

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter One

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

by 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.