

# REALM RAIDERS



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## The Midlogue

The halfway point in our serialised webstory introduces us to a new character.

### The Watcher by Rachel V. Green

I shouldn't have allowed Bane to roast the Azrani priest's bodyguard, it hardly constituted a neutral act.

The dragon's muscles ripple beneath my legs as we circle, his wing joints anchored behind my knees for stability. Gripping his familiar, rough scales I look down at the red-haired woman who stands over the gigantic Avarax, his black guts spilling out in a circle that encompasses her.

For the first time in centuries, I shiver.

The woman has more power than she knows. And rather than let her fall to the creature's reaching claws as I should have, I had acted instead, sending it stumbling into the undergrowth as she ran on through the trees. I freed her from a death that should have been his to claim and in doing so, I broke my vow.

In so many ways, it was a mistake. One I see playing out before me as Avarax's hand loosens on the fangblade. The woman looks up, and across the impossible distance I see a lust for blood in her eyes, and a hunger not yet sated. She wants more. Always more, this one. And the bodies she has left behind her are but the first of many.

"To the portal," I say, digging my knees into Bane, who growls low in his throat, but dips one wing and spirals away, leaving Rhen Kaegan with the fangblade she should never have found.

There will be consequences for my actions. Not only here in the Realms, but in the quiet spaces between, where I should have stayed, watching, weighing. There will be questions as to why. Why her? Why now? After so long on the sidelines, why extend my power to fell *this* beast at *this* moment. Already I feel my ties to the Realms faltering, the intangible threads that hold me here as witness, beginning to fray as I interfere where I should not. I've watched too long. Become...attached.

I face the truth as I approach the portal; I do not want Vouring freed again. And nor, it seems, do I want Rhen Keagan to die.

I've watched them all for years—the descendants of the nine—waiting for Vouring's army to make their move and for the terrible destruction to begin anew. I watch them every time. Every five hundred years, since the beginning of time, when the binding spell begins to falter, and the heroes are called. There are always nine. But not this time, not now. Before they'd even received their summons, Rhen killed Hoji Tharaful and Greton Zulog. As far as I can tell, the two men were unaware of their ancestry, as was Rhen, but the impact of their loss will be felt when the time comes. Rhen has changed things, seemingly for the worse. But something tells me there's more to her than meets the eye. Kaegan's line was always the brightest and she could be the key to ending the swing of this terrible pendulum, which see Vouring fall free twice a millennium.

The portal is upon us, one of the last remaining as the spell weakens and Vouring's strength grows. Bane tucks in his wings as the rip in the fabric of space envelops us, twisting into the vortex, which sucks at my grip, fingers of atmosphere pressing their advantage. Bane roars and fire swirls around us, singeing my hair and clothes. Again. The beast never learns. Thousands of times we've travelled the portals together and every time he roars.

I'm blind in the vortex, pummelled by sensation but I know when we pass through the quiet space. Knowledge comes to me. The knowledge of all the watchers, and it's with a sinking stomach I learn the other two items have been gathered: the righteous blade, the leprecoin. And now the fangblade too, thanks to my actions. All three items are within the hands of the remaining heroes and will soon arrive in the central nexus. Vouring's plan is almost complete.

It's been painful to watch it unfold.



Vouring's army, the magi, have been busy. In the past, they only waited; counting down the years until the binding spell begins to fade. Then helping their master reek as much destruction as a dark god can before he is, inevitably, bound by magic once more. This time, however, the magi have not been content to wait. Perhaps they sense, as I do, that Rhen Keagan is different and that together with Lute, a descendant of unparalleled strength of heart, captivity may no longer be Vouring's greatest threat. Perhaps, they seek true freedom for Vouring, one which cannot be contained by any magic.

The magi planted the seeds of the heroes destruction weeks ago. First, they corrupted the weakest of the nine, dispatching him to deliver letters of lies, directing each of the heroes in search of their own destruction. When he failed to deliver all the letters, the magi found other ways. They sent a vision of Tam Becker to Lute, directed Morin Hast to Myra through dreams he didn't even realise he'd had. Hoji and Greton were sent to Rhen years ago, mysterious benefactors paying them for meaningless jobs until by the time *this* job, the final job, came about, there was no one else Rhen would think to ask to accompany her. The magi lined up their pieces beautifully.

And now, the surviving heroes are coming together. Not to bind Vouring, as they believe. But to free him.

Bursting from the portal at the central nexus, I see the game is already afoot. Myra, Lute and Hast are already at the Citadel, staring up at the bound, dark god, the righteous blade clasped in Lute's hand. Damon, Yaz and Nicky are close with the leprecoin, and Rhen isn't far behind bearing the claws of a giant and a fangblade still wet with blood. They bring everything Vouring needs to escape his prison, forever.

Vouring stirs as I coax Bane higher into the sky, rising above the buildings, above the knees of the god, the waist, the shoulders, until I am face to face with the tormentor. His eyes burn, as they have burned for eternity, and his incorporeal lips draw back into a snarl as I approach.

"Watcher..."

The word escapes him like a breeze, ill-formed and lifting the wings of my dragon, showering us both with malevolence.

"You seek the end of all Realms," I say, though I know his bindings will not allow him to answer me. They sizzle; wisping cables of electricity, woven with starlight and fire, creeping over every part of his body, obscuring his features. But they do nothing to contain the sense of evil seeping from him. "I am charged with watching the worlds burn each time you escape your bonds. To do anything else, is to untether myself from this place and relinquish my home in the quiet spaces."

A rumble reaches my ears, the ground far below me shifting as Vouring stirs. I look down to see the gathering heroes stumbling, as magi creep from the surrounding buildings to encircle them. I see Rhen Kaegan, the fangblade already raised high above her head. A scream of rage tears free of her chest, and she throws herself forwards.

I make my decision.

"Dark god, I no longer wish to feel the screams of millions echo across the universes. And though my loss will be great, my death swift as sunlight, I relinquish my vow."

## Chapter Ten

*In which our avengers assemble with artefacts – but no clue!*

**by Damien Larkin**

“Get me out of this fucking rubber duck, Nikki!”

Seething anger coursed through my...well, rubberiness. Since Nikki implanted my life force in her mascot, we’d moved from one life threatening situation to another. Even in the confines of this bath toy, I remained the glue that held Nikki the so-called necromancer and Yas, the human cigarette lighter, together.

“I’m working on it. I’m working on it,” Nikki said. “It’s not like we’re exactly spoiled for choice around here. I can’t sense anything even remotely organic to transfer you into.”

If I had lips and a mouth, I would’ve sighed. I’d no idea how Nikki, empress of fuckups, managed to move my life force from my dying mortal body into an inanimate object. Now that there were no monstrous creatures attempting to kill us, I had the time to understand how truly overwhelming my predicament was. I didn’t have eyes, ears, or limbs, yet I could sense people and things within my immediate periphery in an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree angle. Thankfully, my powers as a Pathfinder hadn’t deserted me, so I led the co-queens of stupidity onwards.

“Hey, we are not stupid,” Nikki said.

“Or really? You healed those religious fanatics while Captain Flashlight nearly got us all killed fighting that damned leprechaun. And another thing, stop listening to my thoughts.”

“I am not listening to your thoughts, Damon. You’re broadcasting them loud enough for me to hear. It’s like you’ve got this weird narration thing going on. Like in one of those detective movies.”

