voice grew in strength until a lightning strike of forgotten magic burst across my form and my eyes bolted open. Fiery purple mist danced between the lines I'd drawn on the ground and wall, mystical and enrapturing in form and content. Nicky and Yas gasped.

'Take my hand,' I said and reached out for Yas. 'You take Nicky's. Don't let go till you step through. Follow me.'

Destiny called and for once, I answered. I stepped forward and my eyes filled with immense blinding light. Every hair on my body rose and for one split second the atoms of my body merged with the universe. Whipping motions followed. Air tearing at my limbs, then a thud as I slammed full force into something. Pain ate its way through my face, chest, and limbs. Sand crunched against my teeth. Groaning, I rolled over and blinked until I recognised a clear blue sky.

'Did it work?' Yas asked from beside me.

‘Does it look like fucking Ordshaw?’

‘It looks like a desert,’ Nicky said.

I sat up and glanced around. Sand everywhere, broken by rocky hills and lone withered-looking trees. Birds squawked somewhere in the distance. Golden rays of a fiery sun tingled my swollen face.

I focused on my centre, touching the core of my power. One breath, then two to steady my mind. I allowed my thoughts to still and sensed the invisible magnetic currents pulling me towards our objective. Unseen threads connecting every inch of this world. Except...

Everything was wrong. This realm resonated in a way that didn’t fit our target location. To safely get to the realm of the leprechauns, and locate this gold from a verdant glade, we needed a nexus world. A place linking up the countless other worlds that encompassed our reality. The energy within me indicated I had indeed brought us to a nexus world, but not the one I’d had in mind. I scanned my surroundings again and froze when I spotted it.

A tear in the sky, off in the distance. Showing a completely different world upside down and parallel to this one. My stomach rolled and I downed another slug of whiskey. I knew where we were now, and we needed to hurry. The realm of an omnipotent being known as the Wanderer. A creature of immense power imprisoned in this world and seeking to escape it. The nearest nexus Roseline rested three or four kilometres from where we found ourselves, and we had to reach it without detection.

‘Let’s go,’ I said, slipping my gun free and hobbling east. ‘The Roseline’s this way.’

I trudged across the sand, waving on the Idiot Brigade to match my pace. Nicky babbled to Bill, her pet rubber duck, while Yas sauntered beside her puffing on a cigarette. No sense of urgency from either of them. May as well be on a casual Sunday morning stroll.

Barely two hundred metres into our trek and silent alarm bells erupted inside my skull. Someone had eyes on us. I glanced about until I spotted figures on horseback approach. I readied my gun and hissed at Yas and Nicky to leave the talking to me. Without knowing which continent we’d landed on; I couldn’t be sure which culture we’d meet. Thanks to my parents, I’d studied all the dominant civilisations on this world and the other nexus ones. Some were a lot worse than others.

As the riders galloped closer, I noted their white banners adorned with a golden sun crying tears of blood. Followers of a fanatical cult who worshipped a deity known as the Dead God. Their armour, helmets, swords, shields, axes, bows, and spears marked them as belonging to a militant order known as the Purification Squads. These cultists spread their beliefs by sword and flame. Cities, towns, and villages who refused to convert put to the torch with the resisting population thrown on bonfires while still alive.

With luck, I could convince them we were followers too, on a pilgrimage to venerate their bloodthirsty god. Eight battle-hardened warriors halted around twenty-five metres from where we waited. I kept my gun at my side and eyed the group. None made to charge, a good sign from what I’d read about them. In the centre of the unit, one lifted an index finger to the sun.

‘Greetings in the name of the Dead God. May his fire and fury cleanse your heart and purify your soul.’

‘Well met,’ I said and replicated his gesture. ‘In the name of the Dead God I accept your greetings. May his fiery love bring life to your fields and warm your hearths.’

We lowered our hands together and I eyed the line of men and women. No one attempted to draw a blade and charge us. So far, so good. I could probably take out some with my gun if they did attack, but with Nicky and Yas beside me, I hoped I could avoid a confrontation.

‘I name myself Lotr, servant of the Dead God and commander of Greyrock City military garrison. Speak true, strangers. What brings you to these lands?’

‘I’m Damon. This is Nicky and Yas. We’re pilgrims. On our way to visit the Sinners Stone to pay tribute to the valiant warriors who fought back against the abomination known as the Wanderer.’

Warriors turned and glanced at each other. Horses neighed. Nicky bunched tighter to Yas who promptly pushed her away. I scanned the armoured column. Still no sign of anyone drawing swords.

‘A strange pilgrimage to make without supplies,’ Lotr said. ‘Or horses. And in such... unusual garments for a believer. How have you crossed the wastes like this?’

I fumbled. Not one good answer sprang to mind. I gaped across our attire and silently cursed myself. To them, we must have looked like this world’s version of clowns.

‘We were robbed,’ Yas said. Eyes bulging, I mouthed for her to stop, but she continued. ‘By bandits. Lucky we made it this far.’

‘Bandits, you say?’ Lotr smirked at his warriors and laughter erupted. ‘Tell me, stranger; what type of bandits rob travellers of their horses and supplies and allow their victims to live?’

‘The merciful kind,’ Nicky blurted out, and I forced myself to not slap her.

The laughter grew. Every sword-wielding fanatic chuckled on their saddles. They slapped each other’s shoulders and wiped tears from their eyes. Their merriment continued until the smile on Lotr’s face dissolved and he raised a hand. Gloved hands whipped swords from their sheathes. Silence choked us. I stepped closer to Nicky and Yas in preparation.

‘Amusing story,’ Lotr said. ‘You’ll accompany us to Greyrock City. There you’ll be placed in front of a council of devout equals who will hear your story, weigh the evidence, declare you heretics, and burn you on a bonfire.’

‘Wait!’ I said and turned to Yas. ‘This one holds a blessing from the Dead God. The ability to channel his holy power and spread his light with her hands.’

Glaring at Yas, I mouthed for her to act. ‘Use your fucking power. Now.’

‘Okay,’ she said, and puffed out her chest. ‘Prepare to be dazzled, bitches.’

Extending her palms, she pointed them at the zealots. Nicky and I backstepped, waiting for the moment for her gift to wow our audience and hopefully frighten them off. Small, almost imperceptible sparks of light danced on her palms. I breathed in deep in anticipation of what was to follow. In the burning sunlight, I squinted and for a moment, thought I saw her skin lighten up slightly.

Lotr grinned at his armed band, and they all burst into laughter again. I strolled over to Yas, lowered my gaze and couldn’t detect the booming blast of light I’d expected. So much for the power of illumination.

‘Hold on,’ Nicky said, tilting her palms. ‘It’d be way more impressive in low light. Damon, cup your hands over mine.’

‘Nice fucking power,’ I said and shoved her hands down. ‘You two, stay behind me.’

Adrenaline surged through me at what I needed to do next. I raised my gun to the sky and fired once. The merriment died. Horses bucked. Gripping the reins, the riders brought their mounts back under control, then gaped at me wide-eyed. I levelled my gun at Lotr and steadied my breathing.

‘This weapon is called a gun. It can cut through flesh and armour like a hot knife through butter. Leave us be or I’ll grant you and your people a private audience with the Dead God.’

Gleaming drawn blades shone in the sun. The banner of their deity fluttered in the light breeze. Lotr hacked his sword at me and the zealots charged.

I fired once and missed. Aiming at Lotr again, I squeezed the trigger and the bullet flew wide. Third shot and Lotr’s horse bucked from under him, flopped headfirst onto the sand and tossed him from his saddle. He smashed the ground with enough force to shatter his neck and lay unmoving. I aimed at the warrior on the left, fired, and he tumbled flailing from his seat, clutching his chest, head lolling at an awkward angle.

The sudden loss of two of their comrades caused the other six to flounder. They halted their charge and instead spread out. I targeted another warrior and missed again, but her horse bucked, threw her from saddle to land headfirst onto a rock, and then galloped away.

Three down. Better than I expected. From widened eyes and panicked shouts, I noted the surprise I'd given them. These fanatics held no experience of taking on an enemy capable of hurting them back. I'd experienced enough fights in my life to recognise we stood on a periphery. One more nudge and I could break them.

'You're up Nicky,' I said. 'Let's see what this necromancy shit is all about. Raise those three and let's turn the tide on these bastards.'

Gripping Bill, her pet rubber duck, Nicky closed her eyes and clenched her fists. The world darkened slightly for a moment, enough that even the zealots peered up at the sky and then back to us. They raised their swords to attack again, but their horses remained rooted to the spot neighing furiously. Chills ran through my flesh and goosebumps raced up my arms. I shuddered and stepped five paces back from Nicky. Instinct told me something dark was in the process of happening.

I spotted it out of the corner of my eye. Lotr moving. His hands and legs twitched. Then the other two downed warriors. The horses bucked again, and their riders fought to control them. The formation separated as each zealot struggled to calm their mounts while simultaneously gaping at their murdered allies returning to life.

Lotr sat bolt upright first. He ran a hand across his neck, then dragged himself to his feet. The other two rose and all the formerly dead soldiers gazed at Nicky.

'Command them to attack the zealots,' I said with a smile.

Nicky nodded and clenched her teeth. Beads of sweat dripped down her forehead. The three warriors turned and glanced at each other. I absorbed the entire scene, fascinated at the potential of Nicky's power to help us complete our mission and retrieve the damned gold coin.

'I am healed,' Lotr said.

I blinked at his words. The other two agreed and the one I'd shot through the chest tugged his armour aside to reveal no gaping wound. Yas cursed under her breath and brought a hand to her face. Nicky opened her eyes and met my furious gaze with an apologetic, sheepish smile.

'You FUCKING healed them? What type of shit-for-brains necromancer are you?'

Before I could raise my gun, pain bit into my arm. I howled at the sight of an embedded arrow through my forearm and dropped to my knees in shock. The gun landed in the sand, droplets of my blood spilling over it.

'The Dead God truly favours us to return us to life,' Lotr said, patting his archer on the shoulder. 'In his name, we'll build him a bonfire on this spot and consecrate it with your burning flesh.'

Terror gripped me and my mind raced. Nicky and Yas couldn't organise an orgy in a whorehouse, let alone operate a gun and the sheer pain of my wound almost blinded me. I had to keep them safe for the sake of our mission. One option sprung to mind. A bad one.

With my left hand, I etched patterns into the sand using the blood from my wound. The zealots approached to make good their threat and I focused on channelling all my energy into the symbols I'd drawn. One last desperate gamble.

In an instant it appeared between us and the fanatics. Copper-yellow eyes glowed from within the figure of a short statured woman with cropped hair. The warriors all recoiled in her presence, bunching together for protection, weapons at the ready. I'd summoned the one thing that terrified them. The entity known as the Wanderer. Copper eyes focused on me, sending jolts of fear ripping through every atom in my body.

'Why have you called me?' it said, in a soft-spoken voice.

'To make a deal,' I said and hauled myself upright. 'We're not of this world and seek safe passage to the nexus point.'

'Demon!' Lotr shouted.

The Wanderer, without breaking eye contact with me, flicked her head. All eight zealots crashed to their knees; weapons thrown from their hands. They struggled against an unseen power, but not one of them rose from the sand.

‘And why would I do that, Pathfinder?’

‘I can show you how to open the nexus point. I know your work in this place is unfinished, but when the time is right, you’ll require that knowledge.’

The Wanderer stared at me impassively for a few seconds longer, then onto Yas. Her gaze swept to Nicky and in a move that surprised me, it backed away three paces, face contorting in anger and raised its palms. Nicky flinched at the abrupt actions and glanced at me. I shrugged at the unexpected reaction.

‘You’ve brought a death-walker to this realm,’ the Wanderer hissed, glaring at Nicky.

‘We’re only passing through,’ I said and flashed my open palms. ‘We mean you no harm. Take us to the nexus point and you’ll never see us again. I swear it.’

Baring her teeth, the Wanderer continued focusing on Nicky. ‘I agree to your terms. Maintain your distance from me, death-walker.’

Yas opened her mouth to, most likely, make a sarcastic remark about Nicky’s shitty powers but I shut her down with one look. I’d never expected a creature like the Wanderer to fear anything, let alone Nicky. It worked to our advantage. I suspected the Wanderer made the deal more to get rid of Nicky than to learn the secrets of the nexus.

With a casual hand flap from the Wanderer, all eight of the zealots flopped over, heads twisted in unnatural angles. It shook its hand again and, in an instant, we’d changed locations. I gazed around at the rusted armour and disintegrating bones of a battlefield. To my right, a large stone rose from the ground and when I looked up, I spied a parallel world above us. Similar in terrain to this one but upside down. The power emanating from the stone told me this was our destination. From here, I could bring us to the realm of the leprechauns. I eased the arrow from my forearm, applied a bandage, and gritting my teeth, led everyone over to the Sinner’s Stone.

‘Like this,’ I said to the Wanderer and began drawing designs in the sand.

Focusing my power, I endured the process of opening a new passageway. The exertions of this leg of our mission drained me. Tapping into my reserves, and chanting loudly, I managed to open it. With heavy eyelids, I eyed the Wanderer who looked from me to Nicky. It levelled one last hardened glare and disappeared.

‘Come on,’ I said, and extended a hand. ‘Hopefully this next part of the trip will go much more smoothly.’

I prayed it would. Between the beatings, my arm wound, and the sheer level of energy required to open these portals, I wasn’t sure how much more I could endure. Factor in having to protect the two most useless people in existence, and the outcome of our mission didn’t look great. Still, we had to keep trying.

I guided Nicky and Yas through the portal. Rather than slump headfirst into sand, we strolled off a stone bridge with an old country road ahead. I turned as the portal expired and studied the small town behind us. Fireworks lit up the sky and from the throng of people, in colourful garments, it struck me as some sort of celebration.

‘This way,’ I said, pointing at a field beyond the town’s periphery. ‘It’s close.’

Groaning from possibly broken ribs and the wound in my arm, I led the way. With every step, I silently cursed Nicky and Yas’ pointless powers and how they’d nearly gotten us all killed. Light from the town faded the more we walked into the field, but the magic of this world pulled me closer to the object embedded in my mind. I led the morons to the centre and pointed.

‘There. Dig.’

Nicky glanced from me to Yas and when neither of us moved, she dropped to her knees. Under Bill the rubber duck’s supervision, she pushed her pale spindly fingers into the soil and started digging. I gazed across the field, still unsure of what the hell made it so verdant. After five or six scoops of earth, Nicky pulled a shining gold coin loose and held it aloft. In the dark, it radiated.

‘Now, that’s illumination,’ I said, glaring at Yas who huffed and turned away.

My instincts flared to life again. Danger. Close by. I glanced back at the bridge and the site of the portal we required to escape this place. Against the flickering light of the town’s festivities, I spied a small silhouette. A fucking leprechaun. All we needed. I sensed its murderous gaze upon us and every fibre in my being told me we had to elude it.

‘Put that thing away,’ I said, and Nicky shoved the gold coin into her pocket. ‘Someone’s watching us. Follow me. We’ll loop back through the town and head for the bridge the long way around. Hopefully lose it in the crowd.’

‘We really should’ve stopped for a kebab,’ Yas said as she and Nicky matched my pace.

‘At least we have the coin,’ Nicky said. ‘Although, I’m with Yas. We should really get something to eat at some point.’

‘Will you two shut up?’ I said, staring at the leprechaun in the distance, closing on us. ‘We’ll keep going, until the fucking mission is complete!’

That’s what heroes do, after all.

But good intentions are one thing. Reality doesn’t always play by the same rules. All I remember about what happened next, was the explosion.

Chapter Two

In which the heroes are pursued by an angry leprechaun

Derek Power

Clods of earth and small stones exploded from the ground in a strange, inverted mushroom shape. A few lucky earthworms experienced the thrill of flight without the horrific ending their brethren typically came to at the beak of a bird. From the hole of destruction a pale, skinny, hand reached up into the air and grasped at the grass around for purchase.

Nicky the Necromancer clawed her way out of the ground and slowly rose to her feet, dirt and muck caked her skin, mixing into her hair. She knew, without even needing a mirror, that there would be no mistaking her for somebody who had just crawled out of their own grave. Like all good necromancers should, Nicky now looked the part. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the golden coin, with Celtic knots engraved on either side, and held it up to the sunlight.

As the light bounced off the coin's surface, it sang to Nicky with power and promise.

'Finally,' she said, putting a little extra creepiness into her voice.

'Get out of the bloody way, you skin-stretched skeleton,' Damon called from inside the hole, his gruff voice sounding a little irked.

Nicky turned around and watched as the Pathfinder and Yas each climbed out and stood beside her. She glared at Damon, tempted to throw a curse in his direction that would impact his manhood for a decade or so.

The Pathfinder dusted off his dark leather coat and checked his supply pockets.

Yas brushed muck and soil off her clothes. 'What happened?'

'That!' snapped the disgruntled man as he gripped the woman's shoulders and spun her around.

'Who's that?' she asked.

'It's the fucking leprechaun that's just tried to bury us alive, you fucking, useless excuse for a torch. He obviously wants his gold back. We need to get going before he tries it again.'

A whistling sound—impossibly infused with heat—pierced the air. A large fireball exploded a few feet above their heads. Not needing to discuss matters further, Nicky and the others ran across a field towards nearby buildings, doing their best to avoid an endless volley of fiery violence.

As they approached the buildings, they heard the noise from the street and Nicky realised that they had not emerged in a field, but rather a park of some kind. The strange decorations they had seen upon arriving in this world were lit up. A macabre celebration of the dead it seemed, judging by the glowing skeleton skulls and carved pumpkins with candles inside. The necromancer wondered for a moment if they had not stumbled into some amazing reality where necromancers were more prevalent and, potentially, celebrated for their mastery over life and death. When this stupid quest was done and dusted, she would ask the Pathfinder for a return trip.

'What do you think, Bill?' Nicky asked her reliable good luck charm strapped to her belt.

The yellow rubber duck did not reply.

'Do you think we can just blend into the crowd?' Yas asked, looking at her attire. 'It seems that every second person is in a costume of some kind.'

Several teenagers walked past, one of them stopping to point a device at the trio.

'Cool Cyberpunk costume, dude,' he said, while the device flashed.

They watched as the teenagers continued on their way.

‘This could indeed work to our advantage,’ Damon said, shifting the holster of his gun so that it was hidden under his coat but still easily reached.

Several explosions rocked the sky, and they instinctively ducked and covered their heads, Nicky spotting some strange colours above. She looked up as two rockets whizzed upwards before exploding into multi coloured sparks.

‘It’s part of the festival,’ she said to the others.

Another explosion rang out, followed immediately by Damon jumping forward and pulling Nicky down to the ground, as masonry landed on the spot where she had previously stood and shattered into pieces. They rolled over onto their back and looked into the park just as two more fireballs raced towards them at speed.

‘The bloody leprechaun isn’t giving up,’ Yas shouted, offering them each a hand to haul themselves back to their feet. ‘Come on!’

They ran out onto the street, to blend with the crowd. Behind them they heard disgruntled sounds of people being shoved out of their way. A tell-tale sign that the leprechaun was in hot pursuit and not exactly bothered about good manners in his efforts to catch them.

‘We need a distraction,’ Damon said. ‘Something that will keep him busy while we get to the nexus.’

‘You want to do your little light up party trick and dazzle him?’ Nicky asked Yas.

She received a middle finger as a reply.

‘Couldn’t even light the tip of the finger while doing that, amazing powers. Right, I’ll do something,’ Nicky said.

‘Just make sure you don’t heal anyone while trying to drain their life force. Again!’ the Pathfinder said.

Nicky rolled her eyes.

‘Two times that happened, drop it already.’

‘It was only an hour ago, sort of hard to forget,’ Yas pointed out. ‘Short term memory is a bastard, when the person who’s meant to be the ‘big guns’ in the group, starts helping the people trying to kill us.’

‘Fine!’ Nicky roared, throwing her hands up into the air in exasperation.

Around them some of the demons, ghouls, and oddly dressed harlots all looked at the group with a mixture of confusion and apprehension. Clearly the people of this world were not used to anyone expressing themselves in such a loud manner. Which was odd, considering the continuous explosions of coloured sparkles in the sky. Nicky was at a loss as to how anyone could communicate otherwise.

They ducked behind a horseless carriage, Damon peering behind them from the side of the vehicle.

‘Looks like we’ve lost the short arse, for now,’ the Pathfinder said. ‘So, whatever you’re planning to do, Nicky. Do it now.’

The necromancer took a deep breath to steady her nerves, then closed her eyes. Magic, like most things in the universe, required a combination of things to work. Primarily, an ability to cast magic. Otherwise, you just looked like an idiot making hand gestures while speaking in an arcane language for no good reason. Next was skill. As with most things, the more a person practised the mystic arts, the better they got at them. Just like archers spending days shooting at bales of straw, casters would try to control the very fabric of reality and bend it to their whims, all to conjure a werelight that blinked out of existence as soon as the mage lost concentration.

Finally, you needed confidence. Not just in your ability to cast a spell but in yourself. Nicholas von Darth, Nicky’s father, had explained this last piece to her upon her sixteenth birthday. How there were people born with world-ending levels of magic coursing through their veins but lacking the confidence to wield such power beyond simple parlour tricks. He told the young necromancer that to achieve greatness, she needed to believe she had it already. From that point, the rest of the world would envy her powers.

The problem was, Nicholas had completely forgotten to instruct his daughter on how exactly one commanded the Dark Arts correctly. And after the villagers had introduced dear papa to the business end of a pitchfork, after he had reanimated the mayor's wife for a little late-night party, the lessons stopped as well.

Nicky the Necromancer had always wondered if her life would have worked out differently if she'd at least been able to conjure the spirit of her departed father for more education.

Still, when it came to confidence levels, Nicky was more than able to believe in her own greatness.

Reaching out with her mind, the necromancer sought bodies lacking in the vitals department, so they could become prime candidates for zombie summoning. This part had always come easy to her, the souls of those around her pulsed with a pure white light that was sickening to see. White you avoided, red was the colour you desired. A red soul was easily malleable, to the point that a powerful necromancer could skip over mind control and move straight to death and resurrection.

What was strange now, however, was that the surrounding bodies had a mixture of white souls and blue ones. A colour Nicky had never seen before. They pulsed in the same way, the rhythm of a heart, yet seemed to drift back and forth instead of moving in defined lines.

'I've found some,' Nicky said aloud so the other two did not think she was merely having a nap.

'The leprechaun is getting closer,' Damon said. 'Two doors down the street.'

'Perfect,' Nicky whispered, smiling.

On the right, a pair of double doors slammed open and five mindless minions of the undead, sprawled out onto the street. Nicky raised her left hand towards them, fingers spread in a claw, as she extended her will.

'Do as I bid,' she said. 'Stop the leprechaun; use any means necessary and I shall free you from this undead servitude.'

Yaz watched the four creatures stumble and claw their way up a wrought iron fence, while another used the others as a sort of morbid climbing frame. Finally upright and ambulatory, they shuffled off down the street.

'You couldn't have conjured up some skeletons?' she asked Nicky. 'Or, you know, anything that moves faster than a dead snail.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Nicky said, turning slowly as she continued sending her will towards the five figures. 'Nobody brings back snail...oh, watch out.'

This last part she said to Damon as one of the crawling zombies turned towards the Pathfinder and vomited over him. He snarled at the creature, reaching into his coat and pulling out his pistol.

'Jesus!' the zombie shouted, suddenly regaining the ability to stand on his feet again. 'He's got a gun. GUN!'

Chaos erupted around them as everyone on the street ran in random directions, away from the gunman. Nicky tracked her minions, trying to reassert her control, as they ran down the street, only to collide with the leprechaun. In a heap of thrashing limbs, two of the zombies vomited onto the short fairy before scrambling to their feet, to fun off again.

Damon stood up and looked Nicky directly in the eye.

'They were just drunks dressed like the undead,' he said, wiping the vomit of his jacket. 'You weren't even controlling mindless drunks.'

Yaz jumped up ran along with the crowd.

'Come on,' she called back. 'You might not be able to do anything useful, but at least we've a distraction that can buy us some time to get to the portal.'

Like an airborne virus, panic around Damon's gun spread, causing more of the crowd to flee in terror. Some folk ran across the street, dodging horseless carriages, others ran onwards or ducked into side alleys and some, the truly

crazy, ran directly towards the trio. Although in their insane defence, nobody this far down the street knew who exactly they were meant to be running from.

Nicky reached out with her mind once more and latched onto several of the blue thought pockets around them. While clearly not able to actually control the faux zombies, the necromancer figured she could at least nudge them in a direction that might benefit the trio's escape. Eight costumed individuals stopped running, turned, and ran full speed back down the street towards the leprechaun.

'Hey!' Nicky declared, smiling briefly before she remembered to assume her usual sullen disposition. 'Did you see that? I sent those demons back the way we came.'

Damon glanced over his shoulder as they continued running.

'Well, isn't that impressive,' the Pathfinder said. 'Looks like Yas is back to being the least useful one of our gang.'

Yas responded by showing them both the middle finger.

'Duck left, here,' Damon shouted, before turning down a side street.

This street was more tightly packed than the previous one. As such it heaved with people and creatures, mingling with each other like it was a common day occurrence. Which was when Nicky saw the most disturbing thing she had ever seen.

One of the nearby demons lifted its head off, revealing a normal human beneath. The man wiped his forehead on the back of his cloak, then smiled at a very sexually dressed tree.

'What crazy world is this,' Nicky remarked.

At the top of the street they spotted a cast iron bridge, covered with bright lanterns.

'Fire your gun and clear the crowd,' Yas said to Damon.

'We don't need it, there is no sign of the magical creature,' he replied.

Several horseless carriages blew horns at them as they ran across the street and up the steps of the bridge. Stopping at the first archway, Damon knelt down and pulled a knife from his boot. He scraped six symbols into the stonework of the bridge, sigils Nicky had never seen before. The last one he tapped twice with the blade, then placed his right hand flat on the ground. A pulse of power rippled out from Damon's hand, lines of red light racing along the stones, to weave around the bridge's metalwork.

Magic crackled around them, spreading through the air like an energized spider's web. In a second it reached across the bridge to form a red webbed portal.

'Hurry up both of you,' Damon called out.

Not needing to be told twice, Yas stepped through the portal and vanished.

'OOOOOOOHHH' the surrounding crowd all chanted at the same time.

A loud roaring noise, that Nicky thought sounded flame-like, made her look back the way they'd come. She spotted another fireball racing towards them. The collective costumed idiots pushed and shoved each other to get out of its way. Though Nicky's eyes opened wide at the shock of what was speeding towards them, her legs responded independently to her addled brain by jumping off the bridge.

Damon, on the other hand, was not as quick to react. He fired his gun at the fireball, which had no effect at all. The burning sphere slammed into his chest explosively, lifting the Pathfinder off his feet, and slamming him into the ground with such force Nicky could hear multiple bones crack and possibly a few organs squishing.

Nicky glanced down the street and saw the leprechaun slowly marching towards them, another fireball forming in his hand. She ran back onto the bridge, to kneel at Damon's side, patting out the flames. The Pathfinder coughed up blood that trickled down his chin, as he gasped for breath which grew shallower by the second.

'I'm done,' he rasped. 'Don't have long. Go, the portal will close if my essence is no longer here.'

The necromancer looked at the crackling web of red energy lines.

'But doesn't that mean we'll be trapped on the other side if we need another portal?'

Damon coughed, then nodded.

'Yes,' he said. 'Not. Much. I. Can. Do.'

One of the reasons people got into necromancy wasn't because it meant using zombies to do the housework. No, necromancers liked to use the forbidden arts to stave off the great darkness that came at the end of life, by transferring their soul into another vessel. The process usually resulted in the soul, formerly occupying the body, to be ejected into the ether, but that wasn't something to concern the average necromancer.

Nicky knew the spell, but she also knew her skills were not up there to reliably transfer Damon's soul into a nearby body.

'Unless...' she said, reaching down to her belt and touching Bill the rubber duck.

Damon let out one more laboured breath, his eyes losing focus. She had mere seconds before he died.

'This will feel strange,' Nicky said, placing her hand on his forehead and closing her eyes.

She reached into his body at the spectral level, entwining her fingers around everything that made Damon, excluding the pieces that were just body, blood, and bone. Wrapping it all up, Nicky dragged it all together, pulled the soul from the Pathfinder and placed it inside Bill.

'What have you done?' Damon's voiced asked, moving Bill's bill.

A fireball exploded over her head. The leprechaun had gained ground and was conjuring another fireball. That was all the inspiration Nicky needed. Placing a hand around Bill, nee Damon, the necromancer dove through the portal and left the mad world behind.

Chapter Three

In which our heroes are up to their eyeballs in trouble

Phil Williams

Yas Vitroy split her attention between the crackling mess of a portal and the alien cavern ahead, leaning against a wall of black crystal. She'd adopted a bored pose, arms folded, a foot against the wall, but lost her scowl when her daft companions failed to come through right away.

She got distracted by the tunnel's walls, like polished obsidian or hematite. The tunnel's eerie light came not just from the portal but from somewhere further off, reflected across the shiny walls. That and the oddly finger-like stalactites and stalagmites indicated it was not home. Damon had screwed up again, and if he didn't come through soon, Yas was stuck here alone.

Something chirruped, a birdlike noise that echoed through the cave, and Yas stared accusingly towards it. Birds didn't belong in caves. She checked the portal again, considered going back through – but Nicky finally tore out of it, stumbling into a wall and bouncing off. Yas stepped out of the way rather than risk being knocked down, and the necromancer spun towards her. Her expression was stricken, wide-eyed.

'He's right behind me!' she said.

'I bloody hope so.' Yas smiled with sweet malice. 'Because we need that idiot to actually get us home, exciting as this mysterious cave is.'

'Not Damon.' Nicky moved away from the portal, clutching her rubber duck.

Yas folded her arms again, ready to tell her to grow up, but another shape formed in the still-swirling portal.

'Leprechaun!' Nicky's shriek made Yas shriek too, and then, caution be damned, they were sprinting side by side away from the diminutive figure.

'This way!' Yas cried, seeing a fork in the tunnel and taking the lead. She was taller and faster than Nicky, with the fumblesome mage's superfluous gowns and charms, so she had a duty to lead – into a tighter tunnel of arching crystal, up an incline. Up was good; up meant out. Except the cave wound around and narrowed, its reflective light still bouncing from sources unknown.

Another chirrup vibrated past them. Louder.

'What was that?' Nicky cried as Yas slowed.

A gruff shout prevented Yas from a witty rejoinder: the cursed leprechaun, more pissed than ever.

'There!' Yas pointed to a gap in the wall. She skidded into another passage just like the last. Her heart beat hard as she ran, reserves running low. She was a sprinter, not a distance runner, good only in small doses. Summed her up entirely, really. She turned another corner to press herself against a wall. Catching her breath, she pulled Nicky into cover and gave her a warning look to be quiet. They listened as the leprechaun's feet thumped down another tunnel. He was moving away – they'd lost him, for now.

Calming herself, recovering the energy to speak, Yas whispered, 'He sounds ridiculously heavy, doesn't he?'

Nicky glowered, breathing deeply to catch her breath, too. She looked even worse than Yas felt.

'Do you think leprechauns have denser muscles than us?' Yas went on, to distract her, ease the mood. 'Or special bones? I mean, one look at him, you know that guy could tackle a rhino. He was like a bloody bulldog.'

Nicky averted her eyes, wearily supporting herself with one hand against the wall, willing Yas to stop. But Yas had long accepted that her main power in these situations was distraction, and Nicky clearly needed some encouragement.

‘Doesn’t feel right running from someone the size of a child, does it? I kind of want to push him over and steal his lunch money.’ Yas paused. ‘Well, I guess we already stole his money. Tell me you still have the coin.’

‘Shut up,’ Nicky huffed at last.

‘Oh, cheer up, we got away, didn’t we?’

The necromancer glared with red-eyed warning, though, and Yas realised things were somehow worse than she knew.

‘What’s going on? Did you lose the coin? Wait. Where’s Damon?’

Nicky’s trembling eyes gave part of the answer and Yas felt her chest tighten. Was he hurt? Left behind? Gone? The black walls seemed to close in, the possibility that there was no way out.

‘No. He can’t be –’

A muffled grumbling sound came from somewhere lower down and both women frowned. The rubber duck trembled in Nicky’s shaking hand. No, her hand wasn’t shaking – the duck was moving, and she quickly adjusted her grip off its head.

‘You damn moron, are you trying to smother me!’ Damon’s voice snapped furiously. The duck’s bill spoke the words. It somehow wore the Pathfinder’s exact unpleasant expression.

‘What in the living hell?’ Yas gasped.

Nicky held the duck up. ‘There was no time. No choice. I had to – I mean –’

‘She trapped me in this fucking duck!’ Damon shouted from within the toy, and his voice echoed down the caves. Nicky covered the beak again as they pricked their ears to the retreating sound. There was the briefest moment of promising quiet, then a chirrup answered. Two, three – a chorus of awful bird calls. And the angry shout of a very irate leprechaun.

‘Explain,’ Yas said, holding up an instructive finger, already moving. ‘While we run.’

She jogged as the sounds grew in the tunnels. Mostly behind them, but hard to tell.

‘He got hit!’ Nicky said, struggling to keep up. ‘I did the only thing I could, transferring him to a suitable vessel.’

‘Suitable for what? Bathtime?’

‘Suitable for keeping him alive long enough to get us home, how about that!’ Nicky snapped, and Yas conceded the point. Damon in a duck was better than no Damon at all. Shifting tone, Nicky added, ‘On the plus side, my powers work pretty well, so yay me?’

‘Yeah, gold star.’ Yas shot a glance down to the duck bobbing in Nicky’s hand. ‘Can you get us home, Damon Duck?’

‘I’m trying to find a path,’ his voice came out of the toy. ‘Which would be a hell of a lot easier if this rank amateur wasn’t tossing me about!’

Nicky’s wordless grunt conveyed that she couldn’t spare a breath to say, “Sorry we can’t make conditions perfect for you to fuck up again while we’re being chased by a murderous leprechaun and cave birds.”

‘I bloody knew it’d be like this! Paired with the two absolute worst!’ the duck kept complaining.

‘Really captured his full magnetic character in that thing, huh?’ Yas said but quietened to conserve her energy for running.

This had been mad from start to finish, the culmination of a lifetime of being told they were special. Meetings and playdates with these weirdos, with their weird families and fantastical stories too ridiculous to believe. Sure, none of them ever doubted the truth of it, all of them had some inkling of the power within their bloodlines, but they’d all also assumed it was heavily exaggerated. The same way Yas’s family’s ‘power to control light’ leant closer to the magic of stage tricks than fairy-tale wizards, she’d always assumed the protecting of special items and banishment of

big bads was metaphorical. Like, it would involve one day intimidating a judge or repatriating something from the British Museum. But it turned out the Realm Raiders were literal in their storytelling, which shouldn't have been a huge surprise considering how seriously the elders took themselves.

It meant that yes, their 'friend' (annoying as he was) really had apparently been trapped in a rubber duck. And it meant this coin they'd stolen really was important, to them, and the world, and maybe to all existence. So, no pressure. And, most pressingly, it meant they really were at risk of death from monsters.

At another rabid leprechaun shout, Yas picked another random opening. 'Here!'

They were making good progress through this great long maze of conveniently tall but ultimately featureless tunnels.

'Slow down!' Damon-in-the-Duck shouted. 'I'm trying to get a fix! Head right!'

'Aren't those cave birds sound coming from the right?'

'What are they?' Nicky asked, between gasping breaths. Her eyes flitted vaguely towards the growing sounds of angry chirping.

'Don't know. Don't want to. The sound's bad enough.'

'Almost as bad as listening to you,' Damon grumbled.

'Does he squeak if you squeeze him?' Yas asked.

Damon made as hostile a sound as a rubber duck could, but at last Yas noticed the tunnel opening ahead. They ran into an enormous cavern, interlaced with spindly scaffolds holding up huts and track-lines. Rails for mine carts perhaps. Except the scaffolds were unnaturally thin and attached in knobbly protrusions at regular intervals. Bones. Too long and weirdly curved to be any creature Yas recognised, interlaced like an unimaginably complicated web of death. Light reflected off the mirror-like walls from high above, casting deep shadows to give everything an extra unnatural feel. Two immediate thoughts came to mind: these bones came from a large and likely horrible creature. And something else had killed a lot of said creatures to make this bizarre junction-point.

'What the hell . . .' Yas asked, and the chirruping locals replied in a crescendo of angry sounds that came from a series of openings around this awful cavern. Whatever was coming was approaching from all directions. Except for their own tunnel: the leprechaun's increasingly violent string of vitriol burst from that, as he'd apparently picked up their trail. Yas caught a few actual words: 'rapscallions' and 'blood mince', if she heard correctly.

'I've got a read,' Damon said, miserably. Always miserable, even with good news.

'Is it back the way we came?' Yas predicted the worst.

'About fifty feet above us, and maybe a hundred or so to your right.'

Yas looked up, through the lattice of unholy scaffolding. She supposed it was climbable. In theory. But there were the first signs of movement, something alive in the shadows high up. So, she hadn't predicted the worst.

'Come on,' Nicky rasped, barely alive for lack of breath.

'You need to get more cardio,' Yas pointed out helpfully, no less tired but always able to find that little extra for a comment. They hurried on, peering skyward. No ladders, lifts or stairs in the mess of pillars and shacks. Maybe it wasn't even a usable structure, just a totem. Or graveyard?

A sharp chirrup spun them both to discover a creature emerging into view. Yas blinked hard, sure for a second it was a trick of the shadows. But no, the thing scuttled between the pillars, only a few dozen yards off, into better light. There were two more not far behind, bouncing along on hand-like clusters of little tentacles or . . . roots. The creatures were definitely not cave birds. They looked more like plants, with a central stem about four feet tall and three or four limbs flapping at their sides. But their heads were fleshy, top-heavy like they should fall over and pop, each stalk topped by what looked like a flabbily lidded human eye, with an angular, sharp-toothed beak flapping underneath it. They offered more angry chirps as they crept closer.

Nicky gagged, disgust cutting through her gasps for air.

'And I was worried it'd be something terrible,' Yas sighed, backing up slowly, not to trigger the eye-flowers. But more were coming, scuttling from the tunnels, and the leprechaun's footsteps approached in a terrific drumbeat.

'Climb!' Damon-in-the-Duck shouted. 'You have to climb!'

'Up there?' Yas cried back, looking up to see more eye-flowers appearing above.

'I'll rip your heads off and stir porridge in your necks!' the leprechaun boomed.

'Why porridge?' Yas mouthed to Nicky as the short man strode into the cavern, too. He was beetroot with fury, fists clenched and forearms corded with tense muscle. The contrast between his garishly green outfit and his apoplectic face somehow made him even scarier than the cave creatures, which collectively hesitated in response. More chirrups brought reinforcements, though, with the two women standing at the centre of an army of eye-flowers broken only by a murderous little magic man. The eye-flowers swayed aggressively, nearby and on the platforms above, while the leprechaun snarled, surveying the room. His hands flexed at his sides, smoke pouring around them.

'He's literally steaming with rage,' Yas gasped.

Nicky noted through gritted teeth, 'He can throw fire.'

'Climb, now, you damn losers!' Damon said with fresh venom, as if the only obstacle to survival was them refusing to follow orders.

'Give back my bloody coin,' the leprechaun said. His eyes bulged from his head, focus settling absolutely on them as his pursuit apparently disregarded the alien cave-dwelling eye creatures. This made many of the eyes pivot his way with a barrage of indignant chirrups.

'Do you think they might help us?' Yas asked in a stage whisper.

'I think these things stripped all these bones clean,' Nicky replied.

'One last chance,' the leprechaun snarled, taking a step closer. The pair bumped into a pillar and the eye-flowers shouted angrily again. Like hyenas, it struck Yas. They weren't attacking because they were waiting for an opening, and sensed a possible fight they could capitalise on. 'Hand. Over. The. Coin.'

'Come on Nicky,' Yas said urgently. 'This place must be like a wet dream for you – use the bones!'

'And bring the roof down on us?' Nicky said, already resting a hand on one of the scaffolds. The leprechaun stopped ten metres out, holding out his hands. The air shimmered around them. Nicky went on, frightened, 'I can't. There's no energy in them. Or... it's not something I recognise –'

'You put a man in a rubber duck, you've got real power!' Yas cried. 'Finally, one of us can do something, you have to use it, now!'

The leprechaun laughed a deep belly laugh that belonged in a much bigger animal. It promised doom, making the horde of eye-flowers retreat with startled bleats. He said, 'Oh, I'll make your pain last a long time. I'll burn you so slowly, you'll feel every inch of flesh boil.'

'Is it going to boil or burn, make up your mind.' Yas spoke quickly, nerves taking over. He glared up at her, and she kept going, to give Nicky time. 'I mean you lose some of the threat with inconsistencies, how are we supposed to take you seriously? And let's be real, your whole deal is a bit on the nose. Nicky. Please. Do something.'

'I don't know,' Nicky said, and Yas saw then they were out of time and options, the necromancer worn out, too shaken to find a solution in this alien cavern. Even if she could get a handle on her powers, she'd probably just overcharge the eyeballs to shoot lasers or turn the bones into a double-evil construct. Yas clenched her jaw as the leprechaun eyed her with evil relish, recognising their hopelessness. The man had a bulldog's slobber and all.

