

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter Thirteen

Wherein our heroes make their way to the obsidian nexus of worlds

Alex S Bradshaw

The portal closed. The clash of weapons and screams of the dying were abruptly silenced. All they could hear was their own pounding hearts and laboured breaths.

Rhen's thoughts lingered with the dragon rider, Kael. He had taken them to the very edge of this world, but could go no further. He had already risked everything to take them so far, he had said. And as he had explained what they needed to do in this dying world, where they needed to go and why, she was surprised at the depth of concern in his eyes and the tender way he had held her hands at the end, begging her to be safe.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. They had a job to do.

Rhen looked at her companions: an old man who looked like he couldn't withstand a fart let alone a fight, and a woman who looked like she'd rather be at a concert than saving the world. Hell, Rhen would rather be anywhere else. Rhen took a breath and prayed to whatever gods were out there that they could do this.

They were in some kind of dead-end alley. Scraps and detritus collected in its corners. Flickering lantern light shone from the street ahead.

"There's only one way to go now," Rhen said, and edged forwards.

Morin Hast grunted, Myra muttered something about this plan being completely insane, but both followed.

The view from the street showed a city sprawling across a steep hillside that swept into the distant night below. Most of the buildings were timber-framed and roughly plastered but there were larger buildings sprinkled within the endless mess of streets. Fortified estates hunkered in the skyline and too many sharp church spires stabbed up like fingers clutching at the sky for salvation.

"The biggest spire, he said," Rhen said, repeating the dragon rider's instructions. She glared into the night. "Oh great. There it is. Right at the bloody top."

"He didn't say it was going to be so steep," Myra grumbled.

"It's easier for you with your young knees," Morin Hast replied. "Can't we go downhill? That spire there is big enough, surely. Or into a different damned dimension entirely?"

Rhen ignored him and edged onto the cobblestoned road, hands on weapons and alert for danger. Lanterns and braziers painted the empty street with a quivering amber glow. An excited murmur echoed between the buildings from somewhere ahead. Rhen gestured for the others to follow.

They passed dilapidated homes that had plaster tumbling from cracked walls and within a few hundred yards they'd passed four stone churches. Each one scrubbed clean. Its stone practically shone in the dim light.

A cheer from ahead.

Instantly, the group fled into a darkened doorway, pressing themselves against the thick wood of another church door.

"I've never known somewhere to need so many churches," Morin Hast whispered as he craned his neck to look at the intricate iron hinges that curled into the centre of the doors like ghostly talons. He scowled as he studied them all. "So many different deities. What do they need them all for?"

The ground shook as another cheer went up and a crack echoed between the buildings. They shrank back into the door again until a second firework whistled above the buildings and popped in a burst of green light. Another cheer.

"It's a festival," Myra said. "That should make it easier to sneak by."

They kept to the dark edges of the street and soon found themselves at the top of the hill. Morin Hast was red-cheeked and panting. Rhen and Myra both had sweat-stained faces but neither of them was willing to be the first to ask for a break.

The street opened into a plaza filled with people, all turned away and facing a cathedral with three enormous spires disappearing into the black sky.

Another firework. The crowd watched it as it exploded overhead and painted the cathedral in brief, brilliant purple.

"What the fuck is that?" Myra asked, pointing.

Rhen and Morin followed her gaze and gasped.

There, in front of the crowd, was a ten-foot-tall effigy with four arms. A figure that was seared into their nightmares.

Vouring.

A figure stepped onto some kind of platform in front of the effigy, raising their hands to silence the crowd. Morin Hast's expression hardened.

"It's one of those Magi," he said.

"You've got to be fucking joking," Rhen growled.

"Are you sure we need to listen to that strange dragon rider?" Morin asked. "It's going to get us killed. Or worse."

"Do you have a better plan?" Myra asked.

They stared at the crowd as it quietened. Many were mud-stained and their clothes tattered. Rhen, Morin, and Myra had equally dirty clothes, torn and covered in blood and dust, and as Rhen wondered whether they might be able to sneak through, the Magi began to speak.

"Brothers and sisters, tonight is a glorious night. From now on, you need not tend to your countless, fruitless places of worship. You are liberated from the tyranny of your old gods. They are nothing more than predators and you are saved.

"You see here a representation of the true God. Lord Vouring. He is returned to us and with it his strength can protect us once again.

"Let us light the flame of the new age and with it know that the laws of your old gods are burned away. Lord Vouring asks only that you give yourself to him. He has no decrees. Nothing is forbidden." The Magi held up a burning torch in one hand and with the other pointed off to one side. They could just make out a table groaning with casks and food. "Drink deeply, eat heartily, and seek pleasure."

The crowd cheered again and more fireworks screamed into the sky as the Magi turned to the effigy.

"They're distracted. Maybe we can..."

Before Myra could finish the effigy was consumed in flames. Many of the crowd leapt towards the table and tore into the feast. The rest of them fell upon each other in a fit of desire.

"We'll have to go around," Morin said and pointed to a nearby alleyway. "I'm not heading through that madness and I'm certainly in no mood to be chased by a horde of those peasants."

Myra and Morin began to move, but Rhen's eyes were fixed on the scene before her.

Her body ached and her soul was heavy from years of fighting and struggling and now in front of her was everything she ever wanted: pleasure and oblivion. She thought of the others, fighting as hard as they could but still powerless to stop Vouring from breaking free. How could they win? She was running through strange worlds, dodging monsters and expecting to die. She could just wander into that crowd and lose herself in the bodies and the booze until Vouring won. Wasn't that a better way to wait for oblivion than struggling until you are broken? No more scrabbling for pennies and dodging death only to have to do it all again the next day. One glorious night and she'd be done.

Myra tugged Rhen into the alleyway, breaking the spell of the scene on her. The rising noises of gluttony and ecstasy became muffled as they hurried down the dark alleyway.

The alley led them away from the plaza but it also took them back downhill. Myra sucked in a breath through her teeth.

"This is the wrong way," she growled. "We need to be going up."

"We can't make our way through that lot," Morin snapped. "One of you will have to get to a roof and find out which way we need to go."

Myra opened her mouth to protest but Rhen waved her down and volunteered.

They went on a little further until they came to a house that stood a little taller than the ones around it. Rhen examined the outside for footholds, cursing that the plaster looked fresh and smooth. She began to climb its neighbour. Morin Hast edged up to the door and pushed it open.

"It's always worth a try," he said when Rhen shot him a look.

She drew one of her swords, motioned for the others to stay in the alleyway, then disappeared into the shadowy entrance.

It was a simple dwelling, each floor only one room, and it looked to have been abandoned in a hurry: a toppled pot leaking stew onto the floor, plates still set on the table, clothes strewn about the bedrooms.

The attic was drenched in dust with the only light from a dirty circular window. It threw moonlight on a table draped with a heavy cloth. She looked around, hoping for some hatch to get to the roof, but there was none. She peered out of the window and while she saw past some of the low houses she could not get a good sense of direction. She muttered a curse to herself, sheathed her sword, and clambered out onto the roof.

The tiles were slick with moss and recent rain, but she carefully made her way to the top, clinging to the chimney as she got her bearings.

She stared downhill and the city seemed to go on forever. Street lanterns painted the streets in low amber lines like an infinite cobweb drawn with embers. Looking up, the world stopped at the cathedral.

Rhen's heart stuttered as she saw a churning void behind the spires. It reminded her of the black she saw when she leapt through portals, a glimpse of the darkness between worlds. She swallowed as she truly understood what the dragon rider had meant when he said this world was crumbling into the aether.

She shook herself, there was no time, and plotted a course to the cathedral that avoided the plaza.

Satisfied, Rhen slid down the roof and back into the house. As she went through the attic, she saw what was on the covered table: a bell jar and a gilded book.

There was something in the bell jar. It looked like ink swirling in water and as she watched it coalesced into a twirling dancer about a handspan tall. Rhen leaned closer. The dancer paused to beckon her forward. Rhen felt something tug at her soul but she kept her place. Something about it made Rhen's teeth feel cold.

The dancer slowed, then stopped, floating still. In a single blink-quick movement it became jagged like lightning before transforming into something with four clawed feet and a long body. Its inky skull had a shark-like mouth with hundreds of minuscule teeth. It scabbled at the glass like a rat and snapped at her.

Rhen backed away, feeling the warmth return to her skin as she put it behind her, and hurried back to her companions.

"Come on," she said. "If we turn left here I think we come out on the other side of that crowd."

She ran on without another word. She ignored the strange look that Morin Hast shot her and forced them to catch up with her.

