

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter Sixteen

Wherein our heroes enter the Sanctum of Chains

Frank Dorrian

Everything was fucked.

Mage-fire exploded across Damon's screening arm in a rapid staccato wave, spraying chips of marble across the Sanctum of Chains, smoke and dust billowing, stinging Lute's eyes and driving him back into cover. 'Fucking ballbags!'

Around the corner of a broken column, eyes watering, Lute glimpsed Damon as he charged through the hail of Mage-fire. Stone limbs grinding, cracked joints trailing rubble and dust, Magi scattered before him. Damon's fist pounded the sanctum floor, put a crater in it, and sent Magi bodies spinning through the air. Mage-fire bounced from his shoulders, charring white marble, another blow rumbling through Lute's stomach as he hunkered down behind the column.

Above the melee, behind the flare and smoking trails of hurled Mage-fire, Vouring's eyes watched, flitting back and forth like a puppet-master's. Lute shuddered as he felt the thing's gaze slide across him like a rotten grave shroud.

Fucked, and fucked again.

'Fuck. Nicky.' He jabbed the necromancer in the side with an elbow. More of Vouring's Magi were spilling from the antechamber ahead, leaping down from broken balconies upon shimmering waves of power. Nicky cowered, bloody head cradled in her shaking hands. 'Nicky! Eyes up!'

Lute staggered to his feet as the first of the Magi charged him, narrowly swerving a hurled bolt of white-blue power that tore another chunk from the broken column and spilled Nicky on her side. Lute parried the swipe of the Mage's spellblade, countered, opened the bastard like a bag of grain, turned to parry, and found himself on his knees clutching at his bleeding face, his sword a smoking ruin before him. Vouring's

Mage reared, eyes bulging behind his mask, and aethereal blade held high, while the weight of the Fellgod's gaze pinned Lute.

A clumsy body slammed into the Mage as the blow fell, tackling him to the ground in a flurry of half-witted blows. Lute caught a glimpse of the Mage's face, the one he'd just opened up, before a spellblade swept its head from its shoulders. Nicky's shriek was like a bolt through Lute's ear, then, sharp enough to pierce him through. Dead Magi were rising, trading blows with their former comrades, while shadows peeled themselves from the walls to fall upon others like palls wrought of misery's own fabric.

Vouring distracted, Lute shuffled away, watching the chaos unfold for a heartbeat. Nicky was spasming on the floor beside the column while the Magi struggled against themselves, Damon, and things wrought from nothingness. Her eyes were rolling, face smeared bloody, mouth wedged open at the climax of a scream long since silent.

Where was Yas?

Lute's eyes scanned the madness unfolding in the sanctum, looking for any sign of the light-conjurer. A flicker caught his eye through a cloud of dust and smoke, somewhere past the shadows of Damon's stomping legs. Vouring's Magi darted back and forth, dodging narrow beams of light that cut through the murk, bounced from rippling aether-shields. Lute caught a glimpse of Yas's face, bloody and twisted in a grimace of terror and effort, before the smoke obscured her again. She was surrounded, Magi shadows darting in and out, closer with every assault.

'Damon!' The statue's head swivelled toward Lute, its massive fist splattering a Magi into the stone floor. 'Help Yas!'

There was no time to watch. Lute flung himself at the Mage that had broken free of Nicky's web of shifting shadows to stand over her fallen form, spellblade falling for her neck. Lute's fist collided with the side of the Mage's head with a crunch, flopping him like a ragdoll, a jolt of pain shooting up Lute's fist. He swallowed it down behind a snarl, grabbing Nicky's collar and dragging her away from the fight.

‘Come on!’ The last of her puppet-Mages went down in shreds, Vouring’s Mages turning their attention toward them. Nicky spasmed in his grasp. ‘Get on your fucking feet!’

Lute dropped to his knees, screaming, hands over his head, as a Mage bore down on him, blue blade cutting the air, the hum of its power a sickening rhythm.

There was a splat, and cold blood splattered across the back of Lute’s hands. Damon’s foot tore through the air before Lute and Nicky, a knot of Mages bursting into a cloud of red mist. The sanctum shook as Damon’s weight came crashing down, his vast form sinking into a wide pugilist’s stance as he faced down the Magi. ‘Back, you motherfuckers!’

The sanctum shaking again as Damon charged, granite voice screaming, Lute dragged Nicky into cover at the edge of an impact crater, the two of them cowering beneath a rim of shattered stone. Lute passed a hand down his face, body shaking, and sweat and blood dripping from his chin, when Nicky clutched at his chest. ‘I... I can’t do it, Lute.’

He looked at her, the necromancer’s eyes wide, brimming with terror, her voice barely a reedy whisper. ‘It... it sees me.’

The edge of Vouring’s gaze passed across the stone at Lute’s back, and he could have sworn that he heard them shift, give, beneath its weight before it finally passed. He winced, shook it off, wished he could. ‘I need you to try,’ he said, holding Nicky’s hand. ‘For us. For...’

Lute glanced at where he had last seen Yas, and found her staring straight at him. The conjurer lay sprawled atop a pile of rubble on the other side of the sanctum, mouth open, head hanging backward, face dripping blood from a cut neck, her body torn open by spellblades, and the stones around her soaked and running with blood.

‘Yas...’ Lute screwed his eyes shut, hand tightening on Nicky’s, tears burning at the corners of his eyes. It had all gone to shit. They were outnumbered, outmatched, and still, there was no sign of the others. They had moments, minutes at best left to them, before Vouring and its Mages crushed their pathetic distraction beneath their heels. ‘Rhen,’ Lute snarled, wincing as a blast sent stone chips spraying down over his head. ‘Where the fuck are you?’