“I think that’s called hard-boiled,” Yas said.

“I could go for a hard-boiled egg right now,” Nikki said, head drooping. “I told you, we should have really stopped for food, Damon.”

My anger morphed into molten hatred. We stood on the periphery of an ancient prophecy, determined to face down the rising evil of Vouring, and I had the misfortune of being stuck with two of the most useless people in all the known realms. The sooner we located the rest of the heroes who were supposed to aid us on our journey, the better. I might at least have decent company.

“We’re great company,” Nikki said. “Check it out. Yas does a pretty badass impression of you.”

Devoid of eyes, I couldn’t make out Yas fully but sensed her halt in her tracks. She cleared her throat and in faint outlines of her mortal energy, I detected her straightening her posture. Nikki raised me up and edged me closer to her head, as if that would fully compensate for a lack of eyeballs.

“Ugh, I’m Damon,” she said in a deep, flat voice. “I’m so broody and life is so cruel. Everyone’s stupid but me. Ugh, we should totally go this way, idiots. Ugh, no, this way. Hurry up. I’m so angry and misunderstood. Love me.”

Nikki cackled and clapped wildly. Yas bowed and through a weird distortion of energy, I perceived an almighty smug grin. The rubber walls of my prison strained against the murderous rage building within me. Without lungs, I simulated taking deep breaths and exhaling, hoping it calmed me in some type of psychosomatic effect. It worked. At least a little.

“The Roseline is only a few hundred metres ahead,” I said. “I’ll need one of you to act as a conduit for my power so I can open it.”

“Sounds like a sex thing,” Yas said. “Suppose it’s not the first time I’ve used something rubber to—”

“SHUT... THE FUCK... UP... YOU BABBLING... MORON.”

Thankfully, we made it the rest of the way without any other mindless chatter, even if Yas whistled tunelessly with every step. To keep myself focused, I pictured my return to a physical body. It didn't matter what one at this stage. I'd never take breathing, walking, or punching someone for granted again. All I needed was for Nikki to locate a cadaver, ideally a fresh human one, and I could return to my rightful place leading these morons onto our shared destiny.

I couldn't describe the physical outline of where this Roseline was located, but it lit up like a beacon fire in the dead of night in my mind. I ordered the women to halt and slowly walked Yas through the designs I needed her to etch into the soil all the while chanting and reciting the words that channelled my gift. Energy swirled around me, brought to life by archaic incantations. Holding me tight, Nikki linked arms with Yas and continued to repeat my invocations. Soaring pulses of electricity surged through my lifeforce, and I knew we'd been successful. Together, we marched onwards into another realm, hopefully to make the acquaintance of other people just like us.

"Where are we?" Yas asked.

Devoid of eyes, I trusted my gift to confirm we were in the correct nexus world. I reached out, touching the strands of energy unique to this realm. Our physical location was in a cavern of some sort, with multiple tunnels leading in different directions. Something else about this realm spoke to me.

Darkened coldness slithered back from the periphery of my senses. Insidious evil smothered me, dancing around the edges of perception. Calling out in a dead language. Words whose meaning were unknown to me, but the intent was clear. Danger, death, and destruction.

"This is the realm of the Citadel. Where Vouring resides. Quick, Nikki, seek out a body for me. I need an actual real-life physical form to stop you two braindead fuckups from getting yourselves killed."

All around me, the expired lives of countless dead reverberated. Warriors fallen in a desperate no-hope engagement to destroy a beast more powerful than can be imagined. Hundreds of thousands rotting beneath the soil. Nothing more than cannon fodder in the face of Vouring's monstrous wrath.

Nikki extended her hands and drew on her abilities. Surges of energy flickered within my realm of perception, dancing along the floor and burrowing deep into the soil. Slightest threads of movement emanated. Nothing substantial. With a sigh, Nikki returned her hands to her sides.

"I can't do it. They're too far gone to be of any use. I'm sorry, Damon."

The standard variety of insults rushed through my mind. Knowing Nikki could hear every single one, I made sure to echo as many colourful variations as I could think of. I paused when tendrils of a new energy leaked out from somewhere five hundred metres ahead. My tracking abilities detected four other people. I couldn't discern anything other than they were like us. Cursed or gifted to end what our ancestors started. The blips of their presence increased in intensity, signalling us to locate them, even if they didn't know it.

"More of our people are out there," I said. "Walk forward. That tunnel straight ahead. I'll guide you."

The light from Yas' so-called ability shone enough for her to direct Nikki through the cavern. In my mind's eye, I perceived the contours of the passageway perfectly. Every nook and cranny, all the imperfections in the stone. Grooves worn into the rock. The taint of energy hugging the grit from where people spent their last few seconds of life screaming in agony.

Outside, the dark energy expanded and strangled the structure known as the Citadel. The massive building rested across a gorge, connected by a single stone bridge. One we'd have to cross to reach. Giving any set of prying eyes within the hundreds of windows plenty of advance warning. Perfect spot for an ambush.

Rather than order the Idiot Brigade onwards, I ushered them right along a stretch of path carved into a mountain. Even more death lingered out here. Faint moans echoed from within the gorge, and I hoped it was due to the light breeze more than anything else.

I perceived the approaching four newcomers long before my eyes could have. Despite the constraint of my new form, my powers sharpened, almost in compensation. I dug deep and tried to form pictures in my mind. Eager to understand their abilities and what they'd bring to our sacred mission. All I deciphered was that there were two males and two females. I ordered Nikki and Yas to pause near the bridge and we waited.

Within a few minutes, the new arrivals swung into Yas and Nikki's eyeline, and the tension ratcheted up between my traveling companions. If we were wrong about the newcomer's intentions, there would be nothing I could do to keep my two idiotic charges safe in my present form. At best, I could offer advice or lead them back to the Roseline. Warily, the new arrivals approached, then halted around five metres away.

"Who are you?" a weird, bearded, hippy dude asked.

"My name is Nikki. This is Yas. And this little fellow is Damon." For effect, she gave me a squeeze. "Well, he's inside the duck. I mean, his life force is. It's not that he's Ant Man and just really tiny. I'm probably off to a bad start. Let me try again. You see—"

"Shut up, Nikki," I said.

The strangers glanced at each other, and the old, demented guy took it upon himself to introduce everyone. "I am Morin Hast. This is Lute, Myra, and Rhen. We've come to face down Vouring."

Puffing on a cigarette, Yas opened her palm and allowed the coin we'd retrieved to gleam. Lute hoisted the sword in his hands and Rhen held out the fangblade for show. The artefacts. Everything we needed to destroy the prophesied evil and save the realms from utter destruction.

Blackness clung to the auras of everyone in attendance. Not the stain of evil, but the sorrow of loss and the pain of the sacrifice each endured to reach this point. I detected the tingle of agony on each one and dwelt a little longer on the unusually skewed energy of Myra.

"You're different," I said.

"I'm a Pathmaker," she said, throwing resentment on me and the word in equal measure.

Uncertainty hung between our groups like a gulf. We'd each retrieved what ancient obligations commanded us to, but the grimness of what was to happen next lingered. Morin Hast parted his lips to speak when surges of lightning tore across the sky and pounded the bridge. Without eyes, I had no need to blink, and ripples of power indicated this was more than an unnatural weather phenomenon. Nine figures, oozing with Vouring's corruption solidified, blocking our progress to the citadel. Out of instinct, our two clusters forged into one and faced the new arrivals.