As they neared the plaza once again, they drew up short as they heard something moving in a shadowed alcove nearby. Morin Hast clutched his staff and Myra drew her weapon. Rhen rested her hand on her sword hilt.

They stared into the alcove, trying to see what was moving. There were too many limbs for it to be one person. Arms lifted before they groped back down into the tumbling mass.

Myra snorted and turned to the others. "It's just some horny fuckers who've got lost from that pile in the plaza. Come on."

She made to walk past and as she did Rhen felt that same coldness in her teeth.

"Wait!"

The lumpy mass of shadows stretched. Arms unfurled—one, three, seven—and the thing turned, revealing the mangled corpse it had been feasting on.

One of the shadow arms crashed into Myra.

"It can't be..." Morin Hast whispered.

Rhen didn't wait to find out what he meant. She drew her swords and charged.

Myra twisted and scrambled on the floor as the shadow-beast came for her. It was as large as a panther, prowling forward with four feline legs, but its top half was a misty tangle. No head, no tail, too many clawed hands.

Rhen sliced her sword through an arm that clutched at Myra's neck.

The creature squealed, all its arms bubbling into razor-sharp shadow-whips, and turned its bulk to face Rhen.

She parried one whip, then another, and tried to deflect a third. The deadly edge of the shadow skittered along her sword's edge and bounced off, slicing through her forearm. Rhen cried out, dropping a sword and stumbling back.

The creature leapt for her. Its forward arms peeled back to reveal a whirlpool mouth full of churning teeth.

Rhen tried to roll out of the way, but her injured arm gave way under her.

As one of the arms brushed her cheek, biting cold, the monster was clubbed aside. Myra stood over her, panting, holding a splintered plank.

"You okay?" she asked.

Rhen nodded and, with Myra's help, got to her feet.

The shadow monster hissed and wriggled its arms as it righted itself. It stalked around them, wary now, and revealed its swirling mouth once again.

"Any ideas?" Rhen said to Myra.

"Stab it until it stops moving?"

"The usual then."

Myra gripped her makeshift club and Rhen picked up her dropped sword. They placed themselves between the writhing shadows and Morin Hast. The old man seemed shaken, muttering to himself.

Arms whipped at them. Myra deflected them, each blow left a flower of ice on the wood.

"Come on then, you weird fucker," Myra shouted. "Are you just going to watch us or are you going to do something? We're kind of on a deadline here."

The monster hissed and renewed its attacks on her. Myra managed to keep most of them at bay, grunting as the black flailing limbs bashed her arms, then one caught her shoulder. She cried out. The monster opened its yawning maw and leapt.

Rhen was faster.

Her swords were a blur in the weak torchlight. Shadowy limbs fell with each slash.

The monster screeched in pain. Her swords carved it like a scythe through wheat. Its cries grew weaker, its seemingly infinite arms grew slower, until it stopped and fell silent.

They stared at it as the black shadows of its body deflated. Rhen and Myra panted from their efforts and Morin Hast still stared open-mouthed.

"Fat lot of good you were," Myra shot at Hast.

Her rebuke seemed to shake the wizard free of his shock. He blinked, smoothed down his beard, and tried to look tall.

"You don't understand! I was merely..."

Before Morin Hast could defend himself the monster's body shivered.

Fresh arms pushed their way free of the body like poisoned seedlings. Myra raised the battered plank to smash into the monster as Rhen prepared to stab it.

Behind them, Morin Hast cried out in a language Rhen had never heard before. His voice crackled and echoed down the street. Frost spread across the cobblestones and captured the monster in its grasp. The lines of frost thickened until the monster was caught in an icy web with strands as thick as rope and as hard as iron.

"Move," Morin Hast's voice boomed as he rushed up to them and sprinted on. "It won't slow the beast for long."

They did not need more encouragement. Myra dropped her weapon, Rhen sheathed one of her swords, and they all sprinted after Morin Hast.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Myra panted. One of her sleeves flapped loose as they ran and she cursed before tearing it free.

"A creature of the void. They have many names, though they all descend from Urthrak, the first of their kind. They live in the aether between realms. One of the many dangers of wandering the aether and travelling between worlds without using one of the Paths."

Myra's face blanched. She glanced back at the monster now struggling to free itself from its frosty prison.

"If it's from the aether then what the fuck is it doing here?" Rhen snapped as she led them around a corner.

"I don't know," Hast puffed in reply. "I have never seen one outside of the aether."

"Can they be killed?" Rhen asked.

"I believe so, although as you have seen they can be incredibly hardy."

The noises from the plaza grew louder and Rhen held up a hand for them to slow down.

From the looks of it, the carnal festival was still in full swing. Bodies writhed in a collective heap in the centre of the plaza and others were scattered across it, some eating with reckless abandon, others taking part in more private joys in groups of two or three. In front of the cathedral, the effigy burned and the Magi knelt beside it, praying.

"Okay." Rhen pointed to the long table, now stripped of food, and the wagons and carts abandoned behind it. "We can sneak in behind those carts. It looks like the Magi is distracted too so if we're quiet then--"

A crash came from behind them followed by an unearthly scream that set Rhen's teeth on edge.

"We must flee," Morin breathed.

Rhen cursed under her breath. "I guess there's no time for subtlety."

They burst from their shadowed hiding place, sprinting behind the abandoned vehicles a moment before the monster leapt into the plaza. It screamed again, so close this time that Rhen had to put her hands over her ears, and the cries of the crowd turned from ecstasy to terror.

Wood splintered as the monster's arms clawed for them, smashing through the table and wagons.

They kept running.

The cries of the crowd were joined with the crack of bone as the aether beast leapt upon them.

"Can't we help them?"

Rhen skidded to a halt. Myra had paused beside the burning Vouring and had turned a horrified, desperate expression to the carnage in the plaza. Rhen saw tears glistening on her cheeks.

"If we stay here and kill that monster, we don't have time to get the puzzle box. Then everyone dies. We cannot stop."

Myra looked back at the people in the plaza. She opened her mouth, but Morin Hast lurched into her, taking her arm and forcing her on.

Rhen caught Morin's eye and nodded her thanks then she turned to the cathedral. The massive wooden doors were ajar and Rhen thanked whatever gods might be listening that they weren't locked, but as she took a step forward she realised that the doors were closing.

With a curse, she slammed her shoulder against the wood. She heard someone cry out from inside and they redoubled their efforts to shut the door. Rhen shoved her body in the rapidly closing gap between the doors and pushed as hard as she could.

Between the weight of the door and the strength of whoever was on the other side, all she could do was keep it from closing.

Myra and Hast arrived beside her. They threw their weight against the doors.

The heavy wood began to shift, creaking open. As soon as the gap was large enough for them they scrambled through.

There was no one on the other side, only pulleys and weights, but they all turned to the door and forced it shut.

As the enormous doors slammed together the heavy bars on the inside that Rhen had taken for decoration began to shift. They slid across and then fell into place across both doors, holding them shut, locking them inside.

"Well, we're not getting out that way."

The shadows inside of the cathedral danced in strange patterns as the light from the burning effigy came through the circular stained glass windows either side of the doors. Rows of pews sat ahead of an enormous altar and a statue, only half seen in the darkness, but easily as tall as the effigy burning outside. Beyond the altar, the same churning void Rhen had seen from the roof.

"Morin, you're up. Kael said this is the only place in all the worlds you'll be able to see the severed realm where the puzzle box is, but it looks like it's crumbling so be quick."

Before Rhen finished her sentence, the void inched forward and the lectern behind the altar tumbled back and into the darkness.

"I don't want to fall into that," Myra added. "So let's get a fucking move on."

"Youths are always so impatient," Morin muttered, but he shuffled as quickly as he could to the edge of the void.

"Myra, come. Help me until I find the way then you make the path."

Myra hurried up to him. Morin stumbled as he found the edge of the world and nearly fell forward but Myra grabbed him by the waist and dragged him back.

“Okay, get on with it,” she said, keeping her grip on his waist. “Your robes smell awful.”

Rhen watched, her heart thumping as she tried to block out the rending screams from outside.

“Stop that!”

She spun to see a figure emerge from the shadows, wielding a tall candlestick like a spear. The Magi. There was madness in his eyes and spittle on his chin.

“You fools,” he spat. “You will ruin the Ascension. Vouring must be brought to this world. I have waited too long for you to stop me now.”

He charged at Morin and Myra.

Rhen leapt to intercept him and they tumbled down together. Rhen grunted as she fell against a pew, the hard wood knocking the breath from her, and the Magi lost his grip on the candlestick. He snarled and tried to bite her. Rhen pulled back and he tore himself free, stumbling back with the force of his escape.