'Dammit Yas!' Damon shouted. 'Just tackle him for god's sake!'

She glanced at her own hands, cursing her pathetic bloodline. All hail the Vitroys, generationally lazy wastrels with inhuman abilities that were less useful than a reading light. Hell, basic skills in origami would be more useful right now. But talking obviously wasn't going to help. As the leprechaun's hands warmed, his stare burning, and Nicky uselessly grabbed a bone again, growling in frustration, Yas poured her own energy into her hands. She might distract him for a moment, at least, and give Nicky a chance to run. But she was afraid too, and tired, and more than a little unsettled by the sight of those eye-flowers and these bones and the promise of dying in another world at the hands of a little man who could shoot fire, oh God, oh God –

'Burn!' the leprechaun roared and held up his hands, and Yas yelped, throwing up hers too as his palms lit with a blinding flash. The light spread out in a brilliant burst, flooding the cavern and hitting the walls, which reflected it back even brighter. Yas stumbled, crashing into cracking bones, vision white. Nicky shrieked and the eye-flowers echoed in pained chirrups that hurt Yas's ears. Worse, though, was the leprechaun's yell of pain and fury. Had his fireball backfired?!

No, it wasn't hot. Not fire.

She'd done it.

Yas kicked off through the dust, gasping, filling with fresh energy. She stood up, blinking hard to bring the cavern back into view. She was the only one in the chamber who could still see. Nicky was grasping forward and the eye-flowers were bumping into each other, blinking their huge, horrible lids. There was a terrible shriek as one of the eye-flowers tumbled over the edge of a higher platform and squelched into the ground on impact. The leprechaun was turning circles, clutching at the air, eyes turned up in unseeing panic.

'Witch!' he screamed. 'Witch!'

Yas quickly spotted a shard of broken bone on the ground and grabbed it. As the leprechaun swore and readied his hands to throw fire, blind, she swung the bone as hard as she could, throwing her whole body behind it. He took the full force of the blow to his temple and crumpled with a grunt. He crawled aside, groaning. Yas ran to Nicky's side and pulled her up by the arm, towards a lattice of bone scaffold.

'Come on! We have to climb!'

'I can't see!' Nicky shouted. 'What'd you do!'

'Saved our arses! Almost! Put your hands here!' Yas shoved Nicky against the pillars and guided her up, climbing behind, the structure shaking but holding.

'Here. Now here!' Yas said, getting alongside Nicky to tug her hand into place.

'I got it, got it!' Nicky said, slapping her hand away. She was blinking hard, regaining sight.

'I'll cut you up!' the leprechaun moaned loudly, but he'd lost his vigour, slight fear in his voice now. Yas looked down at the little man, pathetic and vulnerable in his blindness.

All around them, the eye-flowers were slowing down, blinking as though regaining their vision too. They were scanning, from the women to the downed leprechaun, decision-making creeping in. Nicky paused as she saw it too. No use climbing if the eye-flowers attacked now.

'Wretched, despicable, filthy witches!' the leprechaun screeched, and his spitting voice snapped the creatures into action. Yas gasped as they charged as one mass. The eyes above slid down bone scaffolds and walked the walls as if they could stick to them. One dipped past only two feet away without any interest in the pair. The leprechaun sat back, quietening at the sound of their approach, then gave a horrific scream as they converged on him.

Yas cringed as he disappeared under the swarm of stalks and eyeballs, sharp teeth gnashing. She hissed, 'Quickly, let's go.'

The women kept climbing as a great boom of fire erupted behind them and a dozen eyes popped and crinkled from flames, but that only encouraged the other eye-flowers to attack more viciously, and Yas tried to block out the

sounds of tearing flesh and leprechaun screams. Soon, they reached a platform, and a tunnel opening, thankfully unguarded, and Damon announced, 'This is it. A short run down there and I can get us out of here.'

'Home, right?' Yas pressed, and he grunted as if it were a stupid question. Screw it. She'd trust him, even if the Pathfinder was now a rubber duck. They were only a few steps from home, leaving the alien eyes devouring the fire-wielding leprechaun behind them and with the coin still in Nicky's pocket.

And Yas had thrown enough light to blind a man.

She had done that – she did have power. And if she could do that, then Damon could damn well get them home. Alive, well, and ready to save the universe...

Chapter Four

In which another team of heroes seek the Righteous Blade

Ed Crocker

Andre Becker was a waste of space. This was a well-known fact. He was a reprobate. A drunken good-for-nothing who ran a business into the ground and half his family out of town. The sort of man who'd drink his last coin and leave nothing of value behind.

Which, alas, included his nephew, Lute.

But Uncle Andre was dead and Lute was very much alive, so that was something to be said at least.

Lute looked in the box. As did the man considering it. Hold your nerve, he scolded himself. Lute's palms were sweaty, much like the rest of him. The box held good tongs, worth at least twelve pieces. The man inserted one grimy weathered hand into the box and poked forlornly at the contents.

Hold fast. Don't let him see you're desperate.

'Five pieces,' the man offered.

'Done.'

Shit. Lute took the money and handed the box and its contents over, desperately wanting a hole to open up and swallow him, and preferably the box too.

The money was warm in his hand, about an even temperature with Lute's hot shame. He waited until the man was out of sight before pulling the pouch from around his neck and adding it to what he'd already taken. Half-turning, he caught sight of the cold forge in the corner of his eye.

His inheritance.

Kicking a crate, he ignored the swelling hunger in his stomach. How long had it been since his last good meal? A few days at least. Did stale crusts of what he severely hoped was bread count as a meal? Make that a week then. Which meant he could go on being hungry. He obviously had a talent for it. Why not turn it into a career?

There was an ominous creaking followed by a crash as the sign hanging outside the smithy fell and splintered into two equally useless large pieces. Lute sighed.

That was about right.

He walked over and grabbed the pieces, tossing them into the forge. The coals sat idle, the char of dozens of years of craft marring the stone with patterns of smoke. Lute remembered making his first horseshoe there, aged eleven, eager to learn.

Andre had shown him how to do it—had stood over him, his thick hands guiding Lute's, telling him how the heat worked to make the metal pliable. Given him gentle encouragement as he hammered out the shape.

Then a dark shadow had fallen over Andre's face, a shadow as familiar by then to Lute as the rising of the sun or the hiss of the rain, and he talked about the pig men and the music boxes that trapped people's voices.

Lute should have known he wasn't quite right back then.

Lute's eyes flickered to the window, beyond which, in the circle of mud and grass that counted as the half-acre that came with the smithy, Andre lay, no longer jabbering about nonsense, at least not so as anyone could hear.

The rain had turned the mud around the burial plot into a quagmire. It was all cold and wet. A pauper's grave. Lute had dug it himself, rolled the body into it with great effort—no one ever tells you how heavy a body is—and stood alone, trying to remember his prayers, and forgetting, ending up in a simple mutter that Langos keep him, Langos watch over him.

Langos was the spirit of the hearth, least this side of the hills. He had piss all to do with dead uncles, but they were smithies so it felt right.

‘You still sifting through that old crackpot’s junk?’ called a voice from the doorway. Gill stood there, arms crossed, leaning against the jamb. He had a shit-eating grin across his gormless face, which improved it considerably to be fair. His mop of red hair was usual around these parts, as was his wonky nose from multiple scuffles, scuffles being the polite word for beatings, both given and taken. But whatever Gill doled out (and received) in violence to his enemies he made up for in being a good, laidback friend to Lute, the kind who’ll listen to you whine and throw up with you in the early morn.

‘You know I wouldn’t pay three pieces for this pile of shit,’ Gill continued. He scuffed one boot across the floor.

‘Didn’t ask you to.’ Lute picked up a fork and tossed it into a box where it conspired to look somehow more worthless. ‘But someone’s got to clear this place out. I’ll never sell it while it’s in this state—and if I don’t sell this place, I’m never getting out of here and away from you.’

Gill grinned. ‘Well, fuck you and your shit box very much. Hungry?’

‘Yes, but I’m not spending money on food. I need every lousy penny I can get.’

Gill whipped something out of his shirt pocket, something whose aroma carried straight over to Lute. He was a good friend. You could always tell someone was a true friend when they brought you pies. Thick pastry, warm gravy. Lute made it disappear like a beggar making coin vanish. Brushing the crumbs from the corner of his mouth, he nodded. ‘On your way to the Seven Worlds?’ He tried not to sound hopeful.

‘Of course I am, and so are you.’ Gill gestured back towards the road that led down into the town. ‘Come on, cheap arse. You can watch me get drunk.’

It always struck Lute as funny that almost every night, most of the townsfolk gathered at The Seven Worlds. Funny in a sad jester way, not funny in a fart-too-hard-you-shit-your-pants-kind-of-way. The thing is, hardly any of them had ever travelled further than Linshore, which was a day’s ride away. As for Talier, a couple days beyond that? It may as well be the Forgotten Realm of Windshear, where, it was said, the weather talked just like people.

This was the kind of place where you either stayed your whole life and ended up in the ground a few yards from where you were born, or simply got up one day, strolled out of town and never came back. That was his plan. The second one, to be clear.

Get the money, put on what remained of his boots and start walking. Lute would be the last of his family to leave and nobody would be sorry to see him go. Well, maybe Gill. For a couple of days at least.

Speaking of Gill, his friend sat, glass of house wine in one hand, badly stacked pipe in his other. Smoke curled out of it, adding to the rest of the smoke filling the Seven Worlds, which was a blessing, as there was not much to be said for the décor of the town’s main drinking hole.

The worn warped beams sat low, as did the stools on occasion, making it a bit of a gamble whether your seat would match your table. The floor glistened with a sticky layer of ale and wine, making a mere walk to the bar an exercise in patience and lower body strength. The mugs and goblets were of an indeterminate material, prone to breaking and smashing through no real reason except having decided that mid-drink was the best time to depart this world.

But it was the only light of Lute’s life, not to mention the townsfolk around him, so he found it hard to begrudge it its manifold and, in the case of the privy, noxious failings.

‘You could just start the forge up again. You know, make a living out of it. You’re good. Really good. Bloody good.’

Lute shook his head while holding his, for want of a better word, ale. ‘Crag would run me out of town before the coals got hot.’

Gill grinned. ‘Crag’s horseshoes are shit.’ His face turned serious. ‘Truly though, why would you want to go out there?’ He gestured in the vague direction of the rest of the world. ‘There’s fuck all work to be had in Linshore, Talier

is overrun with thieves and murderers and Thewles has got the fucking plague again. Twice this year. A hundred and twelve dead so far, coughing their lungs up. Phlegm everywhere.'

'I'm sure it's not everywhere.' Lute made a mental note to avoid Thewles. 'Besides, I don't know how to run a business. It's not in my blood. I can bend metal, but that's not enough. Everyone knows I haven't got the mind for it. I'm not my Uncle.' He remembered why that might be a good thing and tried again. 'I've not got my Uncle's skill.'

'You don't need to be your Uncle. You just need a bit of luck.'

I've not much of that either, he thought.

Gill leaned over and poured him some of his wine from his pitcher. Generous of him. The fact he poured it into a mug containing the dregs of his ale wasn't ideal, but Lute was in a forgiving mood, and Gill had drunk half a bottle of wine already so Lute didn't feel like challenging him.

That said, Gill could hold his drink, unlike the figure stumbling towards their table, keen to engage in what he would inevitably declare 'friendly banter'.

'Hello Leroy,' Gill said without looking up from his goblet.

'Evenin', Gill,' Leroy grinned. 'Becker.' He said Lute's family name like he was straining piss through his teeth. Hopefully someone else's. 'Heard you're sellin' the smithy. That true?'

'Why, you thinking of investing?'

A quick fumble in his pocket, which was a nice way of saying the sad lining cut into his stained tunic, and Leroy produced a battered coin, bent in the middle. He tossed it on the table where it spun for a brief second then gave up the ghost. 'That ought to cover it. Or is that too much?' He laughed like he'd been raising the joke from birth.

Hilarious. Gill reached over and took the coin and flicked it into his own pocket. 'Oh, I'm sorry were you expecting that back?' Leroy stopped laughing and clenched his fists. Gill stood up suddenly. Another man appeared behind Leroy, with somehow fewer teeth in his mouth. Then another.

Gill smiled that shit-eating grin.

Lute looked down at his boots and wished he'd ordered more ale.

Here we go.

Lute sat on the stoop outside the smith holding a cloth to his nose. He pulled it from his face and confirmed that it was still bleeding. He felt a righteous sneeze coming. This was going to hurt. Tears welled in his eyes and the cloth failed to contain the blood. Lute looked out across the dark fields towards the burial plot, watched over by the God of the Hearth and, right then, a thoroughly disinterested owl.

'Asshole.' He called out to the grave. He didn't mean it though. Andre might not have left him with much. But he did have some good memories. More than most would think. That and forearms that made it look like he was smuggling oranges under the skin when he clenched his fist.

I need to get out of this place. Lute walked back into the smithy and slammed the door, stuffing the gaps in the wood with rags that would eventually fall out and let the wind in. He could have rented a room, but he didn't want to be somewhere nobody wanted him.

Better to be in a place where there was nobody at all.

He kept a pillow on a cot next to the forge. Still holding his bloody nose, he sat gingerly, wrapped in memories. The bed was the same one he had slept in as a child, every time he ran to Uncle Andre after his mother started shouting. Funny how back then his mother was the one whose raised voice was to be feared, not Uncle Andre. Not funny at all, he supposed.

But twenty-year-old Lute and twelve-year-old Lute were two very different people, and the bed was only designed for one of them. He lay back and instantly heard an ominous creaking. Lute forgot about the pain in his nose and focused on the pain in his back. The cold, stone floor came hard and quick. Lute was glad there was nobody nearby to hear him whimper, like the child who had cried far from his mother's comfort those years before.

Rolling onto his side, Lute hacked out a phlegmy cough. His brow furrowed. What the hell was that and why had he never noticed it before? Scratchings in the base of the forge. Lute squinted in the dark, which achieved nothing. Were those bat wings? Dragon wings? It was hard to tell. The markings were crude, like a child drawing with a stick in the sand.

Andre had always told stories of the old creatures. Hippogriffs flying amongst the treetops, their impossible wings hovering over the canopy. Basilisks in the marshlands, slithering into the mud, turning to stone wary travellers with one fatal glance, then making their home among the corpse statues.

Lute knew the creatures to be real well enough, even seeing the head of a griffin on display at a faire once, rotting and surrounded by flies proving that it was flesh, not wax. But nobody ever really saw them in the real world. The dreary world. The world of nosebleeds and shit beds. Rubbing a hand along the stonework, Lute felt the movement of a catch. The forge groaned, years of dust spurting from a crack in the base as a segment popped free.

Lute sat up, the drying blood around his nostrils forgotten. Maybe Andre wasn't as useless or as stupid as everyone said. Perhaps this was it—some forgotten will or a small cache of coin squirrelled away to hide it from thieves. This could be the making of him. Screw Leroy. Screw the competition. Screw the forge. He would set up as something new. In a different town maybe. The sky was the limit, this was it. This was...

It wasn't coin. His hand moved and his eyes watered, something slicing his fingertips. The tears burned like acid as white light took over his vision. Lute felt hot, sick, breathless, dizzy—all the things, everything at once. He felt a hot wind scouring his eardrum and a relentless demonic pounding at the side of his skull.

Then the voice came. Deep timbre, gravelly, straight to his brain via his teeth, given the pain that ignited in his molars. It felt like he'd been tied next to a foghorn during a lightning storm. 'Took you long enough.'

I'm dead. I've died in this forge and now I'm going to rot here. At least I'll give the rats a better meal than I ever had.

'You're not dead,' the voice said. 'And I should know.'

Lute's voice cracked. 'Uncle Andre?' Great. He had inherited a haunted fucking forge. If the locals weren't ready to run him out of town before, they would be now. Vision clearing, Lute stood and leaned over the cold hearth. The coals were glowing, yet he felt no heat. Holding his already-scarred hands over them, just to be sure, Lute heard a hum emanating from within the forge.

There was a change to the disembodied tone. Somehow, it managed to sound like it had a bitter taste in its mouth, like it'd had a quick suck on a ghost lemon. 'I am no Andre Becker, I am happy to say. Though my blood did run in his veins. He was inadequate to many tasks, but none more so than the most important. Now, that same task falls to you. I trust you will fare better.'

The glow of the forge brightened to a piercing white, enveloping the room and burning away the smithy in a swirling vortex of light. Lute covered his eyes, but the glow found its way through his fingers and into his retinas. Voices screamed. He heard the grind of metal on metal. Metal on skin. Tearing through flesh. His hands felt wet, and Lute realised his nose was bleeding again. No. That wasn't it. This wasn't blood. It was oil. He felt sparks burning his skin, melting through the flesh. He was blind, but he could hear.

'Tam! Tam! The blade! The blade!'

'He's dying! Help him!'

'We can't hold out.'

The name pricked something in Lute's consciousness. Tam Becker. He knew that name. Some distant relation long dead and forgotten. Why was it so familiar? He remembered. Andre had spoken of him. Well, rambled would be

more accurate. Jabbered, endlessly, with one meaty finger in Lute's face. 'Tam' had spoken to him apparently. Lute had always assumed these were conversations had over the forge with a friend or customer.

Now he wasn't so sure.

'Your bloodline has decreed you must take up the task bestowed upon me and my descendants.' The coals brightened and enveloped Lute in their fervent glow. 'To seek the righteous blade, you must travel to the unreachable tower.'

Suddenly it all became clear to Lute. Clear as cut crystal.

He hadn't died.

He'd been drugged in the Seven Worlds. Probably that arse bastard Leroy. Thought it would be funny to spike him with some 'erb or suchlike. Lute crinkled his eyes as he tried to recall the local merchandise that could make someone properly hallucinate. Sunspice? Grown ironically in the shade. There were rumours it was being sold on the edge of town. Powerful stuff. Yes, that must be it. What had happened was—

His hopeful reverie was broken by the alleged voice of his ancestor Tam Becker.

'You still don't believe me, do you?' He sighed. 'Maybe a memory will help. Fair warning, descendant of mine. This will get a little vivid.'

Lute started to speak. 'It'll wear off in a second, it will—'

Light, all around him. Spells sparking off metal and voices crying out in foreign tongues. Figures, clad in armour, just like his, light glinting off the black-and-gold plated steel. Before him, a figure three times his size, red, burnt crimson red, so red the very colour itself seemed to pool off the dread figure into lakes of liquid fire around him.

A blade in his hand. Sigils on the blade, sparking, fiery. Heat where he held it. Ancient runes. Glowing magic. Racing forward, all nine, the scent of brimstone and arcane ritual in the air. Leaping forward, seeming to stay suspended for a second, in front of the mad god's chest. A roar in front of him. An outstretched hand. The fate of the land held before him. The Nine versus Vouring. A battle that could not be lost.

A battle that would echo down the generations, who would witness its caustic victory.

Lute came to, on the floor. He'd pissed himself a bit. Or maybe that had happened before the vision, to be fair. There was a faint stench of acrid battlesmoke in the air; Lute no longer cared whether it was real or not.

The voice of Tam Becker came to him again.

'You saw the same vision that I did, when the time came. The villainous God, Vouring. The Tormentor. The ender of worlds. He was imprisoned that day by our ancestor, one of the nine. There he stands in another realm, bound by seals, ancient magic, in perpetual wakening torment.'

'That's... ironic...' Lute moaned, his head still filled with memories of the vision and how real it felt. 'Given that he was the tormentor. Do you see...'

Tam continued, albeit with a slightly annoyed lilt to his voice. 'But he will rise again, if the spell is not recast... I did my part five hundred years ago... Now it is down to you, and the other descendants. If the three items are not found and the spell not cast again, the Tormentor will rise and wreak untold havoc. The item you seek is the righteous blade. The blade you held in the vision. Go to the tower. Seek out one of the nine, Morin Hast.'

'Wait...' Lute said, struggling to keep up but hearing something he finally recognised. 'Morin Hast is a story... a myth round these parts. Of a traveller who got lost and died. I've heard it so many ways over so many mugs of ale. He's not alive, even if he is real.'

'I never said he would be alive. Seek him out dead then and find his secrets.'

'So, seek out a corpse in an unreachable tower, then get the ambitiously named Righteous Blade, and use it to help cast a spell that will keep a trapped evil god in his trapped evil state for another five hundred years.'

‘...essentially, yes.’

Lute sighed. But for all his cynicism, something in his heart leapt. In his Uncle’s better moments, ones notably absent of jabbering, he had told Lute of legends of the before times. Of heroes and shenanigans. Lute had found that when he took himself out of his life and into these tales, even but for a few moments, something lifted off his shoulders. A weight. A feeling of inadequacy. Like if he really tried, really tried, he could imagine himself in a tale past, with the entire horizon before him, and no stench of failure at his back. Just the wind of a distant land, whistling as he walked into his future.

If this really wasn’t the result of a hallucinogenic herb, then maybe this was something he could be good at.

Well, something he could be less bad at than his current career path.

‘Will you be with me?’

‘No,’ said Tam, the disembodied voice already fading. ‘Except in spirit. I did this myself. And, despite myself, I have a feeling you can follow in my footsteps. Keep the faith, Lute.’ Almost gone now. ‘Keep the faith...’

‘But where do I go then...’ Even as Lute said it, he saw in his mind’s eye where the tower was. Up a perilous hill smothered in trees and rocks and no discernible path. Excellent. A few days’ travel. More like a week’s. Wonderful. Beyond Linshore. Beyond Talier. May as well be the pissing Deadlands.

This was happening then.

So be it.

He’d miss Gill.

He wouldn’t miss that fucking forge.

Turns out he would be getting out of town the second way after all.

Chapter Five

In which our heroes find answers in a high-rise tower

Simon Kewin

Lute stood at the top of the hill, his chest heaving and his calves burning from the climb. He'd reached the supposedly unreachable tower – and now he understood that it wasn't going to do him any good. In the end, it hadn't been hard to track down the building: a vast stone tower looming above a steep hill wasn't exactly subtly concealed. Once a few travellers on the road had indicated the general direction he needed to travel in – west – he'd spotted it on the horizon within five days.

But it didn't matter. There was no way he could get inside, because the tower didn't touch the ground. It floated in the air, a full tree's height off the top of the hill, as solid and unmoving as any normal tower. How was such a wonder possible?

The wind gusted hard at him, as if trying to push him back down the slope. He stepped forwards, hand outstretched, to touch the place where the wall would be if the tower followed the normal rules for buildings. Perhaps the gap was an illusion, some spell worked to deter the inquisitive. But no, his fingers found only air. Warily, he stepped beneath, peering up at the vast stone bulk of the tower hanging over his head. If it fell, if the magic failed, he'd be crushed.

He stepped back and tried calling, feeling ridiculous as he did so, thinking to summon the miraculous tower to the ground. It ignored him. The plaintive cries of distant mountain birds were his only response.

He couldn't even see a doorway. How was he supposed to get inside to find the answers he needed? On the other hand, this did seem like an excellent place to lodge the Righteous Blade, keep it out of the hands of the unworthy.

If the mythical sword existed.

His gaze fell to the hummocky ground beneath the tower – and there, overgrown by grass, he spotted a smooth boulder that looked to lie beneath the very centre of the flying tower. Was it important? Some way of calling down the building? Or was he ensuring his own death by walking to it?

He hadn't come this far to turn back. Eyeing the tower warily for any sign it was starting to fall, he stepped to the centre of the circle. It was suddenly colder in the shadow beneath the building. The boulder definitely looked crafted, finely carved into regular facets. Nine of them. Lute tried leaning on the boulder with his foot, but it didn't budge.

He touched one of the smooth surfaces with his fingers – and pulled back as a sharp spike of pain shot through his hand. He studied his fingers, expecting to see another burn to join the tapestry of scars the forge had given him. There was nothing. What was this, a warning? Steeling himself, he reached out again, placing his palm against one of the sides of the boulder. The pain burned through him once more, searing through his bones, up his arm and into his chest. He heard himself gasping from the shock of it, but he kept his hand in place. The pain was intense, yet bearable.

More than that, the burning was more than simple agony. It felt oddly ... alive. He had the impression of it snuffling through his veins, his thoughts. Studying him. Tasting him. At the same time, he felt, it wasn't trying to harm him. It was simply ... inquisitive. He let it come. After a moment he found he could master the pain, accept it. The heat moderated to warmth, as if the stone had accepted him.

Recognized him.

He peered up at the tower. It hadn't moved, but above him, clearer and clearer, he saw that a ring of light glowed in the stone base. It burned blue, flared – and then disappeared to leave a round hole.

Lute withdrew his hand from the stone and stood. Something moved up there. Now he did step back, out of the circle of shadow, fearful that a weight was about to fall on him.

It wasn't a weight. Instead, a delicate curl of iron began to wind downwards. A staircase, descending slowly to bridge the gap to the ground. It touched down without a sound directly over the boulder. A spiralling iron staircase – finely

wrought if he was any judge – the metal steps shaped into fabulous beasts, the wings of dragons, the backs of hippogriffs.

Nobody appeared at the top of the stairs to greet him or to attack him. He climbed up into the darkness of the tower. There seemed no other thing to do.

Inside, it took his eyes a moment to adjust. The smoky air caught at the back of his throat. He might be just a blacksmith, but he knew there was more to the heavy fug of the Seer's miraculous tower. Lute was used to smoke and heat, but there was something sorcerous in the air he was breathing. Its cloying sweetness made his thoughts swirl. He found himself glimpsing impossible things out of the corner of his eye: beasts crouching to pounce at him; laughing mouths full of teeth; the wide vistas of unknown lands. When he turned in alarm to look at each vision, none were there. Of course.

But if Morin Hast was dead, like people said, why was there all this smoke? Who was maintaining the fires? Why was there a red glow ahead, through the archway at the top of the flight of stone stairs? And if Hast were alive, how was it that he, Lute, had simply climbed into the tower? He was pretty sure reclusive and powerful magicians went to a great deal of trouble to ensure strangers were kept out. Where were the fearsome guardian beasts, the searing fireballs, the devious traps?

And, where was Morin Hast?

At the top of the stairs, Lute found himself in a wide, circular vault. The smoke and the red glow were coming from a ring of brass censers that hung by chains reaching from the ceiling. They swayed gently, seeding the air with their fumes. Through the thick air and the shifting shadows, he picked out shelves lining the room, filled with books and scrolls of paper. There were also odd little contraptions – glass spheres, brass devices with polished glass lenses – whose function he couldn't begin to guess at.

Taking a few wary steps forwards, he saw there was something in the centre of the room. A squat black form. As he crept towards it, it resolved itself into an altar of carved stone. A figure lay upon it, unmoving. Some sacrificial victim.

Except, not that. It was an old man in dark robes, his grey beard long and bushy. Instead of a knife buried in his chest there was a book there, its pages open, the man's hands upon it as if he'd simply fallen asleep while reading. Lute tried to move without making a sound. As well as cramped text, there were drawings in the book. Lute picked out a towering demon who was, clearly, Vouring. A group of smaller figures stood around it in various aggressive poses – clearly the nine heroes. One wielded a sword that had inked flames emanating from it.

Some ancient tome that might contain a clue as to the whereabouts of the Righteous Blade? Moving as slowly and cautiously as he could, Lute reached out to touch the book, hoping to turn a page to find other clues he could decipher.

But at his first touch, the prone figure on the dais gasped sharply, sucking in a gulp of air. He clutched the book with spindly fingers as if to stop Lute from stealing it. The old man's eyes opened wide. For a moment there was madness there, the witless gaze of some animal – and then a sharp intelligence as he rose to sit up.

His voice was rasping, the anger in it clear. 'Why have you taken so long to wake me, fool! I said a day, no more.'

'I've only just arrived,' Lute managed. 'I didn't know you were here.'

The old man snorted. 'My instructions were perfectly clear. Do you have any idea of the dangers of walking the aether? The risks? Of course you don't. I might have been trapped for the rest of time, the life slowly sucked from me while you slumbered and fidgeted.'

Hast – it had to be him – swung his legs down to sit on the altar. He swayed like a tree in a strong wind as he stood. Lute held his elbow to steady him.

'Leave me be, worm! I'm perfectly capable of standing on my own feet.'

Lute didn't release his grip. 'You clearly aren't.'

Hast snorted again, but didn't respond.

‘You were travelling through the aether?’ Lute asked, ‘walking between the realms?’

Hast sat heavily back down on the altar, his head slumped into his beard for a moment. He closed his eyes.

Lute pressed him. ‘You were searching for the Righteous Blade, weren’t you? That’s what you were doing. It’s there in the book you were holding.’

The old man’s gaze snapped to Lute’s face, and there was a complicated look of fury and doubt upon his features.

*

Hast studied the underling who had roused him so belatedly. Except, now that he studied the newcomer, the black blobs in his vision fading from his standing up too quickly, he saw that this was no underling. Wasn’t one of the blank-eyed servants he employed to cater for his body’s needs. This one was powerful, his arms thick with muscle. Hast did not recognize him at all – and that was not supposed to be possible. A mercenary perhaps, a rogue come to steal the treasures of his tower.

Hast said, ‘What do you know of the Righteous Blade?’

‘I know it was the weapon that defeated Vouring,’ the man said. ‘I know that it is long-lost or hidden.’

‘Why do you care about it? You intend to steal it, no doubt? Is that it? It won’t let you, you know. It will kill you if you try to wield it.’

‘So, you do know where it is?’

‘It is nowhere you will ever be able to find.’

‘It isn’t here in your tower?’

‘What is your name, thief?’

‘Lute. And I’m no thief.’

‘So, you say. Yet you crept in here and tried to steal my book.’

‘I wanted to look at it, nothing more. It’s some retelling of the heroes, isn’t it? The Destruction of Vouring.’

‘Obviously. It won’t help you, though. I do know where the blade is, yes. It exists. But it is far away, a distance greater than any you could imagine.’

‘It’s in another realm. That’s why you were walking the aether.’

Hast stifled the dismissive retort that had risen to his lips. Perhaps there was more to this Lute than met the eye.

The newcomer appeared to take Hast’s lack of a response as confirmation. ‘How long have you lain here, Morin Hast? People say you died years ago. What happened to you?’

Hast thought about dismissing the newcomer, throwing him from his tower, turning him to worms. There was much work to do, much that was still hidden. And yet – this Lute had entered the tower. The fact couldn’t be avoided. Hast’s thoughts were speeding up. The man must have placed his hand upon the Keystone beneath the tower and been admitted. Which meant...

‘What happened to me?’ Hast replied. ‘I’ll tell you what happened. I have travelled long and far in search of the blade, following nonsense rumour after nonsense rumour. Years have I searched. The damned blade has been hurled into the dark waters of some mountain tarn. It’s been embedded in the peak of the tallest mountain where no foot could tread. And so on and so on. Again and again, I ventured forth, risking my life as I stepped between the worlds to glimpse this realm or that.’

‘But you found it?’

Hast snorted. ‘Found it? Yes. That was the easy part in the end. Hard to miss the wretched thing in that damned machine. Getting back here to my body proved to be the hard part.’

‘You were trapped in the aether?’

‘It is ... possible I sallied forth too far and too long. It shouldn’t have mattered; my cursed servants should have watched over me, roused me if I stayed too long. It isn’t always easy to find your way back in from the outside.’

‘I saw no one,’ said Lute. ‘There’s no one here but us.’

‘Wretched creatures. They shall pay for what they did.’

‘I think they may have fled a long time ago,’ said Lute. ‘Perhaps they ... left you asleep so they could escape.’

Hast heard himself snort again. ‘I wasn’t asleep. Haven’t you heard anything I’ve told you? I was walking the realms.’

This Lute didn’t appear to be very sharp after all. Muscles rather than brains, that was his problem. No matter, there were more pressing matters. Vouring was stirring once more, the spheres were coinciding, and the nine heroes needed to be reassembled. He, Morin Hast, was one, a direct bloodline descendant. There was no question about that. This Lute, for all his limitations, appeared to be another. No one else would have been able to simply walk into the tower. The others though: he had no idea where they were at all. Because, of course, people – idiots that they were – had forgotten the dangers, had let the careful warnings from history retreat into myth.

‘Machine?’ said Lute. ‘What machine?’

Lute’s words interrupted Hast’s thoughts. The newcomer’s brain had taken that long to catch up, make sense of what he’d said. Travelling with him was going to be hard work. Perhaps you had to make do with the heroes you could get, flawed as they were.

‘A machine, yes,’ said Hast. ‘I glimpsed it. A terrible construction, titanic like a great siege-engine but walking by its own will. A contraption of devilry and malice.’

‘Where?’ said Lute. ‘And where was the sword? Someone was battling this machine with the Righteous Blade?’

‘Idiot! Don’t you listen to anything I say? No one was battling the machine with the sword. I saw it as it marched upon a walled town. The people there tried to defend themselves with arrows and hurled stones, tried to hack at it with swords, but what chance did they have? Brave but foolish, they all died. The machine cut a swathe through them all, felling them like wheat. The streets ran with their blood.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Lute said. ‘Where was the Righteous Blade in all this?’

‘Upon the machine’s left hand. Its great fingers were swords, and one of them, the longest of them, flamed with an unearthly fire. I recognized it at once.’

‘The sword ... has become part of this monstrosity?’

‘That’s what I just told you! Whoever constructed this machine clearly used whatever items of power they could find, and the Blade, it seems, proved to be the perfect weapon to fuse to it. Little wonder the machine is unstoppable. Only the true hero can wield the blade; it is death to anyone else. But this ... thing is already dead. Or was never alive. It can use the sword without fear.’

‘We have to get there,’ said Lute. ‘You said people were fighting it?’

‘I said they were dying trying to fight it. There’s a difference.’

‘Where? Where do we need to go?’

‘Far from here. Another land, another realm. A place you will never have heard of.’

‘But you can take us there?’

‘It isn’t that simple, you know. Creating a portal, stepping between the realms. It is a hundred times harder than letting the mind fly free. A thousand times harder. A thousand times riskier, too. One misstep and you’ll spend the rest of your life trapped in the emptiness between the worlds. Although, the good news is that you won’t have to suffer for long. A few moments, little more.’

Lute waved away these objections. Whatever else he was, he was brave, no doubt about it. Brave or stupid. Perhaps it amounted to the same thing in the end.

‘Then you have to do it,’ Lute said. ‘Can you stand? You have to take us there.’

‘Oh, I do, do I?’

‘You have to. We both know you have to.’

Hast sighed and stood. The blobs swarmed in his vision again, but they were fainter. Was he strong enough to force a pathway to open between the worlds? He was weak from his long wanderings in the aether – but he could manage it. He was, after all, Morin Hast. If anyone could do this thing, it was him.

‘Help me to the top of the tower, boy,’ he said. ‘The spell circle. I will attempt the magic. If you’re sure you wish to take the risk.’

‘I’m sure.’

Hast grunted. Together, they worked their way up the winding stairs of the tower to step between the worlds.

Chapter Six

In which our heroes learn that size really does matter

Patrick Samphire

London, East End

The exhaust is heavy in the air tonight, thick as wool. Myra can taste the lead and the benzene from the pollution. Sometimes it's almost intoxicating. She wants to breathe in, take it deep into her lungs. Get high on it. There ought to be a song in that. A rock ballad, perhaps. Something with a good guitar. A pretty-boy singer fondling the microphone stand. Sprayed hair and spandex, the whole nine yards.

She's been spending more and more time in this realm these last few years. It's one of those realms where they've forgotten Vouring, if they ever knew about him. Other than a few drug-addled writers and a couple of cults shouting at the moon, they're blissfully ignorant of the whole damned thing. That's the way it should be. She suspects Hawkwind might have written a song about it, but who the fuck could tell?

She's come across a dozen versions of London in different realms on her travels. For all she knows, there are uncounted variations out there, but she's settled on this one precisely because it's been forgotten.

Music thumps loudly from the pub, shaking the paving stones. The cigarette smoke drifting through the open doorway is almost as thick as the fumes from the traffic crawling past behind her. Spit, gum, and cigarette ends litter the pavement outside. She pushes her way in.

This is another reason why she loves this realm. Guitars and drums loud enough to drown out the screams that sometimes come echoing through her head. They're just memories, of course, but sometimes Myra thinks the screams have pierced between the realms to plunge daggers into her head. Whoever came up with the idea of amplifying and distorting guitars was a fucking genius. It means she doesn't have to think.

Even so, this isn't the kind of place she'd normally find her clients. Her services don't come cheap, because she offers something no one else can: the chance to disappear, completely, irretrievably, and without trace. The kind of people who need that are willing to pay. For enough of a fee, she'll take them where they can never be found: any one of a thousand realms. That's another thing people in this realm don't know about: the existence of other realms. Maybe the realms were all linked once. Maybe people could cross between them as easily as they'd step out their door. Not anymore.

The band on stage tonight have really got something. The singer is leaning right over the edge, almost spitting on the audience below in his fury. The guitars are tight, the riff driving the crowd into a frenzy, the drums like punches into her chest. If they don't fuck it up, this band are going to be big. It's almost enough to make her stop and listen, but she's got business. Maybe when she gets back.

She pushes through the heaving crowd, smelling sweat and cigarettes and spilled beer. Bodies thump against her.

The door beside the stage is guarded by a bouncer, but she's already checked the place out and pressed a fiver into the bouncer's hand, so he just lets her through. All she knows about her client is that he's in the music business, and he fucked over the wrong people. Now he wants out. Myra can think of a few good options out there, realms where a man with his talents might thrive. A bunch of places he'd fucking burn, too, if she doesn't take to him. She never promised anything other than getting him out of this realm.

The hallway beyond leads to a dressing room, a toilet, and stairs leading up to the alley behind the pub. She checked that all out, too, just in case. All she learned was that she'd die sooner than use that toilet.

The two men waiting in the hallway aren't her client. For a moment, she thinks she's been set up, that someone is finally on to her talents and wants them for themselves. But only for a moment, because she can feel the wrongness of these men.

They're not from this realm.

Fuck.

And that's not all. She's never met them, she's never even seen pictures of them, but she knows them in a way that's generations deep, bred into her blood.

There's only one way to handle this: bluff. That's another thing this realm has taught her: how to bullshit like a fucking hero. She lifts her chin and closes the distance between them.

One of them is older, a grey beard reaching almost to his belly button, robes drooping off him like a lost monk. The other is young, certainly younger than her. Maybe even a teenager, but big, muscled. Small burn marks scar his arms. A fireman, perhaps, or a blacksmith.

'Let me guess,' Myra says, before either of them can open their mouths. 'You.' She nods at the older man. 'An old hippy. In a band in the sixties, but too many mushrooms and too much LSD, and it all fell to bits. Now you don't even recognise your bandmates. And you.' She turns to the younger one. 'You're the bodyguard, hired to keep him safe, but no one knows who he is anymore, and you haven't had the chance to hit anyone for weeks. How am I doing?'

The two exchange confused looks. But then the older one draws himself up. Maybe it would have been more impressive if he hadn't been standing next to the over-muscled colossus. 'The Righteous Blade.'

Her stomach drops, and her throat tightens. A black fear comes rushing up her spinal cord. Despite the hammering music, she can hear the screams again.

No. Fuck all that. That isn't her anymore. 'Never heard of them. Were they like Jefferson Airplane or the Grateful Dead? But, you know, not famous.'

Again, utter confusion. She takes the opportunity to try to step past them. The young man moves in front of her, hand held out.

She looks down at it. 'Son, if you lay that hand on me, I will cut off your bollocks and shove them up your arse.' Her hand drops to the switchblade in her pocket.

The old man lays a hand on the young man's arm and eases him back. 'No need for that.' His eyes raise to hers. Not a happy man. A man used to getting his way. Arrogant. 'You'll be coming with us, so stop this stupidity.' He waves a hand in the air. Sparks stutter from his fingers and die. He stares at his hand, jaw hanging open like a fish.

Myra laughs in delight. 'You're a magician. You didn't do your research, did you? Magic doesn't work in this realm.' She doesn't know why, but it's something that these cut-off realms often seem to share: a failure of magic to work. Perhaps it's a side-effect of being cut off, or perhaps it's why they're cut off in the first place. Either way, unless the guy knows some card tricks, he isn't going to get far as a magician here.

The young hulk turns to his magician companion. 'Then how are we to get out of this realm? We're stuck!'

Myra lets a smile spread across her face. Maybe this isn't such a disaster after all. 'You've come to the right place. I can get you to any realm you want to go.'

Emotions war across the old man's face. Anger, remorse, a bitterness that wants to spill out, all held back by sheer will. 'Thank you,' he says, with a slight bow.

'No problem. Now, all we have to do is discuss the price.'

*

The young man's face is a book. Again, his jaw drops. Myra has to resist the urge to toss a coin in like a wishing well. Maybe it would be good luck.

The older man isn't so easily shaken. Myra guesses you don't become a wizard by letting people push you around. She hasn't met many wizards. Even in the connected realms, they're unusual. But they're arseholes, one and all. The wizard's chin juts out. 'Vouring is stirring. His bonds grow weak. He must be bound again.'