"Magi," Morin Hast said and pointed a crooked finger. "Servants of Vouring. Bound to his will until the end of times."

"Step aside," Rhen said, her fists tightening.

Lute stepped forward and with muscles bulging, lifted the sword in challenge. From behind hooded veils, nine sets of eyes glared, and a wave of unrepentant hatred crashed through me. Our solidified group shuddered at the cascades of darkened energy pulsing off the magi. Morin Hast raised his palms and slammed his eyes shut. Beads of sweat glittered across his forehead. As his lips moved in silent enchantments, the waft of evil lessened slightly.

Growling, Lute rushed at the magi, his sword prepared to strike down the one in the centre. Unseen forces lifted him from his feet and tossed him backwards, the blade hilt still barely in his grip. With an almighty thump, he crashed a metre behind us and released a long-drawn-out groan as he fought to drag himself up. Yas wrenched him up to his feet, then stretched out her hands showing the flickering sparks of her power. Cackles erupted from the unmoving magi, contempt dripping from every reverberation.

"Come on you, idiots!" I roared. "Tackle them or something. We're not going to get anywhere by—"

"Tough talk from a bath toy," Myra said, joining Lute in raising her weapon.

"We must act together to defeat Vouring's minions," Morin Hast said, his fingers curling inwards, but hands still extended. "I can blunt their power, but I cannot hold it. It is our destiny to defeat the rising evil. We must act in concert. Together, we succeed or fail."

Gandalf had a point. The magi were toying with us. At any point, they could have gripped us in their invisible power and flung us over the bridge. Instead, from their righteous laughter, they relished witnessing us falter. Destiny itself crumbling at our inability to devise a plan. If I had my body, I would've volunteered to lead the attack myself. Better me than Grave-shit-for-brains and the flaming—"

"Damon, knock it off," Nikki said. "It's not the time for—"

"I have an idea," I said, as the basic crumbs of a workable plan melded together. "Xena-The-Warrior-Princess—"

“My name is Myra, you plastic motherfucker.”

“Ok,” I said. “We exited from a Roseline a few hundred metres back. I can still sense it, so if you focus, you can draw power from it to open your own portal. Unleash one right behind them to somewhere nasty and we all just... you know, charge at them and...”

I trailed off. With a physical body, I could have won them over with my steely eyes, rugged good looks, and firm, decisive hand gestures. Might as well have been trying to convince nuns to engage in an orgy from all the enthusiasm from this band of so-called heroes.

Despite her rising hostility, Myra glanced about and sighed when she fixed her gaze on the statuesque magi. “Unless anyone has any better ideas?”

Silence reigned from the magi. If they heard us, they made no movement to interfere. I harnessed my abilities, reached out, and touched the dying embers of the Roseline. At an invisible caress, it spun into life again, primal power spooling up and slowly expanding in strength. Myra focused her energy and the world around her shimmered. The Roseline reacted to her presence and like steel shavings to a magnet, power flowed into her. She remained standing, no physical change in her demeanour. Yet around her, raw energy engulfed her, pouring into her centre, growing exponentially in preparation for opening one hell of a portal.

Blasts of light ripped across the bridge. Space and time ruptured, creating a swirling mass of energy behind the magi. The light crackled, spun, and finally stabilised. A widened portal showing a shadowy world settled behind Vouring’s foul minions. They neither flinched nor turned. Just stood there. Watching us.

“Attack!” Lute said and broke into a sprint.

Morin Hast pulled his palms to his centre and hammered them outwards. Yas raised her hands and unleashed a bolt of light which shrouded the magi in its splendour. Exhausted, Then raised her fangblade and readied herself to join the fray. Even Nikki picked up a rock and prepared to throw it.

The lead magi clapped its hands once and a godawful burst of fiery light seared into every one of us. I slipped from Nikki’s grip and tumbled onto the burning sand. Everyone in our group lay sprawled away from the bridge. Moving, coughing, spluttering, but otherwise alive. The portal flickered and died, fading into nothingness and with it, our one chance to score an early victory against that bastard Vouring.

Unified in motion, the magi advanced. No more toying with their prey or studying us with the fascination a child holds for ants. Nine of Vouring’s most loyal and powerful acolytes flittered closer. While our group struggled to drag themselves up off the dirt, the magi paused and the lead one extended a pale, withered, upturned palm. Embers flickered on unburnt skin and danced into flame.

If I had a stomach, now would’ve been the time for it to churn. Malevolent laughter broke free of that fire prompting unadulterated horror to flow through every atom of what remained of me. I recognised the tone, and the façade of magical fire. I’d tracked down and dispatched letters to eight other people at its behest. Started a journey to retrieve three magical artefacts and fulfil an ancient prophecy.

“You’ve done well, Damon,” a voice said from the sputtering sparks. “You dispatched the letters and brought all the heroes together as commanded. Delivered the artefacts and the survivors right to me. The only people and objects in the known realms capable of stopping me, here and now, under my power.”

That damned flame used me. It promised money and power to reach out to the descendants of those who imprisoned Vouring and commence our mission. I thought it nothing more than a part of the prophecy. A magic user initiating our quest who meant to keep their identity concealed for matters of safety.

“Damon,” Yas said, hauling herself up. “What’s going on? Who is this?”

“You know who I am,” the flame growled.

The eyes of everyone in our band fell upon me. My thoughts swirled. Deep within my plastic confines, I could’ve sworn I sensed my heart hammering. No. It couldn’t be. I fulfilled my part of our destiny. After a lifetime of sorrow, it was me who initiated our search for the artefacts. My place in the limelight. It was meant to happen. This couldn’t all be part of someone else’s plan to...

“Who’s plan, Damon?” Nikki asked, picking me up.

The soft innocence in her voice gutted me. I'd known Nikki and Yas since they were children. It was my place to protect them. Keep them safe. They were too stupid to survive anything beyond ordering a meal or tying their shoelaces. Someone strong had to look after them in a cruel, unloving world. I never meant to place them in harm's way.

The flames burned higher and hotter and danced again when it spoke. "Tell them, Damon. Speak my name."

"Vouring," I said, shame washing through my core and conquering every thought. "That thing is Vouring."

To the numbed shock of my charges, the magi advanced. Everyone else rose in preparation for making our last stand. Snivelling to herself, Nikki held me tight.

Trapped in a damned rubber duck, there wasn't a damned thing I could do to stop Vouring's revenge.



## Chapter 11

### *Enter the Dragon (Rider!)*

**by Phil Williams**

The group formed a loose V formation behind their apparently most heroic member as Lute held the Righteous Blade in both hands, wavering before them. Like he might hold off the mad mages and their minions on his own. He was welcome to, Yas thought – the man had muscles enough, if not to actually fight an army then perhaps to feed them long enough that everyone else would scamper. But in the other direction, where the bridge connected to a great doming temple, and their only chance of shelter, more robed men blocked the way. Myra, at the rear, pulled a gun but made the sort of angry noises that she was realising it either wasn't loaded or wouldn't work here.