He grabbed the candlestick and charged her, but he was no warrior and Rhen had been fighting for too long on too many worlds to be killed by this fool. She hacked her sword through the candlestick and it was sliced in two. The Magi looked at her with fresh terror in his eyes.

“You can’t,” he stammered. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand enough,” Rhen growled and dragged the Magi away from Myra and Morin Hast, throwing him to the floor with her foot on his chest to keep him still.

From outside, there was a surge of screams and then a great creaking and splintering of wood as the effigy tumbled into the cathedral. The stained glass smashed, showering Rhen and the Magi in broken glass and throwing fresh light into the cathedral.

Rhen turned to check on her companions. Her voice caught in her throat.

Lining the pews, unseen in the darkness until now, were hundreds of worshippers. All dressed in finery that would have bankrupted the entire crowd outside. And all of them with their throats torn out. Worse, was the obsidian statue built against the western wall.

“What the fuck is that?” she said.

“Can’t you see I’m busy, girl?” Morin Hast spat, then he too saw the statue and his face paled. “Nine save us...”

The statue’s countless limbs rose from a fugue of smoke that came from incense burners, cunningly placed on the statue to give it the impression of formlessness. The doors flinched against the weight and heat of the effigy.

“It’s Uthrak,” Morin said. “This cathedral is dedicated to the father of the monsters of the aether.”

“Now you see,” the Magi said.

Rhen turned back to him. He kept his head up to keep from skewering himself on her sword but now there was a fresh glint of desperation in his eyes.

“This world is lost to the void. These people have left offerings to the creatures of aether since time immemorial to stave off their hunger, but it has doomed them. It does not matter now.” He laughed, not caring that the motion shook his head enough for Rhen’s sword to stab his throat. “Vouring is come and this world will be saved from its petty desires.”

“You would save them by destroying them,” Rhen shot back.

“A blissful rest untroubled by mortal wants. What better gift could be given?”

Rhen clenched her jaw and looked to Hast, who was still in awe of the statue. Myra shook the old man.

“Come on,” she said. “We need to get the fuck out of here!”

Hast nodded, his face pale and fresh sweat on his brow, and turned back to the void.

Rhen growled as the old man fumbled around in the dark. She felt so useless. She was a Pathfinder, damn it, but she knew that there was no path for where they needed to go. Not yet anyway. Myra's power was unique. She was a Pathmaker. She could make paths where there were none and together with Morin's unparalleled knowledge of the aether they could get them to the puzzle box.

"There!" Morin cried.

"Thank fuck," Rhen breathed. "Myra, make a path!"

"On it," Myra replied.

Myra stepped up to the edge of the world and began weaving. Morin muttered in her ear, presumably guiding her through his newly mapped-out route.

Rhen took slow, deep breaths to try and slow her pounding heart. All she could do was wait.

Then she heard a teeth-chilling howl. It was like the cry of the tiny aether creature in the bell jar in the same way a mouse sounds like a wolf. Whatever this was, it was enormous.

"How much longer?" Rhen called.

"Nearly there. Let me get on with it."

Before Rhen could retort, the cathedral was thrown into darkness. Something had doused the burning effigy like a tsunami over a candle. After a moment, a small light blossomed between Myra's fingertips giving them enough light to see.

Cracking from outside. The effigy was torn apart.

Something slammed against the doors. The teeth-freezing howl of the leviathan aether-beast rang in their ears.

The doors shook again and this time they splintered. Smoke seeped through the cracks and flowed in through the broken windows.

Morin Hast appeared beside her. "I can keep it at bay. I will--"

He trailed off as dozens of clawed hands, each as tall as a man, formed in the smoke leaking into the cathedral.

"Uthrak..." Morin breathed.

"We have to go," Rhen said. "Myra, how are we doing?"

"Almost got it."

The hands groped for them. Rhen and Morin leapt back, but the Magi was still prone and a hand slammed onto him. His screams, immediately muffled, were lost as he was dragged into the inky darkness.

A blot in the darkness seen through the shattered window. Uthrak's head. Rhen felt its gaze and with it came the final cold of eternity. Masonry crumbled as a body pushed its way through the wall.

"Got it!"

Rhen and Morin turned and sprinted for Myra. Behind them, Uthrak brought the cathedral down around him and ahead the world tumbled into the abyss. But there, between Myra's hands, was salvation.

The spot of light fizzed and grew and within it they saw another world. At first, all Rhen could see was a black night and stars, but there were no monsters in it so that was a fucking improvement.

Morin fired off globs of golden light from his staff as they ran. Each one smacked into another of Uthrak's hands, batting them away, but it was not enough. Uthrak followed, infinite arms reaching for them.

"Come on!" Myra screamed at them.

She was on the other side of the portal, desperately ushering them on.

Smoke pressed up against the new world like water against glass. Frost blossomed on the pews, their breath plumed in front of them.

As the black, freezing grip of Urthak reached for them, they leapt through the portal.

Chapter 14

Where our heroes enter the kingdom of madness

Patrick Samphire

Myra staggered out of the portal, and suddenly there was nothing in front of her.

The ground cut away, and all that was left was air. If it hadn't been for Rhen's hand wrapped tight in her jacket, she would have tumbled over and been gone. Instead, Rhen hauled her back onto a narrow stone ledge.

"What the fuck?" she managed. On the other side of Rhen, Morin Hast was struggling to get to his feet, looking every one of his six hundred years, or however the fuck old he was supposed to be. Several centuries overdue a hip replacement, that much was for sure. The old bastard could do some pretty impressive stuff, to be fair. Getting up off the floor on his own wasn't one of them. She shook Rhen off, clambered to her own feet, grabbed the back of Hast's robe, and pulled him up. God knows how long it had been since he'd washed that robe. It felt greasy.

Not that she probably looked all that great herself after whatever hellhole they'd just come through. She was hardly dressed to fight demons and evil gods, and certainly not for a ledge like this, where the rock they balanced on sloped towards the drop-off, their backs were pressed against a cliff face, and the wind was pulling at her worse than a drunk on a Saturday night.

Hast turned to her, his beard jutting forward, the whole effect rather ruined by the wind that slapped it back in his face. "Where in all the hells are we, girl? This isn't the realm I showed you."

Far below them, plains rolled over tired hills, hypnotic patterns sweeping through the long grass. In the distance, a wide lake glittered in sunlight. When she had started to open the portal, she had seen a black-blue sky punctured by cold stars. And, yeah, the wind was chilly, but that was a fucking sun right up in the sky, possibly a second one, too, on the horizon, if it wasn't an overenthusiastic moon. But she had taken them where Hast had told her, even so. She didn't need scenery to find a realm through the void. They were like lighthouses thrusting up from the mist.

"It's exactly where you showed me. I don't make mistakes."

"This is what I get for trusting fools," the wizard muttered. "I should have done this all myself."

Myra resisted the urge to push him off the ledge.

"You know what? If anyone doesn't know what the fuck he's doing, it's you. I was just fine, then you turned up with, 'oh, you have to get the fucking Righteous Sword or Vouring is going to destroy all the realms', and guess what? Vouring wasn't going to do shit without that sword. We could have all just kept about our lives, and Vouring wouldn't be bothering anyone. So don't talk to me about fucking up, all right?"

The wizard's shrivelled face wrinkled even further in fury.

Rhen put up a hand. Myra couldn't help but notice that her other hand was gripping one of her swords. Myra was pretty handy with a knife, but she'd seen enough of Rhen to know when she was outclassed.

"All right, both of you. Enough of the dick-measuring contest. How about we get off this damned ledge before you have your girl-fight?"

"Fine. Yeah. All right. But when we get down, we need to have a serious talk, because I want to know if we're really going to do this."

"What do you mean?" Rhen said.

"You've not been thinking it, too? This guy turns up in the middle of a battle on the back of a fucking dragon – a dragon! – and he's all, 'You have to go and get some magical box,' and we're running around panicking and arguing with a fucking rubber duck, so none of us stops to think, and like a bunch of twats we run off to do what the nerd on the dragon tells us to. Being fooled once is bad enough, but how do we know this guy's not working for Vouring and all we're doing isn't just getting him another weapon?"

"I don't think so," Rhen said. She looked angry to Myra. Why? "I trusted him. And don't call him a nerd."

Oh! "Really? He's your type? Some bumbling, short-arsed nerd with bad eyes? Or is it the dragon? Do you have the hots for the dragon?"

"I will shove this sword so far down your throat it'll come out your arse."

"The girl has a point," Hast said slowly, rubbing his beard.