Again, Myra feels hollowness eat away at her stomach. Vouring, Vouring, Vouring. That was all her parents talked about, even as their home burned, as the city walls shattered, as men and women threw themselves against the machine and died. Somehow, Vouring was still their obsession.

'Good luck with that. I think I'll stay here.'

'Fool.' The old man's face twists. 'You think you're safe here. This realm may be forgotten by man—'

'And woman.'

'It may be forgotten by man, but Vouring has not forgotten it, and Vouring has not forgotten you. Every day, every minute, for centuries, Vouring has been bound, tortured endlessly, and as he suffers, he stares at the statues of the nine heroes who bound him. My ancestor, his ancestor,'—he nods towards the younger man—'your ancestor. Vouring remembers. He will come for you, and no realm will stand in his way.'

Myra takes a step back. She can't help it, even as she curses herself for showing weakness.

The wizard notices. 'Vouring must be bound again before he comes free, or every person across every realm will suffer and die. We need the Righteous Blade. Your family was tasked with keeping it safe. What happened to it?' The last words are bellowed.

She wants to deny it again, pretend they have the wrong person, that she doesn't know what they're talking about. But it's too late for that. Far too late. She heaves in breath and closes her eyes. 'It was lost. One of my ancestors lost it. I don't know how. All I know is that it was taken and made part of a terrible machine.'

The old man's fury is now such that he pursues her, jabbing a finger, even though she could have cut it off with a single swipe of her switchblade. 'Then you should have retrieved it. That was your duty, your job.'

'Yeah?' Now she's furious, too, embracing the raging heat of the anger to burn away fear and guilt. 'I don't recall applying for that job. I don't recall anyone asking me if I wanted to. Why the fuck should I?'

'Are you a coward?' This time the young man speaks.

'A coward?' She turns on him. 'My father tried to retrieve it. He dedicated his life to that. You know what happened? Dead. Butchered by that machine. His mother before him and her mother before her. Dead and dead. That's what we do, my family. We face that thing, and we die. You haven't seen it. I'm not throwing my life away for nothing. What have you done while my family died?'

The boy looks chastised. It's easier to think of him as a boy, despite his size.

The old man speaks softly now. 'The Righteous Blade is bound to us, because of what our ancestors did. Maybe you could not retrieve it alone. But between the three of us, we can. All of us have a destiny. Yours was to keep the sword safe. Mine is to guide. His is to be the hero, the one who can wield it against Vouring. We must embrace those things, and we must do it before Vouring is free, or every realm will suffer.'

She sighs. Behind her, the band has stopped playing. Maybe she doesn't care about the other realms, but she thinks she'll care if the music stops for good here, in this realm. From far away, she can still hear the screams of the people who died when that machine came, falling beneath the power of the Righteous Blade, of her father, body broken and torn, before he could scream no more. Maybe the old man is right. Maybe they can retrieve the sword and take revenge on the thing that ruined her world. And maybe they can't. Either way, perhaps the screams will end.

'Come on then, Gandalf.'

The boy frowns. 'His name is not Gandalf. His name is Morin Hast.'

She rolls her eyes. 'And what do we call you? Conan? Hercules?'

The boy straightens. 'My name is Lute.'

'Well, that's not very heroic, is it? Let's hope those muscles are good for something, eh?' She reaches into the air, her fingers playing it like over harp strings.

'What are you doing?' the wizard demands.

She glances back at him. 'Getting us out of here. That's what you wanted, right?'

He frowns. Not a good look when you already look older than God. 'There is no portal here.'

'Not yet. Give me a chance.'

She tweaks the fabric of the realm, twisting and peeling it back.

'You're not a Pathfinder, are you? You're something else.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Now, are you going to shut up so I can work?'

He leans so close she has to bend back. 'You're a Pathmaker.' He nods. 'Maybe you're not as useless as you seem.'

The temptation to drop in a Hell realm is almost overwhelming. Instead, she keeps working. The fabric of the realm parts beneath her fingers, a portal opening itself like the blackness of space. 'Time to go home.'

*

They step out of the portal to the smell of smoke. Not just burning wood or cigarettes or exhaust, but burning stone, seared metal, and through it all, the smell of burning flesh. It doesn't take Myra long to realise that the screams she's hearing aren't just in her head.

Smoke stings her eyes. She takes an instinctive breath and nearly chokes.

'What is this?' she hears the wizard bellow. Then he chants, a language she doesn't recognise, and the smoke sweeps away. 'At least magic works here,' he mutters.

'What is this?' the boy, Lute, repeats, copying the wizard.

In the clearing smoke, Myra sees golden towers rising from blue stone. Half of them are toppled, broken, and burning. Fire rages through the streets and over buildings, almost animal in its hunger.

'Taras,' she whispers. 'I don't understand.' When she last came to this city, the war was hundreds of miles away. She knows she's been gone a long time, but it's almost unbelievable. The fortresses of Corra, Derrenion, and Span were impregnable, guarded by more than just the mountain heights. They should have stood for a hundred years.

Then she raises her eyes and sees it. The machine.

They call it a machine, and it is. Steel and bronze, gears and pistons. But that's not all. Great bones and ancient flesh, too, added to the machine over time as it conquers and destroys. It towers over the broken walls of the city; far bigger than the last time she saw it.

She'll give the soldiers of Taras this: no one will ever doubt their bravery. Even as she watches, a squad bursts from cover to throw themselves against the machine, spears and swords hammering into metal.

The machine doesn't even seem to notice them. One arm swings casually down, like a man brushing away a fly, and the defenders simply burst. The Righteous Blade, glittering in the firelight, passes through them as though they aren't even there, blood spraying like raindrops.

'How...?' Lute manages. 'How are we supposed to defeat that?'

Myra feels a rush of vindication. 'Now do you see why I ran?'

'It's wrong,' Hast mutters. 'The Righteous Blade should never be used like that.'

‘Maybe tell that thing,’ she says.

‘Is it...? Did Vouring make that monster?’

Myra glances over at Lute. The boy is staring, wide-eyed, as the machine demolishes another section of the city wall.

‘You think Vouring is the only evil in the realms? Men made this, men who were hungry for power. They didn’t need Vouring. Imprison Vouring for eternity, and men will still create shit like this. And you know the funny thing? The men who made this are long gone. I don’t know if they got what they wanted, but they’re dead anyway, and this thing just keeps going. Now. Are you ready to get back out of here? There’s a lot of realms out there. Plenty of places to run and keep running.’ She’s already reaching for the air, ready to pluck it apart.

But the boy’s heard too many stories about heroes. ‘No.’ He heaves in a breath, expanding his already over-sized chest. ‘The Righteous Blade is our destiny.’ He throws a quick glance at Hast, as though looking for reassurance, but the wizard is muttering to himself inside his beard. ‘We will take back the blade, or we will die trying.’

And despite herself, she finds herself believing him. Damned heroes. The boy will be the death of them all. ‘I’m open to ideas.’

Again, the boy turns to Hast. Bit of a crush going on there? ‘Can you stop it with magic? You made a whole tower float. Couldn’t you, you know, toss it into the sun or something?’

The wizard snorts. ‘I didn’t create that spell in a morning.’

‘Magic slides off it, anyway,’ she says. She’s heard the stories of wizards striding confidently out towards the machine and unleashing their power. They’re all dead, too.

‘I didn’t get to be this old without learning a few tricks.’ Hast tilts his head. ‘But, no, I can’t stop it while it holds the Righteous Blade.’

‘Right,’ Myra says. ‘So, to be clear, the plan is to take the Righteous Blade, the weapon that helped defeat Vouring, from the hand of a monstrous machine that can destroy cities, with, what? A wing and a prayer?’

‘We fight,’ Lute says.

‘You ever been in a fight?’

The boy looks shifty. ‘A few.’

‘I’m not talking about a punch-up in the pub. I’m talking about blades-out, blood and guts and bile.’

‘Enough!’ Hast turns on them. ‘I have not lived this long to listen to children bicker. I will slow it down. I will get you to the Blade. Then you can do what you were born to do, or you can die.’

Myra isn’t sure which would be better.

They run through the streets, pushing through terrified, fleeing crowds. Desperation turns the air thick. Around them, buildings crumble as the machine simply tosses chunks of broken wall before it. More than once, the only thing that saves them from falling rubble is Hast’s magic. The absurdity of the situation thumps through Myra with every step.

They burst out into an open square, Hast panting like an overheated dog, and there it is, looming above them like a skyscraper. The machine. It’s vast. Unimaginably so. She can feel the heat of it even from here, and even though it rises up right over them, it must still be a couple of hundred yards away. The only good thing is that it doesn’t seem to have noticed them. They’re just too small.

‘Anyone else wondering if this is still a good idea?’

‘Prepare yourself,’ Hast says.

Right. Her hand falls to the switchblade in her pocket before she lets it fall with a laugh. She might as well attack an elephant with a hair.

The wizard is muttering again, hands moving like he's conducting an orchestra. Static spikes its way across her skin. He's powerful, she can tell that. Maybe the most powerful wizard she's ever encountered.

It won't do any good. The magic will break on the machine's profane body.

With a sweep of his hand, the wizard picks up a chunk of broken battlements the size of a house and hurls it at the monstrosity. The impact staggers the machine for a moment.

'You don't have to hit it with magic,' Hast says.

Yeah. Only the impact has scarcely dented the machine's carapace, and now it really has noticed them. It turns its enormous metal and bone head towards them. A single step crushes a shop. It shoves the stump of a fallen tower aside, toppling what's left of it.

'Get the Blade,' Hast says, and suddenly Myra is flying, almost too fast to scream, heading right for the machine. What a way to go.

Another building rockets up, crashing into the machine, drawing its attention back to Hast and away from this little gnat flying towards it.

The machine comes at her like a freight train. She hits its left hand with an impact that nearly stuns her. As she slips over slick metal, all she can think is that Hast would have made a hell of a darts player. Bullseye.

Her hands close on a ridge of metal and clamp tight. She blinks her eyes into focus.

She's dangling from its hand. All it would need to do is flick its finger and send her tumbling to her bloody death.

Gritting her teeth, she hauls herself up. Above her, the blades that make up its fingers jut viciously into the sky. They all have power. She can feel it, now she's so close. But the Righteous Blade is unmistakable. Its power is overwhelming.

All the blades have been welded solidly to the metal hand. Somehow, she didn't remember to bring an arc welder with her.

'Fuck me.'

At last, the machine's head turns towards her, and she stares into its eyes, each one larger than her. The machine isn't alive. It doesn't breathe. She suspects it doesn't even think. But it seems to Myra that it sighs at the sight of her. It lifts its hand, bringing it towards that machine head, jaws of rusted iron. It doesn't eat, she knows that. Whatever devilry powers it doesn't rely on such mundane things. Whoever built it, whichever forgotten madman, must just have thought it made the thing more intimidating. They're not wrong. Its jagged teeth could rip through her like through tissue paper. There's no getting out of this. She doesn't even have time to open a portal. Instead, she lunges for the Righteous Blade.

The Blade will kill anyone who isn't a true hero. She has never been a hero. She has been a coward and a crook; she's been selfish and contemptuous. But the blood of a long line of heroes runs through her veins, and somehow, she always knew she couldn't run from it forever. Her hand closes on the Righteous Blade, and it recognises her.

She feels the machine's unliving will set itself against her. But she can feel the Blade now. She resisted it for so long, but this was always her destiny. The magics set into this Blade cannot be denied.

The Righteous Blade slips free of the machine's hand.

The thing jerks away, and she falls, tumbling through the air, far above the broken ground.

She never wanted to be a hero. This is what happens to heroes.

Below her, Hast and Lute still stand in the open square. Idiots. They should have run.

She flings the sword towards them.

Magic catches her, Hast's power cushioning and supporting her, sweeping her away from the fury of the machine.

She sees the boy leap forward, hand outstretched, and the Righteous Blade drops into it, as though there was nowhere else it could ever have landed. The boy seems almost to swell, as though he wasn't already big enough.

Fucking heroes.

The Righteous Blade blazes with power, and he charges the machine, an ant attacking a giant. Only this ant wields the power that took down Vouring.

In the end, deprived of the Blade, the machine is nothing. It falls, hitting the ground like an earthquake, as Lute hacks into it, cutting through its metal and bone and flesh, dismantling it.

It takes a long time, but the boy has stamina.

At last, Hast lays his hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Enough, now. We have bigger challenges awaiting.' He gathers them in the square. Slowly, the citizens of Taras are gathering again, staring at the remnants of the fallen machine and the ruins of their city. 'It took nine heroes and more than just the Righteous Blade to bind Vouring before. We are just three. We must find the others, and we must do it soon. I fear we have waited too long.'

'Where are we going?' Lute asks.

'The Citadel, where the Tormentor of Worlds awaits.'

If anyone asked Myra, she would say it was fucking terrible idea. No one asks.

At least she can't hear screams anymore.

Chapter Seven

In which our heroes explore the meaning of tooth, blood and claw

Alex S Bradshaw

The team tumbled through the portal in a knot of limbs and curses down the ancient wooden steps and onto the soft soil.

Slowly, the three of them untangled themselves from each other and moved to stand at the centre of the jungle clearing.

‘What the fuck was that?’ Greton moaned, rolling his neck before pointing at the top of the stairs to the empty platform. ‘Isn’t our Pathfinder supposed to keep the portals safe and easy to use? Thank fuck we only fell down the stairs. What if that had happened on the portal to Mycelia? You stumble there and you’re falling off a fucking cliff.’

‘I thought you were supposed to be tough,’ Hoji said with a smirk, then hissed through his teeth as he shook his leg. ‘You fall down.... four stairs and you’re already bitching?’

‘Shut up, both of you,’ Rhen snapped. She finished checking over her pack then stood and brushed the loose dirt from her coat. ‘It’s Vouring. He’s already infecting the spaces between worlds. It will only get worse so let’s get a fucking move on.’

Greton gritted his teeth. There was no point arguing with Rhen. As Pathfinder she was there to get the job done, everything else was a distraction. Greton sat up, put his hand on Hoji’s shoulder, and pushed down on the other man to get himself up. Hoji cursed as Greton shoved him deeper into the mud but Greton just grinned.

‘What’s the deal, then, boss?’ Greton asked. ‘We had to get out so quick no one told Hoji.’

‘No one told you either, shitstain.’

Rhen sliced a hand through the air to cut off their bickering. They fell silent.

Around them, the jungle hummed back to life. Insects buzzed around them, birds sung in the distance, and something hopped away from them through the undergrowth.

Greton glanced at the nine gargantuan trees lining the clearing. They had been torn down hundreds of years ago but they looked as vibrant as the day they had been felled. Only the statues carved into the redwood-sized trunks gave any indication to their age. The same figure was carved into each tree though each statue differed to show some particular aspect of Vouring. This one had Vouring with the open jaws of a wolf in place of a human mouth. That one he was wrapped in leathery wings with two clawed fingers overlapping like some bestial clasp. The statues’ once-smooth and bright heartwood was now grimy and mould-slicked and peppered with deep cuts. Each cut bled bright red sap that smoked in the dim light.

Greton shuddered.

‘Come on, boss, this place gives me the creeps.’ Greton ignored Hoji’s snickering. ‘Which way?’

Rhen didn’t pull her gaze from the bleeding trees as she said, ‘Fuck knows. We’re looking for some kind of ritual site. My source believes the relic will be hidden beneath an altar. Probably buried. The Azrani aren’t likely to leave it lying around when it’s worth six thousand Veks.’

Hoji nodded, spat on the ground, and stepped up to join the others. ‘Don’t the bats have like a hundred different places they do rituals?’

Rhen shot Hoji a look. ‘Don’t call them that, asshole. We may be here to rob them, but we can still show a little respect.’

Greton grinned but kept his silence.

Rhen took out a battered map from her coat and glanced it over. 'The Azrani do have a lot of temples and places dedicated to various rituals, but I have a feeling we need to visit the one place they won't go.'

'Ah fuck.' Greton's shoulders slumped. He'd been to the jungles of Azra often enough that he knew how to handle himself, but he'd never been to the oldest temple. He shot a glance at Hoji and the man looked just as apprehensive as he did. 'Rhen, you don't mean...'

'We're headed to the Temple of Nine.' Rhen shoved the map back in her coat pocket. 'No arguments. Let's go.'

Rhen turned away from the well-trodden road that would have taken the team to one of the Azrani cities and marched into the jungle. Greton and Hoji glanced at each other. For once, neither of them sneered, they simply shared a look of determination laced with fear.

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Vines, bushes, and half-fallen trees quickly overwhelmed their chosen path leaving the team to duck under branches and cut through leaves to make their way forward. Rhen kept up the pace and it was not long before Greton sweated through his linen shirt. From the look of Hoji's shining forehead he was the same.

'Quiet.'

Rhen hushed Greton. He had been grumbling about the heat and the leaves that kept whipping into his face but fell silent as soon as Rhen stopped.

He couldn't hear anything over the buzz and hum of the jungle but he trusted Rhen. Slowly, he shifted his machete into his left hand and started summoning flame into his right.

'Don't,' Rhen hissed. 'The Azrani won't let us use fire. Put it out.'

Greton gritted his teeth against a complaint but did as he was told. He could feel Hoji's joy behind him.

'We're nearly there,' Rhen said and ducked under the fallen tree in front of them. 'Quiet as you can. There's something nearby.'

Greton had fought his share of monsters on Azra and he was not keen to do it again. He tightened his grip on his machete, back in his right hand, and followed as quietly as he could.

As they neared the Temple of Nine, Greton spotted some Azrani dwellings. The bat-like people built their homes high above the ground, setting timber frame buildings directly into the trunks of the enormous trees and often draping them with bright cloth that caught in the breeze and gave their settlements the feeling they were just as alive as the forest they lived in.

Usually, Greton found the sight beautiful and humbling, but not these.

These homes had been long abandoned. The planks were rotten and half fallen away and the once-beautiful drapery had caught some of the floor and walls that now hung loose like a rotten carcass caught in the branches.

He gripped his machete tighter and hurried on to catch up with Rhen and Hoji.

'How much further?' Greton whispered.

Rhen frowned at him but nodded at the way ahead. 'Over this rise then the temple's in the valley beyond.'

She gestured for them to go ahead and pressed a finger to her lips. The hairs on the back of Greton's neck stood on end as the forest fell silent around them. For a long moment all Greton could hear was the thumping of his own heart, his ragged breathing, and the creak of the dead houses behind them.

The crack of a branch in the distance.

They froze in place.

Behind him, Greton heard the hiss of Rhen's swords leaving their scabbards. In front, Hoji pulled his warhammer from his back. For his part, Greton gripped his machete tight and summoned a gauntlet of stone to cover his clenched fist and forearm.

The forest was drenched in the silent tension of a predator on the hunt. With every second, Greton's heart beat faster. Leather creaked as he gripped his machete even tighter and the low rumble of rock as he thickened his stone armour.

And the silence went on. For a minute. Then two.

Greton grunted and glanced back at Rhen. 'Must have been--'

Something smashed into Greton and threw him into the undergrowth. He screamed but his voice was drowned out by snapping branches and the high-pitched hiss from whatever had attacked him.

He wrenched his stone-clad arm from underneath him as huge reptilian jaws lunged down. The thing's teeth clamped down on his summoned armour. Greton groaned as his ribs creaked under the beast's massive weight.

Then it screamed and was gone.

Hoji roared, raising his warhammer for another strike, then leapt after the creature.

Greton clambered to his feet. He flexed his fist as he pushed molten spikes from his stone gauntlet and stumbled through the undergrowth after Hoji.

It was a damn yitxal. The hulking thing was somewhere between a gorilla and a komodo dragon. Six feet at the shoulder. Its arms and back bulged with muscle and its long reptilian maw glistened with razor sharp teeth. Greton fucking hated yitxal. It pushed itself upright with arms as thick as Greton's waist then threw itself at Hoji.

Rhen lunged in first, carving a deep line into the scaly flesh with her sword. The yitxal hissed as it charged and twisted to try and grab Rhen in its long, taloned fingers.

Its eyes were wild. Saliva whipped around its jaws. Hundreds of cuts along its back glistened red smoke and trailed burning sap.

The yitxal smashed Rhen out of its way before Greton could take another step, then the thing launched itself at Hoji.

The big man swung his hammer to meet it. The crunch echoed around the jungle as it smashed into the yitxal's arm. The thing screamed in pain and snapped its jaw at Hoji who had to stumble to avoid the glittering teeth.

Greton charged in, a wavering war cry on his lips, and swung his machete. It bit into the yitxal's other arm, barely breaking the skin. Greton cursed as the yitxal turned to face him.

The smell of burning sap and searing flesh enveloped him.

Greton coughed.

The yitxal's jaws snapped at his face.

Greton swung his stone fist.

The molten spikes bit and burned into flesh. Stone crunched against bone.

The yitxal squealed and thrashed its body to pull itself free. The strength of the beast yanked Greton off his feet and for a moment he was weightless. Behind the writhing yitxal he saw Rhen and Hoji rushing back into the fight.

Greton stabbed his machete into the beast again and again, not able to tell if he hit anything vital and only knowing that with every thrust he was covered in more hot blood and burning sap.

He slammed into the ground with the full weight of the yitxal on top of him. The monster still writhed and screamed and managed to get its face free of his spiked stone gauntlet.

It spun, throwing Rhen and Hoji back, then with a pain-laced hiss whipped back around to Greton.

One enormous arm, dripping with blood, slammed onto Greton's right arm.

He screamed.

Blood dripped onto Greton's chest. Sap hung from the thing's wounds like tentacles ready to pull him into an embrace. The yixal's wide eyes found his and its teeth came for him.

Hoji's hammer crunched into the head of the beast, knocking it aside and into a nearby tree. Its sap-tendrils writhed and spasmed and then it was still.

'Thanks,' Greton said through gritted teeth.

Hoji grunted but before he could say anything another lizard-beast screamed somewhere in the jungle.

Greton stumbled to his feet. He tried to keep hold of his machete but it slipped from his grasp. He gritted his teeth and summoned more stone to cover his left arm and stood in front of Hoji. The ground shook as the lizard-beast charged, unseen. Then it exploded through the undergrowth, barrelling towards them. Greton fired off a couple of flint slivers through the jungle and was rewarded with a screech of pain.

But still the beast kept coming.

Greton swore and readied himself to summon an earthen barrier.

Something whistled past Greton's head. Then again and again.

Darts.

The thunderous steps slowed and lost their rhythm but they did not stop.

As the reptilian gorilla leapt at them, its body writhing with smoking sap, Greton raised a wall of earth between them and it. The beast smashed into the wall, shaking loose a rain of bugs and worms onto Greton. He spat and cursed and shot a look at Hoji.

The big man had his hammer in a white-knuckle grip. He nodded at Greton and tensed.

Greton dropped the wall of earth and leapt out the way at the same time Hoji charged forward.

The monster managed to raise one meaty arm to block Hoji's first swing, but it was too slow to block the second.

As the yixal tried to gather itself for another attack more darts whistled past Greton to sink into its neck. The thing's eyes flickered. It gave one last pathetic snarl then fell to the ground, lifeless.

'What's up with it?' Hoji said, nudging the poisoned yixal with his boot though he was careful to avoid any burning tendrils of sap.

Greton shrugged, then winced as it sent pain shivering through his ruined arm. 'How the fuck should I know?'

He looked around as Rhen came into view through the trees. She wrenched a leaf off a nearby bush and used it to clean her swords. Behind her Greton spotted another dead yixal.

'Any ideas, boss?' Hoji asked.

Three heavy thumps shook the ground before Rhen could answer.

Greton spun to face their new enemy but when he saw what it was, he let the cracked stone shield crumble from his good arm.

Azrani.

Greton suppressed a shiver as he looked at them. Their cities always instilled a sense of awe in him, but something about the people themselves set the primal part of his brain on edge. Maybe it was because there was nothing like them back on his home world so his brain didn't know what to do with them.

The Azrani had wings of stretched skin like bats, that sprouted from their shoulders: they held them high as they walked towards the team on cloven hoofs. It was the arms, Greton decided, that creeped him out the most. As well as the huge wings at their backs the Azrani all had arms on the front of their chest like those of a praying mantis and right now the two larger Azrani clutched blowpipes, the smaller leading the way held some kind of sceptre or wand. Greton had never been able to read their expressions, as they had porcine snouts with tusks like warthogs, so he had no idea if he should get ready for another fight.

The smallest Azrani, still as big as Greton himself, ignored the group and knelt by the closest yixal corpse.

‘What have you done?’ They demanded as they poked at the corpse with one of their mantis-arms. Every word was clipped as it was forced through a mouth not made for human language. ‘This creature has been corrupted by Vouring. This has not been seen since the days of the Edain. Yet, the world shivers, you arrive, and the poisoned monsters of legend live once more.’

Rhen took a step forward but the Azrani fanned out its wings in warning. She stopped and held up her hands.

‘Peace. This has nothing to do with us. We’re here to worship the nine, nothing more.’

Greton edged up behind Rhen, ready to back her up if needed. As always, the ease with which she lied was both impressive and disturbing.

The two big Azrani shifted behind the smaller one, clearly the leader. They spoke amongst themselves, voices a mix of sharp grunts and inward whistles, until one of the larger Azrani flew off and the small leader turned back to them.

‘Explain,’ it snapped.

Rhen’s eyebrows tipped towards her hairline. “The yixtals are a symptom of Vouring’s stirring. Every Realm is experiencing something like it: a weakening of the bonds that hold back his evil. We came to Azra to pray to the nine for salvation. They are our only hope.”

She tipped her head in a pious gesture, which might have been more believable if Yixtal blood wasn’t smeared across her cheek.

‘Prayer is needed,’ the Azrani repeated, his black eyes taking in every detail of Rhen’s performance. After a moment’s hesitation, it glanced back at its remaining bodyguard and said something in their strange language. The bigger Azrani stepped forward and gave a terse reply, one of his mantis-arms cutting down in denial.

Greton tensed, clenching a fist, but the small Azrani shouted the big one down before turning back to the group. The warrior Azrani rumbled but made no further objections.

‘I wish you well,’ the small Azrani said. ‘We will withdraw and leave you to your pilgrimage. Such worship is needed in these dark days. But tread carefully in our Realm, strangers. Your journey will not be without peril.’

‘Fantastic,’ Greton grumbled, plastering what he hoped was a warm smile on his face. ‘Can you point us in the right direction for the temple of the nine, bat?’

The big Azrani took a threatening step towards him, Greton flinched, instantly regretting the slip of the tongue. But the small Azrani flexed a wing, putting it between Greton and its bodyguard to keep them apart.

‘North,’ the Azrani said simply, before turning to leave.

Rhen took a step forward. ‘We would be grateful if you ...’

The small Azrani coughed something in its strange language and the two creatures leapt into the air and flew off into the jungle’s depths.

Rhen shot Greton a venomous look.

‘What?’ he said. ‘I was just trying to get us there quicker.’

‘I told you not to call them that, dickhead,’ she hissed. ‘Come on. Let’s get to the temple.’

Greton frowned as Rhen stormed off through the jungle. Hoji clomped past him, cuffing him on the back of the head as he went.

‘Oh, fuck off, piss-brains,’ Greton shouted.

He flexed his injured arm and glanced at the still-smoking yixal bodies before hurrying after the rest of his team. Greton hoped that the Temple of Nine was as dead as those ancient priest-kings.

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They fought their way through the jungle. Greton grumbled to himself about the bugs and the squelching mud that somehow found its way into his boots until Rhen told him to shut the fuck up. Greton sighed. Rhen had said this was a quick job. One part of a larger operation. They can get in, get out, get paid. Then he would find a nice-looking girl at the bar and buy her however many drinks it took for him to look pretty.

He slipped on wet mud, knocking his head on a low branch.

Hoji chuckled and Greton summoned a pebble into his palm before chucking it at Hoji’s head.

‘You fucker,’ Hoji growled and turned, one hand going to his hammer.

‘Stop it before I stick you both,’ Rhen snapped from the top of the rise ahead of them. ‘We’re here.’

Hoji and Greton joined her and looked out over the jungle beyond.

In the centre of the valley was a ruin. A circle of crumbling stone that had collapsed on the far side, leaving its walls to be overrun with vines and trees. Whatever statues had lined the entrance and flat roof of the temple had long since fallen to ruin but they could see some central plaza within it draped in shadows.

‘Come on,’ Rhen said and moved on without waiting for a response.

They struggled on through the jungle for an hour before they could make out the ancient walls ahead of them. Roots and time had destroyed much of the carvings on the outer walls, leaving only a hint of humanoid figures, but the gates were still standing.

Two enormous Azrani statues stood guard with their wings unfurled and now draped with vines like the smoking sap that had infested the yixtal. The doorway between them was perhaps ten feet tall and the massive wooden doors, reinforced with tarnished bronze bands, stood ajar.

Rhen led them into the shadows of the statues and they stared through the gap in the doors and into the crumbling stone passageway ahead.

‘Greton, light the torches,’ Rhen’s voice cut through the sudden silence of the jungle.

Greton shivered. Between the silence and the blackness beyond the doors, he felt a cold terror begin to harden in his gut. He glanced over at Hoji. The moron’s face was covered in worry and Greton would be damned if he let that hammer-wielding idiot get the better of him.

Greton took a breath and stepped up to the doors. Nine torches, rusted into their sconces, lined the walls on either side of the doors. Greton summoned a flame into his right hand and lit as many torches as he could reach, only four each side and he scowled when Hoji snickered at him as he stretched to light the higher ones. He gripped one of the lower torches and built up the flame in his hand, trying to burn away the rust and rip the torch free. He did not trust the darkness within the temple. They had to take as much light as they could.

‘Leave it,’ Rhen said after a moment of Greton struggling with the rusted torch. ‘We don’t have time for that. We need to get the relic and get out. Let’s go.’

They marched across the threshold of the Temple of Nine and into the darkness beyond.

Chapter Eight

In which our heroes cannot believe what they see

Frank Dorrian

The glare of Azrani torchlight died as the temple doors slammed shut with an earth-shattering boom. Rhen threw a hand across her face, eyes screwed shut against the darkness and stinging dust that engulfed the team. Greton's coughing pushed through the last echoes of the doors' thunder, somewhere off to her side.

'Fuck... me.' Hoji hawked and spat somewhere behind, the splatter echoing fivefold through the dark. 'Greton - get us a bastard light going, will you?'

Rhen turned her back on the doors, scrubbing grit from her eyes as a blurry light flickered into being at her side, arcing a gritty wad of her own over Hoji's huge silhouette. He jumped as the glob sailed past, a wet plap echoing morosely back toward the team. Hoji grumbled to himself, wiping the hand he combed through his hair on his pants. 'Thanks, boss.'

Rhen ignored him, her eyes roving over what little she could see of the temple. Greton's light was weak, barely dusting the sharp edges and corners of stone some twenty feet ahead of them. 'More light,' she snapped, her impatience getting the best of her.

'I'm not a fucking beacon, Rhen,' Greton panted, 'give me a minute, would you?'

'I said: more light.'

Greton sighed. Ruined arm clutched gingerly to his chest, he raised the other overhead, the fistful of light in his palm detaching, wavering as it rose. Light pulsed through the darkness in pale waves, growing brighter, rising to the sound of the sorcerer's straining. Rhen turned away with a hiss as a blinding flash tore through the shadows, riding the crescendo of Greton's pain.

'Prick!' Rhen saw Hoji bent double before her as she blinked back searing afterimages, the warrior clawing at his eyes and shaking his head. 'You've blinded me, you half-spell shitstain!'

'Shame...' Greton wheezed. 'Won't... be able to see me... clap your sister's cheeks again, eh?'

'Little fucking fairground trickstering, smartmouthed, arsebuggering, shitworm...' Sparks bounced from the ground as Hoji lifted his hammer and stepped toward the fallen mage. Greton raised his hand toward the warrior, a crackle of malign power forming around it.

'Stow it, the pair of you, before I stick a sword up both your arses,' Rhen spat, stepping through the middle of their impending scrap, the pair's grumbling following her. She paused a step or two past them, squinting through the glare from above to scan the temple.

They were in a sprawling vestibule, so vast that Greton's blazing light lit up a hundred-foot half-circle of mouldering stone floor around them. The temple darkness lay impenetrable beyond it, shrouding whatever lay in wait within its depths. Ahead, though, near the edge of the light, great statues towered upon crumbling plinths, their grim features weathered and steeped in lingering shadow. A broad path ran between their sandalled feet, littered with rubble and flaked in patches with faded gold paint, stretching onward into the murk.

'It's the Nine,' Rhen said, stepping closer, unable to keep the strain from her voice as she took in one likeness after another. She pointed to the statue on her left as Hoji and Greton appeared either side of her, the head of its long weapon lost to the darkness that lurked above. 'Tharaful, the Spearstorm.' Her finger moved to the one on the right, its open hands raised before it, fingers clawed as if clutching something unseen between them. 'Zulog, the Wandering Flame.'

Hoji took a step forward, hammer hefted over his shoulder, sniffing the air loudly as they gazed up at the team's legendary forebears. He hawked loudly, and spat again, the glob arcing with a faint whistle before landing silently

somewhere amidst a pile of rubble twelve feet away. 'Place stinks like a sack of Azrani arseholes,' he grunted. Greton sniffed the air in kind.

'Cuntface is right,' he said, a small flame bursting into life as he thrust his hand out to his side. 'For once. Something's not right with this place. It's been defiled.'

Rhen stepped forward, her swords screeching from their scabbards. 'Vouring.' She spat again herself as she stepped over the rubble in her way, the taste of the god's name like shit upon her tongue. 'You two, take point on our flanks, and stay sharp-sharp. Let's make this job quick and get the fuck out of here.'

The team passed between the fading forms of the Nine, following the path onward with Greton's light trailing after them. The likenesses of those that had bested the Devourer of Light before should have been grand - imposing. Instead, they crumbled, rotted like propped-up corpses. Worse, the further they went, what should have been the majesty of Kaegan, the Bane of Fellgods, was but a pair of broken feet amid a pile of decaying rubble.

Rhen raised a sword out at her side and called a halt. The silence that followed their footsteps more dreadful than the ruin brought upon this sacred place by Vouring's evil. Her eyes hardened as they skimmed over Kaegan's remains, sliding quickly onwards into darker shadows.

'There,' she said, pointing ahead with the sword in her left hand. Faded lines were just visible in the darkness, carved into a sprawling, arching relief. A yawning void opened up in the midst of it, refusing Greton's light.

'It's a depiction of the Nine's War,' Rhen breathed, climbing the rubble with her sword-dancer's grace. She paused at the top, poised upon the balls of her feet, Greton and Hoji making a damnable racket as they scrambled up beside her. Her sword-point traced the worn flow of the carving, faded and rotted images of the Nine mid-charge, her weapon pausing upon the monstrosity at its apex. Vouring - the only part of the relief that had withstood the god's corruption.

Lip curling at the beast's passive arrogance, she jabbed a blade toward the opening. 'We're headed the right way for the altar. Greton - get your light in there.'

The mage waved his light forward with a pained grunt, back arched, hunching over his wounded arm. Rhen chewed her lip as the light drifted forth, ducking into the darkened passageway. Something told her the mage's wound from the fight with the yixtal was worse than he'd made out. He wouldn't last much longer, and they'd be fucked in this place without him.

'Arsehole to nowhere,' Hoji muttered, as the light failed to show anything beyond more darkness in the passage.

'Had a few of those, Hoji and me,' Greton creaked.

'Plenty more of 'em to come,' said Hoji.

Rhen rolled her eyes. 'Not if you two don't shut up, and get a fucking move on,' she snarled, hopping down the rubble toward the passage with the sound of the pair's idiotic snickering following her.

*

'Keep that fucking light going!' Rhen hissed somewhere ahead, hunched over her drawn swords and prowling through the murk like a gravehound. Greton bit back pain, scrubbed sweat from his brow, and spared the flickering light a sour glance. It was shrinking, despite his efforts, and suckling slowly away at his Aether reserve with every minute he kept it going. There was still no end in sight to this corridor - no branches, no twists, no turns, no fucking anything other than a wretched trudge between crumbling walls chased with rotted carvings. Hoji caught his eye and shrugged, already half-shrouded in shadow as the light ebbed again.

He channelled another thread of Aether into the light, feeling another fragment of his soul deflate. No use telling Rhen, scrawny bitch was always too focussed on the mission to give much of a fuck about anything else, and it wasn't like she gave a shit about the crew anyway. This was all about the money. For all of them.

'Just get it done, get paid, get your arse home,' he whispered to himself. Sooner he was free of these two ballbags the better, especially that smug prick Hoji. He can eat a fucking foot-long, week-old...

The thought cut off as the light guttered, darkness swallowing Rhen.

'Fuck.' Greton paused, drew a breath, and prepared another thread of Aether. 'Sorry, boss, hold up I'll have it -' Hoji strode past him, warhammer turning in his hands, vanishing into the murk ahead where Rhen had gone, the sound of his footsteps quickly fading. 'What the - hey! Wait! Wait, you idiots!'

Greton pumped Aether into the light, more than he should have - tried to make it blaze - but instead the spell guttered and faded. It withered down to a bare spark, shadows spilling across the wall at Greton's side. He was utterly alone.

'Fuck it!' Greton's breaths rasped against the inside of his skull, his heart beating thunder against his chest as he drew on the last of his Aether, coating his arms in Stoneskin armour again, the very last dregs of it awakening as threads of fire through the gauntlets, a blazing web of glowing cracks. 'What...' He held a gauntlet aloft, stumbling blindly forward in a pathetic panic as the light from the fire magic failed to illuminate where the wall to his side should have been. As his legs tangled like a lame child's, Greton hit the floor on one knee and stone-clad fist, a streamer of embers spiralling from its glowing cracks.

A faint scream reached Greton's ears.

His head snapped up, eyes raking the darkness past the swirl of embers circling him, seeking something - anything - the emptiness of his Aether reserves gnawing at the edges of his being. He gave a cry as an ember slapped his cheek with a searing kiss, freezing mid-flinch as a scream shattered the silence beside his ear. A face - in the ember - charred down to the skull, agonised as it twisted away into the darkness. Another scream, another drifting ember, and they were all around him. Pained faces. Burnt mouths, squealing their last pathetic gasps, begging mercy, tearing at him with accusation. Some he knew, most he didn't, but they all cried the same three words.

Murderer.

Butcherer.

Torturer.

'Get the fuck away from me!' Greton fell back with a shrill cry, stone-clad hands swiping, tearing black streaks through the embers, only for them to reform, swell, grow. He scrabbled backward to the storm of their hate and pain, watching them tighten, drift together, merge. Broken voices found unity as the embers took form, sliding across one another in a blistering tempo, until they roared as one in a molten choir.

Murderer! Butcherer! Torturer!

A head rose before Greton, rippling with flame, white-hot eyes blazing within blackened pits as long, burning arms unfolded, slamming claws into the shadowed ground in bursts of sparks.

You killed us! You burned us!

A smouldering corpse towered over Greton, legless and scorched, its heat tearing at his flesh as it dragged its torso toward him. You burned us! You burned us! Forge-flames billowed from its mouth with every word, faces twisting through its burning flesh in endless rivers of pain, sending Greton scurrying backward in terror. Its hand shot out as his back met the wall, clamping about his ruined forearm in a splatter of molten stone, lifting him from the ground.

You burned us all! You burned us all! It hurts! Oh, it fucking hurts, Greton!

Greton screamed, the heat of the thing's hand searing through his flesh, the stink of it choking him through the pain. He could feel the bones of his arm charring, blackening into ash, cracking open, as the thing lowered him into the flames of its mouth, a hundred burnt hands clawing at his legs from the depths of its throat.

It fucking hurts, Greton!

A faint scent found Greton's nose as he groped for his empty reserves, flames racing up his thighs. Aether - drifting from the corpse-thing's throat. It was unmissable, unmistakable, to a mage - no matter the pain, no matter the terror - they'd seek it like a moss-smoker seeks a fix.

Still screaming, arm beginning to crumble, Greton slammed the stone-covered palm of his free arm into the middle of the corpse-thing's face, right between its eyes, staring into them with gritted teeth. 'Give me your juice, cunt!'

He opened up the hollow of his reserve - bared it to reality like a whore flaunting an unpoxed tit - and inhaled the Aether emanating from the corpse. The thing's screams distorted, wavered, a song wrought upon broken strings. Its form writhed, churned, disintegrating and reforming as it fought against the hunger of Greton's drained Aetherwell. A final scream guttered out like a snuffed candle, the corpse-thing burst apart into embers, and Greton hit the ground in a cloud of dying sparks, clutching at the charred ruin of his arm.

'Fuck the lot of you!' he screamed at the darkness. 'You all fucking deserved it! Every single one of you!' He bent double over his pain, weeping like a child. The thing's touch still blazed, still seared, but... Stoneskin scraped against Stoneskin, crumbling and flaking away with the ebbing of the spell. 'What...'

Greton summoned a small light in his palm and cast it overhead - darkness fleeing in a watery circle around him, revealing the same mouldering stone. His arm was whole - still broken, but whole.