Meanwhile, the city rattled with the movements of the great statue of Vouring. It glowed, the outer stony layer peeling away like sugar dissolved in the rain. They'd got close, but only enough that they could now see it in all its glory. No chance to destroy it, with the couple of blades they had (which really, what the hell were they supposed to do?!). But that didn't seem a possibility anyway – the great ugly monstrosity appeared to be coming to life. And all around the bridge, the noises of monsters were rising. Creatures swarming. Beyond the mages and below, the streets were coming to life too, as people came out from the houses. Screaming. The people they could see below were twitching, pulsing and reshaping. Mutating, skin peeling, growths forming, eyes glowing. A terrible power was gripping everything, warping the population into monsters, and the magi slowed down for it, evidently hoping to see their new creations do their dirty work.

"It's the artefacts!" Morin Hast shouted. "The power's coming from them – we never should've brought them here!"

Rhen, carrying the fangblade, roared in anger, swinging it overhead – and down on the stone. The weapon broke apart, with a solid thrum of energy, and she tossed the pieces aside. But nothing happened. The statue was still unveiling and the creatures still amassing. She turned her furious gaze to Nicky. "You. You brought us here. You did this."

"Not me," Nicky bleated. "Damon. What have you done?"

"Not me either, it was just a fucking job!" the duck bellowed, but Lute shouted louder: "Steady, the lot of you! We need to get back to that temple. We'll figure it out there."

With dreams of blinding the enemy for a devastating distraction, Yas struggled to conjure a fraction of the magic that had felled the leprechaun, flicking her hands and producing nothing. She caught the old magician eyeballing her and gave him a sheepish smile. "Any tips?"

"Yeah, give up and go home," he said, not particularly pleasantly.

"You think I don't want to?"

"Can't you fly us over them, Hast?" Myra put in. "Repel them or something?"

"Not in these numbers," Morin said. "And not with all I've already done for you fools. This has all been a mistake and I need time. I need –"

"Incoming!" Lute warned, as something came slathering up the side of the bridge, limbs jerking like a spider's as it launched over the edge. Only the rags of clothing and some semblance of a human face mixed in with the bulging black mass of sores and broken-boned contortions indicated it had once been a man – and it offered a fittingly terrifying screech.

"Ah, get back!" Lute cried, more scared than forceful, but he stepped forward and stabbed at the creature all the same. The blade made a weird chiming sound as it slid through the monster, which hissed and partly deflated, spraying thick black blood. Lute kept shouting as he stepped back, swinging at the falling monster again. They all retreated a few more steps, seeing how its blood steamed.

"Nice," Nicky said, and raised her hands. "And now we turn –"

"No!" Yas shouted, slapping her hands down. "We do not turn. We do not bring things better off dead back to life."

"It'll work this time!"

"Would you shut up?" Myra snapped. "We need to charge them, together. If we can get in the temple, we can —"

Rhen screamed and ran forward without waiting for more of a plan, out of patience and clearly just a very angry, violent person. She drew a knife from somewhere, small and inconsequential against the mass of monsters, but the force of her will made the enemy falter.

"Okay, yeah, like that, go!" Myra shouted, hurrying to follow, and the others dashed after her. Rhen was well ahead, about to meet the wall of abominations, which were bracing themselves, ready to rip her apart. "Wait! Rhen —"

Fire burst down from the sky, a ferocious pillar that blazed across the far side of the bridge and eviscerated scores of the beasts. The throng screamed pitifully as they blistered, popped and frazzled, the stench awful, and the group stared in stunned silence. Beyond the fire, mages were shrieking as they fell about, cloaks ablaze, trying to roll and save themselves. Others turned and ran.

"The fuck was that?" Yas gasped, looking up to see the source of the fire as a great shape swept through the sky. "Dragon! Oh my god it's a dragon — Nicky look —"

"No time, run!" Lute yelled, shoving her from behind, and she stumbled along. They were all running then, hopping past sputtering flames, over smouldering corpses. Yas banged into Rhen, motionless at the front, still gawping at the attack. They went down together, rolled on the stone, and Rhen came up teeth bared, about to drive her knife into Yas's neck. Lute's hand grabbed her wrist and he pulled her up. "Focus! They're closing the doors!"

Sure enough, the temple doors ahead were creaking slowly shut, a last handful of mages rushing about trying to seal off the exit. Yas watched, stunned again by the nearness of that knife to stabbing her. Myra had pulled ahead, with Hast darting the other way, the pair of them colliding with the distracted mages. She slammed one's head into the door as Hast did something fast with his hands and another fell down clutching his chest. Then Nicky was rushing past and, startled by another mage, raised her hands and produced a horrible cracking sound from his jaw. The man fell down weeping and she kept running.

The others bundled in behind, Lute twisting one way to slice down a mage as Rhen went the other and cut a man's throat, barely pausing. Yas staggered upright and ran desperately after them. Washed in blood and the cries of their enemies, the group passed into the darkness of the temple as the doors continued closing, under some magic enchantment. They clanged loudly together, cutting off the monstrosities outside, and the group were plunged into relative quiet as their footsteps echoed through the chill of the vast temple chamber.

Collectively panting to recover their breath, they fanned out, forming a broad circle, with Myra, Rhen and Lute scanning the shadows to be sure they were alone. Evidently, they were — just six hapless fools in an ancient mysterious chamber, about to be besieged by unknown terrors. They were watched over by a series of immense statues, each almost as grand as that of Vouring — noble knights with immeasurable weapons and extravagant armour, gods or saints of some martial race, joined by an occasional slither woman statue, dressed down and demure.

"We've got a minute," Lute announced. "Those doors will hold for now."

Even as he said it, creatures began pounding on the entrance.

"And then what?" Hast demanded. "You blundering imbecile, never mind the doors holding against them, Vouring is breaking free and there's not a place in this world we'll be safe." To Myra, he said, "There's a portal here, yes? Some way clear?"

She shook her head. "By my estimate, we're at least a mile from one. My head's ringing though, give me a minute. I can find us a way."

"We've got a path finder, too," Nicky announced, lifting her rubber duck. "Damon, what can you feel?"

Rhen spat to one side, knife up, and started advancing on her. "You think we'd follow him now? You dare protect him. Fuck your duck, I ought to gut you all."

Before she could reach the necromancer, whose eyes bulged with surprise, Lute stepped into her path. The Righteous Blade stood large and proud in his hands, and his stern expression said he was ready to use it.

"You're on her side?" Rhen growled. "It's their fault. Though maybe it figures – I could cut your throat and all for severing that monster's bonds."

"Says the woman who wielded the fangblade!" Hast said. "You're all as naïve as each other – he's escaping because you all came. Never in all my years have I experienced such incompetence. Do any of you have any idea the scale of the mess you've created?"

"Do you?" Myra put in. "Because you've had plenty of time to impart any wisdom about all this you might've had."

"Can you all pack it in!" Yas cried, shifting out into the middle, raising her hands for attention. They didn't light up. Would've been a lot more impressive if they did. She held them up anyway, as if the gesture alone was the point. "Whatever you might've all told each other, or had your parents tell you, and whatever this fuckhead in the duck might've done to bring us all here, it's done now, right, and we need to work together to get out of this. More importantly, why is no one mentioning the damn dragon?"

"Because you are conditioned not to see," a calmer, silky smooth voice cut through the room, drifting out of the shadows. "And if not to see, then not to remember." Footsteps accompanied it, and the group turned as one to a figure emerging before them, a small stout silhouette. Rhen made another aggressive noise, knife ready, but he continued calmly. "Such is the way of my ancestry, as yours was always to project. So mine was to observe and remain unseen, unknown. As I have for generations. Until now."

