

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter Two

In which the heroes are pursued by an angry leprechaun

by 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 run 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.

'OOOOOOOOHHH' 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.