'An illusion...' Greton muttered, a laugh leaving him as he stood. 'Just a bit of light play! Ha!' He shunted a thread of his stolen Aether into the light. 'Boss! Hoji! Stay where you are, I'll be with you in -'

Greton turned as light caught on a figure at its edge. 'Who - wait! No!' He stumbled back, Stoneskin armour forming on his limbs half a heartbeat too late.

Blood hit stone.

*

'You're not her.'

Hoji's hammer smashed Eika's head into pulp once again, skull a bloody ruin down to the still-flapping jaw. Small, bloated hands reached for him desperately, blackened with rot, dark blood spurting from a ruined throat as it repeated itself mindlessly again. 'Hoji! Hoji, where are you? I can't see - I can't see! The water's rising! I'm scared, Hoji! Help me!'

'Fuck off.'

Bone crunched, the hammer took the Eika-thing in the side and sent it spinning away into darkness. Hoji sagged, leaning on his grounded hammer, sweat coursing down his bare arms. Chest heaving, he closed his eyes, the same voice rising from behind him, the same words dragging cold knives down his spine.

'Hoji! Hoji! Hoji, where are -'

'I said: fuck off!'

Hoji spun, an overhand blow splattering the groping corpse that came stumbling through the murk, lit by a faint, ghostly light. Another appeared at his side, all sodden nightclothes and lank, matted hair hanging in black ropes. There was an almost believable moment of betrayal on its imitation of his sister's face, before the hammer smashed it into a pile of bloody, rotting chunks.

‘Hoji! Hoji!’

‘Where are you?’

‘Hoji, where are you?’

‘I’m scared...’

‘Help me!’

More and more of them appeared, a swarm of shuffling, rotting things wearing the face of a dead child surrounding him, their voices growing as they closed in, shuffling wetly on sloughing feet. The sound of Eika’s tears was overwhelming, gnashing at Hoji’s skull, sinking freezing daggers through the skin of his soul. For a moment, he froze.

He knew it wasn’t her - Eika had been dead for fifteen years, now. Abducted, found by the Tallaheim town guards, trapped, and drowned, in a flooded cellar. It was some cruel spell, or curse, an illusion, maybe. A fragment of Vouring’s corruption, or something else, come to tear and pry at scars that still throbbed with a bitter ache.

‘I swear on the Nine, if this is some shitty joke of yours, Greton, I’ll shove this hammer up your arse sideways.’

‘Hoji!’

‘Help me!’

With a roar, Hoji spun, hammer swinging, tearing foetid holes through the swarm surrounding him with every blow. Still, they came, the sound of Eika’s fear growing deafening - skull-splitting, and leaden - sending him down to his knees as the hammer was pulled from his hands.

Eika’s dead face surrounded Hoji, wet hands groping him from every angle, sodden skin slipping from rotten fingertips. ‘Get the fuck away from me!’ He sunk a fist into one, a half-dozen rotten little hands clamping shut about the arm, dragging it and him into their midst.

‘Help me!’

‘Hoji, where are you?’

‘No! No! I...’ Tiny hands clutched at Hoji’s eyes, dug at every orifice in his head, filled his mouth, tore at his skin.

‘Eika... I’m sorry... I should have stayed home with you. I...’

Thunder boomed. The swarm of corpse-Eika’s scattered with a stinging flash of lightning, and Hoji hit the ground beside his fallen hammer. A spray of grit and sand clung to the tears on his face as he picked himself up, the wind slithering over the sweat on the back of his neck. He glanced about him, blinking his vision clear of grit. A stormy sky roiled overhead, cut and veined by ghost-pale lightning, and ringed by the broken edges of crumbling temple ruins.

‘What...’

When - how - had they gotten outside?

A noise from behind made Hoji turn, a pallid flash of lightning laying bare the horror that awaited him upon the sands, freezing him down to the marrow.

‘Rhen?’

*

Darkness. Rhen hated darkness.

And now, it enveloped her utterly.

She turned about in a slow circle, blades gripped tight, stance low, the sound of her steady breathing the only thing she could hear. Greton and Hoji had vanished some heartbeats ago when the shadows fell, and she didn't dare call out to them. Her skin crawled, fear's kiss making its way down her spine upon cold, prickling spider legs.

Calm, Rhen. Calm, she told herself, tongue raking over dry lips. The darkness felt... thick, almost tangible, as though it were trying to touch her. She shuddered. It's Vouring's corruption trying to slow you. Make you frightened. You're Rhen - the Shadowpurse, the Gravestepper. You're the greatest thief that Rathelon's gutters ever shit out upon the world, and you're not scared of fuck all. You outsmarted the Sothaki demons at Hallion's Gate and stole their Emberstone with your own two hands. You...

'Rhen.'

She froze where she stood, half-crouched in darkness, fingers numb upon the hilts in her grasp. That voice... that wretched fucking voice. She closed her eyes. It's not possible, she told herself, trying to keep her breathing steady, willing her heart to stillness. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

'Rhen.'

I left you behind.

'Look at me, you little bitch!'

Rhen turned against her will as the voice punched through her with a frigid thunder, the obedient child filled with the fear of punishment, a whimper dying in her throat as a shape emerged from the darkness.

There are some shadows that leave a stain upon the core of the soul - shadows that cannot be outrun, that resist both the bleaching of the light, and the consumption of still greater darkness. Ones that linger like a burr just beneath the skin, refusing to be dislodged, and digging in just enough when forgotten to remind their victim that they are still sharp, no matter the years between.

Telgin was one such shadow.

The old pit boss stood before Rhen yet again - half-emerged from the darkness behind him, his skin stained and steeped in it, like a thing steeped from a colourless world. She'd have recognised that voice anywhere, though, known that stained croupier's motley tunic he never took off, and never washed. Known the mixed stink of dullmoss, sweat, and shitty house ale that followed him everywhere.

A smile spread across Telgin's stubbled face, his long moustaches bristling. His eyes glistened, two pale pinpricks staring from the depths of utter voids, raking her up and down as they had when she was a child.

'That's better, my little knife.' His voice slid over Rhen's skin like cold oil. 'Did you think you could hide from me, here, Rhen? That you lost me, back in Rathelon?'

Telgin's form came closer, still half-submerged and dragging the darkness with it like a cloak of clinging filth. His grin widened; crooked teeth clenched. Rhen's blades trembled in her hands, her body refusing to move into her sword-stance.

'I will never let you go, little knife,' Telgin hissed, eyes glistening brighter, 'you can't get rid of me. I'm the only thing that makes you real.'

Rhen managed to raise a sword between them, its point wavering, her head spinning. Images, memories - old horrors, all - birthed themselves anew behind her eyes, a pierced abscess. 'You fucking stay back from me, nonce. You don't fucking touch me anymore.' Her teeth ground, she tasted blood. 'I cut your throat once - I'll cut your head clean off!'

Telgin laughed. He was close enough now for her to see the gash she'd put in the cunt's neck before she'd fled his gambling pit in Rathelon - a gaping thing that ran from throat to beneath his left ear, bleeding shadows over his tunic like dark mist.

'Don't threaten me, you little bitch!' Telgin roared. 'I'll give you to the den lads, again. You liked that, didn't you? Something to fill that gaping fucking emptiness in you for once.'

The darkness thickened before Rhen could do so much as shudder - grasping her limbs, dragging her deeper within its maw. She could feel them again - the unwanted hands of countless strangers, their violating touch sliding across her skin yet again. Eyes awoke in the darkness around her, a swarm of them leering at her, sucking down her torment with that same hollowness of Telgin's. The noises of the gambling pit filled her ears, wormed through her skull like parasites. Dark fingers wrenched Rhen's eyes open when she screwed them shut, forcing her to look upon Telgin, and that smile of his that stretched into obscenity.

Something brittle shattered within. Terror took Rhen's mind, swallowed it whole, left a ragged wound that filled itself with rage. She broke free of the hands with a scream, halving the distance between her and Telgin in three strides, leaping the rest with a sword gripped point-down in both hands. She landed atop the pitboss in a maelstrom of brutal stabs, plunging her blade down through the fucker's grinning face - again, again, again.

'All these years,' Telgin hissed, his voice fading into the darkness as Rhen split his skull apart and let shadows spill out. 'And you still... scream like a little pig...'

'Fucking die! Fucking die! Fucking die!'

Rhen collapsed atop the pommel of her sword, exhausted astride Telgin's broken body. His voice, and the sounds of his pit, vanished beneath the sob she let loose, tears cutting scalding trails through the blood on her face. Her skin crawled, felt dirty, her soul gouged by things that should have stayed dead - that never should have been.

'Never again,' she wept, 'you'll never touch me, ever - fucking - again.'

'Rhen?'

Rhen snapped bolt upright with a scream, blood flying as she brandished her sword at the figure before her. She blinked - rage melting into confusion.

It was Hoji. The warrior's face was a mask of disbelief as he looked upon her, his hammer sagging in limp hands, and head shaking slowly.

'Ho... Hoji? What...' Thunder roared overhead, lifting Rhen's gaze. A vast circle of dark sky roiled above them, lined by the crumbling silhouettes of ancient ruins. 'This... where?'

'What have you done?' Hoji's face twisted into a mask of fury. 'What have you fucking done?'

'He touched me,' Rhen sputtered, 'I...'

Lightning flashed, throwing the swathe of sand around them into pallid relief, unveiling the rotting ruins of an ancient arena.

And what remained of Greton's face beneath her.

Rhen recoiled, fell on her arse in the sand, scrabbling back from the mage's body. 'I didn't,' she stammered, 'not him, it was - it was...'

Her eyes drifted from the bloody splatter of Greton's head in the sand to meet the warrior's, and that time-cured coldness took her again.

Hoji came for her with a roar that drowned the thunder, hammer hefted, and eyes bulging for bloody murder. Rhen didn't think, didn't give it a moment. She'd already closed off her heart. There was no going back, no way out from this mess.

And no one could ever know.

She snatched up her fallen sword and spun to the side through a clumsy, evasive cut and tumbled onto her back. In a gritty spray, Hoji's hammer smashed into the sand where she'd been sprawled, and he collapsed beside the weapon, choking. The one eye she could see of his held nothing but hate, as blood spilled through the fingers clutching at his

ruined throat. The fingers of his other hand brushed her boot. She kicked it away, unblinking as she watched him take his last, dying gasp, the one eye of his she could see filled with nothing but hatred.

Another slash of lightning tore through the sky, another wave of thunder rolled over Rhen, before she let go of the breath she'd held onto. Danger gone; panic ripped through her.

What the fuck now? What do I do? Think. Think. Th-

Words echoed through the hollow of her mind. Reminding her of why she was here.

'Bound... by blood. By tooth. By claw.'

Rhen pushed herself to a crouch, eyes tearing through the shadows on every side, palming one of her dropped swords as she eyed movement. A hunched thing prowled near the edge of the sand, its face hidden by hooded robes, but its form and voice unmistakably Azrani. A single eye caught the weak moonlight and glowed at her like a night creature's for a heartbeat before vanishing. It came to a halt before what looked to have once been another faded carving of the Nine waging their war against Vouring, and turned to her, the weak light catching upon it. There was a ceremonial cut to its dingy garb: a priest of the Nine. It bared crooked tusks at her in a snarl.

'I know why you have come, thief,' it said, voice dripping with disdain. 'Your lies cannot hide you from my sight.'

Rhen ran her tongue over her teeth and considered her options, which were few and pathetically far between.

'The Devourer was bound by Blood. Tooth. Claw. And in this sacred place we have sheltered that power since his fall. Yet you dare think to infect this land with your corruption?' The Azrani priest's head shook slowly, full of threat. 'No.'

It flung bestial hands out to its sides in a flurry of tattered robes, its shrivelled wings unfurling. Knotted arms trembled as it raised them overhead, lightning slashing the clouds again, its voice more terrible than the thunder that pounded the ruins.

'Avarax! We have need of your strength, brother! Come to me!'

There was a long moment of silence where the thunder held its tongue, and then something slammed into the ruins high above, spraying great chunks of stone across the area. Rhen gazed up, open-mouthed, her sword almost falling from her hand.

A great form was hunched and crouched upon a broken steeple, its eyes white orbs blazing with the moon's light as they stared down at her. Lightning flashed, peeling darkness from a monstrous Azrani, enveloped in the embrace of its torn wings. A forest of ancient spears bristled upon the mountain of its back, from its bestial mane, strips of rotting banners still rippling from some.

It leapt from its perch as shadows came rushing back to hide it, falling with the noise of a storm rushing through its ragged wings, landing between Rhen and the Azrani priest with a force that tore her from her feet. She slammed down on her back with a cry, staring up at the monstrosity towering over her.

'Take up our sacred blade, brother Avarax,' the priest's voice echoed from the arena, 'and show this interloper the mercy you bestowed upon the Devourer's legions! Protect the seal!'

The beast lurched forward onto the palm of one vast hand, grunting as if pained as it reached up to clutch at something on its back. It heaved - once, twice - and, with a harrowing cry of pain, tore loose a great fangblade from its back in a torrent of dark blood.

A fangblade. A moment's clarity prodded Rhen through the utter terror unfolding before her. Fang, as in Tooth. The very thing she was here to find. Her eyes fixed on the weapon; a great length of dark wood and brass, laced with a single, killing edge of monstrous teeth.

"You've got the wrong idea," Rhen tried to tell the Azrani priest, her hands lifting in a hopeless effort to placate the beast before her. But the priest remained annoyingly silent, and the beast snarled.

Its heaving breaths stirring the sand beneath it, Avarax raised its head, and sunk into a crouched Azrani fighting stance, levelling the ancient weapon's blunt head towards Rhen. Its roar shook stones from the ruins above, the ground quivering as it leapt for her.

Chapter Nine

In which the search for tooth, blood and claw leads to murder

Rachel Green

Rhen was fucked. There was no way she could block a strike from the thirty-foot Azrani giant towering in front of her. His arm alone was twice as thick as her entire body, for fucks sake! And the reach of the fangblade was preposterous, making toys of her swords as it sang through the air. The thought that her ancestor had sent her to this place to liberate the damn thing, almost made her scream in frustration. It was a good job she hadn't told her companions what they'd really been seeking, Hoji and Greton would never have agreed to this suicide mission.

She hit the ground hard, breath exploding from her lungs as the weapon's teeth - curved and yellowed - missed her by millimetres. The fetid breath that still clung to them washed over her in a wave of rotting horror

Avarax roared his frustration to the dark heavens, his tattered wings outstretching to obscure half sky, his six-inch claws drawing geysers of blood from his own bastard palms.

If Rhen had been any less of a woman, she would have pissed herself right then and there. Instead, she took the moment of the beast's distraction to scramble backwards on the wet stone floor, ignoring the bite of pain as shards of debris cut into her palms. She would put up with that, and much more, to put just a few precious feet between her and the mutant. She'd never seen anything so fucked-up in her entire life. What the hell were the Azrani feeding this guy?

Nearby, the priest who'd summoned the beast was chanting. Loudly. Some shit about Vouring and the sacred duty of the Azrani to protect the weapon that helped seal him at the Citadel. Even as she prepared to be skewered by the fangblade, Rhen took a moment to shoot the sanctimonious prick a look of pure disgust.

As a rule, she tried to respect the beliefs of others. Although she followed no religion herself, she'd always held the opinion that whatever helped you sleep at night was fine with her. But this asshole was taking the piss. His god had told him Rhen was here to corrupt the magic of his sacred ruins, but that was bullshit. Against her better judgement, Rhen was in this shithole to make sure that when the original seal inevitably failed, Vouring could not break free of his restraints.

She didn't want to be there, covered in blood she hadn't intended to spill, with images of Telgin fresher in her mind than they'd been in years. She didn't. And she certainly didn't want to be facing a fucking giant bat-cunt, while trying to figure out how to relieve him of a weapon that could tear her a new one, as easily as she could rob a rich man of his coin. She was here because she had no choice. And the Azrani priest could go fuck himself if he thought she'd take his judgement on top of everything else.

Avarax struck again, this time bringing the nightmare-blade down spine first, the flat bronze edge just as likely to split her in two as the teeth had been. She rolled at the last second, and the ground shook with the impact of the fangblade just inches from her back. Vibrations travelled through her as Avarax drew back, dragging the heavy weapon with him. Rhen didn't wait to see what he'd do next; she launched herself upright, whirling to sprint for the nearest cover.

With the rumbles of the monster's rage ringing in her ears she leapt over ruins, her feet slipping on wet moss, catching on vines. She desperately wanted to look back, but kept her eyes fixed on a nearby wall, knowing that if she didn't reach it before the rumbles were replaced by a grunt of intention, she was a dead woman.

If Rhen were going to die, it would be with a cock in her cunt and a glass of whisky in her hand. A heart-attack at sixty-five was what she'd planned for herself, after a life full of fucking, fighting and fleecing the rich. Thirty-eight was too young to die. She hadn't seen nearly enough of the realms yet, hadn't gutted enough bad people, or accumulated enough wealth to be able to sleep on a bed of money. All dreams she fully intended to realise. Usually, she avoided shit like this on principle. The jobs she normally took, like the ones that had first brought her into contact with Hoji and Greton all those years ago, were a featherbed compared to this. Relatively low risk for high reward,

those jobs could be settled by the quick flash of a blade in the dark, or a brief, violent struggle. This was something else entirely.

Rhen reached the ruined temple wall, its ornate carvings lost on her as she flung herself around it, grateful for any shelter. She pressed her back to the stone, which shifted alarmingly, as if it might collapse. The sound of Avarax pounding towards her was hardly reassuring.

'Shit!' she spat, fumbling to slip her useless blades back into their sheathes. Greton and Hoji's blood was still sticky on her fingers, the memory of their horrified expressions slowing her thoughts to treacle. But she shoved the image aside. She had to find a way to survive this, and reflecting on the gut-wrenching horror of what she'd just done wasn't going to contribute to that aim.

A fucking fangblade. She should have guessed. The Azrani were famed for them, though Rhen had never heard of anything on this scale before. The creature that had donated the teeth must have been a behemoth.

By bastardising the original Vouring prophecy for his own ends, Rhen hadn't had a clue what Tooth, Blood and Claw meant. She'd only decided to come to Azra because the Temple of Nine had seemed as good a place to start as any. But that bucktoothed monstrosity had to be what she'd been sent to find. A Toothed blade, wielded by a Clawed hand. The only question that remained was whose Blood would seal the deal? Hers? Or had Hoji and Greton already served to fulfil the prophecy, the red stain of her betrayal opening the path to restore Vouring's seal?

Fuck. Her mind had all but disintegrated. She didn't have time for guilt now, at any moment the pig-snouted face of Avarax was going to bear down on her from over the wall. If he didn't just flatten it on top of her.

With that horrifying thought in mind, she darted forwards, slipping between two stone walls slick with green slime, just as the rock at her back exploded. The sound rang in her eardrums, forcing her head down but she kept moving. The walls protected her from most of the flying debris, though her left calf took a stunning blow as she fled.

Fled. Rhen never fled before. Admittedly, she'd never faced a giant bat-hog before either, but still, the principle was the same. She needed to find a way to turn the tables on this motherfucker and stop running.

She jumped over the roots of an enormous tree, which over the centuries had snaked through cracks in the wall like the tentacles of a giant squid, eventually bowing the old temple so that what once must have been a passageway, was now no more than a narrow gauntlet. It gave Rhen an idea.

'Come on then, you fucker!' she shouted over her shoulder, though Avarax clearly needed no encouragement. He'd stepped over the rubble of her last shelter and was busy demolishing the entrance of the gauntlet with nothing more than his hairy, three-fingered fists.

'Come get me, handsome!' she called as she ran, because Rhen had never killed anyone she hadn't taunted first.

Not until Greton anyway.

'Head in the game,' she muttered, leaping over the last root to emerge at the edge of the ruins. She took a chance and paused to scan the vista, trying not to imagine Avarax's breath on her neck.

There. Buried half a mile away in the dense jungle. A ravine, made visible only by the sharp depression in the lush canopy.

Rhen didn't hesitate. She set off running into the trees, her feet skidding on wet leaves, clothes snagging on branches with every step. She let nothing slow her, drawing her swords to slice through vines, powering onwards as if Vouring himself was on her heels. Which if she didn't get that fangblade, he might very well be before long.

How had she got here? Three days ago, she'd been drunk in a bar at Hazreen Harbour, eye-fucking the barman and spending gold like it was going out of fashion. She'd been back from the Lazrean job for less than a week, weighed down with enough wealth that it should have kept her off work for a year. Three days ago, her only goal had been fucking that barman. Now she was running for her life in an Azrani jungle, trying to save a bunch of realms she knew little about.

It had all started with the arrival of that fucking letter. She'd been too drunk to read it, so she'd ignored it, stuffed it into her satchel only to find it there the next day, an unwanted harbinger of change just waiting for her to sober up.

Fearlin Kaegan. The Bane of Fell Gods. One of the nine captors of Vouring. Her ancestor and surely the author of her current predicament. What. An. Asshole. The letter had to have been written by him.

She hadn't thought of her family in years. Unlike some of the nine families, Kaegan's line had always celebrated their roots. Her parents shouted their lineage from the damn rooftops, practically counting down the days until Vouring's restraints would weaken and one of their own would be called upon to strengthen them once more. Rhen was the oldest of three children, the heir to the Kaegan family's expectations, and she'd decided early on that no matter how much status and wealth being a Kaegan could give her, she wanted none of the pressure. At thirteen she'd left the family estate without a backward glance, assuming, naively, that would be enough to free her from the possibility of being called to serve.

She'd travelled the realms ever since and, her time in Telgin's filthy pit aside, had mostly survived unscathed. Until now.

That damn letter had changed everything.

Rhen had no interest in stopping Vouring from returning. For all she knew, a world ruled by a mad god might actually be worth seeing. But Fearlin Kaegan's letter had made it clear she had no choice.

Rhen had no fucking clue what it all meant. But the threat had been ominous enough for her to drag herself out of bed and start looking for Hoji and Greton.

Did she feel bad for not telling the two men what they'd been getting themselves into? In all the years they'd known each other, she'd never told them she was Kaegan's descendant, and therefore they'd had no concept of the danger involved in this particular mission. The Relic had been the reason. None of her usual sources had fed her information, there'd been no buyer. The fact was Hoji and Greton weren't the type to want to save the realms from Vouring's second coming. No, she didn't feel bad. They deserved to be lied to. Hoji had gone behind her back on that job last year, cutting her share down to a third of his own. Despite her clearly telling him to fuck the fuck off, a drunk Greton had still tried to touch her up that night in the Hogs Head.

But they were dead, and that was a different thing all together. She'd never wanted that. But now wasn't the time to dwell on it.

She took a branch to the face, which almost knocked her on her arse and caused blood to well on her left cheek, but she couldn't stop now. The ravine must surely be close. It had to be. Avarax was gaining on her, the sounds of him crashing through the trees growing louder by the second. He'd been slowed by his size in the dense jungle, but his strength propelled him forward anyway and any second now, Rhen expected to feel his brittle, curved claws slicing across her back.

She was slowing. It had been too long since she'd last sprinted for her life and at some stage she'd clearly become complacent. Her lungs burned and her legs grew heavier with every step. Where was the damn ravine?

Before she could come to it, a deafening roar made the last remaining birds take flight from the trees around her. An almighty crash came just metres behind her and she spun to see the Avarax thrashing face-first in the scrub.

A man stood to one side of the beast, leaning against a tree as if it were just a slow Sunday in the Quiet Realm, and all he had to do that day was relax. He was dressed in black army fatigues, reminiscent of those from the earth realms, with an array of knives strapped to his hips and thighs. But his hands were free of weapons, just crossed over his chest like he didn't have a care in the world. He lifted a dark eyebrow as Avarax climbed awkwardly to his hands and knees, a languid smirk spreading across his face.

'Who the fuck...?' Rhen muttered, but her eyes were dragged back to the bat-hog as he lumbered to his feet, hefting the fangblade back to an attack position.

Rhen didn't wait around to ask more, she spun on her heel and started running again, but this time she couldn't help looking back. The man was gone, but over Avarax's head something enormous was rising. Rhen faltered, almost

tripping over her feet as she turned fully to face it, running backwards, unable to tear her eyes away. Black and scaled, with wings that put the Azrani mutant to shame, a fucking dragon had found its way to Azra. Its amber eyes were venomous as fire roiled at the back of a yawning mouth. Its wings beat powerfully, felling trees to either side, and it climbed higher and higher, its claws extending towards the running Avarax. But the beast didn't even notice, so focused on his prey that he was oblivious to the most dangerous creature in all the realms. Dragons didn't need magic. They didn't fangblades, or necromancy. A dragon this size could reduce the jungles of Azra to blackened char with a single breath.

Rhen's foot went from under her and suddenly she was weightless. Avarax launched himself forwards, and together they fell. The underbrush caught Rhen in its unforgiving embrace, and she twisted violently to avoid being crushed beneath the beast. Still falling, her elbows slammed into sharp rocks, ribs bruising as she hurtled downwards, the dark sky flashing in and out of sight as she rolled arse over tit. A roar sounded, though whether it was Avarax or the dragon she couldn't tell. It didn't matter, she had the bat-hog exactly where she'd wanted him. His wild grunts were a beautifully welcome noise to Rhen's battered ears.

Speed was her only hope now. And speed was what Rhen had always excelled at. The moment the ground flattened out she was on her feet, sword already in hand. As Avarax hurtled towards her, all she had to do was lash out in a single sweeping movement, and the Azrani giant was cut open from cock to snout, his beastly black bowels spilling into the ravine with little more than a wet squelch.

The silence that followed her strike was gratifying.

Rhen looked up, chest heaving, to see the dragon circling the ravine high above her. On its back sat the man with the slow smile. She couldn't see his face from that distance, but it was clear he guided the dragon as it tilted suddenly sideways and veered out of sight.

Rhen watched it go with a creeping sense of unease unfurling in her guts. No one but Hoji and Greton had known she was coming here. No one knew what she sought or who she was. And yet this stranger had appeared out of nowhere, to... help her? No good could possibly come of that.

When she was sure the dragon wasn't going return, she wiped her sword on her leg and bent down.

'Thanks for this,' she told Avarax, his beady black eyes blinking stupidly as she yanked the fangblade from his hot fingers. 'I wouldn't have known what to look for, if you hadn't waved it around like a dude with dick complex.'

The massive blade was heavy, and Rhen only managed to drag it a few feet before she collapsed down on a flat rock, embarrassingly knackered. She spent a happy few minutes listening to the last gurgling breaths of the Avarax, picturing the priest's face when he eventually found his prize pig rotting down here in the muck. But eventually she lumbered back to the body, hacked off one hand so that the Teeth of the fangblade could be accompanied by a set of Claws, and smeared the blood of the Avarax over the whole lot for good measure. Who fucking knew whose blood the prophecy was referring too.

With one last look to dark sky above, Rhen began dragging the fangblade back to the portal.

The Midlogue: The Watcher

Rachel V. Green

I shouldn't have allowed Bane to roast the Azrani priest's bodyguard, it hardly constituted a neutral act.

The dragon's muscles ripple beneath my legs as we circle, his wing joints anchored behind my knees for stability. Gripping his familiar, rough scales I look down at the red-haired woman who stands over the gigantic Avarax, his black guts spilling out in a circle that encompasses her.

For the first time in centuries, I shiver.

The woman has more power than she knows. And rather than let her fall to the creature's reaching claws as I should have, I had acted instead, sending it stumbling into the undergrowth as she ran on through the trees. I freed her from a death that should have been his to claim and in doing so, I broke my vow.

In so many ways, it was a mistake. One I see playing out before me as Avarax's hand loosens on the fangblade. The woman looks up, and across the impossible distance I see a lust for blood in her eyes, and a hunger not yet sated. She wants more. Always more, this one. And the bodies she has left behind her are but the first of many.

"To the portal," I say, digging my knees into Bane, who growls low in his throat, but dips one wing and spirals away, leaving Rhen Kaegan with the fangblade she should never have found.

There will be consequences for my actions. Not only here in the Realms, but in the quiet spaces between, where I should have stayed, watching, weighing. There will be questions as to why. Why her? Why now? After so long on the sidelines, why extend my power to fell this beast at this moment. Already I feel my ties to the Realms faltering, the intangible threads that hold me here as witness, beginning to fray as I interfere where I should not. I've watched too long. Become...attached.

I face the truth as I approach the portal; I do not want Vouring freed again. And nor, it seems, do I want Rhen Keagan to die.

I've watched them all for years—the descendants of the nine—waiting for Vouring's army to make their move and for the terrible destruction to begin anew. I watch them every time. Every five hundred years, since the beginning of time, when the binding spell begins to falter, and the heroes are called. There are always nine. But not this time, not now. Before they'd even received their summons, Rhen killed Hoji Tharaful and Greton Zulog. As far as I can tell, the two men were unaware of their ancestry, as was Rhen, but the impact of their loss will be felt when the time comes. Rhen has changed things, seemingly for the worse. But something tells me there's more to her than meets the eye. Kaegan's line was always the brightest and she could be the key to ending the swing of this terrible pendulum, which see Vouring fall free twice a millennium.

The portal is upon us, one of the last remaining as the spell weakens and Vouring's strength grows. Bane tucks in his wings as the rip in the fabric of space envelops us, twisting into the vortex, which sucks at my grip, fingers of atmosphere pressing their advantage. Bane roars and fire swirls around us, singeing my hair and clothes. Again. The beast never learns. Thousands of times we've travelled the portals together and every time he roars.

I'm blind in the vortex, pummelled by sensation but I know when we pass through the quiet space. Knowledge comes to me. The knowledge of all the watchers, and it's with a sinking stomach I learn the other two items have been gathered: the righteous blade, the leprecoin. And now the fangblade too, thanks to my actions. All three items are within the hands of the remaining heroes and will soon arrive in the central nexus. Vouring's plan is almost complete.

It's been painful to watch it unfold.

Vouring's army, the magi, have been busy. In the past, they only waited; counting down the years until the binding spell begins to fade. Then helping their master reek as much destruction as a dark god can before he is, inevitably,

bound by magic once more. This time, however, the magi have not been content to wait. Perhaps they sense, as I do, that Rhen Keagan is different and that together with Lute, a descendant of unparalleled strength of heart, captivity may no longer be Vouring's greatest threat. Perhaps, they seek true freedom for Vouring, one which cannot be contained by any magic.

The magi planted the seeds of the heroes destruction weeks ago. First, they corrupted the weakest of the nine, dispatching him to deliver letters of lies, directing each of the heroes in search of their own destruction. When he failed to deliver all the letters, the magi found other ways. They sent a vision of Tam Becker to Lute, directed Morin Hast to Myra through dreams he didn't even realise he'd had. Hoji and Greton were sent to Rhen years ago, mysterious benefactors paying them for meaningless jobs until by the time this job, the final job, came about, there was no one else Rhen would think to ask to accompany her. The magi lined up their pieces beautifully.

And now, the surviving heroes are coming together. Not to bind Vouring, as they believe. But to free him.

Bursting from the portal at the central nexus, I see the game is already afoot. Myra, Lute and Hast are already at the Citadel, staring up at the bound, dark god, the righteous blade clasped in Lute's hand. Damon, Yaz and Nicky are close with the leprecoin, and Rhen isn't far behind bearing the claws of a giant and a fangblade still wet with blood. They bring everything Vouring needs to escape his prison, forever.

Vouring stirs as I coax Bane higher into the sky, rising above the buildings, above the knees of the god, the waist, the shoulders, until I am face to face with the tormentor. His eyes burn, as they have burned for eternity, and his incorporeal lips draw back into a snarl as I approach.

"Watcher..."

The word escapes him like a breeze, ill-formed and lifting the wings of my dragon, showering us both with malevolence.

"You seek the end of all Realms," I say, though I know his bindings will not allow him to answer me. They sizzle; wisping cables of electricity, woven with starlight and fire, creeping over every part of his body, obscuring his features. But they do nothing to contain the sense of evil seeping from him. "I am charged with watching the worlds burn each time you escape your bonds. To do anything else, is to untether myself from this place and relinquish my home in the quiet spaces."

A rumble reaches my ears, the ground far below me shifting as Vouring stirs. I look down to see the gathering heroes stumbling, as magi creep from the surrounding buildings to encircle them. I see Rhen Kaegan, the fangblade already raised high above her head. A scream of rage tears free of her chest, and she throws herself forwards.

I make my decision.

"Dark god, I no longer wish to feel the screams of millions echo across the universes. And though my loss will be great, my death swift as sunlight, I relinquish my vow."

Chapter Ten

In which our avengers assemble with artefacts – but no clue!

Damien Larkin

“Get me out of this fucking rubber duck, Nikki!”

Seething anger coursed through my...well, rubberiness. Since Nikki implanted my lifeforce in her mascot, we’d moved from one life threatening situation to another. Even in the confines of this bath toy, I remained the glue that held Nikki the so-called necromancer and Yas, the human cigarette lighter, together.

“I’m working on it. I’m working on it,” Nikki said. “It’s not like we’re exactly spoiled for choice around here. I can’t sense anything even remotely organic to transfer you into.”

If I had lips and a mouth, I would’ve sighed. I’d no idea how Nikki, empress of fuckups, managed to move my lifeforce from my dying mortal body into an inanimate object. Now that there were no monstrous creatures attempting to kill us, I had the time to understand how truly overwhelming my predicament was. I didn’t have eyes, ears, or limbs, yet I could sense people and things within my immediate periphery in an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree angle. Thankfully, my powers as a Pathfinder hadn’t deserted me, so I led the co-queens of stupidity onwards.

“Hey, we are not stupid,” Nikki said.

“Or really? You healed those religious fanatics while Captain Flashlight nearly got us all killed fighting that damned leprechaun. And another thing, stop listening to my thoughts.”

“I am not listening to your thoughts, Damon. You’re broadcasting them loud enough for me to hear. It’s like you’ve got this weird narration thing going on. Like in one of those detective movies.”

“I think that’s called hard-boiled,” Yas said.

“I could go for a hard-boiled egg right now,” Nikki said, head drooping. “I told you, we should have really stopped for food, Damon.”

My anger morphed into molten hatred. We stood on the periphery of an ancient prophecy, determined to face down the rising evil of Vouring, and I had the misfortune of being stuck with two of the most useless people in all the known realms. The sooner we located the rest of the heroes who were supposed to aid us on our journey, the better. I might at least have decent company.

“We’re great company,” Nikki said. “Check it out. Yas does a pretty badass impression of you.”

Devoid of eyes, I couldn’t make out Yas fully but sensed her halt in her tracks. She cleared her throat and in faint outlines of her mortal energy, I detected her straightening her posture. Nikki raised me up and edged me closer to her head, as if that would fully compensate for a lack of eyeballs.

“Ugh, I’m Damon,” she said in a deep, flat voice. “I’m so broody and life is so cruel. Everyone’s stupid but me. Ugh, we should totally go this way, idiots. Ugh, no, this way. Hurry up. I’m so angry and misunderstood. Love me.”

Nikki cackled and clapped wildly. Yas bowed and through a weird distortion of energy, I perceived an almighty smug grin. The rubber walls of my prison strained against the murderous rage building within me. Without lungs, I simulated taking deep breaths and exhaling, hoping it calmed me in some type of psychosomatic effect. It worked. At least a little.

“The Roseline is only a few hundred metres ahead,” I said. “I’ll need one of you to act as a conduit for my power so I can open it.”

“Sounds like a sex thing,” Yas said. “Suppose it’s not the first time I’ve used something rubber to—”

“SHUT... THE FUCK... UP... YOU BABBLING... MORON.”

Thankfully, we made it the rest of the way without any other mindless chatter, even if Yas whistled tunelessly with every step. To keep myself focused, I pictured my return to a physical body. It didn't matter what one at this stage. I'd never take breathing, walking, or punching someone for granted again. All I needed was for Nikki to locate a cadaver, ideally a fresh human one, and I could return to my rightful place leading these morons onto our shared destiny.

I couldn't describe the physical outline of where this Roseline was located, but it lit up like a beacon fire in the dead of night in my mind. I ordered the women to halt and slowly walked Yas through the designs I needed her to etch into the soil all the while chanting and reciting the words that channelled my gift. Energy swirled around me, brought to life by archaic incantations. Holding me tight, Nikki linked arms with Yas and continued to repeat my invocations. Soaring pulses of electricity surged through my lifeforce, and I knew we'd been successful. Together, we marched onwards into another realm, hopefully to make the acquaintance of other people just like us.

"Where are we?" Yas asked.

Devoid of eyes, I trusted my gift to confirm we were in the correct nexus world. I reached out, touching the strands of energy unique to this realm. Our physical location was in a cavern of some sort, with multiple tunnels leading in different directions. Something else about this realm spoke to me.

Darkened coldness slithered back from the periphery of my senses. Insidious evil smothered me, dancing around the edges of perception. Calling out in a dead language. Words whose meaning were unknown to me, but the intent was clear. Danger, death, and destruction.

"This is the realm of the Citadel. Where Vouring resides. Quick, Nikki, seek out a body for me. I need an actual real-life physical form to stop you two braindead fuckups from getting yourselves killed."

All around me, the expired lives of countless dead reverberated. Warriors fallen in a desperate no-hope engagement to destroy a beast more powerful than can be imagined. Hundreds of thousands rotting beneath the soil. Nothing more than cannon fodder in the face of Vouring's monstrous wrath.

Nikki extended her hands and drew on her abilities. Surges of energy flickered within my realm of perception, dancing along the floor and burrowing deep into the soil. Slightest threads of movement emanated. Nothing substantial. With a sigh, Nikki returned her hands to her sides.

"I can't do it. They're too far gone to be of any use. I'm sorry, Damon."

The standard variety of insults rushed through my mind. Knowing Nikki could hear every single one, I made sure to echo as many colourful variations as I could think of. I paused when tendrils of a new energy leaked out from somewhere five hundred metres ahead. My tracking abilities detected four other people. I couldn't discern anything other than they were like us. Cursed or gifted to end what our ancestors started. The blips of their presence increased in intensity, signalling us to locate them, even if they didn't know it.

"More of our people are out there," I said. "Walk forward. That tunnel straight ahead. I'll guide you."

The light from Yas' so-called ability shone enough for her to direct Nikki through the cavern. In my mind's eye, I perceived the contours of the passageway perfectly. Every nook and cranny, all the imperfections in the stone. Grooves worn into the rock. The taint of energy hugging the grit from where people spent their last few seconds of life screaming in agony.

Outside, the dark energy expanded and strangled the structure known as the Citadel. The massive building rested across a gorge, connected by a single stone bridge. One we'd have to cross to reach. Giving any set of prying eyes within the hundreds of windows plenty of advance warning. Perfect spot for an ambush.

Rather than order the Idiot Brigade onwards, I ushered them right along a stretch of path carved into a mountain. Even more death lingered out here. Faint moans echoed from within the gorge, and I hoped it was due to the light breeze more than anything else.

I perceived the approaching four newcomers long before my eyes could have. Despite the constraint of my new form, my powers sharpened, almost in compensation. I dug deep and tried to form pictures in my mind. Eager to

understand their abilities and what they'd bring to our sacred mission. All I deciphered was that there were two males and two females. I ordered Nikki and Yas to pause near the bridge and we waited.

Within a few minutes, the new arrivals swung into Yas and Nikki's eyeline, and the tension ratcheted up between my traveling companions. If we were wrong about the newcomer's intentions, there would be nothing I could do to keep my two idiotic charges safe in my present form. At best, I could offer advice or lead them back to the Roseline. Warily, the new arrivals approached, then halted around five metres away.

"Who are you?" a weird, bearded, hippy dude asked.

"My name is Nikki. This is Yas. And this little fellow is Damon." For effect, she gave me a squeeze. "Well, he's inside the duck. I mean, his life force is. It's not that he's Ant Man and just really tiny. I'm probably off to a bad start. Let me try again. You see—"

"Shut up, Nikki," I said.

The strangers glanced at each other, and the old, demented guy took it upon himself to introduce everyone. "I am Morin Hast. This is Lute, Myra, and Rhen. We've come to face down Vouring."

Puffing on a cigarette, Yas opened her palm and allowed the coin we'd retrieved to gleam. Lute hoisted the sword in his hands and Rhen held out the fangblade for show. The artefacts. Everything we needed to destroy the prophesied evil and save the realms from utter destruction.

Blackness clung to the auras of everyone in attendance. Not the stain of evil, but the sorrow of loss and the pain of the sacrifice each endured to reach this point. I detected the tingle of agony on each one and dwelt a little longer on the unusually skewed energy of Myra.

"You're different," I said.

"I'm a Pathmaker," she said, throwing resentment on me and the word in equal measure.

Uncertainty hung between our groups like a gulf. We'd each retrieved what ancient obligations commanded us to, but the grimness of what was to happen next lingered. Morin Hast parted his lips to speak when surges of lightning tore across the sky and pounded the bridge. Without eyes, I had no need to blink, and ripples of power indicated this was more than an unnatural weather phenomenon. Nine figures, oozing with Vouring's corruption solidified, blocking our progress to the citadel. Out of instinct, our two clusters forged into one and faced the new arrivals.

"Magi," Morin Hast said and pointed a crooked finger. "Servants of Vouring. Bound to his will until the end of times."

"Step aside," Rhen said, her fists tightening.