"You've got two seconds –" Rhen started, but he raised a hand.

"I am the dragon rider. Watcher of the realms. He who records and listens and knows. Sworn neutral. You may call me Kael." He stepped into the light and there was a moment of uncertain silence. Then Yas laughed, but quickly covered her mouth. It set off Rhen again.

"You. Again! What the fuck are you?"

"Halt, Rhen Kaegan! You, especially, must heed my words!" He spread his stubby hands for peace before she could totally lose it. A short man, perhaps five foot four, in thick leather-panel armour where no two segments appeared to quite match, strapped together with worn twine and strands of what looked like hair. He had a square head, disproportionate, nose crooked, ears swollen, and glasses so thick they seemed more likely to damage his eyesight than repair it. His eyes bulged through the lenses and a bunch of tatty pouches and document cases hung about his person. He had all the aura of a troll librarian, though his voice carried importantly as he walked towards them.

"There is great power in you. In all of you. But it has been wasted. Worse, it has fuelled the very harm it was meant to prevent. Lute, of Tam Becker's blood – you are betrayed. The circle which lasted so long is broken, and – mmph!"

Kael stumbled, his feet tangling, and he took several startled steps to one side to keep from falling over. Steadying himself, he quickly straightened his glasses and looked around as though checking that no one had seen. He cleared his throat and carried on, pretending they hadn't, but Yas shared a pointed look with Nicky.

"I have forfeited much to be here," he quickly blurted. "I saw your passion and the disaster coming and I could not hold back anymore. For you were sent here to free that which must not be. You were enlisted with no knowledge of that which would truly banish him. It's time to change that. We must. As we speak, Bane clears a path." He swept a hand grandly, as though they might observe great battles being fought outside. The distant sounds of shouts and movements of monsters were just about audible – notably away from the temple, the pounding having momentarily stopped.

"We've busted our arses enough, you little gremlin," Myra said, more tired than angry. "Sorry but I'm with Rhen on this right now. We should just ice the traitorous duck and ditch this realm. It's done for."

"Not just this realm," Kael said, raising his voice. "If you do not stop Vouring here, and now, he will spread far beyond the destruction you have already seen. Every realm is at risk here." He paused, eyeing them each in turn, then, in the face of their blank stares, let the grandiose voice drop. "Seriously, do none of you realise what you've done?"

"I mean, I admit I started to think I should've paid more attention to the family stories when we met the leprechaun and all," Yas said, rolling a hand, "and the eye-stalks drove it home. But no. I think I can speak for all of us when we say we have no idea what the fuck's going on."

"I had a feeling," Lute admitted. "One of rightness. That this was a ritual required, to seal the demon god. But we've been manipulated. As the ladies have said, this... duck –"

"Has been cheated, the same as you," Kael interrupted. "Damon. Poor, impulsive Damon. He was promised riches and instead found terrors. By bringing the artefacts here, the seals have been weakened and Vouring will reach full power. There will be nothing left."

"Well no one told me that," Damon's trademark gruff voice sneered. All eyes turned to the duck in Nicky's hand. "The little shit's right, I'm a victim here too. So did you just come to rub it in or do you have some way to actually help?"

"Why is he still alive," Rhen demanded, but again Lute raised a hand.

"We can deal with the traitor later. We don't have much time. That statue is coming to life and we either need to get very far away or we need to find a way to stop it."

"It's far, far more than a statue, that trapped god," Kael sighed. "A demon unlike any the realms have known. There is hope yet, and that is why the magi came for you. Why they made Damon these promises to get you here. They wish you all dead. You, Lute, have a passion and power that might guide us all. You, Myra, can find any path. And you, Rhen, are the fire that may stoke our success."

"And you, Yas," Yas said, "can go home and have a bath. Thank you."

"You all have a part to play," Kael said sharply, eyeing her. "And there is hope, as long as you still have each other. Oh, and the two remaining items." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "You still have them, don't you?"

Lute looked at the Righteous Blade in his hands, but all attention was drawn instead to Nicky again, as she now hurriedly patted down her cloak.

"Oh shit, shit. I had it. I know I did, it was somewhere – ha! Yes!" Nicky held up her other hand triumphantly, showing off the leprecoin. "Ye of little faith, you thought I'd just drop something like – hey –"

Myra snatched it from her hand, brandishing it Kael's way. "How the hell is this supposed to help? These items caused the fucking problem!" She threw her hand about. "Enough platitudes, weirdo. Answers, now, or I walk."

"Indeed, you must." The dragon rider nodded as though he'd already given them sage advice. "You can lead the way. You can find the final piece. You can recover it." He shifted his gaze, indicating the others – Hast, Rhen. Then settled on Lute. "And you must protect us long enough to use it."

On cue, far outside, something loud crashed, struck by a great force. The noises were getting louder as the ground shook from the energy flowing through Vouring, and whatever fight was still circling around the city centre escalated. Kael clicked his tongue.

"There isn't much time. Myra, Rhen, you must accompany me to recover the puzzle box. That is the missing –"

"Puzzle box?" Rhen cut in. "Are you fucking joking, you walking pustule? First that blade and those damn tunnels and those other idiots I had to –" She caught herself, short of saying something terrible. Redirecting, she snapped, "A puzzle box now?"

"It is imperative. Essential. In the magi's trickery, drawing you here to release Vouring, they gave you half of the solution. I can send you in the direction of the other half. With the coin and box combined, there is a way to stop Vouring once and for all. Please. You do not know what sharing this knowledge will cost me."

There was a tremendous roar outside, a beast of great size injured and pained. Their eyes collectively widened, and Kael looked hurt himself.

"He cannot fight much longer," he whispered. "We must separate. Form a defence here whilst the box is recovered."

"I've got this," Lute said, without hesitation. "I have the blade. I'll do all I can."

"You're gonna need more than that, lughead," Myra said. "Like a robot the size of these statues, at the least."

Another terrible howl shook the room.

"Quickly," Kael urged. "There's a rear exit. Bane will have cleared a path and will catch up later. Rhen and Myra, I must insist."

"I'll gladly leave," Rhen said, but pointed her knife towards Nicky. "Once I've taken the duck's head."

"Oh fuck you!" Damon shot back hotly, as Nicky stepped nervously back. "You heard the prick, I was tricked the same as you!"

"And you're arguing with a rubber duck!" Myra cut in. "Let's go. You lot damn well stay and buy us all the time you can. And take care of this." She flicked the coin through the air, and Yas caught it out of instinct. "None of this will matter if all the realms fall. Come on!" Myra paced past Kael, heading for the shadows he'd emerged from, and it stirred Hast into following, the old man having been quietly observing. Likely just embracing the chance to leave. Rhen kept glaring at the duck, with Lute, Nicky and Yas watching her warily, but at the sound of one more tearing scream outside she shook her head.

"Forget it. Let the magi have the lot of you," Rhen snarled. "If you're still alive when we get back, I'll deal with you then."

"Good luck," Kael offered, more charitably, and turned to move after them. Without the mystery and shadow of his earlier appearance, his waddling walk was more evident. Their footsteps chimed through the temple as the group left the other three staring.

"She was using the plural you there, wasn't she," Yas muttered. "Like. She just wants to kill everyone, doesn't she? I'm not the only one that got that?"