They’ve failed.

Vouring’s voice hit Lute with a cold fist and tore a gasp from him. You’ve all failed. Damon’s gritty roar shook the sanctum, stone hands swatting at the Mages that leapt through the air around him, pelting him with fire and sorcerous blasts.

Kneel.

Damon’s titanic form went rigid as if stuck with a blade, then collapsed to its knees in silence. Enough. Vouring’s Magi loosed their power, hurling volleys of Mage-fire and sorcerous bolts at the fallen statue. Damon’s form vanished beneath a pall of smoke and flame, stone chunks spraying across the sanctum. ‘Damon!’

Lute’s cry was lost beneath the roar of sorcerous blasts. The very sanctum shook with them, dust and stone spilling from the walls, explosion after explosion threatening to crush Lute’s very skull, his gut shaking with detonations. He clamped his hands over his ears, a scream lost beneath the thunder of it all, his throat feeling torn, bloody – and then, it ended.

Lute looked up, head ringing, blinking against the dust, now peeling back from the forms of hooded Magi, and the pile of shattered, smouldering marble at their centre. ‘Damon...’ He shouldn’t have moved, shouldn’t have uttered a word, but the sudden hollowness inside him dragged Lute up to his knees, sure as if it had sunk hooks in his ribs. Yas. Damon. Two of their number, cut down, torn apart. Their mission had been shredded by the Fellgod’s claws before his very eyes.

Be silent!

Before the loss had a chance to truly scrape at his innards, the weight of Vouring’s horrific gaze fell upon Lute, its voice booming with a rotten authority through his heart. A knot of Magi spun beside the ruin that had been Damon

with hands raised. Mage-fire roared, arcing like falling meteorites through the dust that still cloyed overhead. Lute managed a crumb of volition, managed to turn, throw himself over Nicky's huddled form.

Mage-fire exploded upon the rim of the crater, shattering already broken stone. The sanctum vanished in a flash of light, and Lute felt himself hurled, turning in the air, a distant thud, and he found himself sprawled out on his side. Nicky was strewn out on her back before him atop a pile of rubble, their hiding place a now

molten crater spewing flames. Magi were striding toward them, closer every time Lute blinked. He couldn't move, the sanctum slipping in and out of focus, a wretched whistling swelling between his ears. Vouring's voice came crashing through the murk.

You pathetic things. You ungrateful, chattering apes.

A Mage came stomping over broken stones toward Nicky's sprawled, unconscious form. He reached back, a spellblade forming along his forearm from blue aetherial light.

I gave you all a gift, when you were barely able to look up at the stars without quaking in fear, Vouring hissed. I have suffered. Bled beneath the sting of your ire. And now, you would dare raise your hand against me, yet again, with the very gifts I bestowed upon your ancestors? The moment seemed to hang forever, strung out upon the deep notes of Vouring's voice. Lute felt that dreadful attention fall upon him again, as if he were caught within some scalding beam of unseen light. And even you. My own blood. You would join with these creatures, and think to strike me down? Lute reached feebly toward Nicky, tears cutting through the grit on his cheeks.

No.

The Mage's spellblade punched down through Nicky's chest, into the broken stone beneath her. Lute caught the hiss of melting flesh, saw blue vapour burst from the necromancer's mouth, her eyes froth and melt. She gave a single kick, and was gone, the spellblade sliding from her in a blue vapour-trail. Vouring reared, flexing its crooked limbs, and the sanctum shook upon the swelling of its might – air, earth, and soul quivering before it.

Lute could do nothing but stare at Nicky's corpse, his body numb, yet all at once wracked with pain, the gargantuan weight of Vouring's will pinning him to the ground as the Mage came striding toward him, spellblade pulled back for a second kill.

Vouring clenched a many-digited fist, shadows dancing and cloying about them. The time has come for a reckoning amongst the realms. And now, I will not be contained. Not by trinket. Not by blade. And not by men! Die! The Mage's spellblade fell, and a great blaze of light tore through the sanctum with a sound like loosed thunder, the sound of the veil between realms being gouged carelessly open, tearing a snarl from Vouring. The Mage was cast back upon a wave of power, a barely visible silhouette vanishing into nothingness. Lute

saw something moving before him, obscured by the afterburn in his eyes and lingering dizziness, a short blade sending blue aether-sparks flying from shattered spellblades.

'Rhen...'

The thief-girl's snarling, bloodstained face swam into view as she cut open a Mage and put a boot into another's chest. Her glare fell upon him. A furious hand snatched Lute upright against his protesting legs. 'Stop fucking moping, arsehole, and help me open this thing!'

She thrust something into Lute's numb hands. A box, all of ebon-coloured wood, its surface chased with a myriad gilt lines and patterns. Vouring's roar shook the sanctum. You maggots dare violate me? Cracks went racing through the walls to spew dust over Lute and Rhen, the god's voice battering the very fabric of reality with a blunt fist.

You will pay a price for this.

Chapter Seventeen

In which Vouring tries convincing and Lute tries bleeding

Ed Crocker

Smoke in his eyes, blood in his mouth and the sinister bubbling of molten lava assailing his ears, Lute peered at the box his last-minute saviour Rhen had shoved in his hands. Midnight black, smooth wood, etched with gold swirls and intricate patterns. It felt warm in his hands, and he swore he could feel it pulsing. For a moment he was transported to being held, being held by his mother, long before her mania came on. That sense of safety. A sense he had never felt since then, even in his life of tedium and pointlessness as a blacksmith. The box promised him an end to his worries, and his eyes swam in its gilded reflections.