Lute stepped forward and with muscles bulging, lifted the sword in challenge. From behind hooded veils, nine sets of eyes glared, and a wave of unrepentant hatred crashed through me. Our solidified group shuddered at the cascades of darkened energy pulsing off the magi. Morin Hast raised his palms and slammed his eyes shut. Beads of sweat glittered across his forehead. As his lips moved in silent enchantments, the waft of evil lessened slightly.

Growling, Lute rushed at the magi, his sword prepared to strike down the one in the centre. Unseen forces lifted him from his feet and tossed him backwards, the blade hilt still barely in his grip. With an almighty thump, he crashed a metre behind us and released a long-drawn-out groan as he fought to drag himself up. Yas wrenched him up to his feet, then stretched out her hands showing the flickering sparks of her power. Cackles erupted from the unmoving magi, contempt dripping from every reverberation.

"Come on you, idiots!" I roared. "Tackle them or something. We're not going to get anywhere by—"

"Tough talk from a bath toy," Myra said, joining Lute in raising her weapon.

"We must act together to defeat Vouring's minions," Morin Hast said, his fingers curling inwards, but hands still extended. "I can blunt their power, but I cannot hold it. It is our destiny to defeat the rising evil. We must act in concert. Together, we succeed or fail."

Gandalf had a point. The magi were toying with us. At any point, they could have gripped us in their invisible power and flung us over the bridge. Instead, from their righteous laughter, they relished witnessing us falter. Destiny itself crumbling at our inability to devise a plan. If I had my body, I would've volunteered to lead the attack myself. Better me than Grave-shit-for-brains and the flaming—"

"Damon, knock it off," Nikki said. "It's not the time for—"

"I have an idea," I said, as the basic crumbs of a workable plan melded together. "Xena-The-Warrior-Princess—"

"My name is Myra, you plastic motherfucker."

"Ok," I said. "We exited from a Roseline a few hundred metres back. I can still sense it, so if you focus, you can draw power from it to open your own portal. Unleash one right behind them to somewhere nasty and we all just... you know, charge at them and..."

I trailed off. With a physical body, I could have won them over with my steely eyes, rugged good looks, and firm, decisive hand gestures. Might as well have been trying to convince nuns to engage in an orgy from all the enthusiasm from this band of so-called heroes.

Despite her rising hostility, Myra glanced about and sighed when she fixed her gaze on the statuesque magi. "Unless anyone has any better ideas?"

Silence reigned from the magi. If they heard us, they made no movement to interfere. I harnessed my abilities, reached out, and touched the dying embers of the Roseline. At an invisible caress, it spun into life again, primal power spooling up and slowly expanding in strength. Myra focused her energy and the world around her shimmered. The Roseline reacted to her presence and like steel shavings to a magnet, power flowed into her. She remained standing, no physical change in her demeanour. Yet around her, raw energy engulfed her, pouring into her centre, growing exponentially in preparation for opening one hell of a portal.

Blasts of light ripped across the bridge. Space and time ruptured, creating a swirling mass of energy behind the magi. The light crackled, spun, and finally stabilised. A widened portal showing a shadowy world settled behind Vouring's foul minions. They neither flinched nor turned. Just stood there. Watching us.

"Attack!" Lute said and broke into a sprint.

Morin Hast pulled his palms to his centre and hammered them outwards. Yas raised her hands and unleashed a bolt of light which shrouded the magi in its splendour. Exhausted, Then raised her fangblade and readied herself to join the fray. Even Nikki picked up a rock and prepared to throw it.

The lead magi clapped its hands once and a godawful burst of fiery light seared into every one of us. I slipped from Nikki's grip and tumbled onto the burning sand. Everyone in our group lay sprawled away from the bridge. Moving, coughing, spluttering, but otherwise alive. The portal flickered and died, fading into nothingness and with it, our one chance to score an early victory against that bastard Vouring.

Unified in motion, the magi advanced. No more toying with their prey or studying us with the fascination a child holds for ants. Nine of Vouring's most loyal and powerful acolytes flittered closer. While our group struggled to drag themselves up off the dirt, the magi paused and the lead one extended a pale, withered, upturned palm. Embers flickered on unburnt skin and danced into flame.

If I had a stomach, now would've been the time for it to churn. Malevolent laughter broke free of that fire prompting unadulterated horror to flow through every atom of what remained of me. I recognised the tone, and the façade of magical fire. I'd tracked down and dispatched letters to eight other people at its behest. Started a journey to retrieve three magical artefacts and fulfil an ancient prophecy.

"You've done well, Damon," a voice said from the sputtering sparks. "You dispatched the letters and brought all the heroes together as commanded. Delivered the artefacts and the survivors right to me. The only people and objects in the known realms capable of stopping me, here and now, under my power."

That damned flame used me. It promised money and power to reach out to the descendants of those who imprisoned Vouring and commence our mission. I thought it nothing more than a part of the prophecy. A magic user initiating our quest who meant to keep their identity concealed for matters of safety.

"Damon," Yas said, hauling herself up. "What's going on? Who is this?"

"You know who I am," the flame growled.

The eyes of everyone in our band fell upon me. My thoughts swirled. Deep within my plastic confines, I could've sworn I sensed my heart hammering. No. It couldn't be. I fulfilled my part of our destiny. After a lifetime of sorrow, it was me who initiated our search for the artefacts. My place in the limelight. It was meant to happen. This couldn't all be part of someone else's plan to...

"Who's plan, Damon?" Nikki asked, picking me up.

The soft innocence in her voice gutted me. I'd known Nikki and Yas since they were children. It was my place to protect them. Keep them safe. They were too stupid to survive anything beyond ordering a meal or tying their shoelaces. Someone strong had to look after them in a cruel, unloving world. I never meant to place them in harm's way.

The flames burned higher and hotter and danced again when it spoke. "Tell them, Damon. Speak my name."

"Vouring," I said, shame washing through my core and conquering every thought. "That thing is Vouring."

To the numbed shock of my charges, the magi advanced. Everyone else rose in preparation for making our last stand. Snivelling to herself, Nikki held me tight.

Trapped in a damned rubber duck, there wasn't a damned thing I could do to stop Vouring's revenge.

Chapter Eleven

In which a dragon and its rider enters

Phil Williams

The group formed a loose V formation behind their apparently most heroic member as Lute held the Righteous Blade in both hands, wavering before them. Like he might hold off the mad mages and their minions on his own. He was welcome to, Yas thought – the man had muscles enough, if not to actually fight an army then perhaps to feed them long enough that everyone else would scamper. But in the other direction, where the bridge connected to a great doming temple, and their only chance of shelter, more robed men blocked the way. Myra, at the rear, pulled a gun but made the sort of angry noises that she was realising it either wasn't loaded or wouldn't work here.

Meanwhile, the city rattled with the movements of the great statue of Vouring. It glowed, the outer stony layer peeling away like sugar dissolved in the rain. They'd got close, but only enough that they could now see it in all its glory. No chance to destroy it, with the couple of blades they had (which really, what the hell were they supposed to do?!). But that didn't seem a possibility anyway – the great ugly monstrosity appeared to be coming to life. And all around the bridge, the noises of monsters were rising. Creatures swarming. Beyond the mages and below, the streets were coming to life too, as people came out from the houses. Screaming. The people they could see below were twitching, pulsing and reshaping. Mutating, skin peeling, growths forming, eyes glowing. A terrible power was gripping everything, warping the population into monsters, and the magi slowed down for it, evidently hoping to see their new creations do their dirty work.

"It's the artefacts!" Morin Hast shouted. "The power's coming from them – we never should've brought them here!"

Rhen, carrying the fangblade, roared in anger, swinging it overhead – and down on the stone. The weapon broke apart, with a solid thrum of energy, and she tossed the pieces aside. But nothing happened. The statue was still unveiling and the creatures still amassing. She turned her furious gaze to Nicky. "You. You brought us here. You did this."

"Not me," Nicky bleated. "Damon. What have you done?"

"Not me either, it was just a fucking job!" the duck bellowed, but Lute shouted louder: "Steady, the lot of you! We need to get back to that temple. We'll figure it out there."

With dreams of blinding the enemy for a devastating distraction, Yas struggled to conjure a fraction of the magic that had felled the leprechaun, flicking her hands and producing nothing. She caught the old magician eyeballing her and gave him a sheepish smile. "Any tips?"

"Yeah, give up and go home," he said, not particularly pleasantly.

"You think I don't want to?"

"Can't you fly us over them, Hast?" Myra put in. "Repel them or something?"

"Not in these numbers," Morin said. "And not with all I've already done for you fools. This has all been a mistake and I need time. I need –"

"Incoming!" Lute warned, as something came slathering up the side of the bridge, limbs jerking like a spider's as it launched over the edge. Only the rags of clothing and some semblance of a human face mixed in with the bulging black mass of sores and broken-boned contortions indicated it had once been a man – and it offered a fittingly terrifying screech.

"Ah, get back!" Lute cried, more scared than forceful, but he stepped forward and stabbed at the creature all the same. The blade made a weird chiming sound as it slid through the monster, which hissed and partly deflated, spraying thick black blood. Lute kept shouting as he stepped back, swinging at the falling monster again. They all retreated a few more steps, seeing how its blood steamed.

"Nice," Nicky said, and raised her hands. "And now we turn –"

"No!" Yas shouted, slapping her hands down. "We do not turn. We do not bring things better off dead back to life."

"It'll work this time!"

"Would you shut up?" Myra snapped. "We need to charge them, together. If we can get in the temple, we can —"

Rhen screamed and ran forward without waiting for more of a plan, out of patience and clearly just a very angry, violent person. She drew a knife from somewhere, small and inconsequential against the mass of monsters, but the force of her will made the enemy falter.

"Okay, yeah, like that, go!" Myra shouted, hurrying to follow, and the others dashed after her. Rhen was well ahead, about to meet the wall of abominations, which were bracing themselves, ready to rip her apart. "Wait! Rhen —"

Fire burst down from the sky, a ferocious pillar that blazed across the far side of the bridge and eviscerated scores of the beasts. The throng screamed pitifully as they blistered, popped and frazzled, the stench awful, and the group stared in stunned silence. Beyond the fire, mages were shrieking as they fell about, cloaks ablaze, trying to roll and save themselves. Others turned and ran.

"The fuck was that?" Yas gasped, looking up to see the source of the fire as a great shape swept through the sky. "Dragon! Oh my god it's a dragon — Nicky look —"

"No time, run!" Lute yelled, shoving her from behind, and she stumbled along. They were all running then, hopping past sputtering flames, over smouldering corpses. Yas banged into Rhen, motionless at the front, still gawping at the attack. They went down together, rolled on the stone, and Rhen came up teeth bared, about to drive her knife into Yas's neck. Lute's hand grabbed her wrist and he pulled her up. "Focus! They're closing the doors!"

Sure enough, the temple doors ahead were creaking slowly shut, a last handful of mages rushing about trying to seal off the exit. Yas watched, stunned again by the nearness of that knife to stabbing her. Myra had pulled ahead, with Hast darting the other way, the pair of them colliding with the distracted mages. She slammed one's head into the door as Hast did something fast with his hands and another fell down clutching his chest. Then Nicky was rushing past and, startled by another mage, raised her hands and produced a horrible cracking sound from his jaw. The man fell down weeping and she kept running.

The others bundled in behind, Lute twisting one way to slice down a mage as Rhen went the other and cut a man's throat, barely pausing. Yas staggered upright and ran desperately after them. Washed in blood and the cries of their enemies, the group passed into the darkness of the temple as the doors continued closing, under some magic enchantment. They clanged loudly together, cutting off the monstrosities outside, and the group were plunged into relative quiet as their footsteps echoed through the chill of the vast temple chamber.

Collectively panting to recover their breath, they fanned out, forming a broad circle, with Myra, Rhen and Lute scanning the shadows to be sure they were alone. Evidently, they were — just six hapless fools in an ancient mysterious chamber, about to be besieged by unknown terrors. They were watched over by a series of immense statues, each almost as grand as that of Vouring — noble knights with immeasurable weapons and extravagant armour, gods or saints of some martial race, joined by an occasional slither woman statue, dressed down and demure.

"We've got a minute," Lute announced. "Those doors will hold for now."

Even as he said it, creatures began pounding on the entrance.

"And then what?" Hast demanded. "You blundering imbecile, never mind the doors holding against them, Vouring is breaking free and there's not a place in this world we'll be safe." To Myra, he said, "There's a portal here, yes? Some way clear?"

She shook her head. "By my estimate, we're at least a mile from one. My head's ringing though, give me a minute. I can find us a way."

"We've got a path finder, too," Nicky announced, lifting her rubber duck. "Damon, what can you feel?"

Rhen spat to one side, knife up, and started advancing on her. "You think we'd follow him now? You dare protect him. Fuck your duck, I ought to gut you all."

Before she could reach the necromancer, whose eyes bulged with surprise, Lute stepped into her path. The Righteous Blade stood large and proud in his hands, and his stern expression said he was ready to use it.

"You're on her side?" Rhen growled. "It's their fault. Though maybe it figures – I could cut your throat and all for severing that monster's bonds."

"Says the woman who wielded the fangblade!" Hast said. "You're all as naïve as each other – he's escaping because you all came. Never in all my years have I experienced such incompetence. Do any of you have any idea the scale of the mess you've created?"

"Do you?" Myra put in. "Because you've had plenty of time to impart any wisdom about all this you might've had."

"Can you all pack it in!" Yas cried, shifting out into the middle, raising her hands for attention. They didn't light up. Would've been a lot more impressive if they did. She held them up anyway, as if the gesture alone was the point. "Whatever you might've all told each other, or had your parents tell you, and whatever this fuckhead in the duck might've done to bring us all here, it's done now, right, and we need to work together to get out of this. More importantly, why is no one mentioning the damn dragon?"

"Because you are conditioned not to see," a calmer, silky smooth voice cut through the room, drifting out of the shadows. "And if not to see, then not to remember." Footsteps accompanied it, and the group turned as one to a figure emerging before them, a small stout silhouette. Rhen made another aggressive noise, knife ready, but he continued calmly. "Such is the way of my ancestry, as yours was always to project. So mine was to observe and remain unseen, unknown. As I have for generations. Until now."

"You've got two seconds –" Rhen started, but he raised a hand.

"I am the dragon rider. Watcher of the realms. He who records and listens and knows. Sworn neutral. You may call me Kael." He stepped into the light and there was a moment of uncertain silence. Then Yas laughed, but quickly covered her mouth. It set off Rhen again.

"You. Again! What the fuck are you?"

"Halt, Rhen Kaegan! You, especially, must heed my words!" He spread his stubby hands for peace before she could totally lose it. A short man, perhaps five foot four, in thick leather-panel armour where no two segments appeared to quite match, strapped together with worn twine and strands of what looked like hair. He had a square head, disproportionate, nose crooked, ears swollen, and glasses so thick they seemed more likely to damage his eyesight than repair it. His eyes bulged through the lenses and a bunch of tatty pouches and document cases hung about his person. He had all the aura of a troll librarian, though his voice carried importantly as he walked towards them.

"There is great power in you. In all of you. But it has been wasted. Worse, it has fuelled the very harm it was meant to prevent. Lute, of Tam Becker's blood – you are betrayed. The circle which lasted so long is broken, and – mmph!"

Kael stumbled, his feet tangling, and he took several startled steps to one side to keep from falling over. Steadying himself, he quickly straightened his glasses and looked around as though checking that no one had seen. He cleared his throat and carried on, pretending they hadn't, but Yas shared a pointed look with Nicky.

"I have forfeited much to be here," he quickly blurted. "I saw your passion and the disaster coming and I could not hold back anymore. For you were sent here to free that which must not be. You were enlisted with no knowledge of that which would truly banish him. It's time to change that. We must. As we speak, Bane clears a path." He swept a hand grandly, as though they might observe great battles being fought outside. The distant sounds of shouts and movements of monsters were just about audible – notably away from the temple, the pounding having momentarily stopped.

"We've busted our arses enough, you little gremlin," Myra said, more tired than angry. "Sorry but I'm with Rhen on this right now. We should just ice the traitorous duck and ditch this realm. It's done for."

"Not just this realm," Kael said, raising his voice. "If you do not stop Vouring here, and now, he will spread far beyond the destruction you have already seen. Every realm is at risk here." He paused, eyeing them each in turn, then, in the face of their blank stares, let the grandiose voice drop. "Seriously, do none of you realise what you've done?"

"I mean, I admit I started to think I should've paid more attention to the family stories when we met the leprechaun and all," Yas said, rolling a hand, "and the eye-stalks drove it home. But no. I think I can speak for all of us when we say we have no idea what the fuck's going on."

"I had a feeling," Lute admitted. "One of rightness. That this was a ritual required, to seal the demon god. But we've been manipulated. As the ladies have said, this... duck –"

"Has been cheated, the same as you," Kael interrupted. "Damon. Poor, impulsive Damon. He was promised riches and instead found terrors. By bringing the artefacts here, the seals have been weakened and Vouring will reach full power. There will be nothing left."

"Well no one told me that," Damon's trademark gruff voice sneered. All eyes turned to the duck in Nicky's hand. "The little shit's right, I'm a victim here too. So did you just come to rub it in or do you have some way to actually help?"

"Why is he still alive," Rhen demanded, but again Lute raised a hand.

"We can deal with the traitor later. We don't have much time. That statue is coming to life and we either need to get very far away or we need to find a way to stop it."

"It's far, far more than a statue, that trapped god," Kael sighed. "A demon unlike any the realms have known. There is hope yet, and that is why the magi came for you. Why they made Damon these promises to get you here. They wish you all dead. You, Lute, have a passion and power that might guide us all. You, Myra, can find any path. And you, Rhen, are the fire that may stoke our success."

"And you, Yas," Yas said, "can go home and have a bath. Thank you."

"You all have a part to play," Kael said sharply, eyeing her. "And there is hope, as long as you still have each other. Oh, and the two remaining items." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "You still have them, don't you?"

Lute looked at the Righteous Blade in his hands, but all attention was drawn instead to Nicky again, as she now hurriedly patted down her cloak.

"Oh shit, shit. I had it. I know I did, it was somewhere – ha! Yes!" Nicky held up her other hand triumphantly, showing off the leprecoin. "Ye of little faith, you thought I'd just drop something like – hey –"

Myra snatched it from her hand, brandishing it Kael's way. "How the hell is this supposed to help? These items caused the fucking problem!" She threw her hand about. "Enough platitudes, weirdo. Answers, now, or I walk."

"Indeed, you must." The dragon rider nodded as though he'd already given them sage advice. "You can lead the way. You can find the final piece. You can recover it." He shifted his gaze, indicating the others – Hast, Rhen. Then settled on Lute. "And you must protect us long enough to use it."

On cue, far outside, something loud crashed, struck by a great force. The noises were getting louder as the ground shook from the energy flowing through Vouring, and whatever fight was still circling around the city centre escalated. Kael clicked his tongue.

"There isn't much time. Myra, Rhen, you must accompany me to recover the puzzle box. That is the missing –"

"Puzzle box?" Rhen cut in. "Are you fucking joking, you walking pustule? First that blade and those damn tunnels and those other idiots I had to –" She caught herself, short of saying something terrible. Redirecting, she snapped, "A puzzle box now?"

"It is imperative. Essential. In the magi's trickery, drawing you here to release Vouring, they gave you half of the solution. I can send you in the direction of the other half. With the coin and box combined, there is a way to stop Vouring once and for all. Please. You do not know what sharing this knowledge will cost me."

There was a tremendous roar outside, a beast of great size injured and pained. Their eyes collectively widened, and Kael looked hurt himself.

"He cannot fight much longer," he whispered. "We must separate. Form a defence here whilst the box is recovered."

"I've got this," Lute said, without hesitation. "I have the blade. I'll do all I can."

"You're gonna need more than that, lughead," Myra said. "Like a robot the size of these statues, at the least."

Another terrible howl shook the room.

"Quickly," Kael urged. "There's a rear exit. Bane will have cleared a path and will catch up later. Rhen and Myra, I must insist."

"I'll gladly leave," Rhen said, but pointed her knife towards Nicky. "Once I've taken the duck's head."

"Oh fuck you!" Damon shot back hotly, as Nicky stepped nervously back. "You heard the prick, I was tricked the same as you!"

"And you're arguing with a rubber duck!" Myra cut in. "Let's go. You lot damn well stay and buy us all the time you can. And take care of this." She flicked the coin through the air, and Yas caught it out of instinct. "None of this will matter if all the realms fall. Come on!" Myra paced past Kael, heading for the shadows he'd emerged from, and it stirred Hast into following, the old man having been quietly observing. Likely just embracing the chance to leave. Rhen kept glaring at the duck, with Lute, Nicky and Yas watching her warily, but at the sound of one more tearing scream outside she shook her head.

"Forget it. Let the magi have the lot of you," Rhen snarled. "If you're still alive when we get back, I'll deal with you then."

"Good luck," Kael offered, more charitably, and turned to move after them. Without the mystery and shadow of his earlier appearance, his waddling walk was more evident. Their footsteps chimed through the temple as the group left the other three staring.

"She was using the plural you there, wasn't she," Yas muttered. "Like. She just wants to kill everyone, doesn't she? I'm not the only one that got that?"

"It won't matter if we don't stop Vouring," Lute huffed, avoiding actually answering. The temple shook again, cracks spreading through the domed glass above, and he looked up. "I'm fairly sure with this blade, for all the trouble already caused, I can slow their efforts outside. I might not be able to fight this god, but I can fight his minions. What can you two do?"

Nicky and Yas shared a blank look, then turned it back to him. They spoke at the same time, pointing at each other.

"She heals our enemies —"

"She blinded me — hey! That was one time."

"And the duck?" Lute said. "Should we really keep him with us?"

"Seriously?" Damon snapped. "You're up against the shit, and no offence farm boy but I'm the only one here with any combat experience. I was screwed too, understand! Just get me out of this bloody duck and you'll have a real fight on your hands."

Lute frowned.

"Yeeeah," Yas said. "He is in a duck. I'd just ignore him."

"But you put him there?" Lute asked Nicky and she nodded. "Could you take him out?"

"In theory. Then, there's a lot that I can do in theory. I'm a necromancer. You know what that is?"

"A life giver," Lute said, and her face lit up. Perhaps the most positive response her antisocial magic had ever received. He looked up again. Taking in the great statues. "These guardians. Look at them, counting on us. The knight. The king. The paladin. Even the princess and the matron."

They followed his gaze over the armoured titans, with swords and axes fit to fell buildings. Even the women were formidable; the matron, holding a plate of boulder-sized grapes, looked stern enough to command armies.

"I can't animate stone," Nicky said. "My area's more in dead bodies. And small ones, mostly. I once resurrected a squirrel."

"Wow," Yas said. "Just... wow."

"Move me," Damon said, abruptly. "That's what you can do. You've got huge statues here and one waking up out there? Bloody move me into a warrior statue and I'll fight. I'll make things right, dammit. Those snivelling magi have it coming, pissing me about like that."

Lute met Nicky's eye hopefully. It didn't sound like something that would work, and was likely to definitely backfire, but it had just the right air of glorious madness to it. She in turn looked to Yas for the okay, and the taller woman shrugged.

"Worst case scenario you get him stuck in a stone instead of a duck, I guess," Yas said, then paused, realising there would likely be much worse cases. As another booming roar outside reminded them. She added, "How'd we end up the ones having to handle this? I feel like there wasn't even a discussion there. I could be —"

"Okay. We have to act," Lute decided, firmly. "I'll buy you time. I'll buy everyone time. Do whatever you can here. And I'll see you on the other side."

The women smiled and nodded, neither daring to contradict him when he sounded so earnest. As he braced himself, rolling his shoulders and tightening his grip on the sword, ready to go into the fray alone, Yas whispered to Nicky, "When we die, do me a favour and leave me dead."

Chapter Twelve

In which our heroes encounter the Grapes of Granite!

Derek Power

Damon flexed his newly acquired stone fingers and grinned. It felt good to once again have control of a body and not be simply a spirit residing in a rubber duck. Plus, what a body! Never one to be overly religious, the only thing the Pathfinder truly knew about temples was you could rely on them for two things: Fortified ceremonial wine and gigantic statues.

He wondered which delectably detailed deity Nicky had managed to transfer him into and looked along the faces of the other statues, dread slowly creeping into his stone chest as the five warrior figures were all accounted for. Then, slowly, Damon brought up the object in his right hand and looked at the plate of boulder sized grapes.

"Did you put me into The Matron!" he roared, a statement rather than a question.

Nicky and Yas stared up at him, standing a few feet away from his giant big left toe. The necromancer, ever as useless, grinned at him with a hint of panic on her face.

"Right, yeah, you see about that," she began to mumble. "The thing is I wasn't really sure if..."

Damon stopped listening to the yammerings of the spellcaster. All his life people had used him, either directly for their own gains or indirectly as nothing more than a tool. He had been manipulated, deceived, shot at, stabbed and stuffed into a rubber duck to dangle from the belt of a hapless idiot. For the benefit of everyone bar himself.

To learn that Vouring had been responsible for the course Damon's life had taken was the final nail in the coffin of coincidence the Pathfinder needed. The world, the entire collection of pox-stained realms, had conspired against him for the last time. And now, with this body of stone, Damon finally had the minerals to lay waste to everything that wanted to stop him being in charge of his own destiny.

Outside, an explosion shook the temple. Masonry cracked loose from the roof and rained down onto the mosaic floor. Both Nicky and Yas ran towards Damon and cowered under his gigantic form, while he turned and looked at the large crack forming on the temple wall beside him.

"It would be bloody brilliant if I had a massive stone sword right about now," he snarled, making a fist and smashing it into the crumbling wall.

"Oh, stop with the sour grapes already. Ha, that was totally unintentional. Ya'll are welcome," Yas shouted, followed quickly with. "Shit!"

The wall collapsed, brick work and plaster cascading to the ground like dandruff made of detritus. As the large section revealed the outside world, a ramp made of rubble formed beside Damon. But none of that mattered, because if there was one thing the Pathfinder was not going to tolerate while in the body of The Matron, it was jokes about the giant grapes in his hand.

"Run!" Damon snarled. "Good thing there is an Apocalypse happening, because I'm going apocalyptic."

Nicky and Yas clearly did not need to be told a second time. Both of them scampered towards the rumble ramp and ran up it like a pair of drunken children on a hill of ice. Damon, meanwhile, pulled a stone grape off his plate and took aim. Irritating spell casters were going to be no use for what came next, and more than that, his reputation for not tolerating insults had to be upheld. With the sound of stone grinding against stone, Damon flicked the grape at the pair right as they reached the top of the rubble pile.

"Oh shit," Nicky shouted, spotting the grape flying towards her. She dropped to her ass and slid back down some of the stone and dirt.

As he watched her slide to safety, a flicker of gold bouncing along the rubble caught Damon's eye. The leprecoin, the artefact they had recovered from that bizarre world that celebrated the dead with costumes and revelries. Cursed

currency that Vouring presumably needed. Not that Damon understood why. Puppets were never told what their master's intentions were, after all.

"YAS! THE COIN!" the necromancer cried, pointing after the cartwheeling currency.

Yas turned just in time, reaching out and catching the coin as it spun through the air. A move which left her no breathing room at all to avoid being rightfully flattened by a stone grape.

"CRAP!" Yas roared, bringing her arms up over her head as if it would somehow work like a shield from the impending doom.

When, without any rhyme or reason to it, a wall of light formed before her. The light spread faster than a fart at a feast, swallowing up Yas, Nicky, and half the rubble pile. Each passing second, the wall grew intensely bright until, right when a grape should have flattened an irritating rich kid, it didn't. The stone boulder-grape bounced off the wall of light at a ninety-degree angle and sailed harmlessly out into the courtyard beyond.

Harmlessly, that is, to Nicky and Yas. From out in the courtyard there came multiple panicked screams that were suddenly cut short by an unidentifiable squelching sound.

Yas lowered her arms cautiously, staring at the wall of light that contracted back down and disappeared, then looked at Nicky with utter confusion.

"What the hell was that?" she asked the necromancer.

"Don't know, don't care. Do it again, regularly, please and thank you. Now, get out there before Damon throws another grape."

The Pathfinder watched them run over the mound of rubble and slide down the other side into the courtyard. If breathing had been a requirement for his stone body, he would have taken a deep breath to calm down a moment and think things through. But the mental penny spinning in his stone skull landed without the need to inhale deeply, Damon instantly grasping what had happened.

"The coin," he said, stepping off the pedestal upon which The Matron had been carved. "The bloody leprecoin somehow boosted Yas' powers. Which means I can use it to boost my own. Reality warping magic, that's what you need to rewrite reality. He's going to use the power of the coin to win if we don't stop him. I NEED THAT COIN!"

Damon as The Matron made his way towards the hole in the wall, kicking down a section to make it easier to pass through, and stepped out into the courtyard.

Or rather, the battle yard.

The magi, their true colours revealed, were laying waste to the populace without care. Fireballs sailed through the air like burning ducks of death, dark magics streaming in all directions to entice people into harming themselves. While, at the centre of the plaza, a ring of magi channelled magics into Vouring's imprisoned form with the other relics as a power source.

Even from the temple wall, Damon could see the cracks forming along the stone visage that had served as Vouring's prison for centuries. A prison which Damon figured he could now smash into pieces, as long as he had the magical coin in his possession..

Damon spotted the fleeing figures of Yas and Nicky as they weaved through the assembled magi and panicked masses alike. Right as they skirted around his previously thrown stone grape, which had somehow managed to leak a convincing red liquid onto the cobblestones of the courtyard, he gave chase.

"Oh Matron!" Nicky said, punching a magi in the back of the head as she ran past. "Damon is behind us."

"Are you sure?" Yas asked. "Maybe it's some other magically infused statue with the spirit of one of our friends."

"Did we not agree that I was meant to be the sarcastic member of the group?" the necromancer said as they ran through the crowd.

Around them, the world was literally ending. Vouring's prison cracked apart like a cursed chocolate egg. Meanwhile, the magi laid waste to anyone without magic, a brutal reminder that power needs no permission. All of that, coupled with Damon's need for some sort of doctor who could heal traumas of the mind, meant that the day was not going exactly as Nicky had envisioned it would.

They had arrived back with all the McGuffins, it should have been all parades, parties and pastries as far as the eyes could see. Instead of running from a grumpy giant statue while also avoiding a death cult of some sort. A death cult that Nicky was only slightly irked she had not been asked to join. That was necromancerist in every definition of the made-up word.

"Bugger, look there," Yas said, pointing at a group of magi that had spotted the duo and were channelling a spell between the four of them.

"Do your new party trick," Nicky shouted at Yas.

"You do something," she fired back. "I don't know how I did that to begin wi....whoops."

Yas tripped over a plot-placed rock, crashing down to the ground and rolling head over heels. Face planting into the cobbles, her arms and legs jolted outwards. At the last possible second, she hurled the leprecoin backwards toward Nicky — a desperate, blind throw. It spun through the air, at just the right angle for the necromancer to grab it, Celtic cross facing up.

Something surged through Nicky's body, a sensation she'd never felt before. The voices that always whispered in the back of her mind, those of her long dead ancestors that all good necromancers could hear, grew suddenly louder. No longer a minor migraine mumble that she had simply grown accustomed to ignoring, they all spoke loudly. With a single, unified, instruction for the young necromancer.

Free us.

Nicky stopped running and raised her left hand in the direction of the magi and their spell.

"Have at it," the necromancer said, sending a pulse of power out with the words. A pulse that, historically, had never really worked and yet this time, lifted her off her feet. As she fell on her back, a dozen spectral spooks appeared around her. With macabre grins on their faces, they raced towards the magi with hands outstretched faster than the wind. The magi had no time to react, each of them withering instantly into dried out husks that collapsed to the ground.

Yas watched from her prone position, then looked back at Nicky.

"When did you learn to do that?" she asked.

The necromancer got back to her feet and grinned. This was what getting into the family business was always meant to feel like. Raw power, control over the deceased and just a hint of creepy eyeliner to complete the look. She turned around and watched Damon, as he ponderously marched towards them, stepping on a few magi in the process but completely oblivious to the fact he was doing it.

"Now for you, big boy," Nicky said, flicking the coin into the air and catching it.

Celtic knot face-up.

She brought up her hand again and called upon the army of the dead at her disposal.

"Deal with the statue pest," she said, steadying herself this time so that the pulse of power did not take her off her feet.

A trickle of magic dropped from her finger and conjured a ghostly cat on the stones at her feet. It looked at her with the true indifference, that only felines can muster when looking at any other creature, then proceeded to lick its butthole before fading from sight completely.

"What exactly was the plan there?" Yas asked, clambering back to her feet. "Hope that Damon is allergic or something? Toss me the coin and let's get going."

Nicky flicked the coin at Yas with practised ease, then turned and looked up at the approaching giant form of Damon. It seemed to the necromancer that Damon was moving ponderously slow. He would lift his foot, move forward, and then with the agonising pace of a zombie shuffling along on broken knees, place it down again. Every second step seemed to coincidentally result in a magi or two being turned into magi jam, or majam if you would, beneath the stoney boot of Damon-in-Matron.

Which gave Nicky an idea.

"We don't need to try and fight every one of these cult clothed lunatics," the necromancer said, running after Yas as she ran across the plaza. "We just need to have Damon do it for us."

Yas glanced back over her shoulder at Nicky, then up at Damon-in-Matron, before looking down at Nicky again.

"He isn't exactly talking to us right now, if you haven't noticed," she said to Nicky. "And it looks like he is plucking another grape off the plate."

Nicky looked back and saw Yas was correct. Damon had pulled another grape the size of a small boulder free from the bunch on the plate and was taking aim. Except this time the grape apparently was not intended for his former teammates. He had turned his stoney face towards a group of magi that had started to attack him with fireballs.

Like discarding some trash with a casual flick of his wrist, Damon released the grape and let it tumble towards the plaza cobbles. It struck with the force of a meteor, sending a shower of bricks and dirt up into the air. Three of the five magi laughed, pointing at the stone grape and making hand gestures of an obscene nature at Damon, mocking him for missing his shot.

Damon grinned down at them, then swiftly kicked the grape towards them, like a football. Everyone might have suddenly developed an ability to move at increased speeds, but there was no way you could dodge a well struck stone ball. It rolled across the intervening space between them, flattening the middle three and pinning the pair on either side underneath.

Painfully.

Even from his new height, the Pathfinder could see their mangled legs trapped under the stone and see the pain on their faces.

"If I'd known reincarnation, so to speak, was going to be like this, I'd have died years ago," he said.

Damon shifted and tried to see where Nicky and Yas had gotten to. The leprecoin was still the object of his desire, along with the power to take on Vouring and end this charade of heroics once and for all. While punching the statue-prison into dust seemed like a great idea, Damon wanted to be sure his new form was juiced up with leprechaun magic so that the blows really destroyed prison and prisoner alike.

Vouring wasn't going to get a chance to manipulate anyone else again. He wanted to kill Vouring, finish him, once and for all!

"You've put on a little weight," Nicky shouted off to his left.

Damon turned and spotted the necromancer waving at him. As soon as he clapped eyes on her, she began to do a little dance, jutting her posterior precariously towards him and pointing at it.

"Strange way to die, but who am I to judge," he said, striding towards her.

"He's taken the bait," Yas said, cowering behind a destroyed water fountain and peering over the edge of what was left of the stone basin.

"Well, I bloody hope so," Nicky said, wiggling her bony butt for all its worth. "I've got my ass on display here."

"There's not a lot to display," Yas sniped back. "Do necromancers just not eat or what's the – shit, DUCK!"

A granite grape sailed over both their heads like a lost siege projectile, crashing into two magi and turning them into bloody stains via the magic of friction. Nicky stopped dancing and stared at the grape, then ran for her life towards Yas.

"Do it," she shouted.

Yas stepped out from behind the broken fountain and held her hand up, palm pointed towards Damon's face.

"COME AND GET SOME!" she roared, pushing out a pulse of magic.

The tips of her nails all began to glow, then twinkle on and off like fairy lights during Winterfest. Yas frowned and concentrated on her power, rubbing the coin in her other hand. With each second that passed, Damon-in-Matron stepped closer, but her powers had decided that now was not the time to work even a fraction of how they usually did.

"Come on, come on," Yas instructed her hand, shaking it vigorously to no avail.

Then the world grew darker, from an illumination point of view, since the end of the world going on around them was dark on a much more metaphysical level, and Yas looked up at the sole of a stone boot slowly coming down towards her. It was too late to run, she would have never made it to safety no matter which direction she chose.

Turning to see Nicky, Yas flung the leprecoin towards her.

"Look after yourself," she shouted, watching the coin spin through the air right until the necromancer snatched it.

"SPECTRAL PUSHOVEM!" Nicky roared, gripping the coin tightly in her right hand and stretching both arms out in front of her.

There was a rush of air from every direction all at once, racing towards Nicky. Except it was not air, but howls and screams, cries of pain and anguish. From the nearby corpses and blood-stained stones, green energies rose and coalesced into floating skulls. Each swirling through the air towards Nicky, flying behind her and gathering together. In a second there was a wall of green light, the likes of which Yas had never seen. A beautiful sight to see before a giant flattened you into the ground.

But, as that thought entered her mind, Yas figured hope was sometimes a dangerous thing to indulge in. She crouched on the ground, cover her head with her arms, and watched as the necromancer sent forth the wave of ghostly skulls like a ghastly tsunami.

The green energies washed over Nicky, moving faster than anything living would be able to move, and headed directly towards Yas. As one, all the skulls banked upwards in the air, slamming into the bottom of Damon-in-Matron's boot with both force and speed. Some bounced off, reminding Yas of when sparks fell from a blacksmith's hammer and thongs, falling away before becoming swept up in the wave again.

There came an ominous groaning sound, followed by several swear words Yas had never heard before. She looked up and watched as the skulls not only forced Damon's boot back but pushed the giant statue over as well. Sounding like a beautifully carved landslide, the giant toppled backwards and crashed into the plaza cobbles.

His landing boom was a sound of stonework being destroyed coupled with a half dozen magi meeting a two-dimensional end.

Nicky ran over and helped Yas to her feet.

"Thanks," Yas said, amazed that she had survived.

The necromancer pointed at Damon-in-Matron.

"He made a cartload of majam," she said, grinning.

"Majam?" Yas asked, almost regretting it instantly. "Magi jam, right?"

Nicky grinned like an idiot and nodded.

"That's never going to catch on," Yas said.

"So, what do we do now?" Nicky asked, looking around at the battleground and flicking the leprecoin up and catching it. "Oh, no you don't!"

This last bit was directed at a magi who had taken aim at the women. Nicky tried to conjure a skeleton-warrior from a nearby corpse. The left femur, exposed already through a gaping wound in the thigh, flopped out onto the stones and stood to attention, like a barely intimidating soldier, waiting for orders.

"Toss it to me," Yas said.

Nicky threw the coin towards her. In one motion, Yas snatched it mid-toss and sent a beam of pure sunlight directly towards the magi. It hit the man in the chest and continued through his lungs, past his spine, and off into the distance.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this coin thing," Yas said. "If we flip the coin and it lands cross up, we get a power boost. It changes our reality so we're actually...you know...good at what we do! Come on, let's go climb up Damon's chest and tell him to calm the hell down so we can hold the line until everyone else gets back with that music box or whatever the bloody thing is."

They climbed up the giant stone sandal and ran along the shapely carved legs of Damon-in-Matron. Yas wondered, not for the first time in her life, if the artists of statues had ever truly seen a female form before. It always seemed to be standards of beauty that just did not exist in the real world.

Damon, thankfully, remained on his back as they ran. Not moving a stoney muscle the entire time, he almost seemed to be subdued. Defeated, even. As they reached the twin peaks that were the Pathfinder's breasts, Damon moved his head ever so slightly and looked at them both.

"Are you crying?" Nicky asked, frowning at him.

He shook his head.

"No, just have some dust in my eye, that's all," Damon replied, not entirely convincingly.

Yas and Nicky exchanged a quick, knowing, glance, then looked back at the fallen idol.

"Look, we get it, okay. You were working for the bad guys and didn't fully understand that's who was pulling your strings," the necromancer said. "But you know the best thing about dying? You get a second chance at living. Assuming you know a talented practitioner of the dark arts, that is."

"Do you happen to know one?" Damon asked. "The one I've got on retainer isn't very good."

Ignoring the nonsensical statement, Nicky continued.

"What I am saying is, why do this alone? What do you need the coin for?"

"What does Vouring need the coin for, while we're at it," Yas said.

This question made all the three of them pause. How did all the artefacts work together to free, or imprison, the dark god?

"Maybe you put it into the puzzle box, have the reality warping effects do something, and poof?" Damon suggested.

Nicky shook her head and gave him a dismissive look.

"No, that can't be it. That sounds like a weak ass plot point from some bard story in a two-bit tavern. But ignoring all of that, why not just tell us you want revenge, instead of crying dust like a golem style baby?"

There are a few things it is hard to achieve on a battlefield. One of them is the sound of silence, as usually the air is full of the screams of the dying, the attacking, or the fearful. Yet, at that moment, the air grew calmer and still..