"And stop calling me a fucking girl," Myra snapped. "I'm thirty-two years old." How the hell had she ended up in the middle of his cosmic shitstorm with these two idiots? The moment she had seen Lute and Hast in the back of the pub, she should have turned around and walked out. If she had, they wouldn't have been able to get the Righteous Blade, Vouring would still be bound, and she could have hooked up with one of the guys from that band. The drummer had looked all right. She had a thing for drummers. She still didn't know why she hadn't.

"Fuck it," Rhen said. "None of us asked for this, I get it. We're all pissed off. We're all scared. Trust me, I'd rather be almost anywhere. But we're here, so let's just get it fucking over with, shall we?"

Myra felt the fury drain out of her. She was angry at the world, the universe, every single realm, but none of it was going to be made better by sniping at each other. "Yeah. Fine. You're right." She looked around. The ledge didn't extend more than a dozen yards in either direction, and she wasn't much good at estimating heights, but they must have been at least five hundred feet off the ground. "Um. Anyone got any ideas? Hast?"

The wizard peered down, wobbling enough that Myra grabbed the back of his cloak again. "If I had not used so much of my power in the battle and finding the way here, I might be able to fly us. It would be unwise to trust it here. In any case, I must save my power to find the puzzle box."

"Great," Rhen said. "Anyone enjoy climbing?"

Myra looked over the edge again. Maybe they could climb down. There were cracks and outcroppings that might work as handholds and footholds.

Ah, who are you fooling? They wouldn't get twenty feet without one or all of them losing their grip and plummeting to their death. Maybe Hast's robes would work as a parachute, but she and Rhen? It would be a contest to see which of them died soonest.

"I might be able to get us down," she said. It would take a lot of skill and accuracy, but in theory it wasn't so different to what she usually did. "I can open a portal and take us through that."

"Portals open between realms, girl, not within them," Hast spat. She guessed he hadn't bought into Rhen's truce.

"I know that, genius. Here's what I can do. I can open a portal out of here to another realm, then a second one back again. Now that I've been here, I can make a portal back." She jabbed a finger at the plain beneath them. "Down there."

Hast grunted, which was about as much acknowledgement as she reckoned she was going to get out of him.

"Other alternative," she added, "we could get out of here, keep running, find a realm so far away from Vouring that we'll all be long dead by the time his influence reaches there. Get ourselves out this shit now before we make everything worse. Maybe one of those cut off realms like the one Hast and Lute found me in."

"Doesn't work like that," Hast said. "Realms aren't lined up in a row. The place they are doesn't have any distance or direction. It just has intent. Each realm is pressed up to the next while being infinitely far away. Do you understand that?"

"Not even slightly. Are you ready?"

"I see no other choice."

And with that ringing endorsement, Myra reached out, her fingers twitching through the fibres of the realm, searching, parting them. At first she thought about taking the three of them back to the realm she had come to call

home, to where she could soak in the noise and pollution and the lights one last time, maybe even find that drummer... But then a vision of the thing made of smoke – Urthak, Hast had called it – came over her, the thing that lived in the aether between realms, and for a second she was sure she would lead it to her realm. Absurd though that was, the thought of it was more than she could bear. She might not care about Vouring or the rest of the realms, but that place was where she belonged, and she wouldn't have it ruined. No matter what. So she took them to an empty realm she knew. She'd never understood why some realms had never developed life much more advanced than bacteria, but they were out there. Maybe realms Vouring had eaten last time he'd been free. Maybe just the randomness of evolution. Whichever, Urthak was welcome to it.

Not that it was entirely empty. She'd left a businessman there a couple of weeks back. He'd been on the run from the tax man, but then he'd thought he'd take a bonus grope of her on the way, so she'd left him in the empty realm. She hadn't lied. The tax man would never find him there.

The moment they were through, she was opening another portal, feeling for that exact point on the plain beneath the cliff. It was surprisingly difficult. The fabric of the realms resisted. That realm did not want to be found. But she'd been there, and she had it now.

They stepped through.

Into a deep forest.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Hast exploded. "Are you absolutely fucking incompetent, girl? Do I have to do all of this myself? This is not where you said you would take us."

But it was. She could feel it. She turned, peering around, trying to get a sense of the place. They had all looked down on the grassy plain, but now they were in trees, and she was certain she'd taken them to the same place.

"Don't be so certain," Rhen said. She was pointing up through the canopy. Myra followed her finger. There, between the leaves and branches, mountains rose into the sky, and directly before them was a cliff. "Maybe I'm insane, but that's the ledge we were on, isn't it?"

Myra squinted. It looked like it. It was high enough, narrow enough. But one ledge was much like another, wasn't it? And was that smoke drifting around it? It was too far to be sure. There hadn't been smoke when they'd stood there.

An enormous grinding sound shivered the air. The ground shook like an earthquake, knocking Myra to one knee. She looked around desperately. The forest shuddered. All around, a low, distant wailing sounded, like hollow, empty wolf howls.

"Look!" Rhen was still pointing through the trees towards the mountains. Except the mountains seemed to be folding up, turning inside themselves, like tissue paper in water.

"This way!" Myra said. "I want to see what's happening."

They raced up a low hill, Hast groaning his way behind, while she and Rhen sprinted ahead.

The trees thinned at the crown of the hill. They turned to see the last of the mountains collapse into nothing, leaving what looked like a mangrove swamp, a beach beyond, and then a glittering ocean.

"What the fuck is going on?" Rhen demanded.

Hast finally reached them, panting heavily. He stood for a moment, bent at the hips, watching the waves settle on the ocean. Then he began chanting, hands waving in the air. Myra took a step back. Never a good idea to be too close to a wizard when they started in on the magic. Myra had seen one too many spells go wrong in her time. At last, though, Hast dropped his hands. No one having been vaporised or transmogrified into a reptile, Myra crept closer again.

"What is it?"

"This realm is unstable," the wizard said. "It's collapsing and rebuilding itself over and over again."

"So... maybe I brought us to the right place after all?"

The wizard shot her a disgusted look. "There's something powerful here, distorting and destroying the realm. Something that shouldn't be here."

"The puzzle box?"

"Maybe. We've not been told what it is or what it does, but if it's supposed to challenge or destroy Vouring, it must be powerful indeed."

"And we're expected to, what, just pick this up and take it back with us?" That sounded a lot like suicide. Suicide was not on her agenda any time soon. Yeah, they were all taking risks, here, and yeah, this might kill them. But she wasn't going to kill herself to do it, not deliberately. That sounded more like a Lute kind of thing to do. Dumb kid. Maybe he should have been the one to come here after all. He'd grab it, no questions asked, even if it turned him inside out.

"It has been here a long time. Its effect has been building over time. We should be safe enough."

'Should' was carrying a lot of weight there. Still, they could decide when they found the damned thing.

"What happens if we're standing here when this part of the realm decides to rearrange itself?" Rhen said.

Hast turned his dried-up face to her. "Don't be."

"Okay," Myra said. "While we're doing questions, what the fuck is that?"

Through the trees, a figure moved almost in slow motion. It stood almost like a gorilla, heavy front legs or arms longer than the squat back limbs, but its body shape was more like a deer, antlers extending from its skull. It was made entirely of mist, and mist seemed to drip from its body like water.

"And there," Rhen said, pointing to the other side. This figure was again made from mist, but it was almost snake-shaped, with hundreds of small tentacles or protrusions dangling from along its length, and it moved, again in slow motion, in great oscillating waves.

"Ghosts," Hast said. "Memories of what lived here once, before the realm became unstable."

"It's moving this way," Myra said. "And look. More."

Emerging from the trees were further strange, distorted mist figures, some enormous, some tiny, all drifting, dripping mist, but unmistakably heading their way. Rhen drew her sword.

"Don't touch them!" Hast said. "They're drawn to us because we're still living. But if they touch us, we'll become like them."

"You're fucking kidding me," Rhen muttered, loud enough for Myra and Hast to hear.

"What do we do?" Myra asked. "Do you want me to open another portal out of here?"

"No. We have to find the puzzle box."

"Yeah? And how the fuck do we do that?" She wasn't sure exactly what she'd been expecting. Open the portal and find the puzzle box waiting for them on a nice plinth with a friendly note saying, 'Help yourself'?

"It won't be far. This realm is collapsing fast. There's not much of it left. It will be wherever the effect is strongest."

"Of course it will. And which way is that?"

The wizard whispered another spell, then pointed to their left.

"Well, let's get a move on then," Rhen said. She was still waving her sword around. Myra understood the urge to stab someone. "Those things are getting too close for comfort."

The ghosts were definitely heading for them. Myra saw a bird apparently made entirely of cogs, and something that looked like a gigantic bacteria hauling itself over the ground. "Time to run."