His reverie was broken by Rhen, who screamed in his face. “We have to move, shithead!”

Lute looked up and met her eyes, wiping the soot from his own. Through the smog beyond, he saw a large silhouette of a fist raised into the air. The chamber was broken, and in a few seconds time, they would be too.

“Hmm,” said Lute. “You make a good point.” Then he scrabbled himself up and turned around to where the far wall of the chamber was, riddled with scorch marks from the savage battle they’d just fought.

“There,” he said, pointing to a thin passageway, which was hopefully too small for the colossal figure of a furious god to get through. Rhen didn’t need to be told twice, and bolted ahead of him, and as Vouring’s monstrous, red-eyed, scarlet-fleshed form came lurching out of the shadows to end the last of them, Lute followed.

For a brief terrible moment, Lute decided to look back and get his first proper look at Vouring. Impossibly tall, with muscles so veined and bulging they appeared distorted, the mad god lumbered after him, all four arms ending in huge fists clenched for the kill. The blood-red eyes matched the hell-hued, deep-red flesh, like some fire-birthing demon loosed into the world. The remnants of the seals that had so recently bound him were scarred into each of his limbs like an infernal tattoo.

Lute turned back, heart engaged in multiple palpitations, and made a mental note to himself to never be curious again.

He was almost there, with Rhen already in the passageway, when the sound of stone crashing somewhere above him sent an instinctive thrill of adrenaline through him, and fearing the worst—pessimists live longer—he decided to skip the last few steps by turning his run into a flying leap. As he soared through the air like an overweight arrow he felt, rather than saw, the mortared blocks come tumbling down in the air above him, and as he landed in the opening of the passage he heard a colossal bellow of stone on stone as an avalanche of rock fell, followed by a great plume of dust which coated him as he lay there groaning.

Turning slowly in a great amount of pain, he saw the way he had come was now blocked by a wall of scorched rock, rubble that had almost ended him but now formed a useful barrier between him and the rageaholic immortal being who sought him out.

He glanced ahead, to see Rhen at the far end of the passageway, where it opened out into a small chamber. Groaning, he half stood, half crawled towards her as his joints sent him various damage reports conveyed as sharp jolts of fuck-me-that-hurts.

“If you’re done lying around, I have good news and bad news,” said Rhen, looking ahead of her. Attempting to dust himself off, he finally joined her in the new chamber.

It looked very similar in terms of proportion of red-hued rock and general inhospitableness as the old one, with two significant differences. It was much smaller and...

“There’s no fucking way out.”

Lute looked at Rhen, then back to the chamber. She was right. It was more like a tiny circular atrium, but with no exits. Just walls. In the middle was what looked like a marble altar. Whatever had once rested on it was gone. Several wall sconces held torches which provided the only light.

“So what’s the good news?” Lute asked, holding tighter onto the wooden box in his hand which he was relieved, yet strangely unsurprised, to find he had not lost in the frantic dash.

“We have extended our pointless fucking lives by at least a number of minutes.” She listened to the hammering blows of Vouring behind the stone blockade. “Hopefully.”

Lute considered this. “I think I liked you better when you were saving my life.”

Rhen nodded, adjusting her blood-specked ponytail. “I get that a lot.”

Lute moved to the altar, and sat down on the low stone wall that surrounded it. “So, this box.”

Rhen shrugged. “Had to do a lot of crazy shit to get it. Some people died for it. It’s rumoured to contain Vouring’s heart. Or something to kill him with. Or something connected to it.” She thought on this. “Could just be a box.”

Lute shook his head, entranced by the glow of the patterns. “It’s not just a box.”

“And you know that how, blacksmith?”

Lute shrugged. “I can’t explain.” He looked up at her. “How do you know I was a blacksmith? We’ve not talked that much.”

Rhen shrugged back. “Someone mentioned it on one of these endless fucking quests.”

Lute stared into the distance. “I wasn’t a very good blacksmith. I wasn’t a very good anything, really.” He paused. “I was a good drinker, I suppose. Although my friend Gill always outdrank me. So I take that back.”

Rhen sighed and sat down next to him, stretching her legs out and wincing in pain. Her legs were marred with small scratches; a deeper cut bled from her arm. She reached into her belt and removed a small vial of yellow liquid, some of which she dabbed onto the cut, wincing as she did so, and then she took a thin roll of gauzy fabric out and began to dress the wound.

“Look, no offence Lute, but if you’re going to start getting all maudlin and self-pitying, then don’t expect me to help. I’d like my final moments to be as far from pathetic as possible.”

“This has been a good chat, thanks Rhen.”

Wound dressing done, Rhen sighed and turned to him. “Look, so you were a waste of space back in whatever shithole you dragged yourself from. Who gives a fuck? You’ve turned out to be pretty good at fighting and staying alive.”

“Not for long.”

“Long enough.” Rhen turned from him and looked up at the chamber ceiling high above, as if expecting another rockfall to land and end the conversation. “Look, it doesn’t matter how long your life is, alright? I’m gobsmacked I’m still around, some pervert god has lost a sack load of gold betting on my demise over the years. But I wouldn’t give me praise for the length of my killing years. Just the gold it’s got me. What matters is...”

Lute waited for her to finish, as dust motes danced before him.

After a while Rhen shrugged apologetically. “I thought I was building up to something then. I wasn’t.”

Lute smiled, feeling a little better despite it all. “Appreciate the mildly terrible effort.”

LET’S TRY THIS AGAIN, SHALL WE?