"It won't matter if we don't stop Vouring," Lute huffed, avoiding actually answering. The temple shook again, cracks spreading through the domed glass above, and he looked up. "I'm fairly sure with this blade, for all the trouble already caused, I can slow their efforts outside. I might not be able to fight this god, but I can fight his minions. What can you two do?"

Nicky and Yas shared a blank look, then turned it back to him. They spoke at the same time, pointing at each other.

"She heals our enemies —"

"She blinded me — hey! That was one time."

"And the duck?" Lute said. "Should we really keep him with us?"

"Seriously?" Damon snapped. "You're up against the shit, and no offence farm boy but I'm the only one here with any combat experience. I was screwed too, understand! Just get me out of this bloody duck and you'll have a real fight on your hands."

Lute frowned.

"Yeeeah," Yas said. "He is in a duck. I'd just ignore him."

"But you put him there?" Lute asked Nicky and she nodded. "Could you take him out?"

"In theory. Then, there's a lot that I can do in theory. I'm a necromancer. You know what that is?"

"A life giver," Lute said, and her face lit up. Perhaps the most positive response her antisocial magic had ever received. He looked up again. Taking in the great statues. "These guardians. Look at them, counting on us. The knight. The king. The paladin. Even the princess and the matron."

They followed his gaze over the armoured titans, with swords and axes fit to fell buildings. Even the women were formidable; the matron, holding a plate of boulder-sized grapes, looked stern enough to command armies.

"I can't animate stone," Nicky said. "My area's more in dead bodies. And small ones, mostly. I once resurrected a squirrel."

"Wow," Yas said. "Just... wow."

"Move me," Damon said, abruptly. "That's what you can do. You've got huge statues here and one waking up out there? Bloody move me into a warrior statue and I'll fight. I'll make things right, dammit. Those snivelling magi have it coming, pissing me about like that."

Lute met Nicky's eye hopefully. It didn't sound like something that would work, and was likely to definitely backfire, but it had just the right air of glorious madness to it. She in turn looked to Yas for the okay, and the taller woman shrugged.

"Worst case scenario you get him stuck in a stone instead of a duck, I guess," Yas said, then paused, realising there would likely be much worse cases. As another booming roar outside reminded them. She added, "How'd we end up the ones having to handle this? I feel like there wasn't even a discussion there. I could be —"

"Okay. We have to act," Lute decided, firmly. "I'll buy you time. I'll buy everyone time. Do whatever you can here. And I'll see you on the other side."

The women smiled and nodded, neither daring to contradict him when he sounded so earnest. As he braced himself, rolling his shoulders and tightening his grip on the sword, ready to go into the fray alone, Yas whispered to Nicky, "When we die, do me a favour and leave me dead."



## Chapter Twelve

*In which our heroes encounter the Grapes of Granite!*

**by Derek Power**

Damon flexed his newly acquired stone fingers and grinned. It felt good to once again have control of a body and not be simply a spirit residing in a rubber duck. Plus, what a body! Never one to be overly religious, the only thing the Pathfinder truly knew about temples was you could rely on them for two things: Fortified ceremonial wine and gigantic statues.

He wondered which delectably detailed deity Nicky had managed to transfer him into and looked along the faces of the other statues, dread slowly creeping into his stone chest as the five warrior figures were all accounted for. Then, slowly, Damon brought up the object in his right hand and looked at the plate of boulder sized grapes.

"Did you put me into The Matron!" he roared, a statement rather than a question.

Nicky and Yas stared up at him, standing a few feet away from his giant big left toe. The necromancer, ever as useless, grinned at him with a hint of panic on her face.

"Right, yeah, you see about that," she began to mumble. "The thing is I wasn't really sure if..."

Damon stopped listening to the yammerings of the spellcaster. All his life people had used him, either directly for their own gains or indirectly as nothing more than a tool. He had been manipulated, deceived, shot at, stabbed and stuffed into a rubber duck to dangle from the belt of a hapless idiot. For the benefit of everyone bar himself.

To learn that Vouring had been responsible for the course Damon's life had taken was the final nail in the coffin of coincidence the Pathfinder needed. The world, the entire collection of pox-stained realms, had conspired against him for the last time. And now, with this body of stone, Damon finally had the minerals to lay waste to everything that wanted to stop him being in charge of his own destiny.

Outside, an explosion shook the temple. Masonry cracked loose from the roof and rained down onto the mosaic floor. Both Nicky and Yas ran towards Damon and cowered under his gigantic form, while he turned and looked at the large crack forming on the temple wall beside him.

"It would be bloody brilliant if I had a massive stone sword right about now," he snarled, making a fist and smashing it into the crumbling wall.

"Oh, stop with the sour grapes already. Ha, that was totally unintentional. Ya'll are welcome," Yas shouted, followed quickly with. "Shit!"

The wall collapsed, brick work and plaster cascading to the ground like dandruff made of detritus. As the large section revealed the outside world, a ramp made of rubble formed beside Damon. But none of that mattered, because if there was one thing the Pathfinder was not going to tolerate while in the body of The Matron, it was jokes about the giant grapes in his hand.

"Run!" Damon snarled. "Good thing there is an Apocalypse happening, because I'm going apocalyptic."

Nicky and Yas clearly did not need to be told a second time. Both of them scampered towards the rumble ramp and ran up it like a pair of drunken children on a hill of ice. Damon, meanwhile, pulled a stone grape off his plate and took aim. Irritating spell casters were going to be no use for what came next, and more than that, his reputation for not tolerating insults had to be upheld. With the sound of stone grinding against stone, Damon flicked the grape at the pair right as they reached the top of the rubble pile.

"Oh shit," Nicky shouted, spotting the grape flying towards her. She dropped to her ass and slid back down some of the stone and dirt.

As he watched her slide to safety, a flicker of gold bouncing along the rubble caught Damon's eye. The leprecoin, the artefact they had recovered from that bizarre world that celebrated the dead with costumes and revelries. Cursed

currency that Vouring presumably needed. Not that Damon understood why. Puppets were never told what their master's intentions were, after all.

"YAS! THE COIN!" the necromancer cried, pointing after the cartwheeling currency.

Yas turned just in time, reaching out and catching the coin as it spun through the air. A move which left her no breathing room at all to avoid being rightfully flattened by a stone grape.

"CRAP!" Yas roared, bringing her arms up over her head as if it would somehow work like a shield from the impending doom.

When, without any rhyme or reason to it, a wall of light formed before her. The light spread faster than a fart at a feast, swallowing up Yas, Nicky, and half the rubble pile. Each passing second, the wall grew intensely bright until, right when a grape should have flattened an irritating rich kid, it didn't. The stone boulder-grape bounced off the wall of light at a ninety-degree angle and sailed harmlessly out into the courtyard beyond.

Harmlessly, that is, to Nicky and Yas. From out in the courtyard there came multiple panicked screams that were suddenly cut short by an unidentifiable squelching sound.

Yas lowered her arms cautiously, staring at the wall of light that contracted back down and disappeared, then looked at Nicky with utter confusion.

"What the hell was that?" she asked the necromancer.

"Don't know, don't care. Do it again, regularly, please and thank you. Now, get out there before Damon throws another grape."