On the plus side, the ghosts were slow, almost sedate in their vacant intentions. On the minus side, they were everywhere, floating and hauling themselves towards the group, like they were pulled in by gravity, the path between them narrowing. Are we being herded?

They came over a rise, and ahead of them, at last, the forest thinned to become a valley. A deep stream flowed between high, rocky valley walls, silver in the sunlight.

"Where now?" Rhen demanded.

Hast's face was red, his beard dripping with sweat. He didn't seem to be able to speak, so he just waved them towards the valley. Myra glanced around. The ghosts were still slowly, ponderously closing. That one there could have been a man, except he was ten feet tall with spikes jutting from every joint. Damnit, but he looked a bit like the drummer from the band. She clearly wasn't getting enough sex. Forcing her exhausted legs forward, she stumbled on.

They were ten feet from the edge of the trees when suddenly, as one, the ghosts let out a chorus of howls. Muffled, like from behind a thick curtain, but howls anyway.

Instinct, only, acted. She grabbed her companions and dragged them back, bodily.

"What the fuck?" Rhen managed.

Then the valley folded, at one moment looking like rock and earth and water, the next like a matte painting on canvas, then paper, then nothing as it dissolved. In its place, a patchwork of landscapes appeared. A desert of red stones and sand, a reed-lined lake sliced neatly in half, a cavern entrance in a hill that ended abruptly, grasslands, a snowfield, a patch of jungle no bigger than a tennis court.

"Fuck this place!" Rhen shouted.

Already the lake was folding in on itself, replaced by a beach, and the snowfield vanished to become a scree slope. All the while, the ghosts keep howling, and the patches of landscape shifted, collapsed, rebuilt themselves from ever smaller pieces.

"What the hell is it doing?" Myra demanded.

"The realm grows thin," Hast said, his breath still coming fast. "There is less and less to rebuild itself with."

"And how the fuck are we supposed to get through this?"

The forest shook. The ghosts howled once again, louder, from every part of the forest.

"This part is failing," Rhen said. "We have to get out of here."

"Hast?"

The man was staring at the chaotic landscape.

"Fuck it." Myra reached for the fabric of the realm. She wasn't standing here while the realm sucked her into its own collapse. Her fingers pulled a portal out of space.

"There!" Hast said.

She paused, looking where he was pointing. On the horizon, a single part of the landscape seemed to be frozen, unchanging. White stone, or maybe ice.

"Get us there!"

The forest flattened around them, the trees becoming two dimensional, then folding, folding, folding, the ground itself disintegrating. Myra grabbed her companions and threw all three of them into the portal.

She didn't know where she'd opened it to. She hadn't had time to plan. She'd just ripped it open. They hit something hard and long. Metal. And stones. A vibration in the metal drove through them. A scream sounded. She jerked her head up.

They were on a train track, that was all she could see, and pounding down on them was a train trailing steam and smoke, its whistle blaring.

“Shit!” She tore open another portal, and they stumbled through again.

This time they were on the side of a sand dune. Fuck knows where. Some realm out there in the multiverse. Could be anywhere. It didn’t matter as long as they weren’t about to be flattened, eaten, ripped to shreds, or folded into nonexistence.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rhen spat.

“Just give me a moment.” This wasn’t something she could afford to get wrong. If they missed that stable spot by even a few yards, they could come out into a part of the puzzle box realm that was collapsing, taking them with it.

She could do this. She’d been doing it most her life. She’d never fucked it up yet.

You’ve never tried to be that exact before, either.

“Ready?”

Hast nodded. Rhen lifted her sword, as though there was anything she might be able to hit over there.

Myra opened a portal.

It was ice. That much was obvious as all three of them lost their footing and came crashing down.

“Shit, fucking bollocking crap,” Rhen cursed. “Warning next time!”

Myra pushed herself up. The icy patch wasn’t that big. The size of a couple of dozen car parking spaces. In the middle, incongruently, sat a stone box, deeply inlaid and dark against the ice. She slipped her way over. These boots might have been good for a night at the pub, but they had no grip and were terrible on the ice. I didn’t even have time to change into something sensible before this. She’d fought a gigantic robot-flesh machine for the Righteous Blade, travelled to the Citadel, where they had been attacked again, and ended up in the middle of a battle, been chased by a shadow monster through that really fucked up, Vouring-worshipping realm, and now this. Always make sure you’re wearing clean knickers when you go out, in case you die, someone had once told her. Well, that was a lost cause by now.

She reached the box. It was covered in symbols, places that you might push, pull or twist. “Is this the puzzle box?” she called back to Hast and Rhen.

“Can you work out how to open it?” Hast shouted.

“No.”

“Then it’s probably fucking puzzle box, isn’t it? Unless you can see another one.”

She was tempted to pick it up and bash the wizard’s head in, not for the first time. Only it looked heavy and with her luck, she’d slip over and brain herself.

“Is that another ghost?” Rhen said.

“What?”

“There.”

A shape seemed to be bounding across the shifting terrain towards them. Only it was moving far faster than the ghosts they had seen, and its mist was black. Like smoke.

Hast whirled on Myra. “Did you close that first portal we came through?”

“Of course.”

“Did you seal it?”

“What?”

“Did you seal the hells-damned thing?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The wizard’s face was nearly purple. The bit she could see under the beard. “Damned, bloody amateurs! That’s not a ghost. That’s Urthak. You didn’t seal the portal. It followed the path you made and forced itself through. You have to seal the portals!” He jabbed a finger at Rhen. “You. Pick up the puzzle box.” He turned to Myra. “You get us out of here!”

The smoke had picked up speed, whirling and rushing, arms emerging to tug itself on ever faster then disappearing again.

“How come it didn’t get folded up with the rest of this realm?” Rhen said as she skated and slipped her way to the puzzle box.

“It is a thing of the aether. It exists outside the realms. Just PICK UP THE BLOODY BOX.”

Hast lifted his hands, shouted a spell, and threw a ball of expanding light at Urthak. The creature swerved, but it kept on coming.

Rhen knelt down beside the box, wrapped her arms around it, and lifted with a grunt. She swayed, her feet sliding. Myra steadied her.

“I don’t know what the fuck is in this, but you’d better not be planning on running.” Already her face was red.

The smoke reached the ice, arms reaching for Hast. He batted one away with a burst of light, but a second was already reaching for him. Myra threw her knife. It sliced through the arm, which dissipated into smoke.

“Open the portal,” Hast said, retreating towards them. “I can’t hold it for long.”

“It’ll follow us,” Myra said.

“So seal the portal the moment we’re through.”

“I don’t know how!”

“Fucking amateurs. Why am I cursed with amateurs?”

Maybe it would be satisfied with eating Hast. That would do them all a favour.

Myra opened a portal. “Go through. I’ve got an idea.”

Rhen glanced at her, her jaw set in effort. “How about you?”

“I’ll follow you. I think I can get it off our trail.” She was going to be a hero again. How fucking stupid. She’d played the hero when they had retrieved the Righteous Blade. That had worked out, thank god. At least this should be far easier. One last time. She was never, ever doing this again. “Go!”

Staggering, Rhen entered the portal, followed by Hast, who shot her a furious look.

“Yeah, thank you, too,” Myra mumbled. She closed the portal.

Urthak rose up before her, its shadowy, smoky form like a void. Arms reached out to pull her in or bat her aside. She opened another portal.

“Here, kitty, kitty. Follow aunty Myra. Who’s a good boy?”

She stepped backwards, through the portal, and Urthak lunged after her.

Immediately, she was falling. Everything was black. Not a hint of moon or stars. Nothing. No air, either, to scream.

She had found this realm a long time ago by mistake, and she had almost died finding it. An entirely empty realm, except for gravity pulling her down, accelerating her faster and faster. A black hole, perhaps, or something even more final. Even Urthak couldn't crawl its way out of this.

Hey void boy. How do you like this void? she thought at Urthak. She would have screamed it, but she had no breath. Compared to this, Urthak was an ant.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't see. Her chest burned. Her pulse thumped frantically in her temples. She reached for the fabric of the realm. She still had time to fashion a new portal, drag herself out of here like she had before. Even if Urthak followed, she wouldn't lead it anywhere near where she'd sent Rhen and Hast.

She twisted the fabric of the realm, parted it...

Then something fastened on her arm, jerking it back. She felt teeth bite into her flesh. She lost her grip on the realm. Desperately, she grabbed for it again, but something else latched onto her other arm. She felt herself pulled back and up and in. Something rushed and whirled around her, cold and leeching and screamingly empty.

"Fuck you," she tried to scream, but there was no air, nothing to scream into.

At least Urthak isn't getting out of this either was the last thing she thought, and then she thought no more.