The voice was all around them, impossibly loud despite the rock that separated them. It bled into their ears and bounced around their skulls.

I MAY HAVE BEEN TOO HARSH WHEN I CALLED YOU UNGRATEFUL, CHATTERING APES.

"Oh, you think," Lute muttered, as the voice of Vouring rang out. He didn't know if he could hear them. He suspected this was almost like a projection of his voice.

"Gods," said Rhen. "He's such a prick."

YOU HAVE NOT HEARD MY STORY, NOR UNDERSTOOD IT. IT IS TIME YOU LEARNED THE WAY THE WORLD WORKS, MY CHILDREN. YOU ARE NOT THE HEROES YOU THINK YOU ARE.

Rhen turned to Lute, and they shrugged in unison. They had nowhere to go. Nothing to do but to listen to the deep bass rumble of a mad god.

BACK WHEN MEN WERE BARELY CIVILISED, I SEPARATED THE REALMS, AND GAVE ACCESS TO THEM. I SOUGHT TO SPREAD THE SEEDS OF MY WORSHIP AND MAKE A STRONG CONNECTED WORLD. SAFE, SECURE. THE FREEDOM OF A WAR-LESS WORLD. BUT HUMANS FAILED MY VISION AND I SAW THE FLAME OF CONFLICT SPREAD BETWEEN THE REALMS, WORSENING NOT BETTERING THE MANYVERSE.

Lute tried to imagine endless conflict. He didn't have to try very hard.

SO I MADE THE DECISION TO SHUT THE REALMS OFF FROM EACH OTHER FOR GOOD. AND MAKE THE ONES I COULD PURER IN THEIR VISION, HOLIER IN THEIR AIMS. NO BLOOD IS SHED WHEN PEOPLE HAVE A UNIFIED PURPOSE. BUT I WAS PAINTED A TYRANT, AND TURNED ON BY THE SO-CALLED HEROES MEANT TO SERVE ME. TRAPPED, ALL FOR THE CRIME OF WANTING TO SAVE YOU FROM YOURSELVES.

Lute looked at Rhen, who seemed to be listening closely. He shut his eyes briefly and imagined an inn far away and a life of no responsibility, free of lectures. The grass is always greener, he realised. And frequently bloodier.

BUT NOW I OFFER YOU SOMETHING MORE THAN YOU DESERVE. AGREE TO SERVE ME AND I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES HERE. YOU WILL BECOME MY NEW HEROES, DESERVING OF THE TITLE, AND BRING PEACE EVERYWHERE MY TOUCH DESCENDS. YOU HAVE UNTIL I BREAK THROUGH TO YOU TO MAKE YOUR MIND UP. I TRUST YOU WILL MAKE THE SANE CHOICE.

And then silence descended, and Lute breathed out, watching a tiny spider who had been awed by the rumble of a god finally creep out from under the lip of the altar and begin what looked like a prodigious journey across the chamber to some unknown crevice.

"Could be he's right," said Rhen, after a few more moments of spider watching.

Lute turned to her, frowning. "About what?"

Rhen shrugged. "Maybe he just wanted peace and order, and it was us lot, or our forefathers or whatever, who fucked it up."

Lute thought on this. "Has his behaviour been that of someone who's in the right? Feel like less killing and more pints of tea over a pleasant sit down would have been the actions of the hero in this story."

"Pints of tea?"

Lute side-eyed her. "I don't drink tea."

"I can tell, yes." Then Rhen shrugged and stood up, stretching her battered legs. "We're the ones who attacked him. Technically."

"Lot of heavy lifting on the word technically there." Lute sighed. "Look, even if there is anything to that story, his world is not exactly better. Closed off worlds, worshipping him. Doesn't sound like the cost of peace is all that great either."

Rhen narrowed her eyes at him. "You were just a blacksmith, were you? Much time for philosophising at the furnace, was there?"

Lute ignored that one. "But he did tell us something important with that speech. He's scared."

Now it was Rhen's turn to frown. "Scared of what? I don't see any fucking huge old gods bigger than him marching around."

"Scared of us," continued Lute. "Well, this." He nodded at the puzzle box in his hands, still warm, still enticing him somehow. "He knows it can hurt him. Knows we have something on him. Hence, the peace talk."

Rhen shrugged. "So we could use this, get ourselves out of here. Then if he's bluffing, still fuck him up."

Lute looked at her. "Or figure out how to destroy him with it."

Rhen laughed. "You're quick to want to get yourself killed even after seeing all the bodies of your friends, are you?"

Lute looked at her then. Really looked at her. "Why are you like this?"

"What the fuck does that mean?" She backed away from where he was sat, like he had a weapon aimed at her.

"You know exactly what I mean. You've seen the stakes. And you're trying to wriggle your way out of this. Who..." He thought on this a second. It didn't feel like the right thing to say; it felt like he was doing a lot of presuming. But he also didn't give a shit anymore.

"Who hurt you?"

Rhen barked out a laugh that went on for a few seconds, but she moved further away from him. "Oh seriously fuck off now! Philosopher, counsellor, anything else you can do, Lute? Give it a rest. You're from a piss-poor village somewhere in the arse end of nowhere, or somewhere jealous of the arse end of nowhere more like, what the fuck would you know about my life?"

Lute just stared at her and said nothing.

"Fuck right off," said Rhen again, a little quieter, but she turned away from him, and pretended to inspect the red stone walls of the altar room.

After a minute or two Lute had given up on any hope of a response, but then Rhen's voice sounded, flatter than before, dying out quickly in the humid air of their prison.