The Pathfinder watched them run over the mound of rubble and slide down the other side into the courtyard. If breathing had been a requirement for his stone body, he would have taken a deep breath to calm down a moment and think things through. But the mental penny spinning in his stone skull landed without the need to inhale deeply, Damon instantly grasping what had happened.

"The coin," he said, stepping off the pedestal upon which The Matron had been carved. "The bloody leprecoin somehow boosted Yas' powers. Which means I can use it to boost my own. Reality warping magic, that's what you need to rewrite reality. He's going to use the power of the coin to win if we don't stop him. I NEED THAT COIN!"

Damon as The Matron made his way towards the hole in the wall, kicking down a section to make it easier to pass through, and stepped out into the courtyard.

Or rather, the battle yard.

The magi, their true colours revealed, were laying waste to the populace without care. Fireballs sailed through the air like burning ducks of death, dark magics streaming in all directions to entice people into harming themselves. While, at the centre of the plaza, a ring of magi channelled magics into Vouring's imprisoned form with the other relics as a power source.

Even from the temple wall, Damon could see the cracks forming along the stone visage that had served as Vouring's prison for centuries. A prison which Damon figured he could now smash into pieces, as long as he had the magical coin in his possession..

Damon spotted the fleeing figures of Yas and Nicky as they weaved through the assembled magi and panicked masses alike. Right as they skirted around his previously thrown stone grape, which had somehow managed to leak a convincing red liquid onto the cobblestones of the courtyard, he gave chase.

"Oh Matron!" Nicky said, punching a magi in the back of the head as she ran past. "Damon is behind us."

"Are you sure?" Yas asked. "Maybe it's some other magically infused statue with the spirit of one of our friends."

"Did we not agree that I was meant to be the sarcastic member of the group?" the necromancer said as they ran through the crowd.

Around them, the world was literally ending. Vouring's prison cracked apart like a cursed chocolate egg. Meanwhile, the magi laid waste to anyone without magic, a brutal reminder that power needs no permission. All of that, coupled with Damon's need for some sort of doctor who could heal traumas of the mind, meant that the day was not going exactly as Nicky had envisioned it would.

They had arrived back with all the McGuffins, it should have been all parades, parties and pastries as far as the eyes could see. Instead of running from a grumpy giant statue while also avoiding a death cult of some sort. A death cult that Nicky was only slightly irked she had not been asked to join. That was necromancerist in every definition of the made-up word.

"Bugger, look there," Yas said, pointing at a group of magi that had spotted the duo and were channelling a spell between the four of them.

"Do your new party trick," Nicky shouted at Yas.

"You do something," she fired back. "I don't know how I did that to begin wi....whoops."

Yas tripped over a plot-placed rock, crashing down to the ground and rolling head over heels. Face planting into the cobbles, her arms and legs jolted outwards. At the last possible second, she hurled the leprecoin backwards toward Nicky — a desperate, blind throw. It spun through the air, at just the right angle for the necromancer to grab it, Celtic cross facing up.

Something surged through Nicky's body, a sensation she'd never felt before. The voices that always whispered in the back of her mind, those of her long dead ancestors that all good necromancers could hear, grew suddenly louder. No longer a minor migraine mumble that she had simply grown accustomed to ignoring, they all spoke loudly. With a single, unified, instruction for the young necromancer.

*Free us.*

Nicky stopped running and raised her left hand in the direction of the magi and their spell.

"Have at it," the necromancer said, sending a pulse of power out with the words. A pulse that, historically, had never really worked and yet this time, lifted her off her feet. As she fell on her back, a dozen spectral spooks appeared around her. With macabre grins on their faces, they raced towards the magi with hands outstretched faster than the wind. The magi had no time to react, each of them withering instantly into dried out husks that collapsed to the ground.

Yas watched from her prone position, then looked back at Nicky.

"When did you learn to do that?" she asked.

The necromancer got back to her feet and grinned. This was what getting into the family business was always meant to feel like. Raw power, control over the deceased and just a hint of creepy eyeliner to complete the look. She turned around and watched Damon, as he ponderously marched towards them, stepping on a few magi in the process but completely oblivious to the fact he was doing it.

"Now for you, big boy," Nicky said, flicking the coin into the air and catching it.

Celtic knot face-up.

She brought up her hand again and called upon the army of the dead at her disposal.

"Deal with the statue pest," she said, steadying herself this time so that the pulse of power did not take her off her feet.

A trickle of magic dropped from her finger and conjured a ghostly cat on the stones at her feet. It looked at her with the true indifference, that only felines can muster when looking at any other creature, then proceeded to lick its butthole before fading from sight completely.

"What exactly was the plan there?" Yas asked, clambering back to her feet. "Hope that Damon is allergic or something? Toss me the coin and let's get going."

Nicky flicked the coin at Yas with practised ease, then turned and looked up at the approaching giant form of Damon. It seemed to the necromancer that Damon was moving ponderously slow. He would lift his foot, move forward, and then with the agonising pace of a zombie shuffling along on broken knees, place it down again. Every second step seemed to coincidentally result in a magi or two being turned into magi jam, or majam if you would, beneath the stoney boot of Damon-in-Matron.

Which gave Nicky an idea.

"We don't need to try and fight every one of these cult clothed lunatics," the necromancer said, running after Yas as she ran across the plaza. "We just need to have Damon do it for us."

Yas glanced back over her shoulder at Nicky, then up at Damon-in-Matron, before looking down at Nicky again.

"He isn't exactly talking to us right now, if you haven't noticed," she said to Nicky. "And it looks like he is plucking another grape off the plate."

Nicky looked back and saw Yas was correct. Damon had pulled another grape the size of a small boulder free from the bunch on the plate and was taking aim. Except this time the grape apparently was not intended for his former teammates. He had turned his stoney face towards a group of magi that had started to attack him with fireballs.

Like discarding some trash with a casual flick of his wrist, Damon released the grape and let it tumble towards the plaza cobbles. It struck with the force of a meteor, sending a shower of bricks and dirt up into the air. Three of the five magi laughed, pointing at the stone grape and making hand gestures of an obscene nature at Damon, mocking him for missing his shot.

Damon grinned down at them, then swiftly kicked the grape towards them, like a football. Everyone might have suddenly developed an ability to move at increased speeds, but there was no way you could dodge a well struck stone ball. It rolled across the intervening space between them, flattening the middle three and pinning the pair on either side underneath.

Painfully.

Even from his new height, the Pathfinder could see their mangled legs trapped under the stone and see the pain on their faces.

"If I'd known reincarnation, so to speak, was going to be like this, I'd have died years ago," he said.

Damon shifted and tried to see where Nicky and Yas had gotten to. The leprecoin was still the object of his desire, along with the power to take on Vouring and end this charade of heroics once and for all. While punching the statue-prison into dust seemed like a great idea, Damon wanted to be sure his new form was juiced up with leprechaun magic so that the blows really destroyed prison and prisoner alike.

Vouring wasn't going to get a chance to manipulate anyone else again. He wanted to kill Vouring, finish him, once and for all!

"You've put on a little weight," Nicky shouted off to his left.

Damon turned and spotted the necromancer waving at him. As soon as he clapped eyes on her, she began to do a little dance, jutting her posterior precariously towards him and pointing at it.

"Strange way to die, but who am I to judge," he said, striding towards her.

"He's taken the bait," Yas said, cowering behind a destroyed water fountain and peering over the edge of what was left of the stone basin.