A loud rumbling travelled across the courtyard at speed. The three of them turned to Vouring's prison, just as a wall of air, stone, body parts and magic spewed forth. In place of the stone prison there now was a spiralling black cloud,

crackling with red lightning. The clouds directly above took on a black colour darker than night, with flecks of fire running through them, almost as if a volcano had erupted but forgot the destructive step of spewing lava out on the surrounding populace. Deep underground there came a tremor, causing the stones of the courtyard to bounce and jostle. All an indication of one very scary fact.

Vouring was free.

“Oh SHIT!” all three roared.

Damon-in-Matron reached up and cupped his stone breasts, providing some shelter for Yas and Nicky from the debris headed their way. He carefully got back to his feet, keeping the spellcasters safe from harm. As he scanned the battle, Damon-in-Matron spotted Lute fighting on the other side of the courtyard. Deftly holding back several magi single handedly without seemingly noticing that nobody else had come to his aid.

“Right,” he said, looking down at two spell casters held close to his chest. “Let’s do this together. As a team. You two use the magic of the leprecoin and keep it away from the magi, I’ll move around the battlefield. And one way or the other, we kill Vouring or die trying.”

“Can we rethink that last part just a little?” Yas shouted up to him from the safety of his left breast.

Nicky rolled her eyes. “You living lot are just the worst,” she said, then flicked the coin into the air. “Alright ladies, let’s show them how it’s done!”

Chapter Thirteen

Wherein our heroes make their way to the obsidian nexus of worlds

Alex S Bradshaw

The portal closed. The clash of weapons and screams of the dying were abruptly silenced. All they could hear was their own pounding hearts and laboured breaths.

Rhen's thoughts lingered with the dragon rider, Kael. He had taken them to the very edge of this world, but could go no further. He had already risked everything to take them so far, he had said. And as he had explained what they needed to do in this dying world, where they needed to go and why, she was surprised at the depth of concern in his eyes and the tender way he had held her hands at the end, begging her to be safe.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. They had a job to do.

Rhen looked at her companions: an old man who looked like he couldn't withstand a fart let alone a fight, and a woman who looked like she'd rather be at a concert than saving the world. Hell, Rhen would rather be anywhere else. Rhen took a breath and prayed to whatever gods were out there that they could do this.

They were in some kind of dead-end alley. Scraps and detritus collected in its corners. Flickering lantern light shone from the street ahead.

"There's only one way to go now," Rhen said, and edged forwards.

Morin Hast grunted, Myra muttered something about this plan being completely insane, but both followed.

The view from the street showed a city sprawling across a steep hillside that swept into the distant night below. Most of the buildings were timber-framed and roughly plastered but there were larger buildings sprinkled within the endless mess of streets. Fortified estates hunkered in the skyline and too many sharp church spires stabbed up like fingers clutching at the sky for salvation.

"The biggest spire, he said," Rhen said, repeating the dragon rider's instructions. She glared into the night. "Oh great. There it is. Right at the bloody top."

"He didn't say it was going to be so steep," Myra grumbled.

"It's easier for you with your young knees," Morin Hast replied. "Can't we go downhill? That spire there is big enough, surely. Or into a different damned dimension entirely?"

Rhen ignored him and edged onto the cobblestoned road, hands on weapons and alert for danger. Lanterns and braziers painted the empty street with a quivering amber glow. An excited murmur echoed between the buildings from somewhere ahead. Rhen gestured for the others to follow.

They passed dilapidated homes that had plaster tumbling from cracked walls and within a few hundred yards they'd passed four stone churches. Each one scrubbed clean. Its stone practically shone in the dim light.

A cheer from ahead.

Instantly, the group fled into a darkened doorway, pressing themselves against the thick wood of another church door.

"I've never known somewhere to need so many churches," Morin Hast whispered as he craned his neck to look at the intricate iron hinges that curled into the centre of the doors like ghostly talons. He scowled as he studied them all.

"So many different deities. What do they need them all for?"

The ground shook as another cheer went up and a crack echoed between the buildings. They shrank back into the door again until a second firework whistled above the buildings and popped in a burst of green light. Another cheer.

"It's a festival," Myra said. "That should make it easier to sneak by."

They kept to the dark edges of the street and soon found themselves at the top of the hill. Morin Hast was red-cheeked and panting. Rhen and Myra both had sweat-stained faces but neither of them was willing to be the first to ask for a break.

The street opened into a plaza filled with people, all turned away and facing a cathedral with three enormous spires disappearing into the black sky.

Another firework. The crowd watched it as it exploded overhead and painted the cathedral in brief, brilliant purple.

"What the fuck is that?" Myra asked, pointing.

Rhen and Morin followed her gaze and gasped.

There, in front of the crowd, was a ten-foot-tall effigy with four arms. A figure that was seared into their nightmares.

Vouring.

A figure stepped onto some kind of platform in front of the effigy, raising their hands to silence the crowd. Morin Hast's expression hardened.

"It's one of those Magi," he said.

"You've got to be fucking joking," Rhen growled.

"Are you sure we need to listen to that strange dragon rider?" Morin asked. "It's going to get us killed. Or worse."

"Do you have a better plan?" Myra asked.

They stared at the crowd as it quietened. Many were mud-stained and their clothes tattered. Rhen, Morin, and Myra had equally dirty clothes, torn and covered in blood and dust, and as Rhen wondered whether they might be able to sneak through, the Magi began to speak.

"Brothers and sisters, tonight is a glorious night. From now on, you need not tend to your countless, fruitless places of worship. You are liberated from the tyranny of your old gods. They are nothing more than predators and you are saved.

"You see here a representation of the true God. Lord Vouring. He is returned to us and with it his strength can protect us once again.

"Let us light the flame of the new age and with it know that the laws of your old gods are burned away. Lord Vouring asks only that you give yourself to him. He has no decrees. Nothing is forbidden." The Magi held up a burning torch in one hand and with the other pointed off to one side. They could just make out a table groaning with casks and food. "Drink deeply, eat heartily, and seek pleasure."

The crowd cheered again and more fireworks screamed into the sky as the Magi turned to the effigy.

"They're distracted. Maybe we can..."

Before Myra could finish the effigy was consumed in flames. Many of the crowd leapt towards the table and tore into the feast. The rest of them fell upon each other in a fit of desire.

"We'll have to go around," Morin said and pointed to a nearby alleyway. "I'm not heading through that madness and I'm certainly in no mood to be chased by a horde of those peasants."

Myra and Morin began to move, but Rhen's eyes were fixed on the scene before her.

Her body ached and her soul was heavy from years of fighting and struggling and now in front of her was everything she ever wanted: pleasure and oblivion. She thought of the others, fighting as hard as they could but still powerless to stop Vouring from breaking free. How could they win? She was running through strange worlds, dodging monsters and expecting to die. She could just wander into that crowd and lose herself in the bodies and the booze until Vouring won. Wasn't that a better way to wait for oblivion than struggling until you are broken? No more scrabbling for pennies and dodging death only to have to do it all again the next day. One glorious night and she'd be done.

Myra tugged Rhen into the alleyway, breaking the spell of the scene on her. The rising noises of gluttony and ecstasy became muffled as they hurried down the dark alleyway.

The alley led them away from the plaza but it also took them back downhill. Myra sucked in a breath through her teeth.

"This is the wrong way," she growled. "We need to be going up."

"We can't make our way through that lot," Morin snapped. "One of you will have to get to a roof and find out which way we need to go."

Myra opened her mouth to protest but Rhen waved her down and volunteered.

They went on a little further until they came to a house that stood a little taller than the ones around it. Rhen examined the outside for footholds, cursing that the plaster looked fresh and smooth. She began to climb its neighbour. Morin Hast edged up to the door and pushed it open.

"It's always worth a try," he said when Rhen shot him a look.

She drew one of her swords, motioned for the others to stay in the alleyway, then disappeared into the shadowy entrance.

It was a simple dwelling, each floor only one room, and it looked to have been abandoned in a hurry: a toppled pot leaking stew onto the floor, plates still set on the table, clothes strewn about the bedrooms.

The attic was drenched in dust with the only light from a dirty circular window. It threw moonlight on a table draped with a heavy cloth. She looked around, hoping for some hatch to get to the roof, but there was none. She peered out of the window and while she saw past some of the low houses she could not get a good sense of direction. She muttered a curse to herself, sheathed her sword, and clambered out onto the roof.

The tiles were slick with moss and recent rain, but she carefully made her way to the top, clinging to the chimney as she got her bearings.

She stared downhill and the city seemed to go on forever. Street lanterns painted the streets in low amber lines like an infinite cobweb drawn with embers. Looking up, the world stopped at the cathedral.

Rhen's heart stuttered as she saw a churning void behind the spires. It reminded her of the black she saw when she leapt through portals, a glimpse of the darkness between worlds. She swallowed as she truly understood what the dragon rider had meant when he said this world was crumbling into the aether.

She shook herself, there was no time, and plotted a course to the cathedral that avoided the plaza.

Satisfied, Rhen slid down the roof and back into the house. As she went through the attic, she saw what was on the covered table: a bell jar and a gilded book.

There was something in the bell jar. It looked like ink swirling in water and as she watched it coalesced into a twirling dancer about a handspan tall. Rhen leaned closer. The dancer paused to beckon her forward. Rhen felt something tug at her soul but she kept her place. Something about it made Rhen's teeth feel cold.

The dancer slowed, then stopped, floating still. In a single blink-quick movement it became jagged like lightning before transforming into something with four clawed feet and a long body. Its inky skull had a shark-like mouth with hundreds of minuscule teeth. It scabbled at the glass like a rat and snapped at her.

Rhen backed away, feeling the warmth return to her skin as she put it behind her, and hurried back to her companions.

"Come on," she said. "If we turn left here I think we come out on the other side of that crowd."

She ran on without another word. She ignored the strange look that Morin Hast shot her and forced them to catch up with her.

As they neared the plaza once again, they drew up short as they heard something moving in a shadowed alcove nearby. Morin Hast clutched his staff and Myra drew her weapon. Rhen rested her hand on her sword hilt.

They stared into the alcove, trying to see what was moving. There were too many limbs for it to be one person. Arms lifted before they groped back down into the tumbling mass.

Myra snorted and turned to the others. "It's just some horny fuckers who've got lost from that pile in the plaza. Come on."

She made to walk past and as she did Rhen felt that same coldness in her teeth.

"Wait!"

The lumpy mass of shadows stretched. Arms unfurled—one, three, seven—and the thing turned, revealing the mangled corpse it had been feasting on.

One of the shadow arms crashed into Myra.

"It can't be..." Morin Hast whispered.

Rhen didn't wait to find out what he meant. She drew her swords and charged.

Myra twisted and scrambled on the floor as the shadow-beast came for her. It was as large as a panther, prowling forward with four feline legs, but its top half was a misty tangle. No head, no tail, too many clawed hands.

Rhen sliced her sword through an arm that clutched at Myra's neck.

The creature squealed, all its arms bubbling into razor-sharp shadow-whips, and turned its bulk to face Rhen.

She parried one whip, then another, and tried to deflect a third. The deadly edge of the shadow skittered along her sword's edge and bounced off, slicing through her forearm. Rhen cried out, dropping a sword and stumbling back.

The creature leapt for her. Its forward arms peeled back to reveal a whirlpool mouth full of churning teeth.

Rhen tried to roll out of the way, but her injured arm gave way under her.

As one of the arms brushed her cheek, biting cold, the monster was clubbed aside. Myra stood over her, panting, holding a splintered plank.

"You okay?" she asked.

Rhen nodded and, with Myra's help, got to her feet.

The shadow monster hissed and wriggled its arms as it righted itself. It stalked around them, wary now, and revealed its swirling mouth once again.

"Any ideas?" Rhen said to Myra.

"Stab it until it stops moving?"

"The usual then."

Myra gripped her makeshift club and Rhen picked up her dropped sword. They placed themselves between the writhing shadows and Morin Hast. The old man seemed shaken, muttering to himself.

Arms whipped at them. Myra deflected them, each blow left a flower of ice on the wood.

"Come on then, you weird fucker," Myra shouted. "Are you just going to watch us or are you going to do something? We're kind of on a deadline here."

The monster hissed and renewed its attacks on her. Myra managed to keep most of them at bay, grunting as the black flailing limbs bashed her arms, then one caught her shoulder. She cried out. The monster opened its yawning maw and leapt.

Rhen was faster.

Her swords were a blur in the weak torchlight. Shadowy limbs fell with each slash.

The monster screeched in pain. Her swords carved it like a scythe through wheat. Its cries grew weaker, its seemingly infinite arms grew slower, until it stopped and fell silent.

They stared at it as the black shadows of its body deflated. Rhen and Myra panted from their efforts and Morin Hast still stared open-mouthed.

"Fat lot of good you were," Myra shot at Hast.

Her rebuke seemed to shake the wizard free of his shock. He blinked, smoothed down his beard, and tried to look tall.

"You don't understand! I was merely..."

Before Morin Hast could defend himself the monster's body shivered.

Fresh arms pushed their way free of the body like poisoned seedlings. Myra raised the battered plank to smash into the monster as Rhen prepared to stab it.

Behind them, Morin Hast cried out in a language Rhen had never heard before. His voice crackled and echoed down the street. Frost spread across the cobblestones and captured the monster in its grasp. The lines of frost thickened until the monster was caught in an icy web with strands as thick as rope and as hard as iron.

"Move," Morin Hast's voice boomed as he rushed up to them and sprinted on. "It won't slow the beast for long."

They did not need more encouragement. Myra dropped her weapon, Rhen sheathed one of her swords, and they all sprinted after Morin Hast.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Myra panted. One of her sleeves flapped loose as they ran and she cursed before tearing it free.

"A creature of the void. They have many names, though they all descend from Urthrak, the first of their kind. They live in the aether between realms. One of the many dangers of wandering the aether and travelling between worlds without using one of the Paths."

Myra's face blanched. She glanced back at the monster now struggling to free itself from its frosty prison.

"If it's from the aether then what the fuck is it doing here?" Rhen snapped as she led them around a corner.

"I don't know," Hast puffed in reply. "I have never seen one outside of the aether."

"Can they be killed?" Rhen asked.

"I believe so, although as you have seen they can be incredibly hardy."

The noises from the plaza grew louder and Rhen held up a hand for them to slow down.

From the looks of it, the carnal festival was still in full swing. Bodies writhed in a collective heap in the centre of the plaza and others were scattered across it, some eating with reckless abandon, others taking part in more private joys in groups of two or three. In front of the cathedral, the effigy burned and the Magi knelt beside it, praying.

"Okay." Rhen pointed to the long table, now stripped of food, and the wagons and carts abandoned behind it. "We can sneak in behind those carts. It looks like the Magi is distracted too so if we're quiet then--"

A crash came from behind them followed by an unearthly scream that set Rhen's teeth on edge.

"We must flee," Morin breathed.

Rhen cursed under her breath. "I guess there's no time for subtlety."

They burst from their shadowed hiding place, sprinting behind the abandoned vehicles a moment before the monster leapt into the plaza. It screamed again, so close this time that Rhen had to put her hands over her ears, and the cries of the crowd turned from ecstasy to terror.

Wood splintered as the monster's arms clawed for them, smashing through the table and wagons.

They kept running.

The cries of the crowd were joined with the crack of bone as the aether beast leapt upon them.

"Can't we help them?"

Rhen skidded to a halt. Myra had paused beside the burning Vouring and had turned a horrified, desperate expression to the carnage in the plaza. Rhen saw tears glistening on her cheeks.

"If we stay here and kill that monster, we don't have time to get the puzzle box. Then everyone dies. We cannot stop."

Myra looked back at the people in the plaza. She opened her mouth, but Morin Hast lurched into her, taking her arm and forcing her on.

Rhen caught Morin's eye and nodded her thanks then she turned to the cathedral. The massive wooden doors were ajar and Rhen thanked whatever gods might be listening that they weren't locked, but as she took a step forward she realised that the doors were closing.

With a curse, she slammed her shoulder against the wood. She heard someone cry out from inside and they redoubled their efforts to shut the door. Rhen shoved her body in the rapidly closing gap between the doors and pushed as hard as she could.

Between the weight of the door and the strength of whoever was on the other side, all she could do was keep it from closing.

Myra and Hast arrived beside her. They threw their weight against the doors.

The heavy wood began to shift, creaking open. As soon as the gap was large enough for them they scrambled through.

There was no one on the other side, only pulleys and weights, but they all turned to the door and forced it shut.

As the enormous doors slammed together the heavy bars on the inside that Rhen had taken for decoration began to shift. They slid across and then fell into place across both doors, holding them shut, locking them inside.

"Well, we're not getting out that way."

The shadows inside of the cathedral danced in strange patterns as the light from the burning effigy came through the circular stained glass windows either side of the doors. Rows of pews sat ahead of an enormous altar and a statue, only half seen in the darkness, but easily as tall as the effigy burning outside. Beyond the altar, the same churning void Rhen had seen from the roof.

"Morin, you're up. Kael said this is the only place in all the worlds you'll be able to see the severed realm where the puzzle box is, but it looks like it's crumbling so be quick."

Before Rhen finished her sentence, the void inched forward and the lectern behind the altar tumbled back and into the darkness.

"I don't want to fall into that," Myra added. "So let's get a fucking move on."

"Youths are always so impatient," Morin muttered, but he shuffled as quickly as he could to the edge of the void.

"Myra, come. Help me until I find the way then you make the path."

Myra hurried up to him. Morin stumbled as he found the edge of the world and nearly fell forward but Myra grabbed him by the waist and dragged him back.

“Okay, get on with it,” she said, keeping her grip on his waist. “Your robes smell awful.”

Rhen watched, her heart thumping as she tried to block out the rending screams from outside.

“Stop that!”

She spun to see a figure emerge from the shadows, wielding a tall candlestick like a spear. The Magi. There was madness in his eyes and spittle on his chin.

“You fools,” he spat. “You will ruin the Ascension. Vouring must be brought to this world. I have waited too long for you to stop me now.”

He charged at Morin and Myra.

Rhen leapt to intercept him and they tumbled down together. Rhen grunted as she fell against a pew, the hard wood knocking the breath from her, and the Magi lost his grip on the candlestick. He snarled and tried to bite her. Rhen pulled back and he tore himself free, stumbling back with the force of his escape.

He grabbed the candlestick and charged her, but he was no warrior and Rhen had been fighting for too long on too many worlds to be killed by this fool. She hacked her sword through the candlestick and it was sliced in two. The Magi looked at her with fresh terror in his eyes.

“You can’t,” he stammered. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand enough,” Rhen growled and dragged the Magi away from Myra and Morin Hast, throwing him to the floor with her foot on his chest to keep him still.

From outside, there was a surge of screams and then a great creaking and splintering of wood as the effigy tumbled into the cathedral. The stained glass smashed, showering Rhen and the Magi in broken glass and throwing fresh light into the cathedral.

Rhen turned to check on her companions. Her voice caught in her throat.

Lining the pews, unseen in the darkness until now, were hundreds of worshippers. All dressed in finery that would have bankrupted the entire crowd outside. And all of them with their throats torn out. Worse, was the obsidian statue built against the western wall.

“What the fuck is that?” she said.

“Can’t you see I’m busy, girl?” Morin Hast spat, then he too saw the statue and his face paled. “Nine save us...”

The statue’s countless limbs rose from a fugue of smoke that came from incense burners, cunningly placed on the statue to give it the impression of formlessness. The doors flinched against the weight and heat of the effigy.

“It’s Uthrak,” Morin said. “This cathedral is dedicated to the father of the monsters of the aether.”

“Now you see,” the Magi said.

Rhen turned back to him. He kept his head up to keep from skewering himself on her sword but now there was a fresh glint of desperation in his eyes.

“This world is lost to the void. These people have left offerings to the creatures of aether since time immemorial to stave off their hunger, but it has doomed them. It does not matter now.” He laughed, not caring that the motion shook his head enough for Rhen’s sword to stab his throat. “Vouring is come and this world will be saved from its petty desires.”

“You would save them by destroying them,” Rhen shot back.

“A blissful rest untroubled by mortal wants. What better gift could be given?”

Rhen clenched her jaw and looked to Hast, who was still in awe of the statue. Myra shook the old man.

“Come on,” she said. “We need to get the fuck out of here!”

Hast nodded, his face pale and fresh sweat on his brow, and turned back to the void.

Rhen growled as the old man fumbled around in the dark. She felt so useless. She was a Pathfinder, damn it, but she knew that there was no path for where they needed to go. Not yet anyway. Myra's power was unique. She was a Pathmaker. She could make paths where there were none and together with Morin's unparalleled knowledge of the aether they could get them to the puzzle box.

"There!" Morin cried.

"Thank fuck," Rhen breathed. "Myra, make a path!"

"On it," Myra replied.

Myra stepped up to the edge of the world and began weaving. Morin muttered in her ear, presumably guiding her through his newly mapped-out route.

Rhen took slow, deep breaths to try and slow her pounding heart. All she could do was wait.

Then she heard a teeth-chilling howl. It was like the cry of the tiny aether creature in the bell jar in the same way a mouse sounds like a wolf. Whatever this was, it was enormous.

"How much longer?" Rhen called.

"Nearly there. Let me get on with it."

Before Rhen could retort, the cathedral was thrown into darkness. Something had doused the burning effigy like a tsunami over a candle. After a moment, a small light blossomed between Myra's fingertips giving them enough light to see.

Cracking from outside. The effigy was torn apart.

Something slammed against the doors. The teeth-freezing howl of the leviathan aether-beast rang in their ears.

The doors shook again and this time they splintered. Smoke seeped through the cracks and flowed in through the broken windows.

Morin Hast appeared beside her. "I can keep it at bay. I will--"

He trailed off as dozens of clawed hands, each as tall as a man, formed in the smoke leaking into the cathedral.

"Uthrak..." Morin breathed.

"We have to go," Rhen said. "Myra, how are we doing?"

"Almost got it."

The hands groped for them. Rhen and Morin leapt back, but the Magi was still prone and a hand slammed onto him. His screams, immediately muffled, were lost as he was dragged into the inky darkness.

A blot in the darkness seen through the shattered window. Uthrak's head. Rhen felt its gaze and with it came the final cold of eternity. Masonry crumbled as a body pushed its way through the wall.

"Got it!"

Rhen and Morin turned and sprinted for Myra. Behind them, Uthrak brought the cathedral down around him and ahead the world tumbled into the abyss. But there, between Myra's hands, was salvation.

The spot of light fizzed and grew and within it they saw another world. At first, all Rhen could see was a black night and stars, but there were no monsters in it so that was a fucking improvement.

Morin fired off globs of golden light from his staff as they ran. Each one smacked into another of Uthrak's hands, batting them away, but it was not enough. Uthrak followed, infinite arms reaching for them.

"Come on!" Myra screamed at them.

She was on the other side of the portal, desperately ushering them on.

Smoke pressed up against the new world like water against glass. Frost blossomed on the pews, their breath plumed in front of them.

As the black, freezing grip of Urthak reached for them, they leapt through the portal.

Chapter Fourteen

Where our heroes enter the kingdom of madness

Patrick Samphire

Myra staggered out of the portal, and suddenly there was nothing in front of her.

The ground cut away, and all that was left was air. If it hadn't been for Rhen's hand wrapped tight in her jacket, she would have tumbled over and been gone. Instead, Rhen hauled her back onto a narrow stone ledge.

"What the fuck?" she managed. On the other side of Rhen, Morin Hast was struggling to get to his feet, looking every one of his six hundred years, or however the fuck old he was supposed to be. Several centuries overdue a hip replacement, that much was for sure. The old bastard could do some pretty impressive stuff, to be fair. Getting up off the floor on his own wasn't one of them. She shook Rhen off, clambered to her own feet, grabbed the back of Hast's robe, and pulled him up. God knows how long it had been since he'd washed that robe. It felt greasy.

Not that she probably looked all that great herself after whatever hellhole they'd just come through. She was hardly dressed to fight demons and evil gods, and certainly not for a ledge like this, where the rock they balanced on sloped towards the drop-off, their backs were pressed against a cliff face, and the wind was pulling at her worse than a drunk on a Saturday night.

Hast turned to her, his beard jutting forward, the whole effect rather ruined by the wind that slapped it back in his face. "Where in all the hells are we, girl? This isn't the realm I showed you."

Far below them, plains rolled over tired hills, hypnotic patterns sweeping through the long grass. In the distance, a wide lake glittered in sunlight. When she had started to open the portal, she had seen a black-blue sky punctured by cold stars. And, yeah, the wind was chilly, but that was a fucking sun right up in the sky, possibly a second one, too, on the horizon, if it wasn't an overenthusiastic moon. But she had taken them where Hast had told her, even so. She didn't need scenery to find a realm through the void. They were like lighthouses thrusting up from the mist.

"It's exactly where you showed me. I don't make mistakes."

"This is what I get for trusting fools," the wizard muttered. "I should have done this all myself."

Myra resisted the urge to push him off the ledge.

"You know what? If anyone doesn't know what the fuck he's doing, it's you. I was just fine, then you turned up with, 'oh, you have to get the fucking Righteous Sword or Vouring is going to destroy all the realms', and guess what? Vouring wasn't going to do shit without that sword. We could have all just kept about our lives, and Vouring wouldn't be bothering anyone. So don't talk to me about fucking up, all right?"

The wizard's shrivelled face wrinkled even further in fury.

Rhen put up a hand. Myra couldn't help but notice that her other hand was gripping one of her swords. Myra was pretty handy with a knife, but she'd seen enough of Rhen to know when she was outclassed.

"All right, both of you. Enough of the dick-measuring contest. How about we get off this damned ledge before you have your girl-fight?"

"Fine. Yeah. All right. But when we get down, we need to have a serious talk, because I want to know if we're really going to do this."

"What do you mean?" Rhen said.

"You've not been thinking it, too? This guy turns up in the middle of a battle on the back of a fucking dragon – a dragon! – and he's all, 'You have to go and get some magical box,' and we're running around panicking and arguing with a fucking rubber duck, so none of us stops to think, and like a bunch of twats we run off to do what the nerd on the dragon tells us to. Being fooled once is bad enough, but how do we know this guy's not working for Vouring and all we're doing isn't just getting him another weapon?"

"I don't think so," Rhen said. She looked angry to Myra. Why? "I trusted him. And don't call him a nerd."

Oh! "Really? He's your type? Some bumbling, short-arsed nerd with bad eyes? Or is it the dragon? Do you have the hots for the dragon?"

"I will shove this sword so far down your throat it'll come out your arse."

"The girl has a point," Hast said slowly, rubbing his beard.

"And stop calling me a fucking girl," Myra snapped. "I'm thirty-two years old." How the hell had she ended up in the middle of his cosmic shitstorm with these two idiots? The moment she had seen Lute and Hast in the back of the pub, she should have turned around and walked out. If she had, they wouldn't have been able to get the Righteous Blade, Vouring would still be bound, and she could have hooked up with one of the guys from that band. The drummer had looked all right. She had a thing for drummers. She still didn't know why she hadn't.

"Fuck it," Rhen said. "None of us asked for this, I get it. We're all pissed off. We're all scared. Trust me, I'd rather be almost anywhere. But we're here, so let's just get it fucking over with, shall we?"

Myra felt the fury drain out of her. She was angry at the world, the universe, every single realm, but none of it was going to be made better by sniping at each other. "Yeah. Fine. You're right." She looked around. The ledge didn't extend more than a dozen yards in either direction, and she wasn't much good at estimating heights, but they must have been at least five hundred feet off the ground. "Um. Anyone got any ideas? Hast?"

The wizard peered down, wobbling enough that Myra grabbed the back of his cloak again. "If I had not used so much of my power in the battle and finding the way here, I might be able to fly us. It would be unwise to trust it here. In any case, I must save my power to find the puzzle box."

"Great," Rhen said. "Anyone enjoy climbing?"

Myra looked over the edge again. Maybe they could climb down. There were cracks and outcroppings that might work as handholds and footholds.

Ah, who are you fooling? They wouldn't get twenty feet without one or all of them losing their grip and plummeting to their death. Maybe Hast's robes would work as a parachute, but she and Rhen? It would be a contest to see which of them died soonest.

"I might be able to get us down," she said. It would take a lot of skill and accuracy, but in theory it wasn't so different to what she usually did. "I can open a portal and take us through that."

"Portals open between realms, girl, not within them," Hast spat. She guessed he hadn't bought into Rhen's truce.

"I know that, genius. Here's what I can do. I can open a portal out of here to another realm, then a second one back again. Now that I've been here, I can make a portal back." She jabbed a finger at the plain beneath them. "Down there."

Hast grunted, which was about as much acknowledgement as she reckoned she was going to get out of him.

"Other alternative," she added, "we could get out of here, keep running, find a realm so far away from Vouring that we'll all be long dead by the time his influence reaches there. Get ourselves out this shit now before we make everything worse. Maybe one of those cut off realms like the one Hast and Lute found me in."

"Doesn't work like that," Hast said. "Realms aren't lined up in a row. The place they are doesn't have any distance or direction. It just has intent. Each realm is pressed up to the next while being infinitely far away. Do you understand that?"

"Not even slightly. Are you ready?"

"I see no other choice."

And with that ringing endorsement, Myra reached out, her fingers twitching through the fibres of the realm, searching, parting them. At first she thought about taking the three of them back to the realm she had come to call

home, to where she could soak in the noise and pollution and the lights one last time, maybe even find that drummer... But then a vision of the thing made of smoke – Urthak, Hast had called it – came over her, the thing that lived in the aether between realms, and for a second she was sure she would lead it to her realm. Absurd though that was, the thought of it was more than she could bear. She might not care about Vouring or the rest of the realms, but that place was where she belonged, and she wouldn't have it ruined. No matter what. So she took them to an empty realm she knew. She'd never understood why some realms had never developed life much more advanced than bacteria, but they were out there. Maybe realms Vouring had eaten last time he'd been free. Maybe just the randomness of evolution. Whichever, Urthak was welcome to it.

Not that it was entirely empty. She'd left a businessman there a couple of weeks back. He'd been on the run from the tax man, but then he'd thought he'd take a bonus grope of her on the way, so she'd left him in the empty realm. She hadn't lied. The tax man would never find him there.

The moment they were through, she was opening another portal, feeling for that exact point on the plain beneath the cliff. It was surprisingly difficult. The fabric of the realms resisted. That realm did not want to be found. But she'd been there, and she had it now.

They stepped through.

Into a deep forest.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Hast exploded. "Are you absolutely fucking incompetent, girl? Do I have to do all of this myself? This is not where you said you would take us."

But it was. She could feel it. She turned, peering around, trying to get a sense of the place. They had all looked down on the grassy plain, but now they were in trees, and she was certain she'd taken them to the same place.

"Don't be so certain," Rhen said. She was pointing up through the canopy. Myra followed her finger. There, between the leaves and branches, mountains rose into the sky, and directly before them was a cliff. "Maybe I'm insane, but that's the ledge we were on, isn't it?"

Myra squinted. It looked like it. It was high enough, narrow enough. But one ledge was much like another, wasn't it? And was that smoke drifting around it? It was too far to be sure. There hadn't been smoke when they'd stood there.

An enormous grinding sound shivered the air. The ground shook like an earthquake, knocking Myra to one knee. She looked around desperately. The forest shuddered. All around, a low, distant wailing sounded, like hollow, empty wolf howls.

"Look!" Rhen was still pointing through the trees towards the mountains. Except the mountains seemed to be folding up, turning inside themselves, like tissue paper in water.

"This way!" Myra said. "I want to see what's happening."

They raced up a low hill, Hast groaning his way behind, while she and Rhen sprinted ahead.

The trees thinned at the crown of the hill. They turned to see the last of the mountains collapse into nothing, leaving what looked like a mangrove swamp, a beach beyond, and then a glittering ocean.

"What the fuck is going on?" Rhen demanded.

Hast finally reached them, panting heavily. He stood for a moment, bent at the hips, watching the waves settle on the ocean. Then he began chanting, hands waving in the air. Myra took a step back. Never a good idea to be too close to a wizard when they started in on the magic. Myra had seen one too many spells go wrong in her time. At last, though, Hast dropped his hands. No one having been vaporised or transmogrified into a reptile, Myra crept closer again.

"What is it?"

"This realm is unstable," the wizard said. "It's collapsing and rebuilding itself over and over again."

"So... maybe I brought us to the right place after all?"

The wizard shot her a disgusted look. "There's something powerful here, distorting and destroying the realm. Something that shouldn't be here."

"The puzzle box?"

"Maybe. We've not been told what it is or what it does, but if it's supposed to challenge or destroy Vouring, it must be powerful indeed."

"And we're expected to, what, just pick this up and take it back with us?" That sounded a lot like suicide. Suicide was not on her agenda any time soon. Yeah, they were all taking risks, here, and yeah, this might kill them. But she wasn't going to kill herself to do it, not deliberately. That sounded more like a Lute kind of thing to do. Dumb kid. Maybe he should have been the one to come here after all. He'd grab it, no questions asked, even if it turned him inside out.

"It has been here a long time. Its effect has been building over time. We should be safe enough."

'Should' was carrying a lot of weight there. Still, they could decide when they found the damned thing.

"What happens if we're standing here when this part of the realm decides to rearrange itself?" Rhen said.

Hast turned his dried-up face to her. "Don't be."

"Okay," Myra said. "While we're doing questions, what the fuck is that?"

Through the trees, a figure moved almost in slow motion. It stood almost like a gorilla, heavy front legs or arms longer than the squat back limbs, but its body shape was more like a deer, antlers extending from its skull. It was made entirely of mist, and mist seemed to drip from its body like water.

"And there," Rhen said, pointing to the other side. This figure was again made from mist, but it was almost snake-shaped, with hundreds of small tentacles or protrusions dangling from along its length, and it moved, again in slow motion, in great oscillating waves.

"Ghosts," Hast said. "Memories of what lived here once, before the realm became unstable."

"It's moving this way," Myra said. "And look. More."

Emerging from the trees were further strange, distorted mist figures, some enormous, some tiny, all drifting, dripping mist, but unmistakably heading their way. Rhen drew her sword.

"Don't touch them!" Hast said. "They're drawn to us because we're still living. But if they touch us, we'll become like them."

"You're fucking kidding me," Rhen muttered, loud enough for Myra and Hast to hear.

"What do we do?" Myra asked. "Do you want me to open another portal out of here?"

"No. We have to find the puzzle box."

"Yeah? And how the fuck do we do that?" She wasn't sure exactly what she'd been expecting. Open the portal and find the puzzle box waiting for them on a nice plinth with a friendly note saying, 'Help yourself'?

"It won't be far. This realm is collapsing fast. There's not much of it left. It will be wherever the effect is strongest."

"Of course it will. And which way is that?"

The wizard whispered another spell, then pointed to their left.

"Well, let's get a move on then," Rhen said. She was still waving her sword around. Myra understood the urge to stab someone. "Those things are getting too close for comfort."

The ghosts were definitely heading for them. Myra saw a bird apparently made entirely of cogs, and something that looked like a gigantic bacteria hauling itself over the ground. "Time to run."

On the plus side, the ghosts were slow, almost sedate in their vacant intentions. On the minus side, they were everywhere, floating and hauling themselves towards the group, like they were pulled in by gravity, the path between them narrowing. Are we being herded?

They came over a rise, and ahead of them, at last, the forest thinned to become a valley. A deep stream flowed between high, rocky valley walls, silver in the sunlight.

"Where now?" Rhen demanded.

Hast's face was red, his beard dripping with sweat. He didn't seem to be able to speak, so he just waved them towards the valley. Myra glanced around. The ghosts were still slowly, ponderously closing. That one there could have been a man, except he was ten feet tall with spikes jutting from every joint. Damnit, but he looked a bit like the drummer from the band. She clearly wasn't getting enough sex. Forcing her exhausted legs forward, she stumbled on.

They were ten feet from the edge of the trees when suddenly, as one, the ghosts let out a chorus of howls. Muffled, like from behind a thick curtain, but howls anyway.

Instinct, only, acted. She grabbed her companions and dragged them back, bodily.

"What the fuck?" Rhen managed.

Then the valley folded, at one moment looking like rock and earth and water, the next like a matte painting on canvas, then paper, then nothing as it dissolved. In its place, a patchwork of landscapes appeared. A desert of red stones and sand, a reed-lined lake sliced neatly in half, a cavern entrance in a hill that ended abruptly, grasslands, a snowfield, a patch of jungle no bigger than a tennis court.

"Fuck this place!" Rhen shouted.

Already the lake was folding in on itself, replaced by a beach, and the snowfield vanished to become a scree slope. All the while, the ghosts keep howling, and the patches of landscape shifted, collapsed, rebuilt themselves from ever smaller pieces.

"What the hell is it doing?" Myra demanded.

"The realm grows thin," Hast said, his breath still coming fast. "There is less and less to rebuild itself with."

"And how the fuck are we supposed to get through this?"

The forest shook. The ghosts howled once again, louder, from every part of the forest.

"This part is failing," Rhen said. "We have to get out of here."

"Hast?"

The man was staring at the chaotic landscape.

"Fuck it." Myra reached for the fabric of the realm. She wasn't standing here while the realm sucked her into its own collapse. Her fingers pulled a portal out of space.

"There!" Hast said.

She paused, looking where he was pointing. On the horizon, a single part of the landscape seemed to be frozen, unchanging. White stone, or maybe ice.

"Get us there!"

The forest flattened around them, the trees becoming two dimensional, then folding, folding, folding, the ground itself disintegrating. Myra grabbed her companions and threw all three of them into the portal.

She didn't know where she'd opened it to. She hadn't had time to plan. She'd just ripped it open. They hit something hard and long. Metal. And stones. A vibration in the metal drove through them. A scream sounded. She jerked her head up.

They were on a train track, that was all she could see, and pounding down on them was a train trailing steam and smoke, its whistle blaring.

“Shit!” She tore open another portal, and they stumbled through again.

This time they were on the side of a sand dune. Fuck knows where. Some realm out there in the multiverse. Could be anywhere. It didn’t matter as long as they weren’t about to be flattened, eaten, ripped to shreds, or folded into nonexistence.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rhen spat.

“Just give me a moment.” This wasn’t something she could afford to get wrong. If they missed that stable spot by even a few yards, they could come out into a part of the puzzle box realm that was collapsing, taking them with it.

She could do this. She’d been doing it most her life. She’d never fucked it up yet.

You’ve never tried to be that exact before, either.

“Ready?”

Hast nodded. Rhen lifted her sword, as though there was anything she might be able to hit over there.

Myra opened a portal.

It was ice. That much was obvious as all three of them lost their footing and came crashing down.

“Shit, fucking bollocking crap,” Rhen cursed. “Warning next time!”

Myra pushed herself up. The icy patch wasn’t that big. The size of a couple of dozen car parking spaces. In the middle, incongruently, sat a stone box, deeply inlaid and dark against the ice. She slipped her way over. These boots might have been good for a night at the pub, but they had no grip and were terrible on the ice. I didn’t even have time to change into something sensible before this. She’d fought a gigantic robot-flesh machine for the Righteous Blade, travelled to the Citadel, where they had been attacked again, and ended up in the middle of a battle, been chased by a shadow monster through that really fucked up, Vouring-worshipping realm, and now this. Always make sure you’re wearing clean knickers when you go out, in case you die, someone had once told her. Well, that was a lost cause by now.

She reached the box. It was covered in symbols, places that you might push, pull or twist. “Is this the puzzle box?” she called back to Hast and Rhen.

“Can you work out how to open it?” Hast shouted.

“No.”

“Then it’s probably fucking puzzle box, isn’t it? Unless you can see another one.”

She was tempted to pick it up and bash the wizard’s head in, not for the first time. Only it looked heavy and with her luck, she’d slip over and brain herself.

“Is that another ghost?” Rhen said.

“What?”

“There.”

A shape seemed to be bounding across the shifting terrain towards them. Only it was moving far faster than the ghosts they had seen, and its mist was black. Like smoke.

Hast whirled on Myra. “Did you close that first portal we came through?”

“Of course.”

“Did you seal it?”

“What?”

“Did you seal the hells-damned thing?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The wizard’s face was nearly purple. The bit she could see under the beard. “Damned, bloody amateurs! That’s not a ghost. That’s Urthak. You didn’t seal the portal. It followed the path you made and forced itself through. You have to seal the portals!” He jabbed a finger at Rhen. “You. Pick up the puzzle box.” He turned to Myra. “You get us out of here!”

The smoke had picked up speed, whirling and rushing, arms emerging to tug itself on ever faster then disappearing again.

“How come it didn’t get folded up with the rest of this realm?” Rhen said as she skated and slipped her way to the puzzle box.

“It is a thing of the aether. It exists outside the realms. Just PICK UP THE BLOODY BOX.”

Hast lifted his hands, shouted a spell, and threw a ball of expanding light at Urthak. The creature swerved, but it kept on coming.

Rhen knelt down beside the box, wrapped her arms around it, and lifted with a grunt. She swayed, her feet sliding. Myra steadied her.

“I don’t know what the fuck is in this, but you’d better not be planning on running.” Already her face was red.

The smoke reached the ice, arms reaching for Hast. He batted one away with a burst of light, but a second was already reaching for him. Myra threw her knife. It sliced through the arm, which dissipated into smoke.