"Everyone has hurt me. Everyone I've ever known. Some in traditional ways: physically and worse. Some with light betrayals, the kind you shake off and think nothing of once you've got out of town, but come back to you days later, when you realise all the memories of their friendship have been soured by the shitty end of it. Some with words, making me try and feel small. I brush it off, knowing that I've got a trail of bodies and heists and jobs behind me that anyone in all the realms would be fucking jealous of. But it still hurts."

She sighed, and placed a hand on the chamber wall, fingers splayed out.

"They did it because I was poor, they did it because I was a woman, they did it because they could; because no-one gives a shit in half the towns out there. It's every man and woman and fuck-up for themselves. And over time, you try and brush it off, but it makes you cold, and then every now and again it makes you want to cry, and then you hate yourself for your weakness."

Lute nodded. "So, you try and bargain with a mad god instead."

Rhen turned back to him, her eyes dry but a minuscule quiver in her mouth. "Yeah why not? No one else is going to help me. So I need to help myself."

Lute stood up and walked over to her, and looked her in the eyes.

"Now you're fucking freaking me out, Lute."

Lute grabbed her hand, and expected her to flinch, or maybe hit him, but she didn't move. They were still for a moment. "We don't know each other, Rhen. Not well. We could be cunts. Out there"— he pointed at some random spot he hoped fully indicated the world outside — "I could be the kind you're talking about. The ones who betray you. But in here, in this shitty room, which neither of us are likely to get out of alive, why don't we make a promise, if

only for a few minutes. We both trust each other, and we don't fuck each other. Over, that is. And if our trust turns out to be ill-founded who gives a buggery? We're dead anyway. Let's take a risk, and act like we're real friends."

Rhen didn't say anything, but she kept her eyes locked on him.

Lute spoke, quieter now. "I'm sorry. You deserve better. You always have, most likely. Will you help me? I can't do this without you."

She looked down. They were still holding hands. Then she pulled out of his grip and marched back to the altar, laughing. "Ten realms, Lute. You were wasted at the fucking forge weren't you with those speeches. You and that prick out there. I'm just surrounded by men with speeches." She sighed. "Okay then, let's try it your way. Team Last People Standing. Go team. What's next then?"

Lute looked down at the box. "We open this. Hope it's his heart. Crush his sad little heart."

Rhen nodded. "And how do we open it?"

Lute paused. "Ah, well, I hadn't quite got that far yet."

Rhen sighed and then looked up as another booming sound of rocks being moved aside indicated that Vouring was making good progress on breaking into their makeshift tomb. "Well no pressure, but I think our time is running out."

Lute blanched. "I've never had any experience of working under pressure, to be honest. People back in my village were fairly relaxed about when they got stuff from my forge. Not a lot of urgency round my way."

"Do you miss it?" asked Rhen, head tilted at him, trying to figure him out.

Lute thought on this. "I had a friend called Gill, well still have, unless he's finally pissed off the wrong villager with his drinking antics... who used to tell me about all the tales he'd heard off the merchants, about all the monsters out beyond the hills, and those hired to catch them; of the rogue mages down past the valley, and of even farther climes than that. Different realms, different sunsets, that kind of thing. And every single time he told me, I felt this... this throbbing in my heart." He beat his chest once, twice. "Painful, like. As if my heart itself couldn't bear the fact that I was stuck there with him while all those tales were happening somewhere else."

Rhen nodded, understanding. "And now?" she asked, quietly.

Lute sighed and then chuckled. "Now I'd give anything to see his stupid face again and have a mug of that piss-poor excuse for ale they served in the Seven Worlds."

Rhen smiled and clacked her tongue. "Yeah, that figures."

"Sorry if that sounded a bit—"

IT BEATS, it beats so loud. It wants to be back in its master. The blood trickles down. Down from the veins. OH, the sound it makes as it spatters on the floor. But the box opens. And the heart is trapped. And what will make it close will make it open. We can't change the magic. So, we will hide the box.

"Ahhhhh," Lute cried, his head over his hands.

But there's so much blood. I never knew there could be so much blood in me. But it all must go. It takes a lot of blood to trap a god. And I've done a lot of living. I don't regret.

Do you regret?

Do you regret, Lute?

Lute? Lute?

"Lute! Lute!"

Lute came to on the floor with Rhen shaking him. His head was on fire, and his eyes burned. Drool fell from his mouth. He forced his eyes open and took in Rhen's concerned face above him as the pain slowly faded.

"A vision?" asked Rhen.

He nodded. "I last had one when Tam Becker contacted me. Or spoke to me. Or whatever you call that creepy voice of your great great, great whatever floating in your head. I saw one of the original heroes, as they fought Vouring."

Rhen nodded back. "Your ancestor. Just like mine. We're descended from them. What did you see?"

He tried to remember. "There was so much blood. But I think I saw the box, and the heart go in it. I think... there was a voice. Explaining. I think..." He paused, then covered his face in his hands. "Oh fuck, I think I know what I need to do."

Rhen helped him to his feet and he stood, staring not at her but at the altar. "It's not great."

Rhen narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to explain it, or just talk in twatty riddles?"

"Well," he said, feeling a little bit numb, but also not that surprised. It was always going to come to this, after all. Most big quests are the last big quest. He knew what he was signing up for. Well, he didn't. But he wouldn't have said no if he'd known. And that's what matters.

Lute turned to her. "The voice in my head was talking about their blood, and how it trapped Vouring's heart in the box. They had to bleed on it to work. To get it open, that's what I have to do, too."

