

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter 5

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

by 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.

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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.