Chapter 15

In which Rhen and Morin traverse the aether carrying Vouring's heart

Simon Kewin

Morin stared at the portal that Myra had opened for them to escape Urkath. Beside him, Rhen sat on the puzzle box, head in her hands. They were both breathing heavily. Neither spoke. The good news was that Urkath's shadowy tentacles repeatedly failed to seep through the portal. The bad was that Myra also didn't step through to ... wherever they were. Morin almost missed her volley of cheery insults and curses.

It was Rhen that broke the silence. "She didn't make it, did she? She's not coming back."

"It is conceivable she has taken another route, leading Urkath astray."

"Come on, you don't fucking believe that, do you?"

Did he? Probably not. Myra had some limited power, but she was no match for Urkath. No one was. Even Vouring might struggle if it came to it. Especially in the aether: in Urkath's natural abode, he doubted there was any being in the multiverse powerful enough. He'd fought the entity enough times to know that. Although, to himself, he would admit that fought was generous. Fled in terrorized panic from might be more accurate.

He looked to Rhen. They both knew what needed to be done. Rhen nodded, her usual bluster gone for the moment. Morin waited a moment longer, then worked the magic to seal the portal, knitting the threads of the veils back together so that nothing – not Myra, not Urkath – could easily step through.

It was trivial-enough magic, but it cost him. His bones ached. How was that even possible? He'd been badly drained when that lunkhead had found him in his tower, and everything that had happened since had only exhausted him further.

When the portal was sealed, Rhen stood and gazed around. "Where do you think we are?"

"I have no idea."

"Can't you cast Alion's Map of Marvellous Location or some such mystical magicky bollocks?"

"I literally have no idea what you're talking about."

Rhen snorted and climbed onto the puzzle box to get a better view. They were in a clearing in a forest. A clearing was good; it meant they could see that nothing was about to attack them. On the other hand, they had no idea what was beyond the ring of trees.

And, were they trees? Now that he studied them, he wasn't so sure. They were tall, certainly, and they were pointy like all good fir trees were supposed to be. But he couldn't shake the notion that they might also look like teeth if you were standing far enough away. Ranks of sharp, grindy teeth. Which meant he and Rhen were – what? – standing on or even in the mouth of some colossal beast.

He set the notion aside. Their experiences in the previous realm had clearly affected him. Still, he didn't like the way these trees lashed and swayed. There was no wind for one thing, and it was hard to escape the notion they were leaning over to talk to each other, debating what to do about these newcomers.

The sky was a vivid scarlet, which just seemed unnecessarily threatening.

"We must traverse the void again," said Morin. "Hopefully we can find a way to the Citadel realm."

"I feel like hopefully is a pretty significant word in that sentence, old man."

"I will open a way."

"There's another portal here?"

"Not yet. I will form one; it is no difficulty."

"A portal to where?"

"To nowhere. Into the aether."

"Wait, what? You can create a doorway into the aether without it connecting to another realm? Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I did, if anyone had been listening! You've all been too busy yabbering away. Only a powerful spellworker such as myself can manage the magic required, of course. It isn't like pushing a door open between two worlds as you and Myra do."

"Unfuckingbelievable. OK, so we stroll across the void and get to the Citadel. We can do that."

She had no idea, did she? "No, no! The aether is limitless in extent and the paths through it are, by definition, endless. Even I do not know them all. Stepping into the aether is more dangerous than you can possibly imagine. If there were any other way, I would take it, believe me. Hopefully, the way to the central nexus node, the Citadel, will be obvious once we're inside, as we should see multiple pathways converging to one point and..."

"More fucking hopefully. You know, the way you talk, it sounds a lot like you're afraid to go in there."

"Of course I'm not afraid. I've walked through the aether a hundred times. A thousand! I could step between the worlds with my eyes closed."

"OK. Only, you seemed pretty fucking freaked out by Urkath."

What did Rhen see when she looked at him? He knew. A doddering old man who'd probably manage to cut off his own arm if he tried wielding a sword. His own sword arm. She had no idea who and what he was. His body might be old, his limbs weakened from lack of use, and he might be no match for Urkath in a fight, but he'd outsmarted the entity often in his long travels. Sharp lumps of metal were useless in the endless void, too, however skilfully they were wielded; you had only your wits and your knowledge and your bravery. And those, at least, he had plenty of.

"A perfectly reasonable response I assure you," he said. "You have no idea what that thing is capable of. You think we've seen the worst of it? We have not. That was only a mere emanation into the material plane. It is an unspeakable horror! It may well be the death of the multiverse itself, rendered in living form."

He knew that aspects of the entity crept through portals and cracks from time to time – a fact that accounted for many tales of ghosts and demons – but its fundamental self remained in the void. Perhaps in some way it was the void. It was certainly voracious, it's very touch turning your flesh to ice and shadow.

Rhen held up a hand as if he were an errant child. "OK, enough magesplaining. I get it. Scary void, scary void baddie. Please, let's not pretend you're so high and mighty. Lute said he found you lying half-dead on a stone altar because you let your soul get trapped in the aether. You think I feel good about following you in there?"

"It is our only choice, given the lack of any convenient portals."

"And then there's your clothes."

That threw him. "What? What is wrong with my clothes? Why do they matter?"

He thought about working magic to turn her inside out, see if she was more polite wearing her organs on the outside. He restrained himself.

"I mean, come on!" she continued. "Long flowing robes. Great bushy beard. The knobbly staff. You're a bit of a cliché for a powerful wizard, aren't you?"

He settled for fixing Rhen with a piercing gaze, frowning at her through his bushy eyebrows. He'd found it worked on most people. He didn't understand a lot of what she said, though. His appearance? It was many years – many decades – since he'd given the question a moment's thought. It was possible he had let himself go a little in the

grooming department. Too locked up in his arcane research, that was the problem. His mind was on far higher matters than what he chose to wear.

The truth was, though, that this Rhen troubled him in more ways than he would admit to anyone. Another reason he refrained from fundamentally altering the arrangement of her organs. She was limited intellectually, but he was used to dealing with those stupider than he was.

Or people, as he called them.

She was crude in her manner, too, almost childishly so – but that didn't trouble him either. In fact, he found her bawdiness unexpectedly exhilarating. Perhaps even ... arousing. Was that the word? Unfamiliar emotions washed through Morin at the sight of her. Here was the problem. When she looked at him, he felt stirrings in parts of his body that he'd long-since considered to be mere plumbing. This was very definitely not the time for such matters. Not only was he old enough to be her father – by the damned Nine, her grandfather – they were on a desperate mission to save the realms.

He dimly recalled reading that the prospect of imminent death could make you ... lusty. No one had mentioned that when they'd set out on this ridiculous adventure.

He heard himself saying, "My staff is not knobbly. It is perfectly well suited to its purpose." For some reason, he found his face flushing, his tongue slipping over the syllables as he spoke. What was going on with him? Some ill-effect of his exhaustion, no doubt. Yes, that was it.

Her smile though. That was what really got to him. She seemed to be suggesting all manner of illicit delights with only the raising of an eyebrow. She was clearly a woman who took what she wanted from life, sampled every pleasure there was to be sampled. Devoted to his calling and his research, lost in his books and his mumblings, he was aware that he'd allowed much to pass him by. He'd gained a great deal of arcane knowledge, acquired great power – but at what cost?

This was the thing that had troubled him more and more as the ridiculous assortment of misfits had assembled. How much had he missed out on? It wasn't just her smile and her way of talking; he found himself acutely aware of the swelling curve of her breasts, the sway of her hips as she walked. She was smart, too, perhaps even as smart as he was. Perhaps even - he could admit this possibility to himself - smarter. He'd always found stupidity in others depressing and dreary, but Rhen blazed. He tried again to stifle the pangs of regret coursing through him. He was too old to set these things right, now. Oh, there had been paramours in his younger days: a beautiful, clean-limbed young man who'd read books in a library they both visited; a tavern serving-wench whose smile had lit him up like the sunrise. Nothing had ever come of these infatuations. He couldn't even recall their names, now.

His problem was that he was clever. Too clever. Had been as a boy. Everyone had said so. He regretted it in many ways. Stupid people seemed to have more fun. Stupid people didn't waste their time worrying about unseen futures and phantom worlds. No, they frittered away their lives drinking and fucking and fighting. And having families and friends. Why couldn't that have been him? And now here was this Rhen, full of life, so dazzling and dangerous. Ah, if only he were a hundred years younger.

He was also lying. The aether terrified him. It always had. The first time he'd walked it, it had been like jumping off a ship into a bottomless ocean in the dead of night. The vastness of it was too terrible to fully comprehend. The way his magic worked, he could see the slightest silver lines – mere gossamer threads – leading through the endless void, and he knew that if he lost sight of the thread he was following, he would be lost. He would wander the void for the rest of time, lost to life but also not dying, his body frozen on the other side of the veils.