"Alright," Rhen shrugged, whipping a small dagger with emerald stones in the handle out so quickly Lute was not actually sure which garment or belt it had been stored in to begin with. The gems winked in the torchlight. "It's not like we've not already bled a dozen times so far on this fucking quest. I'll bandage you up as well." She waved the dagger in front of his face playfully. "It's not exactly the Righteous Blade but that prick's buried under a ton of rubble back there. But it'll do. So, where do you want the cut, blacksmith?"

Lute sighed and sat back down on the wall around the altar. "No you don't understand. It was... a lot of blood. Enough to kill them. It has to be, I think. It's a blood sacrifice. A blood self-sacrifice, to be accurate. That's what opens the box."

Rhen rolled her eyes. "Oh fucking come off it. Don't think I don't know what you're doing. The old 'good death' hero trick. What are you, a masochist? Depressed? You just gave this big speech about us working together, pretending we're friends, you're not getting off that easily."

Lute looked up at Rhen, and something about his face made her go quiet and lose her grin. "Rhen. You're a world-wise woman. You've been around magic. And magical objects. Is there anything I've said that doesn't ring true? Do you really think a small cut would hack it?"

Rhen grimaced, and spun her dagger theatrically between her fingers, lips pouting. "Put aside whatever the fuck 'world-wise woman' means and nah, piss on that. I'm a descendant too, remember? We'll both make two nice little cuts, a decent amount each, and that'll do the trick. Magic's actually a lot less fussy than you think. It's a bit of a tricky prick like that. There was one time in Rathelon, this mage with a wig on—not sure why he bothered with a wig, but it—"

He stood up then and grabbed both of Rhen's hands.

"Look Lute, I know we're bonding and everything, but all this hand touching, anyone would think you'd be in a room by yourself for ten fucking years—"

"Rhen," Lute said, cutting her off again. She looked at him askance but let him speak. "I know it has to be this way. I... feel it. In my blood, fittingly. This is how it was done originally. And I, the descendant, must do it again. So this time, it can be destroyed for good. I think maybe this was the point of me. Is the point of me. Let a random blacksmith from a piss-poor village in the arse end of nowhere do something good with his life, eh?"

"Actually, it was a piss-poor village jealous of the arse end of nowhere."

"Rhen..."

“No,” said Rhen, letting go of his hands and backing away. “Fuck you. You don’t do this. You don’t make this whole speech about my life, and say sorry for it, and get through to me for the first fucking time in... years... and make me risk trusting someone, and then just off yourself. You don’t get to do that. Fuck you. Bollocks. I won’t let you.” She held her dagger up in front of him. “Good luck finding a blade, you little blacksmith prick, cos I ain’t letting you use this one.”

Lute smiled and backed away. “Oh, Rhen. You think you’re the only one who carries hidden knives?” He reached under his tunic then, and whipped out a dagger of his own, which had a dull handle it made up for with a wicked-sharp, glinting blade. “Picked it up off one of the mage corpses. Bit odd for a magic-wielder to carry a knife, but they were pretty strange blokes all round.”

Rhen started to move towards him, eyes on the knife, but he held it in front of him threateningly and she stopped. Then his eyes softened and he sighed.

“Find someone who won’t betray you, Rhen, and never let them go.”

“Lute—”

But before her words had met the air, Lute had dragged the knife upwards along his left arm, opening up his veins and then, before the pain and the shock hit him, he used the last motion of his left arm to do the same to his right. Then he dropped the knife and fell back against the altar wall, gasping, as his lifeblood flowed out of him onto the floor. He stared at the box on the ground next to him. “Rhen,” he whispered.

Rhen, running on mainly instinct, leapt down and grabbed the box and held it under his arms as the rivers of scarlet coursed onto its etchings.

“You fucking bastard,” she growled, as the gilt patterns on the puzzle box glowed and then faded, and the blood filled the tiny lines, and a new glow could be seen, deep ruby, deeper even than the blood, and the box started to turn and twist and screw itself loose.

Lute lay back as his life pooled out of him, and as his sight started to fade. He thought he saw stars above him, faint whirls of light, and he wandered where he could have ended up if things had gone differently. And, for a moment, he felt a deep numb sadness about all the lives and journeys and paths he would never take, and all the loves he would never have, and the lands he would never call home, and all the hearts he would never break, including his own.

But then he felt his hand grabbed by Rhen, and she held it, held it so firm, and she didn’t say anything but that grip was the most real touch he’d ever had, and all the sadness went away, and he didn’t feel alone, and he didn’t feel regret, for the first time ever.

It’s quite a thing, to be free of regret.

Lute died with that thought in his head.

Rhen watched as Lute’s eyes lost their life and his breath stilled. In her other hand, covered in Lute’s blood, the box still turned. She couldn’t take her eyes off Lute as a single tear formed and ran down her cheek, mingling with the red rivers beneath her.

“Good journey, blacksmith,” she whispered and for a moment it hurt so bad she couldn’t breathe. And then she shook the feeling from herself, just as always, and turned down to see whether it was Vouring’s fucking heart in this fucking box.

She didn’t get chance. She looked up to see, at the end of the long corridor where previously there had been rubble, a figure whose voice still rumbled in her head.

Vouring smiled at the last remaining hero and moved to make his final kill.

Chapter Eighteen

In which our story reaches its dramatic conclusion

Rachel V Green

Rhen saw her only chance and took it. Vouring blocked the entrance, his massive feet spread wide, his hunched shoulders blotting out the sun. Capturing his smug stare in a seething glance, she ran straight for him. The god lifted the dusty girder he wielded as his weapon, ready to end the last stand of the nine descendants. But Rhen wasn't about to die so easily. Not like Myra, lost to nothingness. Like Hast and Lute, to their own fantasies of heroism. Not like Greton and Hoji lost to her own hallucinogenic mistake. No, Rhen intended to leave this forsaken pit alive.