“Open the portal,” Hast said, retreating towards them. “I can’t hold it for long.”

“It’ll follow us,” Myra said.

“So seal the portal the moment we’re through.”

“I don’t know how!”

“Fucking amateurs. Why am I cursed with amateurs?”

Maybe it would be satisfied with eating Hast. That would do them all a favour.

Myra opened a portal. “Go through. I’ve got an idea.”

Rhen glanced at her, her jaw set in effort. “How about you?”

“I’ll follow you. I think I can get it off our trail.” She was going to be a hero again. How fucking stupid. She’d played the hero when they had retrieved the Righteous Blade. That had worked out, thank god. At least this should be far easier. One last time. She was never, ever doing this again. “Go!”

Staggering, Rhen entered the portal, followed by Hast, who shot her a furious look.

“Yeah, thank you, too,” Myra mumbled. She closed the portal.

Urthak rose up before her, its shadowy, smoky form like a void. Arms reached out to pull her in or bat her aside. She opened another portal.

“Here, kitty, kitty. Follow aunty Myra. Who’s a good boy?”

She stepped backwards, through the portal, and Urthak lunged after her.

Immediately, she was falling. Everything was black. Not a hint of moon or stars. Nothing. No air, either, to scream.

She had found this realm a long time ago by mistake, and she had almost died finding it. An entirely empty realm, except for gravity pulling her down, accelerating her faster and faster. A black hole, perhaps, or something even more final. Even Urthak couldn't crawl its way out of this.

Hey void boy. How do you like this void? she thought at Urthak. She would have screamed it, but she had no breath. Compared to this, Urthak was an ant.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't see. Her chest burned. Her pulse thumped frantically in her temples. She reached for the fabric of the realm. She still had time to fashion a new portal, drag herself out of here like she had before. Even if Urthak followed, she wouldn't lead it anywhere near where she'd sent Rhen and Hast.

She twisted the fabric of the realm, parted it...

Then something fastened on her arm, jerking it back. She felt teeth bite into her flesh. She lost her grip on the realm. Desperately, she grabbed for it again, but something else latched onto her other arm. She felt herself pulled back and up and in. Something rushed and whirled around her, cold and leeching and screamingly empty.

"Fuck you," she tried to scream, but there was no air, nothing to scream into.

At least Urthak isn't getting out of this either was the last thing she thought, and then she thought no more.

Chapter Fifteen

In which Rhen and Morin traverse the aether

Simon Kewin

Morin stared at the portal that Myra had opened for them to escape Urkath. Beside him, Rhen sat on the puzzle box, head in her hands. They were both breathing heavily. Neither spoke. The good news was that Urkath's shadowy tentacles repeatedly failed to seep through the portal. The bad was that Myra also didn't step through to ... wherever they were. Morin almost missed her volley of cheery insults and curses.

It was Rhen that broke the silence. "She didn't make it, did she? She's not coming back."

"It is conceivable she has taken another route, leading Urkath astray."

"Come on, you don't fucking believe that, do you?"

Did he? Probably not. Myra had some limited power, but she was no match for Urkath. No one was. Even Vouring might struggle if it came to it. Especially in the aether: in Urkath's natural abode, he doubted there was any being in the multiverse powerful enough. He'd fought the entity enough times to know that. Although, to himself, he would admit that fought was generous. Fled in terrorized panic from might be more accurate.

He looked to Rhen. They both knew what needed to be done. Rhen nodded, her usual bluster gone for the moment. Morin waited a moment longer, then worked the magic to seal the portal, knitting the threads of the veils back together so that nothing – not Myra, not Urkath – could easily step through.

It was trivial-enough magic, but it cost him. His bones ached. How was that even possible? He'd been badly drained when that lunkhead had found him in his tower, and everything that had happened since had only exhausted him further.

When the portal was sealed, Rhen stood and gazed around. "Where do you think we are?"

"I have no idea."

"Can't you cast Alion's Map of Marvellous Location or some such mystical magicky bollocks?"

"I literally have no idea what you're talking about."

Rhen snorted and climbed onto the puzzle box to get a better view. They were in a clearing in a forest. A clearing was good; it meant they could see that nothing was about to attack them. On the other hand, they had no idea what was beyond the ring of trees.

And, were they trees? Now that he studied them, he wasn't so sure. They were tall, certainly, and they were pointy like all good fir trees were supposed to be. But he couldn't shake the notion that they might also look like teeth if you were standing far enough away. Ranks of sharp, grindy teeth. Which meant he and Rhen were – what? – standing on or even in the mouth of some colossal beast.

He set the notion aside. Their experiences in the previous realm had clearly affected him. Still, he didn't like the way these trees lashed and swayed. There was no wind for one thing, and it was hard to escape the notion they were leaning over to talk to each other, debating what to do about these newcomers.

The sky was a vivid scarlet, which just seemed unnecessarily threatening.

"We must traverse the void again," said Morin. "Hopefully we can find a way to the Citadel realm."

"I feel like hopefully is a pretty significant word in that sentence, old man."

"I will open a way."

"There's another portal here?"

"Not yet. I will form one; it is no difficulty."

"A portal to where?"

"To nowhere. Into the aether."

"Wait, what? You can create a doorway into the aether without it connecting to another realm? Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I did, if anyone had been listening! You've all been too busy yabbering away. Only a powerful spellworker such as myself can manage the magic required, of course. It isn't like pushing a door open between two worlds as you and Myra do."

"Unfuckingbelievable. OK, so we stroll across the void and get to the Citadel. We can do that."

She had no idea, did she? "No, no! The aether is limitless in extent and the paths through it are, by definition, endless. Even I do not know them all. Stepping into the aether is more dangerous than you can possibly imagine. If there were any other way, I would take it, believe me. Hopefully, the way to the central nexus node, the Citadel, will be obvious once we're inside, as we should see multiple pathways converging to one point and..."

"More fucking hopefully. You know, the way you talk, it sounds a lot like you're afraid to go in there."

"Of course I'm not afraid. I've walked through the aether a hundred times. A thousand! I could step between the worlds with my eyes closed."

"OK. Only, you seemed pretty fucking freaked out by Urkath."

What did Rhen see when she looked at him? He knew. A doddering old man who'd probably manage to cut off his own arm if he tried wielding a sword. His own sword arm. She had no idea who and what he was. His body might be old, his limbs weakened from lack of use, and he might be no match for Urkath in a fight, but he'd outsmarted the entity often in his long travels. Sharp lumps of metal were useless in the endless void, too, however skilfully they were wielded; you had only your wits and your knowledge and your bravery. And those, at least, he had plenty of.

"A perfectly reasonable response I assure you," he said. "You have no idea what that thing is capable of. You think we've seen the worst of it? We have not. That was only a mere emanation into the material plane. It is an unspeakable horror! It may well be the death of the multiverse itself, rendered in living form."

He knew that aspects of the entity crept through portals and cracks from time to time – a fact that accounted for many tales of ghosts and demons – but its fundamental self remained in the void. Perhaps in some way it was the void. It was certainly voracious, it's very touch turning your flesh to ice and shadow.

Rhen held up a hand as if he were an errant child. "OK, enough magesplaining. I get it. Scary void, scary void baddie. Please, let's not pretend you're so high and mighty. Lute said he found you lying half-dead on a stone altar because you let your soul get trapped in the aether. You think I feel good about following you in there?"

"It is our only choice, given the lack of any convenient portals."

"And then there's your clothes."

That threw him. "What? What is wrong with my clothes? Why do they matter?"

He thought about working magic to turn her inside out, see if she was more polite wearing her organs on the outside. He restrained himself.

"I mean, come on!" she continued. "Long flowing robes. Great bushy beard. The knobbly staff. You're a bit of a cliché for a powerful wizard, aren't you?"

He settled for fixing Rhen with a piercing gaze, frowning at her through his bushy eyebrows. He'd found it worked on most people. He didn't understand a lot of what she said, though. His appearance? It was many years – many decades – since he'd given the question a moment's thought. It was possible he had let himself go a little in the grooming department. Too locked up in his arcane research, that was the problem. His mind was on far higher matters than what he chose to wear.

The truth was, though, that this Rhen troubled him in more ways than he would admit to anyone. Another reason he refrained from fundamentally altering the arrangement of her organs. She was limited intellectually, but he was used to dealing with those stupider than he was.

Or people, as he called them.

She was crude in her manner, too, almost childishly so – but that didn't trouble him either. In fact, he found her bawdiness unexpectedly exhilarating. Perhaps even ... arousing. Was that the word? Unfamiliar emotions washed through Morin at the sight of her. Here was the problem. When she looked at him, he felt stirrings in parts of his body that he'd long-since considered to be mere plumbing. This was very definitely not the time for such matters. Not only was he old enough to be her father – by the damned Nine, her grandfather – they were on a desperate mission to save the realms.

He dimly recalled reading that the prospect of imminent death could make you ... lusty. No one had mentioned that when they'd set out on this ridiculous adventure.

He heard himself saying, "My staff is not knobbly. It is perfectly well suited to its purpose." For some reason, he found his face flushing, his tongue slipping over the syllables as he spoke. What was going on with him? Some ill-effect of his exhaustion, no doubt. Yes, that was it.

Her smile though. That was what really got to him. She seemed to be suggesting all manner of illicit delights with only the raising of an eyebrow. She was clearly a woman who took what she wanted from life, sampled every pleasure there was to be sampled. Devoted to his calling and his research, lost in his books and his mumblings, he was aware that he'd allowed much to pass him by. He'd gained a great deal of arcane knowledge, acquired great power – but at what cost?

This was the thing that had troubled him more and more as the ridiculous assortment of misfits had assembled. How much had he missed out on? It wasn't just her smile and her way of talking; he found himself acutely aware of the swelling curve of her breasts, the sway of her hips as she walked. She was smart, too, perhaps even as smart as he was. Perhaps even - he could admit this possibility to himself - smarter. He'd always found stupidity in others depressing and dreary, but Rhen blazed. He tried again to stifle the pangs of regret coursing through him. He was too old to set these things right, now. Oh, there had been paramours in his younger days: a beautiful, clean-limbed young man who'd read books in a library they both visited; a tavern serving-wench whose smile had lit him up like the sunrise. Nothing had ever come of these infatuations. He couldn't even recall their names, now.

His problem was that he was clever. Too clever. Had been as a boy. Everyone had said so. He regretted it in many ways. Stupid people seemed to have more fun. Stupid people didn't waste their time worrying about unseen futures and phantom worlds. No, they frittered away their lives drinking and fucking and fighting. And having families and friends. Why couldn't that have been him? And now here was this Rhen, full of life, so dazzling and dangerous. Ah, if only he were a hundred years younger.

He was also lying. The aether terrified him. It always had. The first time he'd walked it, it had been like jumping off a ship into a bottomless ocean in the dead of night. The vastness of it was too terrible to fully comprehend. The way his magic worked, he could see the slightest silver lines – mere gossamer threads – leading through the endless void, and he knew that if he lost sight of the thread he was following, he would be lost. He would wander the void for the rest of time, lost to life but also not dying, his body frozen on the other side of the veils.

He pulled himself together. She was still watching him quizzically, that damned amused expression on her face. Her beautiful face. Her lips parted slightly...

He said, "Please, if you can give me some peace for a moment, I'll begin working the magic. Forcing a way into the aether itself is ... gruelling. Much more powerful once you complete it because you can go anywhere, but it's not easy. Not easy at all."

Now he was boasting. What the hell was happening to him?

Rhen set a foot onto the puzzle box. "And how do you propose we lug this damned thing across your aether? I notice you didn't do any of the lifting."

He sighed. Did he have to do everything? “If it’s too heavy for you I can reduce its dimensions for a time.”

There was that amused expression on her face again. “Right, cast Alion’s Incantation of Prodigious Shrinkage, right?”

“Again, I have no idea who Alion is or what you’re talking about.” He set about intoning the syllables needed for the spell. This, at least, was easy enough, the magic familiar from his many forays into the aether. The effects would last longer in the void where the dimensions of objects was a barely meaningful concept. The magic might even last long enough for them to reach the Citadel.

Might. He chose not to mention that word. He flared a blue light from the tip of his staff. In truth, it was completely unnecessary for the spell to operate, but it looked impressive. The curious stone sarcophagus with its markings and carvings glowed for a moment, then, with a whump, shrank down to the size of a small book. He felt the faintest inrush of air as reality hurriedly re-established itself, filling the gap where the box had been.

“Can you manage to lift it now?” he asked.

She was about to throw some predictably crude retort at him when something roared from the shadows of the things that either were or weren’t trees. The sound had clear notes of rage and hunger to it. It was also loud enough to make the branches quiver. Something big and pissed off was coming for them. The damned trees had clearly finished their discussions and had called for backup.

Rhen picked up the box in one hand and drew her sword with the other. At the same moment, the owner of the roar came bounding out of the forest.

It was something like a cross between an oversized wolf and a seriously pissed off thorn bush. Its green, spiky body looked like twisting vegetation, but it loped rapidly from the trees on its six legs like any predator. It bristled with vicious spikes, but it also had a head, and eyes. And, perhaps, some equivalent of a brain. Whether the green of this realm had infected an animal with its spores, altering and controlling it, or whether the weird vegetation grew nightmares like this as protection, he had no idea. It was another horror. Couldn’t they have visited just one realm where everyone was kind and the local wildlife didn’t try to eat you?

The creature paused, its snout casting around as if it were awaiting the arrival of others of its kind.

Rhen said, “Get us out of here, old man.”

“Guard my back while I work. You can manage that, I assume?”

“Depends how long you fucking take. Start mumbling your spells now.”

Morin set to work, moving his hands and uttering the syllables needed to impose his will upon the fabric of reality. The veils resisted him as he strove to unknit them. Opening a tear was harder in some realms, the walls thicker. And he had been through too much recently. But there was no time to stop and rest.

He glanced over his shoulder. Rhen’s sword scythed backwards and forwards as she held off two of the creatures. It looked like she was battling a thicket of dagger-like barbs – and losing badly. She sliced off several of the creatures’ limbs, but it appeared to make no difference. Blood wept from wounds on her body where a spike had stuck into her. In the background, a third creature lurked, awaiting its moment to pounce.

Rhen dropped to her haunches and struck upwards, piercing one of the creatures through the bottom of its jaw. Green gore sprayed from the wound. It screamed and hissed, its whole body quivering as she held it impaled. That was good. The horrors did have some version of a brain. A vulnerable spot.

The creature lurking in the background, though, saw its opportunity and threw itself forwards, directly at Rhen. Morin thought she was lost, but he had underestimated her. She swung with her other hand and dealt the leaping creature a crunching blow that knocked the life from it in mid-air. The shrunken puzzle box. She had used it as a weapon.

“Old man,” she snarled through gritted teeth. “Get us out of here now!”

If the creatures thought to surround he and Rhen, she wouldn't be able to protect him. How intelligent were they? Desperately, he returned to his work, trying to focus, trying to shut out the distractions of the world around him. He could do this. He had done it many times. Another snarl of anger came from behind him, and he couldn't be sure if it came from one of the creatures or from Rhen.

"Morin!"

He felt the moment when the veil gave under his hands, succumbing to his incantations.

"I have it!" he gasped.

The grunts and clangs of the fight taking place behind him were louder as Rhen was pushed backwards. Her words were punctuated by the efforts of the fight. "Took your. Fucking. Time! I'm fighting a battle here. While you. Fiddle about with. Spells and shit."

"Well, finish waving your sword around and follow me."

He squeezed through the slit he had cut in the walls between the worlds, first one foot then the other. The familiar icy clutch of the void robbed him of his breath. That endless, freezing ocean. It resisted him; it was no place for a living being.

He forced himself inside.

He reached an arm back into the solid world, feeling around for her. He found her arm, pulled her through. The veils resisted, then he had her, yanking her through the gash to flop, gasping, at his feet.

But she wasn't alone. One of the vicious wolf thicket monsters had a grip on one of her legs. Rhen hacked at it with her sword – the ethereal ghost of her sword – but Morin knew that was pointless. The void was not like the real worlds.

He intoned familiar syllables, summoning the magic that thrust the creature aside. He was desperately weary from opening the breach, but he had to ignore that. He completed the spell, letting the light blaze out of his staff, blasting the creature off the silver path and into the void. It clung desperately to Rhen as if it were caught in some violent wind. Rhen kicked and kicked as she felt herself being pulled off the way. Morin seized her arm, anchoring her to the pathway, then threw another spell at the creature, this time targeting the limb it gripped Rhen with, blasting it with green fire.

With a guttural scream, it relented. Morin breathed heavily as it was hurled backwards into the darkness. It flailed helplessly, as if it were sinking into sunless waters. He knew it was doomed. The aether had it now.

Working quickly, he closed the breach between the worlds. Sealing them inside.

"Are you injured?" he asked Rhen.

"I'm fine." She stood, studying her arms, plucking out splinters.

"Come. Hold my hand."

"Oh sure," she replied. "I know your fucking sort. You'll be telling me I need to take my clothes off to make the magic work next."

Morin did his best to ignore the mental images that conjured.

"We have no time for this! If you leave the silver pathway you will never find it again. Never! You'll spend your days fading away, hunted by Urkath. I've seen it happen. Is that what you want?"

"How can we even breathe in here?"

"Because I'm working powerful magic! Didn't I mention I could do that? Shall we stop while I explain in detail?"

Her hand in his was warm, slick with the sweat of her battle. But her grip was firm.

"Lead on, old man. But try anything, and I'll break your fingers."

"I shall be too busy attempting not to die, I assure you."

They walked for some time – hours, possibly, judging by the leaden weariness that filled his legs, but he'd come to understand that time and distance meant nothing in this realm. The pathway was a shimmering silvery line before him, thin as spider's silk in the moonlight. Occasionally other threads led off in different directions, off to the sides, upwards or downwards – if those terms had any meaning here. His sense of which was the right path to take was highly-developed, the maps in his head comprehensive, but he knew he wasn't infallible. He had to hope he wasn't leading them astray. If he was, they were doomed. Dimly, like a morning star glimpsed through fog, he discerned a brighter glow up ahead. The point where multiple pathways converged if he was any damned guide. The Citadel realm. He headed that way and didn't speak.

He felt the presence of Urkath nearby rather than seeing it. In this, its native realm, it was little more than a seething cloud of darkness. It hungered for life and light, seeking to devour them. Whether it fed off living things, or whether it was outraged by them, Morin didn't know.

"Run," he said. "Urkath is on our trail."

Rhen pulled her hand from his. He heard her draw her sword. Ridiculous. She might as well try and poke holes in the sky.

"What? Where?"

"Behind. All around. The question is meaningless! We have to leave the aether before it devours us. Run! And do not stray off the path. If you do, you are lost."

"Yes, yes, so you keep fucking saying."

He ignored her words and ran.

Urkath swept past them. Its scale was hard to measure; it was like trying to gauge the size of a storm cloud in the sky. Morin caught glimpses of teeth and eyes and claws in the shadowy form of Urkath. He knew they were only illusions: inventions of the creature, or perhaps of his own mind trying to make sense of a place where no person belonged, an entity no person should ever have to face.

He caught another brief glimpse of it, or at least the place where it was. It drifted past directly ahead, eclipsing the pathway they had to walk along for a moment, a deeper shadow in the darkness. They couldn't outrun it. He had to think.

He paused, considering. "I will lead it off into the aether. You must take Vouring's heart. The way through the veils is there. That pathway towards the faint light. Do you see it?"

"I don't..."

"There, there! It's perfectly clear to anyone with some wit. Are you so stupid? Go that way, and hurry. That thing may be the most powerful, but there are other nightmares in the void that will come for you."

"What about you?"

Obviously, he and Rhen could never be. The years had slipped by, and he was far too old, now. But he refused, also, to be the irritable old man they saw, lost in his dusty tomes and his mystical research. None of them knew the real him, but he could still show them. And, this brief time they'd had together, he and the other offspring of the heroes. He had valued it. Unexpectedly, he had enjoyed it. It had given him a glimpse of the path his own life might have taken. They were ridiculous and dim-witted and foolhardy – sometimes all at once – but there hadn't been enough of any of those things in his life.

By the dark gods of hell, when did he get so old?

"I will take the long way round. There is another path. I will lead this creature away while you escape the aether."

"Oh, right, you just assume it will hunt you rather than me?"

"It knows me, knows my scent. We're old adversaries. Did you think it was coincidence Urkath turned up when we were barricaded inside that cathedral? It sniffed me out. You'll be safe enough if you hurry. The way out isn't far now."

"Where will you lead it?"

"Let me worry about that. Now, go! I will buy you as much time as I can. I will see you at the Citadel. Just be sure you get the puzzle box there and that you don't get distracted by anything that looks like it might be fun."

Rhen hesitated for a moment, then did something he didn't expect. Not speaking, she reached up to kiss him on the cheek. Her lips on his skin were warm and soft. In that moment, lights flooded through his mind. Bright, sparkly lights.

"What ... what was that for?" he managed.

Rhen placed a hand on his arm, and there was an oddly knowing look in her eyes, just for a moment. A sadness, even a fondness. Perhaps there was more to her than he'd thought.

She said, simply, "Thank you. Stay safe, old man."

He had to hope that in the darkness of the void, she wouldn't be able to see the way his loins were stirring. Another good reason to wear shapeless robes.

"Hurry now," he said. "There's no time for this!"

Rhen turned and stepped away, balancing on the silver pathway as if it were a tightrope she might fall off at any moment. Which, effectively, it was. He watched her for as long as he dared, delight and regret mingling in him, then he, too, sighing, turned away.

He took a moment to orientate himself. It was a mistake to think of the silver lines as something like paths on solid ground. Not only could they shift around, they could also loop and twist, lead you overhead and upside down. The aether had its own laws of nature. If you couldn't handle that, you were lost.

The Shadow Labyrinth, though. That was what he had to find. He had never been there – obviously – but he had read about it in more than one ancient tome. One – the original, he thought – had been penned by Ithager the Planeswalker nearly three thousand years previously. Ithager claimed to have seen the Labyrinth forming, some explosion or calamity in one of the realms causing a huge part of the aether to collapse in on itself. Perhaps an entire realm had been destroyed, causing the rupture. Whatever the truth of it, the silver pathways had become impossibly tangled at this point. Ithager's warnings had been very clear. You could walk in, but you could never walk out again. There was no escaping the Shadow Labyrinth.

Morin wondered how Ithager knew that. He obviously couldn't have gone in and returned to report. Perhaps he had witnessed others stepping inside, never to return. Morin had spent his life making sure he didn't follow them – but now he was going to do exactly that. If he could get trapped in there, then maybe Urkath could, too.

Maybe.

He ran along forking pathways, all the time fighting his instinct not to go that way, not to go that way. The feeling for the aether he'd built up over the years was useful; he simply had to do the opposite of what his senses told him. He felt Urkath behind him, around him, a storm cloud gathering itself to unleash a tempest. Was it intelligent, or a mere creature of hungers? He didn't know.

He reached the place – indistinguishable to anyone else's eye – that he knew was the threshold. A step he'd never dared take before. He couldn't afford to hesitate. He strode on.

Inside, oddly, the silvery lines became clearer. He could see the tangle of them, twisting together into some impossible knot. That gave him hope. If the light of the pathways couldn't escape the Labyrinth, perhaps Urkath couldn't either. Did that make sense? Ithager had claimed that the aether itself was folded in on itself here, not simply the pathways, but who really knew?

The thought of Urkath made him stop, though. Where was the creature? It should have followed him. He turned, reaching out with his mind's eye to find Urkath, see the deeper darkness within the endless night.

There. The creature hesitated at the threshold. It knew about the Labyrinth. Again, was that knowledge or mere instinct? Morin imagined it turning, loping off to find Rhen, rend her before she could escape. He refused to let that happen.

He readied a spell. Long ago, as a young man, he had encountered Urkath in the aether and had hurled fire and lightning at it in an attempt to harm it. He'd soon learned he was having the opposite effect. It was different outside, in a physical realm, but here, the more magic he threw at the entity, the more powerful it became.

It was the Labyrinth – the calamity Ithager had witnessed – that had given him the idea for the spell. Black Light he called it. It was a sphere of concentrated aether, so concentrated that it sucked in the void around it. The void and anything nearby. The effect was limited, but devastating. He knew the magic hurt Urkath; he had inflicted pain upon the monster more than once. Barely enough to slow it down, but that was something. It was also gruelling magic, something he could only manage two or three times without a month's rest – and he was already utterly spent.

He had no choice. He could at least hurt Urkath, goad it. And that was all he needed to do.

The effort of hurling the Black Light spell at Urkath made his head swim. Dizziness washed over him, and he almost teetered off the silver path. He fell to one knee, placing a hand to the silver line to steady himself. He felt the moment the magic ball struck Urkath, felt the tug in the aether as a part of it collapsed in on itself. Saw, also, the black smoke that was the body of the entity briefly illuminated by a purple flash, like lightning discharging inside a storm cloud.

Morin heard Urkath's furious screech of rage in his head, in his bones. The entity loomed at him, across the threshold, into the Labyrinth. Morin stood and, swaying from his exertions, forced himself to flee once again. Deeper, deeper into the maze he raced, barely keeping to the silver thread now, his vision clouding and fading.

The cloud passed near him. No, worse than that, through him. He felt the wash of ice as some tendril of Urkath's form brushed his body. Morin stopped and stood his ground. He would strike the entity again. All his strength was gone, utterly gone, but he had a reserve stored in his staff, there for dire emergency. This, now, was the emergency.

He gripped the staff tight, hurriedly intoning the words of the Black Light spell one final time. Power blazed through his hand from the staff, roaring through him, and he hurled it at Urkath. The staff cracked in two and fell from his hand to the pathway. The substance of the aether shook, and Urkath howled its pain, its fury greater than any Morin had ever heard. He had struck it a terrible blow. But he knew it wouldn't be enough. It could never be enough.

He stumbled on, alone and powerless. Time passed, but he was barely aware of it. Urkath shadowed him, creeping nearer but not attacking for the moment. Whether it had grown wary or was simply biding its time, Morin didn't know. It reached out with a misty tendril of darkness to test Morin, but he could do nothing except waft at it uselessly with his hand and run on. On and on.

Something lay on the silver pathway ahead of him. His broken staff, lying where he'd dropped it minutes – or hours – previously. How could that be? He'd fled as quickly as he could. But of course, the Labyrinth had looped him back, twisted him around. He really was trapped.

Good. That was good.

He stopped running and slumped to his knees, then sat upon the silver way, his broken staff beside him. Strangely, he found himself laughing. The thing that was Urkath was all around him now. It didn't matter. He had no strength left. He didn't know for sure whether Urkath was trapped in the Labyrinth with him, but it might be. At least he had bought Rhen and the others some time.

He hoped it was enough. At least his life had meant something in the end. He just hoped the others, the descendants of the Nine, were enough to save the realms.

Idiots that they were.

He closed his eyes for a final time as the darkness engulfed him.

Rhen paused at the end of the shimmering silver path, turned to look back. There was no sign of Hast. She knew well that he had sacrificed himself. There was a lot more to him than she'd thought. And, an old man? She'd have been into that. Young stallions could be too eager. No stamina, that was their problem. They took and they didn't give. An older man, though, slower to excite, slower to release? Yeah, she'd have been into that. She believed in experiencing everything life had to offer. And she relished a challenge. Although, she'd have insisted on him having a fucking bath, first.

Ah well, it was not to be. He was gone.

The shrunken puzzle box in her hand, she pushed through the weak spot in the veils where the silver pathway ended, stepping from the cold quiet of the aether into the Citadel realm.

A wall of noise and flame and fury engulfed her.

Chapter Sixteen

Wherein our heroes enter the Sanctum of Chains

Frank Dorrian

Everything was fucked.

Mage-fire exploded across Damon's screening arm in a rapid staccato wave, spraying chips of marble across the Sanctum of Chains, smoke and dust billowing, stinging Lute's eyes and driving him back into cover. 'Fucking ballbags!'

Around the corner of a broken column, eyes watering, Lute glimpsed Damon as he charged through the hail of Mage-fire. Stone limbs grinding, cracked joints trailing rubble and dust, Magi scattered before him. Damon's fist pounded the sanctum floor, put a crater in it, and sent Magi bodies spinning through the air. Mage-fire bounced from his shoulders, charring white marble, another blow rumbling through Lute's stomach as he hunkered down behind the column.

Above the melee, behind the flare and smoking trails of hurled Mage-fire, Vouring's eyes watched, flitting back and forth like a puppet-master's. Lute shuddered as he felt the thing's gaze slide across him like a rotten grave shroud.

Fucked, and fucked again.

'Fuck. Nicky.' He jabbed the necromancer in the side with an elbow. More of Vouring's Magi were spilling from the antechamber ahead, leaping down from broken balconies upon shimmering waves of power. Nicky cowered, bloody head cradled in her shaking hands. 'Nicky! Eyes up!'

Lute staggered to his feet as the first of the Magi charged him, narrowly swerving a hurled bolt of white-blue power that tore another chunk from the broken column and spilled Nicky on her side. Lute parried the swipe of the Mage's spellblade, countered, opened the bastard like a bag of grain, turned to parry, and found himself on his knees clutching at his bleeding face, his sword a smoking ruin before him. Vouring's

Mage reared, eyes bulging behind his mask, and aethereal blade held high, while the weight of the Fellgod's gaze pinned Lute.

A clumsy body slammed into the Mage as the blow fell, tackling him to the ground in a flurry of half-witted blows. Lute caught a glimpse of the Mage's face, the one he'd just opened up, before a spellblade swept its head from its shoulders. Nicky's shriek was like a bolt through Lute's ear, then, sharp enough to pierce him through. Dead Magi were rising, trading blows with their former comrades, while shadows peeled themselves from the walls to fall upon others like palls wrought of misery's own fabric.

Vouring distracted, Lute shuffled away, watching the chaos unfold for a heartbeat. Nicky was spasming on the floor beside the column while the Magi struggled against themselves, Damon, and things wrought from nothingness. Her eyes were rolling, face smeared bloody, mouth wedged open at the climax of a scream long since silent.

Where was Yas?

Lute's eyes scanned the madness unfolding in the sanctum, looking for any sign of the light-conjurer. A flicker caught his eye through a cloud of dust and smoke, somewhere past the shadows of Damon's stomping legs. Vouring's Magi darted back and forth, dodging narrow beams of light that cut through the murk, bounced from rippling aether-shields. Lute caught a glimpse of Yas's face, bloody and twisted in a grimace of terror and effort, before the smoke obscured her again. She was surrounded, Magi shadows darting in and out, closer with every assault.

'Damon!' The statue's head swivelled toward Lute, its massive fist splattering a Magi into the stone floor. 'Help Yas!'

There was no time to watch. Lute flung himself at the Mage that had broken free of Nicky's web of shifting shadows to stand over her fallen form, spellblade falling for her neck. Lute's fist collided with the side of the Mage's head with a crunch, flopping him like a ragdoll, a jolt of pain shooting up Lute's fist. He swallowed it down behind a snarl, grabbing Nicky's collar and dragging her away from the fight.

‘Come on!’ The last of her puppet-Mages went down in shreds, Vouring’s Mages turning their attention toward them. Nicky spasmed in his grasp. ‘Get on your fucking feet!’

Lute dropped to his knees, screaming, hands over his head, as a Mage bore down on him, blue blade cutting the air, the hum of its power a sickening rhythm.

There was a splat, and cold blood splattered across the back of Lute’s hands. Damon’s foot tore through the air before Lute and Nicky, a knot of Mages bursting into a cloud of red mist. The sanctum shook as Damon’s weight came crashing down, his vast form sinking into a wide pugilist’s stance as he faced down the Magi. ‘Back, you motherfuckers!’

The sanctum shaking again as Damon charged, granite voice screaming, Lute dragged Nicky into cover at the edge of an impact crater, the two of them cowering beneath a rim of shattered stone. Lute passed a hand down his face, body shaking, and sweat and blood dripping from his chin, when Nicky clutched at his chest. ‘I... I can’t do it, Lute.’

He looked at her, the necromancer’s eyes wide, brimming with terror, her voice barely a reedy whisper. ‘It... it sees me.’

The edge of Vouring’s gaze passed across the stone at Lute’s back, and he could have sworn that he heard them shift, give, beneath its weight before it finally passed. He winced, shook it off, wished he could. ‘I need you to try,’ he said, holding Nicky’s hand. ‘For us. For...’

Lute glanced at where he had last seen Yas, and found her staring straight at him. The conjurer lay sprawled atop a pile of rubble on the other side of the sanctum, mouth open, head hanging backward, face dripping blood from a cut neck, her body torn open by spellblades, and the stones around her soaked and running with blood.

‘Yas...’ Lute screwed his eyes shut, hand tightening on Nicky’s, tears burning at the corners of his eyes. It had all gone to shit. They were outnumbered, outmatched, and still, there was no sign of the others. They had moments, minutes at best left to them, before Vouring and its Mages crushed their pathetic distraction beneath their heels. ‘Rhen,’ Lute snarled, wincing as a blast sent stone chips spraying down over his head. ‘Where the fuck are you?’

They’ve failed.

Vouring’s voice hit Lute with a cold fist and tore a gasp from him. You’ve all failed. Damon’s gritty roar shook the sanctum, stone hands swatting at the Mages that leapt through the air around him, pelting him with fire and sorcerous blasts.

Kneel.

Damon’s titanic form went rigid as if stuck with a blade, then collapsed to its knees in silence. Enough. Vouring’s Magi loosed their power, hurling volleys of Mage-fire and sorcerous bolts at the fallen statue. Damon’s form vanished beneath a pall of smoke and flame, stone chunks spraying across the sanctum. ‘Damon!’

Lute’s cry was lost beneath the roar of sorcerous blasts. The very sanctum shook with them, dust and stone spilling from the walls, explosion after explosion threatening to crush Lute’s very skull, his gut shaking with detonations. He clamped his hands over his ears, a scream lost beneath the thunder of it all, his throat feeling torn, bloody – and then, it ended.

Lute looked up, head ringing, blinking against the dust, now peeling back from the forms of hooded Magi, and the pile of shattered, smouldering marble at their centre. ‘Damon...’ He shouldn’t have moved, shouldn’t have uttered a word, but the sudden hollowness inside him dragged Lute up to his knees, sure as if it had sunk hooks in his ribs. Yas. Damon. Two of their number, cut down, torn apart. Their mission had been shredded by the Fellgod’s claws before his very eyes.

Be silent!

Before the loss had a chance to truly scrape at his innards, the weight of Vouring’s horrific gaze fell upon Lute, its voice booming with a rotten authority through his heart. A knot of Magi spun beside the ruin that had been Damon

with hands raised. Mage-fire roared, arcing like falling meteorites through the dust that still cloyed overhead. Lute managed a crumb of volition, managed to turn, throw himself over Nicky's huddled form.

Mage-fire exploded upon the rim of the crater, shattering already broken stone. The sanctum vanished in a flash of light, and Lute felt himself hurled, turning in the air, a distant thud, and he found himself sprawled out on his side. Nicky was strewn out on her back before him atop a pile of rubble, their hiding place a now

molten crater spewing flames. Magi were striding toward them, closer every time Lute blinked. He couldn't move, the sanctum slipping in and out of focus, a wretched whistling swelling between his ears. Vouring's voice came crashing through the murk.

You pathetic things. You ungrateful, chattering apes.

A Mage came stomping over broken stones toward Nicky's sprawled, unconscious form. He reached back, a spellblade forming along his forearm from blue aetherial light.

I gave you all a gift, when you were barely able to look up at the stars without quaking in fear, Vouring hissed. I have suffered. Bled beneath the sting of your ire. And now, you would dare raise your hand against me, yet again, with the very gifts I bestowed upon your ancestors? The moment seemed to hang forever, strung out upon the deep notes of Vouring's voice. Lute felt that dreadful attention fall upon him again, as if he were caught within some scalding beam of unseen light. And even you. My own blood. You would join with these creatures, and think to strike me down? Lute reached feebly toward Nicky, tears cutting through the grit on his cheeks.

No.

The Mage's spellblade punched down through Nicky's chest, into the broken stone beneath her. Lute caught the hiss of melting flesh, saw blue vapour burst from the necromancer's mouth, her eyes froth and melt. She gave a single kick, and was gone, the spellblade sliding from her in a blue vapour-trail. Vouring reared, flexing its crooked limbs, and the sanctum shook upon the swelling of its might – air, earth, and soul quivering before it.

Lute could do nothing but stare at Nicky's corpse, his body numb, yet all at once wracked with pain, the gargantuan weight of Vouring's will pinning him to the ground as the Mage came striding toward him, spellblade pulled back for a second kill.

Vouring clenched a many-digited fist, shadows dancing and cloying about them. The time has come for a reckoning amongst the realms. And now, I will not be contained. Not by trinket. Not by blade. And not by men! Die! The Mage's spellblade fell, and a great blaze of light tore through the sanctum with a sound like loosed thunder, the sound of the veil between realms being gouged carelessly open, tearing a snarl from Vouring. The Mage was cast back upon a wave of power, a barely visible silhouette vanishing into nothingness. Lute

saw something moving before him, obscured by the afterburn in his eyes and lingering dizziness, a short blade sending blue aether-sparks flying from shattered spellblades.

'Rhen...'

The thief-girl's snarling, bloodstained face swam into view as she cut open a Mage and put a boot into another's chest. Her glare fell upon him. A furious hand snatched Lute upright against his protesting legs. 'Stop fucking moping, arsehole, and help me open this thing!'

She thrust something into Lute's numb hands. A box, all of ebon-coloured wood, its surface chased with a myriad gilt lines and patterns. Vouring's roar shook the sanctum. You maggots dare violate me? Cracks went racing through the walls to spew dust over Lute and Rhen, the god's voice battering the very fabric of reality with a blunt fist.

You will pay a price for this.

Chapter Seventeen

In which Vouring tries convincing and Lute lies bleeding

Ed Crocker

Smoke in his eyes, blood in his mouth and the sinister bubbling of molten lava assailing his ears, Lute peered at the box his last-minute saviour Rhen had shoved in his hands. Midnight black, smooth wood, etched with gold swirls and intricate patterns. It felt warm in his hands, and he swore he could feel it pulsing. For a moment he was transported to being held, being held by his mother, long before her mania came on. That sense of safety. A sense he had never felt since then, even in his life of tedium and pointlessness as a blacksmith. The box promised him an end to his worries, and his eyes swam in its gilded reflections.

His reverie was broken by Rhen, who screamed in his face. “We have to move, shithead!”

Lute looked up and met her eyes, wiping the soot from his own. Through the smog beyond, he saw a large silhouette of a fist raised into the air. The chamber was broken, and in a few seconds time, they would be too.

“Hmm,” said Lute. “You make a good point.” Then he scrambled himself up and turned around to where the far wall of the chamber was, riddled with scorch marks from the savage battle they’d just fought.

“There,” he said, pointing to a thin passageway, which was hopefully too small for the colossal figure of a furious god to get through. Rhen didn’t need to be told twice, and bolted ahead of him, and as Vouring’s monstrous, red-eyed, scarlet-fleshed form came lurching out of the shadows to end the last of them, Lute followed.

For a brief terrible moment, Lute decided to look back and get his first proper look at Vouring. Impossibly tall, with muscles so veined and bulging they appeared distorted, the mad god lumbered after him, all four arms ending in huge fists clenched for the kill. The blood-red eyes matched the hell-hued, deep-red flesh, like some fire-birthing demon loosed into the world. The remnants of the seals that had so recently bound him were scarred into each of his limbs like an infernal tattoo.

Lute turned back, heart engaged in multiple palpitations, and made a mental note to himself to never be curious again.

He was almost there, with Rhen already in the passageway, when the sound of stone crashing somewhere above him sent an instinctive thrill of adrenaline through him, and fearing the worst—pessimists live longer—he decided to skip the last few steps by turning his run into a flying leap. As he soared through the air like an overweight arrow he felt, rather than saw, the mortared blocks come tumbling down in the air above him, and as he landed in the opening of the passage he heard a colossal bellow of stone on stone as an avalanche of rock fell, followed by a great plume of dust which coated him as he lay there groaning.

Turning slowly in a great amount of pain, he saw the way he had come was now blocked by a wall of scorched rock, rubble that had almost ended him but now formed a useful barrier between him and the rageaholic immortal being who sought him out.

He glanced ahead, to see Rhen at the far end of the passageway, where it opened out into a small chamber. Groaning, he half stood, half crawled towards her as his joints sent him various damage reports conveyed as sharp jolts of fuck-me-that-hurts.

“If you’re done lying around, I have good news and bad news,” said Rhen, looking ahead of her. Attempting to dust himself off, he finally joined her in the new chamber.

It looked very similar in terms of proportion of red-hued rock and general inhospitableness as the old one, with two significant differences. It was much smaller and...

“There’s no fucking way out.”

Lute looked at Rhen, then back to the chamber. She was right. It was more like a tiny circular atrium, but with no exits. Just walls. In the middle was what looked like a marble altar. Whatever had once rested on it was gone. Several wall sconces held torches which provided the only light.

“So what’s the good news?” Lute asked, holding tighter onto the wooden box in his hand which he was relieved, yet strangely unsurprised, to find he had not lost in the frantic dash.

