

# REALM RAIDERS



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## Chapter 3

In which our heroes are up to their eyeballs in trouble

by 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 bards 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...