Vouring laughed and brought the girder crashing down towards her. Rhen darted to one side and ran up the sloping wall on Vouring's right and looped around the mad god's leg, feet sliding on loose shale. When impetus failed her, she slid awkwardly down the wall, her hip screaming as rock tore through her clothes and flesh. She landed on the rough ground, on the other side of Vouring, gasping as sunlight drenched her. Now all she had to do was get far enough away that she could open the damn puzzlebox and grind this bastard's heart to dust.

The god roared as she scrambled to her feet and ran. Bursting out into the Citadel's main courtyard, she jumped over the bodies littering the square, men, women and even children. Rhen tore her gaze away from their small bodies to squint up at the white rock, against which Vouring had once been bound. The seven seals that the realms had relied upon for so long, hung listlessly from huge leather straps, the metal twisted and cracked.

All around Rhen, Magi scurried, their curved blades flashing as they hunted down the survivors of the fray. They paid her no heed, far more intent on squirrelling out the people who were hiding in the buildings surrounding the square. People who had lived their whole lives in Vouring's shadow, scratching out a living from the hordes that had flocked to witness his incarceration each day. Some of those people's families would have lived there for generations. Vouring had been trapped for so long, their children unaware of the ongoing threat. Rhen couldn't blame them. Six weeks ago, she'd supped ale at the tavern from which smoke now bellowed at the eastern edge of the courtyard. Oblivious to how much her life would change in such a short space of time.,

Rhen didn't pause as she ran from Vouring, but she unhesitatingly threw her blade. It slammed to the hilt in the magi's throat, sending him toppling backwards, fingers scrabbling to stop the inevitable flow of blood. Lute must have got to her after all. A week ago, she would let that old man die, too intent on her own survival to pause in aid of anyone else's. But Lute had a way of seeing the world, which in their brief moments together seemed to have infected Rhen's subconscious. Or perhaps it was Morin Hast, who looked vaguely like the frail man at the Magi's mercy, and whose magic and cantankerous moods had almost made her smile. Either way Rhen didn't look back.

Wind whipped her hair as her feet pounded the once polished tiles. The iron smell of blood and the stench of shit burned her nose, but she kept going. Once, she looked behind her to see Vouring demolishing the entrance to the cavern system. She knew where she had to reach. A crack in the rock, where once wet kisses had crowded the tight space, fumbling hands and hot, hard bodies. The guard had dragged her in there after she'd flirted with him at the barriers, and she hadn't let him leave until long after his shift had ended. The crack had once rested at the centre of the bound god's legs, an open secret very few had dared to venture into. But it was now abandoned, wood and leather scattered before it's narrow entrance. It was far too small for Vouring to gain access to the passage beyond, which was buried too deep within the rockface for even a god to reach without precious minutes of toil. And best of all? There was a corresponding crack further around the small, flat-topped mountain, just a twenty-minute walk away. The guard had led Rhen back to his small hovel that way, after they'd both exhausted themselves in the darkness. Rhen made for it with the imagined sensation of hot breath on her neck, expecting Vouring to reach out and disembowel her at any moment. But though his roar of frustration made her bones shake, she reached the crack and slipped inside before he could crush her.

The passage led her into a space so tight she had to squeeze sideways through the rock, which scraped her shoulder blades. An unexpected wave of claustrophobia was drowned out only by gut wrenching fear. Rhen had survived a lot of violence but nothing as terrifying as being hunted by a crazed god.

BOOM. Rhen screeched as Vouring struck the rock face, as if by sheer will he could crush the space between them. She pushed frantically on, deeper, until after a few minutes of side-stepping she entered a dark cave. On the wall she found a scone and lit it with shaking hands. Falling to her knees, she opened the puzzlebox.

The box was as big as a grown woman's splayed hand. The inside was lined with rich, purple silk, golden hinges holding the polished wooden lid open. It was probably worth a pretty penny. Perhaps even enough to buy Rhen passage through the last remaining portals. Which was lucky, because that was the only way Rhen was going to survive this.

The box was empty.

"Motherfucker," Rhen whispered.

Lute had died for nothing. Hast had died for nothing. Myra, Damon, Nicki, Yas. They'd all died for nothing. And Rhen would never be absolved for the murder of Greton and Hoji, which was what had been driving her until now. She admitted it to herself for the first time as the box fell limply from her hands.

Vouring was free. And he was staying free.

Rhen laughed, the harsh sound reverberating through the passageway as she slumped back against the wet rock. It was over. The nine descendants of the great heroes had failed. And this time, there was no one left alive to offer them a lifeline.

"Rhen Kaegan!" Vouring screamed through the rockface. She could hear him crushing the stone beneath his fingers metres away, gouging out the passageway, to come closer and closer.

"Fuck you," she muttered, though it lacked her usual heat.

She wasn't sure if she could be bothered to run. What was the point? The whole damn realm would soon collapse, followed by the next, and the next. Vouring's promises of a better world, which when she and Lute had stood side by side—the hero and the thief—had momentarily tempted her, were now very clearly a lie. Rhen had thought herself different to the others. Harder. Colder. She'd thought that all that mattered was her survival. That she would steal whatever future gave her the best chance of living. But now that Lute was dead, and Rhen was the only surviving descendant of the great nine, she found she didn't want to be just a thief. She couldn't be the hero. Not with an empty box and a sense of self-interest so well developed it made sacrifice impossible. But she'd thought, for a moment, she might have made some kind of difference. That she could have taken the heroism of everyone else and made it count. Now though, she saw all of them had been fools. Vouring's rise had been inevitable.