"Well, I bloody hope so," Nicky said, wiggling her bony butt for all its worth. "I've got my ass on display here."

"There's not a lot to display," Yas sniped back. "Do necromancers just not eat or what's the – shit, DUCK!"

A granite grape sailed over both their heads like a lost siege projectile, crashing into two magi and turning them into bloody stains via the magic of friction. Nicky stopped dancing and stared at the grape, then ran for her life towards Yas.

"Do it," she shouted.

Yas stepped out from behind the broken fountain and held her hand up, palm pointed towards Damon's face.

"COME AND GET SOME!" she roared, pushing out a pulse of magic.

The tips of her nails all began to glow, then twinkle on and off like fairy lights during Winterfest. Yas frowned and concentrated on her power, rubbing the coin in her other hand. With each second that passed, Damon-in-Matron stepped closer, but her powers had decided that now was not the time to work even a fraction of how they usually did.

"Come on, come on," Yas instructed her hand, shaking it vigorously to no avail.

Then the world grew darker, from an illumination point of view, since the end of the world going on around them was dark on a much more metaphysical level, and Yas looked up at the sole of a stone boot slowly coming down towards her. It was too late to run, she would have never made it to safety no matter which direction she chose.

Turning to see Nicky, Yas flung the leprecoin towards her.

"Look after yourself," she shouted, watching the coin spin through the air right until the necromancer snatched it.

"SPECTRAL PUSHOVEM!" Nicky roared, gripping the coin tightly in her right hand and stretching both arms out in front of her.

There was a rush of air from every direction all at once, racing towards Nicky. Except it was not air, but howls and screams, cries of pain and anguish. From the nearby corpses and blood-stained stones, green energies rose and coalesced into floating skulls. Each swirling through the air towards Nicky, flying behind her and gathering together. In a second there was a wall of green light, the likes of which Yas had never seen. A beautiful sight to see before a giant flattened you into the ground.

But, as that thought entered her mind, Yas figured hope was sometimes a dangerous thing to indulge in. She crouched on the ground, cover her head with her arms, and watched as the necromancer sent forth the wave of ghostly skulls like a ghastly tsunami.

The green energies washed over Nicky, moving faster than anything living would be able to move, and headed directly towards Yas. As one, all the skulls banked upwards in the air, slamming into the bottom of Damon-in-Matron's boot with both force and speed. Some bounced off, reminding Yas of when sparks fell from a blacksmith's hammer and thongs, falling away before becoming swept up in the wave again.

There came an ominous groaning sound, followed by several swear words Yas had never heard before. She looked up and watched as the skulls not only forced Damon's boot back but pushed the giant statue over as well. Sounding like a beautifully carved landslide, the giant toppled backwards and crashed into the plaza cobbles.

His landing boom was a sound of stonework being destroyed coupled with a half dozen magi meeting a two-dimensional end.

Nicky ran over and helped Yas to her feet.

"Thanks," Yas said, amazed that she had survived.

The necromancer pointed at Damon-in-Matron.

"He made a cartload of majam," she said, grinning.

"Majam?" Yas asked, almost regretting it instantly. "Magi jam, right?"

Nicky grinned like an idiot and nodded.

"That's never going to catch on," Yas said.

"So, what do we do now?" Nicky asked, looking around at the battleground and flicking the leprecoin up and catching it. "Oh, no you don't!"

This last bit was directed at a magi who had taken aim at the women. Nicky tried to conjure a skeleton-warrior from a nearby corpse. The left femur, exposed already through a gaping wound in the thigh, flopped out onto the stones and stood to attention, like a barely intimidating soldier, waiting for orders.

"Toss it to me," Yas said.

Nicky threw the coin towards her. In one motion, Yas snatched it mid-toss and sent a beam of pure sunlight directly towards the magi. It hit the man in the chest and continued through his lungs, past his spine, and off into the distance.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this coin thing," Yas said. "If we flip the coin and it lands cross up, we get a power boost. It changes our reality so we're actually...you know...good at what we do! Come on, let's go climb up Damon's chest and tell him to calm the hell down so we can hold the line until everyone else gets back with that music box or whatever the bloody thing is."

They climbed up the giant stone sandal and ran along the shapely carved legs of Damon-in-Matron. Yas wondered, not for the first time in her life, if the artists of statues had ever truly seen a female form before. It always seemed to be standards of beauty that just did not exist in the real world.

Damon, thankfully, remained on his back as they ran. Not moving a stoney muscle the entire time, he almost seemed to be subdued. Defeated, even. As they reached the twin peaks that were the Pathfinder's breasts, Damon moved his head ever so slightly and looked at them both.

"Are you crying?" Nicky asked, frowning at him.

He shook his head.

"No, just have some dust in my eye, that's all," Damon replied, not entirely convincingly.

Yas and Nicky exchanged a quick, knowing, glance, then looked back at the fallen idol.

"Look, we get it, okay. You were working for the bad guys and didn't fully understand that's who was pulling your strings," the necromancer said. "But you know the best thing about dying? You get a second chance at living. Assuming you know a talented practitioner of the dark arts, that is."

"Do you happen to know one?" Damon asked. "The one I've got on retainer isn't very good."

Ignoring the nonsensical statement, Nicky continued.

"What I am saying is, why do this alone? What do you need the coin for?"

"What does Vouring need the coin for, while we're at it," Yas said.

This question made all the three of them pause. How did all the artefacts work together to free, or imprison, the dark god?

"Maybe you put it into the puzzle box, have the reality warping effects do something, and poof?" Damon suggested.

Nicky shook her head and gave him a dismissive look.

"No, that can't be it. That sounds like a weak ass plot point from some bard story in a two-bit tavern. But ignoring all of that, why not just tell us you want revenge, instead of crying dust like a golem style baby."

There are a few things it is hard to achieve on a battlefield. One of them is the sound of silence, as usually the air is full of the screams of the dying, the attacking, or the fearful. Yet, at that moment, the air grew calmer and still..

A loud rumbling travelled across the courtyard at speed. The three of them turned to Vouring's prison, just as a wall of air, stone, body parts and magic spewed forth. In place of the stone prison there now was a spiralling black cloud,



crackling with red lightning. The clouds directly above took on a black colour darker than night, with flecks of fire running through them, almost as if a volcano had erupted but forgot the destructive step of spewing lava out on the surrounding populace. Deep underground there came a tremor, causing the stones of the courtyard to bounce and jostle. All an indication of one very scary fact.

Vouring was free.

“Oh SHIT!” all three roared.

Damon-in-Matron reached up and cupped his stone breasts, providing some shelter for Yas and Nicky from the debris headed their way. He carefully got back to his feet, keeping the spellcasters safe from harm. As he scanned the battle, Damon-in-Matron spotted Lute fighting on the other side of the courtyard. Deftly holding back several magi single handedly without seemingly noticing that nobody else had come to his aid.

“Right,” he said, looking down at two spell casters held close to his chest. “Let’s do this together. As a team. You two use the magic of the leprecoin and keep it away from the magi, I’ll move around the battlefield. And one way or the other, we kill Vouring or die trying.”

“Can we rethink that last part just a little?” Yas shouted up to him from the safety of his left breast.

Nicky rolled her eyes. “You living lot are just the worst,” she said, then flicked the coin into the air. “Alright ladies, let’s show them how it’s done!”

Our next 3 chapters will follow in