“We have extended our pointless fucking lives by at least a number of minutes.” She listened to the hammering blows of Vouring behind the stone blockade. “Hopefully.”

Lute considered this. “I think I liked you better when you were saving my life.”

Rhen nodded, adjusting her blood-specked ponytail. “I get that a lot.”

Lute moved to the altar, and sat down on the low stone wall that surrounded it. “So, this box.”

Rhen shrugged. “Had to do a lot of crazy shit to get it. Some people died for it. It’s rumoured to contain Vouring’s heart. Or something to kill him with. Or something connected to it.” She thought on this. “Could just be a box.”

Lute shook his head, entranced by the glow of the patterns. “It’s not just a box.”

“And you know that how, blacksmith?”

Lute shrugged. “I can’t explain.” He looked up at her. “How do you know I was a blacksmith? We’ve not talked that much.”

Rhen shrugged back. “Someone mentioned it on one of these endless fucking quests.”

Lute stared into the distance. “I wasn’t a very good blacksmith. I wasn’t a very good anything, really.” He paused. “I was a good drinker, I suppose. Although my friend Gill always outdrank me. So I take that back.”

Rhen sighed and sat down next to him, stretching her legs out and wincing in pain. Her legs were marred with small scratches; a deeper cut bled from her arm. She reached into her belt and removed a small vial of yellow liquid, some of which she dabbed onto the cut, wincing as she did so, and then she took a thin roll of gauzy fabric out and began to dress the wound.

“Look, no offence Lute, but if you’re going to start getting all maudlin and self-pitying, then don’t expect me to help. I’d like my final moments to be as far from pathetic as possible.”

“This has been a good chat, thanks Rhen.”

Wound dressing done, Rhen sighed and turned to him. “Look, so you were a waste of space back in whatever shithole you dragged yourself from. Who gives a fuck? You’ve turned out to be pretty good at fighting and staying alive.”

“Not for long.”

“Long enough.” Rhen turned from him and looked up at the chamber ceiling high above, as if expecting another rockfall to land and end the conversation. “Look, it doesn’t matter how long your life is, alright? I’m gobsmacked I’m still around, some pervert god has lost a sack load of gold betting on my demise over the years. But I wouldn’t give me praise for the length of my killing years. Just the gold it’s got me. What matters is...”

Lute waited for her to finish, as dust motes danced before him.

After a while Rhen shrugged apologetically. “I thought I was building up to something then. I wasn’t.”

Lute smiled, feeling a little better despite it all. “Appreciate the mildly terrible effort.”

LET’S TRY THIS AGAIN, SHALL WE?

The voice was all around them, impossibly loud despite the rock that separated them. It bled into their ears and bounced around their skulls.

I MAY HAVE BEEN TOO HARSH WHEN I CALLED YOU UNGRATEFUL, CHATTERING APES.

"Oh, you think," Lute muttered, as the voice of Vouring rang out. He didn't know if he could hear them. He suspected this was almost like a projection of his voice.

"Gods," said Rhen. "He's such a prick."

YOU HAVE NOT HEARD MY STORY, NOR UNDERSTOOD IT. IT IS TIME YOU LEARNED THE WAY THE WORLD WORKS, MY CHILDREN. YOU ARE NOT THE HEROES YOU THINK YOU ARE.

Rhen turned to Lute, and they shrugged in unison. They had nowhere to go. Nothing to do but to listen to the deep bass rumble of a mad god.

BACK WHEN MEN WERE BARELY CIVILISED, I SEPARATED THE REALMS, AND GAVE ACCESS TO THEM. I SOUGHT TO SPREAD THE SEEDS OF MY WORSHIP AND MAKE A STRONG CONNECTED WORLD. SAFE, SECURE. THE FREEDOM OF A WAR-LESS WORLD. BUT HUMANS FAILED MY VISION AND I SAW THE FLAME OF CONFLICT SPREAD BETWEEN THE REALMS, WORSENING NOT BETTERING THE MANYVERSE.

Lute tried to imagine endless conflict. He didn't have to try very hard.

SO I MADE THE DECISION TO SHUT THE REALMS OFF FROM EACH OTHER FOR GOOD. AND MAKE THE ONES I COULD PURER IN THEIR VISION, HOLIER IN THEIR AIMS. NO BLOOD IS SHED WHEN PEOPLE HAVE A UNIFIED PURPOSE. BUT I WAS PAINTED A TYRANT, AND TURNED ON BY THE SO-CALLED HEROES MEANT TO SERVE ME. TRAPPED, ALL FOR THE CRIME OF WANTING TO SAVE YOU FROM YOURSELVES.

Lute looked at Rhen, who seemed to be listening closely. He shut his eyes briefly and imagined an inn far away and a life of no responsibility, free of lectures. The grass is always greener, he realised. And frequently bloodier.

BUT NOW I OFFER YOU SOMETHING MORE THAN YOU DESERVE. AGREE TO SERVE ME AND I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES HERE. YOU WILL BECOME MY NEW HEROES, DESERVING OF THE TITLE, AND BRING PEACE EVERYWHERE MY TOUCH DESCENDS. YOU HAVE UNTIL I BREAK THROUGH TO YOU TO MAKE YOUR MIND UP. I TRUST YOU WILL MAKE THE SANE CHOICE.

And then silence descended, and Lute breathed out, watching a tiny spider who had been awed by the rumble of a god finally creep out from under the lip of the altar and begin what looked like a prodigious journey across the chamber to some unknown crevice.

"Could be he's right," said Rhen, after a few more moments of spider watching.

Lute turned to her, frowning. "About what?"

Rhen shrugged. "Maybe he just wanted peace and order, and it was us lot, or our forefathers or whatever, who fucked it up."

Lute thought on this. "Has his behaviour been that of someone who's in the right? Feel like less killing and more pints of tea over a pleasant sit down would have been the actions of the hero in this story."

"Pints of tea?"

Lute side-eyed her. "I don't drink tea."

"I can tell, yes." Then Rhen shrugged and stood up, stretching her battered legs. "We're the ones who attacked him. Technically."

"Lot of heavy lifting on the word technically there." Lute sighed. "Look, even if there is anything to that story, his world is not exactly better. Closed off worlds, worshipping him. Doesn't sound like the cost of peace is all that great either."

Rhen narrowed her eyes at him. "You were just a blacksmith, were you? Much time for philosophising at the furnace, was there?"

Lute ignored that one. "But he did tell us something important with that speech. He's scared."

Now it was Rhen's turn to frown. "Scared of what? I don't see any fucking huge old gods bigger than him marching around."

"Scared of us," continued Lute. "Well, this." He nodded at the puzzle box in his hands, still warm, still enticing him somehow. "He knows it can hurt him. Knows we have something on him. Hence, the peace talk."

Rhen shrugged. "So we could use this, get ourselves out of here. Then if he's bluffing, still fuck him up."

Lute looked at her. "Or figure out how to destroy him with it."

Rhen laughed. "You're quick to want to get yourself killed even after seeing all the bodies of your friends, are you?"

Lute looked at her then. Really looked at her. "Why are you like this?"

"What the fuck does that mean?" She backed away from where he was sat, like he had a weapon aimed at her.

"You know exactly what I mean. You've seen the stakes. And you're trying to wriggle your way out of this. Who..." He thought on this a second. It didn't feel like the right thing to say; it felt like he was doing a lot of presuming. But he also didn't give a shit anymore.

"Who hurt you?"

Rhen barked out a laugh that went on for a few seconds, but she moved further away from him. "Oh seriously fuck off now! Philosopher, counsellor, anything else you can do, Lute? Give it a rest. You're from a piss-poor village somewhere in the arse end of nowhere, or somewhere jealous of the arse end of nowhere more like, what the fuck would you know about my life?"

Lute just stared at her and said nothing.

"Fuck right off," said Rhen again, a little quieter, but she turned away from him, and pretended to inspect the red stone walls of the altar room.

After a minute or two Lute had given up on any hope of a response, but then Rhen's voice sounded, flatter than before, dying out quickly in the humid air of their prison.

"Everyone has hurt me. Everyone I've ever known. Some in traditional ways: physically and worse. Some with light betrayals, the kind you shake off and think nothing of once you've got out of town, but come back to you days later, when you realise all the memories of their friendship have been soured by the shitty end of it. Some with words, making me try and feel small. I brush it off, knowing that I've got a trail of bodies and heists and jobs behind me that anyone in all the realms would be fucking jealous of. But it still hurts."

She sighed, and placed a hand on the chamber wall, fingers splayed out.

"They did it because I was poor, they did it because I was a woman, they did it because they could; because no-one gives a shit in half the towns out there. It's every man and woman and fuck-up for themselves. And over time, you try and brush it off, but it makes you cold, and then every now and again it makes you want to cry, and then you hate yourself for your weakness."

Lute nodded. "So, you try and bargain with a mad god instead."

Rhen turned back to him, her eyes dry but a minuscule quiver in her mouth. "Yeah why not? No one else is going to help me. So I need to help myself."

Lute stood up and walked over to her, and looked her in the eyes.

"Now you're fucking freaking me out, Lute."

Lute grabbed her hand, and expected her to flinch, or maybe hit him, but she didn't move. They were still for a moment. "We don't know each other, Rhen. Not well. We could be cunts. Out there" — he pointed at some random spot he hoped fully indicated the world outside — "I could be the kind you're talking about. The ones who betray you. But in here, in this shitty room, which neither of us are likely to get out of alive, why don't we make a promise, if

only for a few minutes. We both trust each other, and we don't fuck each other. Over, that is. And if our trust turns out to be ill-founded who gives a buggery? We're dead anyway. Let's take a risk, and act like we're real friends."

Rhen didn't say anything, but she kept her eyes locked on him.

Lute spoke, quieter now. "I'm sorry. You deserve better. You always have, most likely. Will you help me? I can't do this without you."

She looked down. They were still holding hands. Then she pulled out of his grip and marched back to the altar, laughing. "Ten realms, Lute. You were wasted at the fucking forge weren't you with those speeches. You and that prick out there. I'm just surrounded by men with speeches." She sighed. "Okay then, let's try it your way. Team Last People Standing. Go team. What's next then?"

Lute looked down at the box. "We open this. Hope it's his heart. Crush his sad little heart."

Rhen nodded. "And how do we open it?"

Lute paused. "Ah, well, I hadn't quite got that far yet."

Rhen sighed and then looked up as another booming sound of rocks being moved aside indicated that Vouring was making good progress on breaking into their makeshift tomb. "Well no pressure, but I think our time is running out."

Lute blanched. "I've never had any experience of working under pressure, to be honest. People back in my village were fairly relaxed about when they got stuff from my forge. Not a lot of urgency round my way."

"Do you miss it?" asked Rhen, head tilted at him, trying to figure him out.

Lute thought on this. "I had a friend called Gill, well still have, unless he's finally pissed off the wrong villager with his drinking antics... who used to tell me about all the tales he'd heard off the merchants, about all the monsters out beyond the hills, and those hired to catch them; of the rogue mages down past the valley, and of even farther climes than that. Different realms, different sunsets, that kind of thing. And every single time he told me, I felt this... this throbbing in my heart." He beat his chest once, twice. "Painful, like. As if my heart itself couldn't bear the fact that I was stuck there with him while all those tales were happening somewhere else."

Rhen nodded, understanding. "And now?" she asked, quietly.

Lute sighed and then chuckled. "Now I'd give anything to see his stupid face again and have a mug of that piss-poor excuse for ale they served in the Seven Worlds."

Rhen smiled and clacked her tongue. "Yeah, that figures."

"Sorry if that sounded a bit—"

IT BEATS, it beats so loud. It wants to be back in its master. The blood trickles down. Down from the veins. OH, the sound it makes as it spatters on the floor. But the box opens. And the heart is trapped. And what will make it close will make it open. We can't change the magic. So, we will hide the box.

"Ahhhhh," Lute cried, his head over his hands.

But there's so much blood. I never knew there could be so much blood in me. But it all must go. It takes a lot of blood to trap a god. And I've done a lot of living. I don't regret.

Do you regret?

Do you regret, Lute?

Lute? Lute?

"Lute! Lute!"

Lute came to on the floor with Rhen shaking him. His head was on fire, and his eyes burned. Drool fell from his mouth. He forced his eyes open and took in Rhen's concerned face above him as the pain slowly faded.

"A vision?" asked Rhen.

He nodded. "I last had one when Tam Becker contacted me. Or spoke to me. Or whatever you call that creepy voice of your great great, great whatever floating in your head. I saw one of the original heroes, as they fought Vouring."

Rhen nodded back. "Your ancestor. Just like mine. We're descended from them. What did you see?"

He tried to remember. "There was so much blood. But I think I saw the box, and the heart go in it. I think... there was a voice. Explaining. I think..." He paused, then covered his face in his hands. "Oh fuck, I think I know what I need to do."

Rhen helped him to his feet and he stood, staring not at her but at the altar. "It's not great."

Rhen narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to explain it, or just talk in twatty riddles?"

"Well," he said, feeling a little bit numb, but also not that surprised. It was always going to come to this, after all. Most big quests are the last big quest. He knew what he was signing up for. Well, he didn't. But he wouldn't have said no if he'd known. And that's what matters.

Lute turned to her. "The voice in my head was talking about their blood, and how it trapped Vouring's heart in the box. They had to bleed on it to work. To get it open, that's what I have to do, too."

"Alright," Rhen shrugged, whipping a small dagger with emerald stones in the handle out so quickly Lute was not actually sure which garment or belt it had been stored in to begin with. The gems winked in the torchlight. "It's not like we've not already bled a dozen times so far on this fucking quest. I'll bandage you up as well." She waved the dagger in front of his face playfully. "It's not exactly the Righteous Blade but that prick's buried under a ton of rubble back there. But it'll do. So, where do you want the cut, blacksmith?"

Lute sighed and sat back down on the wall around the altar. "No you don't understand. It was... a lot of blood. Enough to kill them. It has to be, I think. It's a blood sacrifice. A blood self-sacrifice, to be accurate. That's what opens the box."

Rhen rolled her eyes. "Oh fucking come off it. Don't think I don't know what you're doing. The old 'good death' hero trick. What are you, a masochist? Depressed? You just gave this big speech about us working together, pretending we're friends, you're not getting off that easily."

Lute looked up at Rhen, and something about his face made her go quiet and lose her grin. "Rhen. You're a world-wise woman. You've been around magic. And magical objects. Is there anything I've said that doesn't ring true? Do you really think a small cut would hack it?"

Rhen grimaced, and spun her dagger theatrically between her fingers, lips pouting. "Put aside whatever the fuck 'world-wise woman' means and nah, piss on that. I'm a descendant too, remember? We'll both make two nice little cuts, a decent amount each, and that'll do the trick. Magic's actually a lot less fussy than you think. It's a bit of a tricky prick like that. There was one time in Rathelon, this mage with a wig on—not sure why he bothered with a wig, but it—"

He stood up then and grabbed both of Rhen's hands.

"Look Lute, I know we're bonding and everything, but all this hand touching, anyone would think you'd be in a room by yourself for ten fucking years—"

"Rhen," Lute said, cutting her off again. She looked at him askance but let him speak. "I know it has to be this way. I... feel it. In my blood, fittingly. This is how it was done originally. And I, the descendant, must do it again. So this time, it can be destroyed for good. I think maybe this was the point of me. Is the point of me. Let a random blacksmith from a piss-poor village in the arse end of nowhere do something good with his life, eh?"

"Actually, it was a piss-poor village jealous of the arse end of nowhere."

"Rhen..."

“No,” said Rhen, letting go of his hands and backing away. “Fuck you. You don’t do this. You don’t make this whole speech about my life, and say sorry for it, and get through to me for the first fucking time in... years... and make me risk trusting someone, and then just off yourself. You don’t get to do that. Fuck you. Bollocks. I won’t let you.” She held her dagger up in front of him. “Good luck finding a blade, you little blacksmith prick, cos I ain’t letting you use this one.”

Lute smiled and backed away. “Oh, Rhen. You think you’re the only one who carries hidden knives?” He reached under his tunic then, and whipped out a dagger of his own, which had a dull handle it made up for with a wicked-sharp, glinting blade. “Picked it up off one of the mage corpses. Bit odd for a magic-wielder to carry a knife, but they were pretty strange blokes all round.”

Rhen started to move towards him, eyes on the knife, but he held it in front of him threateningly and she stopped. Then his eyes softened and he sighed.

“Find someone who won’t betray you, Rhen, and never let them go.”

“Lute—”

But before her words had met the air, Lute had dragged the knife upwards along his left arm, opening up his veins and then, before the pain and the shock hit him, he used the last motion of his left arm to do the same to his right. Then he dropped the knife and fell back against the altar wall, gasping, as his lifeblood flowed out of him onto the floor. He stared at the box on the ground next to him. “Rhen,” he whispered.

Rhen, running on mainly instinct, leapt down and grabbed the box and held it under his arms as the rivers of scarlet coursed onto its etchings.

“You fucking bastard,” she growled, as the gilt patterns on the puzzle box glowed and then faded, and the blood filled the tiny lines, and a new glow could be seen, deep ruby, deeper even than the blood, and the box started to turn and twist and screw itself loose.

Lute lay back as his life pooled out of him, and as his sight started to fade. He thought he saw stars above him, faint whirls of light, and he wandered where he could have ended up if things had gone differently. And, for a moment, he felt a deep numb sadness about all the lives and journeys and paths he would never take, and all the loves he would never have, and the lands he would never call home, and all the hearts he would never break, including his own.

But then he felt his hand grabbed by Rhen, and she held it, held it so firm, and she didn’t say anything but that grip was the most real touch he’d ever had, and all the sadness went away, and he didn’t feel alone, and he didn’t feel regret, for the first time ever.

It’s quite a thing, to be free of regret.

Lute died with that thought in his head.

Rhen watched as Lute’s eyes lost their life and his breath stilled. In her other hand, covered in Lute’s blood, the box still turned. She couldn’t take her eyes off Lute as a single tear formed and ran down her cheek, mingling with the red rivers beneath her.

“Good journey, blacksmith,” she whispered and for a moment it hurt so bad she couldn’t breathe. And then she shook the feeling from herself, just as always, and turned down to see whether it was Vouring’s fucking heart in this fucking box.

She didn’t get chance. She looked up to see, at the end of the long corridor where previously there had been rubble, a figure whose voice still rumbled in her head.

Vouring smiled at the last remaining hero and moved to make his final kill.

Chapter 18

In which our story reaches its dramatic conclusion

Rachel V Green

Rhen saw her only chance and took it. Vouring blocked the entrance, his massive feet spread wide, his hunched shoulders blotting out the sun. Capturing his smug stare in a seething glance, she ran straight for him. The god lifted the dusty girder he wielded as his weapon, ready to end the last stand of the nine descendants. But Rhen wasn't about to die so easily. Not like Myra, lost to nothingness. Like Hast and Lute, to their own fantasies of heroism. Not like Greton and Hoji lost to her own hallucinogenic mistake. No, Rhen intended to leave this forsaken pit alive.

Vouring laughed and brought the girder crashing down towards her. Rhen darted to one side and ran up the sloping wall on Vouring's right and looped around the mad god's leg, feet sliding on loose shale. When impetus failed her, she slid awkwardly down the wall, her hip screaming as rock tore through her clothes and flesh. She landed on the rough ground, on the other side of Vouring, gasping as sunlight drenched her. Now all she had to do was get far enough away that she could open the damn puzzlebox and grind this bastard's heart to dust.

The god roared as she scrambled to her feet and ran. Bursting out into the Citadel's main courtyard, she jumped over the bodies littering the square, men, women and even children. Rhen tore her gaze away from their small bodies to squint up at the white rock, against which Vouring had once been bound. The seven seals that the realms had relied upon for so long, hung listlessly from huge leather straps, the metal twisted and cracked.

All around Rhen, Magi scurried, their curved blades flashing as they hunted down the survivors of the fray. They paid her no heed, far more intent on squirrelling out the people who were hiding in the buildings surrounding the square. People who had lived their whole lives in Vouring's shadow, scratching out a living from the hordes that had flocked to witness his incarceration each day. Some of those people's families would have lived there for generations. Vouring had been trapped for so long, their children unaware of the ongoing threat. Rhen couldn't blame them. Six weeks ago, she'd supped ale at the tavern from which smoke now bellowed at the eastern edge of the courtyard. Oblivious to how much her life would change in such a short space of time.,

Rhen didn't pause as she ran from Vouring, but she unhesitatingly threw her blade. It slammed to the hilt in the magi's throat, sending him toppling backwards, fingers scrabbling to stop the inevitable flow of blood. Lute must have got to her after all. A week ago, she would let that old man die, too intent on her own survival to pause in aid of anyone else's. But Lute had a way of seeing the world, which in their brief moments together seemed to have infected Rhen's subconscious. Or perhaps it was Morin Hast, who looked vaguely like the frail man at the Magi's mercy, and whose magic and cantankerous moods had almost made her smile. Either way Rhen didn't look back.

Wind whipped her hair as her feet pounded the once polished tiles. The iron smell of blood and the stench of shit burned her nose, but she kept going. Once, she looked behind her to see Vouring demolishing the entrance to the cavern system. She knew where she had to reach. A crack in the rock, where once wet kisses had crowded the tight space, fumbling hands and hot, hard bodies. The guard had dragged her in there after she'd flirted with him at the barriers, and she hadn't let him leave until long after his shift had ended. The crack had once rested at the centre of the bound god's legs, an open secret very few had dared to venture into. But it was now abandoned, wood and leather scattered before it's narrow entrance. It was far too small for Vouring to gain access to the passage beyond, which was buried too deep within the rockface for even a god to reach without precious minutes of toil. And best of all? There was a corresponding crack further around the small, flat-topped mountain, just a twenty-minute walk away. The guard had led Rhen back to his small hovel that way, after they'd both exhausted themselves in the darkness. Rhen made for it with the imagined sensation of hot breath on her neck, expecting Vouring to reach out and disembowel her at any moment. But though his roar of frustration made her bones shake, she reached the crack and slipped inside before he could crush her.

The passage led her into a space so tight she had to squeeze sideways through the rock, which scraped her shoulder blades. An unexpected wave of claustrophobia was drowned out only by gut wrenching fear. Rhen had survived a lot of violence but nothing as terrifying as being hunted by a crazed god.

BOOM. Rhen screeched as Vouring struck the rock face, as if by sheer will he could crush the space between them. She pushed frantically on, deeper, until after a few minutes of side-stepping she entered a dark cave. On the wall she found a scone and lit it with shaking hands. Falling to her knees, she opened the puzzlebox.

The box was as big as a grown woman's splayed hand. The inside was lined with rich, purple silk, golden hinges holding the polished wooden lid open. It was probably worth a pretty penny. Perhaps even enough to buy Rhen passage through the last remaining portals. Which was lucky, because that was the only way Rhen was going to survive this.

The box was empty.

"Motherfucker," Rhen whispered.

Lute had died for nothing. Hast had died for nothing. Myra, Damon, Nicki, Yas. They'd all died for nothing. And Rhen would never be absolved for the murder of Greton and Hoji, which was what had been driving her until now. She admitted it to herself for the first time as the box fell limply from her hands.

Vouring was free. And he was staying free.

Rhen laughed, the harsh sound reverberating through the passageway as she slumped back against the wet rock. It was over. The nine descendants of the great heroes had failed. And this time, there was no one left alive to offer them a lifeline.

"Rhen Kaegan!" Vouring screamed through the rockface. She could hear him crushing the stone beneath his fingers metres away, gouging out the passageway, to come closer and closer.

"Fuck you," she muttered, though it lacked her usual heat.

She wasn't sure if she could be bothered to run. What was the point? The whole damn realm would soon collapse, followed by the next, and the next. Vouring's promises of a better world, which when she and Lute had stood side by side—the hero and the thief—had momentarily tempted her, were now very clearly a lie. Rhen had thought herself different to the others. Harder. Colder. She'd thought that all that mattered was her survival. That she would steal whatever future gave her the best chance of living. But now that Lute was dead, and Rhen was the only surviving descendant of the great nine, she found she didn't want to be just a thief. She couldn't be the hero. Not with an empty box and a sense of self-interest so well developed it made sacrifice impossible. But she'd thought, for a moment, she might have made some kind of difference. That she could have taken the heroism of everyone else and made it count. Now though, she saw all of them had been fools. Vouring's rise had been inevitable.

She pulled herself to her feet with a world-weary grunt, turned her back on the sound of Vouring's slow and steady pursuit, and set off towards the second entrance. When she finally stepped out of the rock, she was greeted with twilight. A purple sky, scattered with pinprick stars, a hot, humid day just cooling into night. An ending. One no one could escape.

She wasn't even surprised when a warm waft of air buffeted her clothes, lifting the damp hair from her face, and a dragon landed on the brown grass of an empty town square with thunderous thump.

The beast was magnificent. It towered over her, twice the size of nearby dwellings, so enormous that she had to step back and tilt her head simply to take in its immense size. It was midnight back, with an opalescent sheen of blue hypnotically catching the dying light. Its head alone, when it dropped down low to face Rhen directly, was the size of a fully grown horse. Its eyes were bright amber, intelligent and terrifying. Rhen expected its jaws to crack, for the blue of early flame to flicker at the back of its throat, and to meet her death in its monstrous fires. But instead, the dragon simply huffed through its nostrils, blasting her with its fishy smelling breath, and then laid its head down on the grass at her feet.

"Rhen," Kael said, as he swung his leg over the dragon's spine and slid down to the ground. "Do you have the box?"

"The box?" She almost lost it. "No, I don't have the fucking box. It's back there," she thumbed over her shoulder towards the crack in the rocks. "Empty, Kael. Fucking empty."

He frowned, and Rhen almost screamed.

He was wearing the face she'd first seen him wear in the Azrani forest. Handsome again, distractingly so. In front of the others, he'd made himself appear grotesque. He'd been clumsy and awkward for them, but she'd still known it was the man who'd saved her from Avarax. How could she not? Dragon's bond for life and that beast of his was impossible to forget.

"You sent us on a wild goose chase," she accused him, stepping around the dragon... Bane, was it? "Lute gave his life for that box, and there was nothing in it."

"That can't be."

There was a rumble of earth and debris tumbled down the mountain, bouncing off grassy hummocks, stones splintering as they hit bare rock.

"Would that still be happening if Vouring's heart had been where you said it would be?"

"The whispers swore it was so," Kael murmured. "I sacrificed the quiet spaces for that knowledge."

He looked tired, though her own exhaustion left Rhen with little sympathy.

"The whispers lied," she said, and cracking her back, she went to walk past him. She'd left the box in the dark passageway, but there were other ways to buy passage out of this realm. Even if the known portals were all closed, Myra wasn't the only path maker Rhen knew. They were rare, yes. Exceptionally so. But Rhen had always made it her business to collect contacts. The rarer the better.

"Where are you going?" Kael asked.

"Anywhere but here."

"But this isn't over. Vouring must be stopped."

"How, genius? There is no heart. And unless you happen to be an all-powerful god yourself, we're shit out of luck. Get back on your pony, pretty boy, and fly the fuck away, while you still can."

Rhen kept walking. There was a row of houses in front of her, backing on to the warren of slums that surrounded Vouring's prison. If she could disappear into the streets, would Vouring pursue her? Why would he? She was no threat to him, not now.

A hand closed around her arm and Kael spun her around to face him.

"Where will you go, thief? What will you do? I've seen this all before." His eyes darken, a universe of pain twisting in their depths. Rhen tried to step back, but he gripped her other arm too, holding her fast. "Human memory is short, Rhen. The nine who trapped Vouring here five hundred years ago, were not the first to do so. Every five hundred years the pattern repeats. Vouring breaks free. He promises change to a people tired of monotony. Some follow him and survive, becoming Magi, his eternal servants. Most die. I've seen whole realms wiped out. Again and again, rebuilt only to fall when Vouring's bindings weaken once more. Your ancestors go back further than you can imagine, always fighting to bind a giant, always succeeding but not before the realms have suffered unimaginable losses. Vouring knows he will be bound each time. He relishes it. The cycle. The chance to rebuild the realms, only to destroy them once more. They are toy to him. But this time is different."

Kael released her arms, and spun away, raking a hand through his hair.

"Because the nine are all dead," Rhen muttered. "All except me. There's no one left to bind him. Is this how the cycle ends?"

"Yes," Kael said. "But how it ends is up to you. Vouring could destroy the realms once and for all. Or you could kill Vouring, and protect the realms for all time."

"What the hell do you think I've been doing all this time?" she gasped, wheezing. "Do you think I hunted Avarax for fun? Do you think I killed two men..." Her laughter caught in her throat. "Do you think I killed Hoji and Greton, for a

joke?" Her face twisted, the smile mutating into a horrified sob. "I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do any of this!"

Angrily, she wiped the tears from her face, shaking her head as if that might deny the unexpected grief bubbling up in her chest. It had been years since she'd cried. Really cried. And she was damned if she was going to fall apart now. But Kael was looking at her with a kind of loving sympathy, that made her want to cry even more.

She drew her knife. "You can fuck off if you think I'm doing any more, princess. I'm done."

"You're not," he said, and before she could so much as breathe, he had stepped inside her guard and disarmed her. Rhen blinked in surprise, but didn't let the shock derail her. She grabbed the hilt of one of the dragon rider's blades and yanked it free of his belt, brought the cold, shiny silver to his throat.

"And I suppose you're going to stop me, are you?"

"Rhen," Kael breathed. "I saw you save that old man back there. You didn't need to, but you did, instinctively. You're a good person."

Rhen wanted to argue the point, but then the mountain exploded. Shards of rock and dirt showered Bane. The dragon reared up, his feet crashing into the ground just feet away. Kael, ignoring the knife at his throat, pulled Rhen against him, sheltering her from the debris as he dragged her back from the lumbering dragon. Bane roared and fire erupted from his maw, spraying the rockface until it turned molten, the crack dissolving into lavafall.

Rhen found herself clinging to Kael, in order to keep her balance. His body was hot against hers, all hard lines and soft edges. As soon as she found her feet, she fumbled to get away from him and dropped the knife. Dropped the fucking knife. There was a first time for everything.

"Vouring is almost through!" Kael shouted. He released her and ran towards Bane. Like he was born to do it, he ran up the dragon's foreleg, grasping the black spines that decorated the ridge of the beast's spine, and hauled himself up. Turning to Rhen, he held out his hand.

"We can do this," he said, when she looked at him blankly. "Trust me."

Rhen hadn't trusted anyone since she was a child. Lute had asked her to trust him in the cavern, and now he was dead. But it was harder than you might imagine to resist a handsome man astride a dragon. Swearing under her breath, Rhen ran towards Bane.

Dragon flight was revelatory. Bane rose into the air faster than Rhen had thought possible, leaving her stomach on the ground. She clung to Kael, her arms wrapped firmly around his waist as he effortlessly guided Bane higher and higher into the sky. It was the only way to stay seated. There was no saddle. No stirrups. Only the strength of Kael's thighs kept them in place, a thought Rhen found deliciously enticing, even as Bane rolled left and the ground became the sky.

"I assume you have a plan?" Rhen said, when the dragon finally slowed his wing beats to circle high about the Citadel. Below, the houses had become toys, the mountain a hummock. Vouring was still buried within the rock, still tunnelling his way through to reach Rhen. But it was clear from the clouds of dust rising from the second entrance, and from the way the mountain had collapsed in on itself in a path leading directly to it, that Vouring was almost through. He wouldn't reach Rhen, but there was a whole town of people for him to tear through instead.

"Not exactly. I'm not supposed to be doing any of this. I'm a Watcher."

Rhen's eyebrows hit her hairline. Not many people knew about Watchers. But Telgin, the pit boss Rhen still had nightmares about, had a contact in the ministry of the Quiet Realm. The ministry was responsible for liaising with the Watchers of the Quiet Space. Beings who lived between realms. Not in the aether: an empty, lifeless void. But in

the... soil, for want of a better word, from which worlds grew. The quiet space is life itself. And the Watchers were sworn to observe the realms, never to interfere or alter the course of their paths. Watchers were ancient. Other. The man beneath Rhen's hands seemed too real to be one of them.

"You know of us," Kael said, interpreting her stillness as he scanned the mountain.

"You're not supposed to engage with humans," Rhen said.

Kael looked over his shoulder and met her eyes. "I never have before."

Why now? Rhen wanted to ask. Why trip the Avarax as it chased her through the forest? Why scoop her up on the back of his dragon when all she'd wanted to do was run. But there was no time.

"We don't have Vouring's heart," she said instead, looking down at the town below. Magi had infiltrated the houses. They must have circumvented the Citadel and come up through the streets. They were turning people out of their houses; children, the elderly. And they were slaughtering them in the streets. "We have no weapon that can harm Vouring."

"I cannot do more than watch," Kael said, his voice thick with pain. "By helping the nine I have already untethered myself from the quiet space. If I could give my life to stop Vouring, I would. But it would achieve nothing. Before I could act, my time here would be ended by the other Watchers."

"Jesus fucking Christ, will people please stop talking about giving their lives for the greater fucking good! It doesn't work! Eight out of nine assholes have already tried it and look where we are! No one is asking you fall on your own sword, dickhead. We're looking for solutions here, not problems!"

Kael's lips quirked upwards in a smile.

"There!" Rhen pointed to other side of the mountain where, almost invisible across the distance, the fangblade she'd shattered earlier still lay in pieces on the ground. Close by was Nicki's body, and as Bane flew closer, Rhen could see the glint of gold in her pale outstretched palm. The leprecoin. Hope flaring in her chest, Rhen relaxed her grip on Kael's waist and twisted around towards the cavern she and Lute had hidden in. There in the rubble of Vouring's passage, was the handle of the righteous blade.

"Drop down!" Rhen said, and with a gentle tilt forwards, Kael instructed Bane to do just that.

Rhen's spine almost shattered when Bane hit the floor of the courtyard and she gratefully slid from his back, before Kael could offer to help her. Leaving him behind, she ran across the courtyard, gathering the three items that started all this mess. She kept her eye open for Magi as she ran, or for the sight of Vouring backtracking through the mountain. But the area was quiet, abandoned as the fight moved on to the town itself.

"What are you thinking?" Kael asked, as he strode over to meet her. She was sitting on the ground; all three items scattered on the floor in front of her.

"I'm thinking that Vouring wouldn't have needed these things to break free, if they didn't hold some serious power. I'm thinking that with everyone else dead, and you fucking useless, these three things are the best chance we have of ending Vouring once and for all."

Kael smiled. A languid smirk, like the one he'd worn as she stumbled away from him in the Avarax's forest, still determined to rob the beast of its weapon. Like he'd always known she'd make this decision. Like he was proud of her for choosing to fight.

Rhen rolled her eyes.

The fangblade was in bits. The yellowed teeth scattered around her knees, the bronze housing forlorn without its bite. The righteous blade was broken at the tip, snapped in half by some last lunge of Lute. But the leprecoin was perfect, still gleaming, the Celtic cross emblazoned on one side still clear as the day it was minted. It hummed with power. Even Rhen, who was no spellcaster, could feel it.

"I have an idea," she said. "And I doubt you're going to like it."

Ten minutes later they were back on the other side of the mountain, having flown on Bane to return to the site Vouring was about to emerge from.

Kael slid from Bane's back first, then helped her down with the artefacts, his hands tight on her waist.

"If we live through this," she told him. "I know a great little bar on the southern tip of the Citadel. It does breakfast too."

Kael lips curved, and he ran his fingers over the swell of her hips, before releasing her and stepping away.

"Don't go too far," Rhen told him. "This won't work without you."

"I'm here."

Rhen knelt down in front of the crumbling mountainside. She lay the fangbade down, hastily aligning the teeth with the bronze. Next came the righteous blade, Lute's weapon, the silver tip she'd dug from the rubble lain against the flat edge of the silver. In her hands she held the leprecoin, but before she say anything more, Vouring exploded from the rock.

Rhen bent forwards over her broken weapons, shielding them from the flying debris. Bane screeched and with a powerful thrust, launched in to the air, leaving his rider behind.

"Rhen Kaegan," Vouring boomed. His scarlet skin glowed hot and red, his eyes were bloodshot and slitted. His anger was a physical thing, thundering across the space between them. "Now you die."

"Now!" Rhen shouted, and she threw the leprecoin high into the sky.

Kael caught it, cross up. There was a burst of light and shockwave of power slammed into them all. Vouring stumbled backwards, but Rhen was ready for it, and she didn't hesitate. She caught the coin as it fell from Kael's fingers. The dragon rider collapsed behind her, his immense power stripped by the coins magic as she'd hoped. Because if the Watcher couldn't use his power to save the Realms, Rhen would. The moment the metal came into contact with Rhen's skin, the magic flooded into her. It was like freefalling through the night sky, surrounded by stars and space, with the centre of the universe drawing her closer with every spin of the descent. For a heartbeat she was lost to it. To the magnitude of Kael's power, and to the quiet spaces that fed the realms with life. It was so expansive that it almost tore her apart. But Rhen was no ordinary human. Kael had known it. Morin Hast had known it. Though there had been no words to describe the knowledge then. Rhen wasn't just a thief. And she wasn't a hero. Rhen was the last of Vouring's foes. Raised on pain and blood. Forged in the darkest streets of broken realms.

Born to kill a god.

Rhen slammed her hands on to the two blades, and Kael's magic rushed through her. It re-forged the weapons, binding teeth to bronze, silver to silver.

"No!" Vouring growled, his enormous hands reaching Rhen, but it was too late. She was already standing, the fangblade in one hand, the righteous blade in the other.

"Time to die, asshole."

Rhen moved in a blur. With Kael's borrowed power thrumming through her veins, she was faster than lightning. Darting forwards, she cut into Vouring's calf with the fangblade. The teeth tore through flesh, and the god cried out, stumbling forwards. Before he could right himself, Rhen struck again, driving the righteous blade deep into the Vouring's side. Blood, thick and black, poured from the wound and onto her hand. It smelled foul, like a millennium of death had been stored within the god's corrupted vessels, but she didn't slow as she gagged on the rot. As Vouring fell to one knee, she spun and slammed the hilt of the fangblade into his temple.

“Rhen!” Kael cried out, and she ducked just in time as Vouring’s flailing fist flew past her head.

The god fell onto his side, the impact shaking nearby houses. Glass exploded from window frame, spraying across the grassy square. A roar from above made Rhen glance upwards. Bane was circling and as she stared, his huge maw opened and flames spilled from his throat.

Vouring screamed as the dragonfire engulfed him. The smell of burning stung Rhen’s nose, and scarlet flesh melted before her eyes. But it wasn’t enough to keep the god down. When Bane drew breath and circled back over the town, a scorched Vouring clawed his way to one knee.

“You will die for that,” he hissed. Skin dripped from his bones, which were blackened and charred.

Rhen shrugged. “There are worst things to die for.”

She lunged for him again, avoiding the reach of his now skeletal fingertips to pass beneath his huge frame. Before he could defend himself, she drove the righteous blade straight into his solar plexus and twisted.

“This is for Lute!” she screamed. And releasing the silver, she spun, dragging the teeth of the fangblade across the gods ragged throat. “This is for Morin and Myra! For Damon!” Vouring choked, great rivers of blood spilling onto the dry grass. Rhen ducked from beneath him and slammed the blade of Avarax’s weapon down onto the god’s skull until it cracked. “This is for Nicki and Yas, who never got the chance to understand their power.” The god fell forwards, gurgling sounds erupting from a gaping mouth. With his eyes wide as he stared in disbelief, Rhen made sure he watched as she bent down and said with finality. “And this is for Hoji and Greton, who didn’t deserve to die because your minions sent us into a forest of madness, as well as for me,” she whispered. She slid the tip of her own rusty blade into back of the god’s spine, Kael’s power driving it towards the soft, vulnerable cord between the god’s bones. “Because the world you made is rotten and I experienced every last stinking bit of it.”

Kael’s shadow fell over her, and Rhen looked up at the dragon rider as she severed the spine of the god at her feet.

“This is the end,” she said, as Vouring gasped his last foul breath.

“No,” Kael smiled. “This is just the...”

“Don’t fucking say it,” Rhen groaned. She climbed to her feet and wiped her blade on her trousers as Vouring slumped forwards, his bones sinking into the grass as the putrid tissue that held it together fell apart. “Don’t you dare be such a hideous cliché.”

Kael grinned and handed her one of his own blades to compliment her own.

“Ok, thief,” he said. “This isn’t the beginning. It’s just the start of things to come.”

THE END

Thank you for reading our collaborative venture, we hope you’ve enjoyed Realm Raiders!

If you have, please share the good news on social media! As #indieauthors, we appreciate the opportunity to get noticed. Tell us which character was your favourite, which chapter you enjoyed or simply what you liked about the story as a whole.

With our enormous thanks to Holly Tinsley and the Spotlight Indie Team.

Look out in the autumn for the Creative Commune’s online magazine – Writers’ Voice

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Phil Williams is an author of fantasy, horror and dystopian fiction, including the Blood Scouts epic military fantasies, the Ordshaw urban fantasy thrillers and the post-apocalyptic Estalia series. He also writes bestselling reference books to help foreign learners master English. Phil lives with his wife and impossibly fluffy dog by the coast in Sussex, UK.

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