He pulled himself together. She was still watching him quizzically, that damned amused expression on her face. Her beautiful face. Her lips parted slightly...

He said, "Please, if you can give me some peace for a moment, I'll begin working the magic. Forcing a way into the aether itself is ... gruelling. Much more powerful once you complete it because you can go anywhere, but it's not easy. Not easy at all."

Now he was boasting. What the hell was happening to him?

Rhen set a foot onto the puzzle box. “And how do you propose we lug this damned thing across your aether? I notice you didn’t do any of the lifting.”

He sighed. Did he have to do everything? “If it’s too heavy for you I can reduce its dimensions for a time.”

There was that amused expression on her face again. “Right, cast Alion’s Incantation of Prodigious Shrinkage, right?”

“Again, I have no idea who Alion is or what you’re talking about.” He set about intoning the syllables needed for the spell. This, at least, was easy enough, the magic familiar from his many forays into the aether. The effects would last longer in the void where the dimensions of objects was a barely meaningful concept. The magic might even last long enough for them to reach the Citadel.

Might. He chose not to mention that word. He flared a blue light from the tip of his staff. In truth, it was completely unnecessary for the spell to operate, but it looked impressive. The curious stone sarcophagus with its markings and carvings glowed for a moment, then, with a whump, shrank down to the size of a small book. He felt the faintest inrush of air as reality hurriedly re-established itself, filling the gap where the box had been.

“Can you manage to lift it now?” he asked.

She was about to throw some predictably crude retort at him when something roared from the shadows of the things that either were or weren’t trees. The sound had clear notes of rage and hunger to it. It was also loud enough to make the branches quiver. Something big and pissed off was coming for them. The damned trees had clearly finished their discussions and had called for backup.

Rhen picked up the box in one hand and drew her sword with the other. At the same moment, the owner of the roar came bounding out of the forest.

It was something like a cross between an oversized wolf and a seriously pissed off thorn bush. Its green, spiky body looked like twisting vegetation, but it loped rapidly from the trees on its six legs like any predator. It bristled with vicious spikes, but it also had a head, and eyes. And, perhaps, some equivalent of a brain. Whether the green of this realm had infected an animal with its spores, altering and controlling it, or whether the weird vegetation grew nightmares like this as protection, he had no idea. It was another horror. Couldn’t they have visited just one realm where everyone was kind and the local wildlife didn’t try to eat you?

The creature paused, its snout casting around as if it were awaiting the arrival of others of its kind.

Rhen said, “Get us out of here, old man.”

“Guard my back while I work. You can manage that, I assume?”

“Depends how long you fucking take. Start mumbling your spells now.”

Morin set to work, moving his hands and uttering the syllables needed to impose his will upon the fabric of reality. The veils resisted him as he strove to unknit them. Opening a tear was harder in some realms, the walls thicker. And he had been through too much recently. But there was no time to stop and rest.

He glanced over his shoulder. Rhen’s sword scythed backwards and forwards as she held off two of the creatures. It looked like she was battling a thicket of dagger-like barbs – and losing badly. She sliced off several of the creatures’ limbs, but it appeared to make no difference. Blood wept from wounds on her body where a spike had stuck into her. In the background, a third creature lurked, awaiting its moment to pounce.

Rhen dropped to her haunches and struck upwards, piercing one of the creatures through the bottom of its jaw. Green gore sprayed from the wound. It screamed and hissed, its whole body quivering as she held it impaled. That was good. The horrors did have some version of a brain. A vulnerable spot.

The creature lurking in the background, though, saw its opportunity and threw itself forwards, directly at Rhen. Morin thought she was lost, but he had underestimated her. She swung with her other hand and dealt the leaping creature a crunching blow that knocked the life from it in mid-air. The shrunken puzzle box. She had used it as a weapon.

“Old man,” she snarled through gritted teeth. “Get us out of here now!”

If the creatures thought to surround he and Rhen, she wouldn’t be able to protect him. How intelligent were they? Desperately, he returned to his work, trying to focus, trying to shut out the distractions of the world around him. He could do this. He had done it many times. Another snarl of anger came from behind him, and he couldn’t be sure if it came from one of the creatures or from Rhen.

“Morin!”

He felt the moment when the veil gave under his hands, succumbing to his incantations.

“I have it!” he gasped.

The grunts and clangs of the fight taking place behind him were louder as Rhen was pushed backwards. Her words were punctuated by the efforts of the fight. “Took your. Fucking. Time! I’m fighting a battle here. While you. Fiddle about with. Spells and shit.”

“Well, finish waving your sword around and follow me.”

He squeezed through the slit he had cut in the walls between the worlds, first one foot then the other. The familiar icy clutch of the void robbed him of his breath. That endless, freezing ocean. It resisted him; it was no place for a living being.

He forced himself inside.

He reached an arm back into the solid world, feeling around for her. He found her arm, pulled her through. The veils resisted, then he had her, yanking her through the gash to flop, gasping, at his feet.

But she wasn’t alone. One of the vicious wolf thicket monsters had a grip on one of her legs. Rhen hacked at it with her sword – the ethereal ghost of her sword – but Morin knew that was pointless. The void was not like the real worlds.

He intoned familiar syllables, summoning the magic that thrust the creature aside. He was desperately weary from opening the breach, but he had to ignore that. He completed the spell, letting the light blaze out of his staff, blasting the creature off the silver path and into the void. It clung desperately to Rhen as if it were caught in some violent wind. Rhen kicked and kicked as she felt herself being pulled off the way. Morin seized her arm, anchoring her to the pathway, then threw another spell at the creature, this time targeting the limb it gripped Rhen with, blasting it with green fire.

With a guttural scream, it relented. Morin breathed heavily as it was hurled backwards into the darkness. It flailed helplessly, as if it were sinking into sunless waters. He knew it was doomed. The aether had it now.

Working quickly, he closed the breach between the worlds. Sealing them inside.

“Are you injured?” he asked Rhen.

“I’m fine.” She stood, studying her arms, plucking out splinters.

“Come. Hold my hand.”

“Oh sure,” she replied. “I know your fucking sort. You’ll be telling me I need to take my clothes off to make the magic work next.”

Morin did his best to ignore the mental images that conjured.

“We have no time for this! If you leave the silver pathway you will never find it again. Never! You’ll spend your days fading away, hunted by Urkath. I’ve seen it happen. Is that what you want?”

“How can we even breathe in here?”

“Because I’m working powerful magic! Didn’t I mention I could do that? Shall we stop while I explain in detail?”

Her hand in his was warm, slick with the sweat of her battle. But her grip was firm.

“Lead on, old man. But try anything, and I’ll break your fingers.”

“I shall be too busy attempting not to die, I assure you.”

They walked for some time – hours, possibly, judging by the leaden weariness that filled his legs, but he’d come to understand that time and distance meant nothing in this realm. The pathway was a shimmering silvery line before him, thin as spider’s silk in the moonlight. Occasionally other threads led off in different directions, off to the sides, upwards or downwards – if those terms had any meaning here. His sense of which was the right path to take was highly-developed, the maps in his head comprehensive, but he knew he wasn’t infallible. He had to hope he wasn’t leading them astray. If he was, they were doomed. Dimly, like a morning star glimpsed through fog, he discerned a brighter glow up ahead. The point where multiple pathways converged if he was any damned guide. The Citadel realm. He headed that way and didn’t speak.

He felt the presence of Urkath nearby rather than seeing it. In this, its native realm, it was little more than a seething cloud of darkness. It hungered for life and light, seeking to devour them. Whether it fed off living things, or whether it was outraged by them, Morin didn’t know.

“Run,” he said. “Urkath is on our trail.”

Rhen pulled her hand from his. He heard her draw her sword. Ridiculous. She might as well try and poke holes in the sky.

“What? Where?”

“Behind. All around. The question is meaningless! We have to leave the aether before it devours us. Run! And do not stray off the path. If you do, you are lost.”

“Yes, yes, so you keep fucking saying.”

He ignored her words and ran.

Urkath swept past them. Its scale was hard to measure; it was like trying to gauge the size of a storm cloud in the sky. Morin caught glimpses of teeth and eyes and claws in the shadowy form of Urkath. He knew they were only illusions: inventions of the creature, or perhaps of his own mind trying to make sense of a place where no person belonged, an entity no person should ever have to face.

He caught another brief glimpse of it, or at least the place where it was. It drifted past directly ahead, eclipsing the pathway they had to walk along for a moment, a deeper shadow in the darkness. They couldn’t outrun it. He had to think.

