

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter 4

In which another team of heroes seek the Righteous Blade

by 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.’ Gilli 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 waking 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.