He paused, considering. “I will lead it off into the aether. You must take Vouring’s heart. The way through the veils is there. That pathway towards the faint light. Do you see it?”

“I don’t...”

“There, there! It’s perfectly clear to anyone with some wit. Are you so stupid? Go that way, and hurry. That thing may be the most powerful, but there are other nightmares in the void that will come for you.”

“What about you?”

Obviously, he and Rhen could never be. The years had slipped by, and he was far too old, now. But he refused, also, to be the irritable old man they saw, lost in his dusty tomes and his mystical research. None of them knew the real him, but he could still show them. And, this brief time they’d had together, he and the other offspring of the heroes. He had valued it. Unexpectedly, he had enjoyed it. It had given him a glimpse of the path his own life might have taken. They were ridiculous and dim-witted and foolhardy – sometimes all at once – but there hadn’t been enough of any of those things in his life.

By the dark gods of hell, when did he get so old?

“I will take the long way round. There is another path. I will lead this creature away while you escape the aether.”

“Oh, right, you just assume it will hunt you rather than me?”

“It knows me, knows my scent. We’re old adversaries. Did you think it was coincidence Urkath turned up when we were barricaded inside that cathedral? It sniffed me out. You’ll be safe enough if you hurry. The way out isn’t far now.”

“Where will you lead it?”

“Let me worry about that. Now, go! I will buy you as much time as I can. I will see you at the Citadel. Just be sure you get the puzzle box there and that you don’t get distracted by anything that looks like it might be fun.”

Rhen hesitated for a moment, then did something he didn’t expect. Not speaking, she reached up to kiss him on the cheek. Her lips on his skin were warm and soft. In that moment, lights flooded through his mind. Bright, sparky lights.

“What ... what was that for?” he managed.

Rhen placed a hand on his arm, and there was an oddly knowing look in her eyes, just for a moment. A sadness, even a fondness. Perhaps there was more to her than he’d thought.

She said, simply, “Thank you. Stay safe, old man.”

He had to hope that in the darkness of the void, she wouldn’t be able to see the way his loins were stirring. Another good reason to wear shapeless robes.

“Hurry now,” he said. “There’s no time for this!”

Rhen turned and stepped away, balancing on the silver pathway as if it were a tightrope she might fall off at any moment. Which, effectively, it was. He watched her for as long as he dared, delight and regret mingling in him, then he, too, sighing, turned away.

He took a moment to orientate himself. It was a mistake to think of the silver lines as something like paths on solid ground. Not only could they shift around, they could also loop and twist, lead you overhead and upside down. The aether had its own laws of nature. If you couldn’t handle that, you were lost.

The Shadow Labyrinth, though. That was what he had to find. He had never been there – obviously – but he had read about it in more than one ancient tome. One – the original, he thought – had been penned by Ithager the Planeswalker nearly three thousand years previously. Ithager claimed to have seen the Labyrinth forming, some explosion or calamity in one of the realms causing a huge part of the aether to collapse in on itself. Perhaps an entire realm had been destroyed, causing the rupture. Whatever the truth of it, the silver pathways had become impossibly tangled at this point. Ithager’s warnings had been very clear. You could walk in, but you could never walk out again. There was no escaping the Shadow Labyrinth.

Morin wondered how Ithager knew that. He obviously couldn’t have gone in and returned to report. Perhaps he had witnessed others stepping inside, never to return. Morin had spent his life making sure he didn’t follow them – but now he was going to do exactly that. If he could get trapped in there, then maybe Urkath could, too.

Maybe.

He ran along forking pathways, all the time fighting his instinct not to go that way, not to go that way. The feeling for the aether he’d built up over the years was useful; he simply had to do the opposite of what his senses told him. He felt Urkath behind him, around him, a storm cloud gathering itself to unleash a tempest. Was it intelligent, or a mere creature of hungers? He didn’t know.

He reached the place – indistinguishable to anyone else’s eye – that he knew was the threshold. A step he’d never dared take before. He couldn’t afford to hesitate. He strode on.

Inside, oddly, the silvery lines became clearer. He could see the tangle of them, twisting together into some impossible knot. That gave him hope. If the light of the pathways couldn’t escape the Labyrinth, perhaps Urkath couldn’t either. Did that make sense? Ithager had claimed that the aether itself was folded in on itself here, not simply the pathways, but who really knew?

The thought of Urkath made him stop, though. Where was the creature? It should have followed him. He turned, reaching out with his mind's eye to find Urkath, see the deeper darkness within the endless night.

There. The creature hesitated at the threshold. It knew about the Labyrinth. Again, was that knowledge or mere instinct? Morin imagined it turning, loping off to find Rhen, rend her before she could escape. He refused to let that happen.

He readied a spell. Long ago, as a young man, he had encountered Urkath in the aether and had hurled fire and lightning at it in an attempt to harm it. He'd soon learned he was having the opposite effect. It was different outside, in a physical realm, but here, the more magic he threw at the entity, the more powerful it became.

It was the Labyrinth – the calamity Ithager had witnessed – that had given him the idea for the spell. Black Light he called it. It was a sphere of concentrated aether, so concentrated that it sucked in the void around it. The void and anything nearby. The effect was limited, but devastating. He knew the magic hurt Urkath; he had inflicted pain upon the monster more than once. Barely enough to slow it down, but that was something. It was also gruelling magic, something he could only manage two or three times without a month's rest – and he was already utterly spent.

He had no choice. He could at least hurt Urkath, goad it. And that was all he needed to do.

The effort of hurling the Black Light spell at Urkath made his head swim. Dizziness washed over him, and he almost teetered off the silver path. He fell to one knee, placing a hand to the silver line to steady himself. He felt the moment the magic ball struck Urkath, felt the tug in the aether as a part of it collapsed in on itself. Saw, also, the black smoke that was the body of the entity briefly illuminated by a purple flash, like lightning discharging inside a storm cloud.

Morin heard Urkath's furious screech of rage in his head, in his bones. The entity loomed at him, across the threshold, into the Labyrinth. Morin stood and, swaying from his exertions, forced himself to flee once again. Deeper, deeper into the maze he raced, barely keeping to the silver thread now, his vision clouding and fading.

The cloud passed near him. No, worse than that, through him. He felt the wash of ice as some tendril of Urkath's form brushed his body. Morin stopped and stood his ground. He would strike the entity again. All his strength was gone, utterly gone, but he had a reserve stored in his staff, there for dire emergency. This, now, was the emergency.

He gripped the staff tight, hurriedly intoning the words of the Black Light spell one final time. Power blazed through his hand from the staff, roaring through him, and he hurled it at Urkath. The staff cracked in two and fell from his hand to the pathway. The substance of the aether shook, and Urkath howled its pain, its fury greater than any Morin had ever heard. He had struck it a terrible blow. But he knew it wouldn't be enough. It could never be enough.

He stumbled on, alone and powerless. Time passed, but he was barely aware of it. Urkath shadowed him, creeping nearer but not attacking for the moment. Whether it had grown wary or was simply biding its time, Morin didn't know. It reached out with a misty tendril of darkness to test Morin, but he could do nothing except waft at it uselessly with his hand and run on. On and on.

Something lay on the silver pathway ahead of him. His broken staff, lying where he'd dropped it minutes – or hours – previously. How could that be? He'd fled as quickly as he could. But of course, the Labyrinth had looped him back, twisted him around. He really was trapped.

Good. That was good.

He stopped running and slumped to his knees, then sat upon the silver way, his broken staff beside him. Strangely, he found himself laughing. The thing that was Urkath was all around him now. It didn't matter. He had no strength left. He didn't know for sure whether Urkath was trapped in the Labyrinth with him, but it might be. At least he had bought Rhen and the others some time.

He hoped it was enough. At least his life had meant something in the end. He just hoped the others, the descendants of the Nine, were enough to save the realms.

Idiots that they were.

He closed his eyes for a final time as the darkness engulfed him.

Rhen paused at the end of the shimmering silver path, turned to look back. There was no sign of Hast. She knew well that he had sacrificed himself. There was a lot more to him than she'd thought. And, an old man? She'd have been into that. Young stallions could be too eager. No stamina, that was their problem. They took and they didn't give. An older man, though, slower to excite, slower to release? Yeah, she'd have been into that. She believed in experiencing everything life had to offer. And she relished a challenge. Although, she'd have insisted on him having a fucking bath, first.

Ah well, it was not to be. He was gone.

The shrunken puzzle box in her hand, she pushed through the weak spot in the veils where the silver pathway ended, stepping from the cold quiet of the aether into the Citadel realm.

A wall of noise and flame and fury engulfed her.