She pulled herself to her feet with a world-weary grunt, turned her back on the sound of Vouring's slow and steady pursuit, and set off towards the second entrance. When she finally stepped out of the rock, she was greeted with twilight. A purple sky, scattered with pinprick stars, a hot, humid day just cooling into night. An ending. One no one could escape.

She wasn't even surprised when a warm waft of air buffeted her clothes, lifting the damp hair from her face, and a dragon landed on the brown grass of an empty town square with thunderous thump.

The beast was magnificent. It towered over her, twice the size of nearby dwellings, so enormous that she had to step back and tilt her head simply to take in its immense size. It was midnight back, with an opalescent sheen of blue hypnotically catching the dying light. Its head alone, when it dropped down low to face Rhen directly, was the size of a fully grown horse. Its eyes were bright amber, intelligent and terrifying. Rhen expected its jaws to crack, for the blue of early flame to flicker at the back of its throat, and to meet her death in its monstrous fires. But instead, the dragon simply huffed through its nostrils, blasting her with its fishy smelling breath, and then laid its head down on the grass at her feet.

"Rhen," Kael said, as he swung his leg over the dragon's spine and slid down to the ground. "Do you have the box?"

"The box?" She almost lost it. "No, I don't have the fucking box. It's back there," she thumbed over her shoulder towards the crack in the rocks. "Empty, Kael. Fucking empty."

He frowned, and Rhen almost screamed.

He was wearing the face she'd first seen him wear in the Azrani forest. Handsome again, distractingly so. In front of the others, he'd made himself appear grotesque. He'd been clumsy and awkward for them, but she'd still known it was the man who'd saved her from Avarax. How could she not? Dragon's bond for life and that beast of his was impossible to forget.

"You sent us on a wild goose chase," she accused him, stepping around the dragon... Bane, was it? "Lute gave his life for that box, and there was nothing in it."

"That can't be."

There was a rumble of earth and debris tumbled down the mountain, bouncing off grassy hummocks, stones splintering as they hit bare rock.

"Would that still be happening if Vouring's heart had been where you said it would be?"

"The whispers swore it was so," Kael murmured. "I sacrificed the quiet spaces for that knowledge."

He looked tired, though her own exhaustion left Rhen with little sympathy.

"The whispers lied," she said, and cracking her back, she went to walk past him. She'd left the box in the dark passageway, but there were other ways to buy passage out of this realm. Even if the known portals were all closed, Myra wasn't the only path maker Rhen knew. They were rare, yes. Exceptionally so. But Rhen had always made it her business to collect contacts. The rarer the better.

"Where are you going?" Kael asked.

"Anywhere but here."

"But this isn't over. Vouring must be stopped."

"How, genius? There is no heart. And unless you happen to be an all-powerful god yourself, we're shit out of luck. Get back on your pony, pretty boy, and fly the fuck away, while you still can."

Rhen kept walking. There was a row of houses in front of her, backing on to the warren of slums that surrounded Vouring's prison. If she could disappear into the streets, would Vouring pursue her? Why would he? She was no threat to him, not now.

A hand closed around her arm and Kael spun her around to face him.

"Where will you go, thief? What will you do? I've seen this all before." His eyes darken, a universe of pain twisting in their depths. Rhen tried to step back, but he gripped her other arm too, holding her fast. "Human memory is short, Rhen. The nine who trapped Vouring here five hundred years ago, were not the first to do so. Every five hundred years the pattern repeats. Vouring breaks free. He promises change to a people tired of monotony. Some follow him and survive, becoming Magi, his eternal servants. Most die. I've seen whole realms wiped out. Again and again, rebuilt only to fall when Vouring's bindings weaken once more. Your ancestors go back further than you can imagine, always fighting to bind a giant, always succeeding but not before the realms have suffered unimaginable losses. Vouring knows he will be bound each time. He relishes it. The cycle. The chance to rebuild the realms, only to destroy them once more. They are toy to him. But this time is different."

Kael released her arms, and spun away, raking a hand through his hair.

"Because the nine are all dead," Rhen muttered. "All except me. There's no one left to bind him. Is this how the cycle ends?"

"Yes," Kael said. "But how it ends is up to you. Vouring could destroy the realms once and for all. Or you could kill Vouring, and protect the realms for all time."

"What the hell do you think I've been doing all this time?" she gasped, wheezing. "Do you think I hunted Avarax for fun? Do you think I killed two men..." Her laughter caught in her throat. "Do you think I killed Hoji and Greton, for a

joke?" Her face twisted, the smile mutating into a horrified sob. "I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do any of this!"

Angrily, she wiped the tears from her face, shaking her head as if that might deny the unexpected grief bubbling up in her chest. It had been years since she'd cried. Really cried. And she was damned if she was going to fall apart now. But Kael was looking at her with a kind of loving sympathy, that made her want to cry even more.

She drew her knife. "You can fuck off if you think I'm doing any more, princess. I'm done."

"You're not," he said, and before she could so much as breathe, he had stepped inside her guard and disarmed her. Rhen blinked in surprise, but didn't let the shock derail her. She grabbed the hilt of one of the dragon rider's blades and yanked it free of his belt, brought the cold, shiny silver to his throat.

"And I suppose you're going to stop me, are you?"

"Rhen," Kael breathed. "I saw you save that old man back there. You didn't need to, but you did, instinctively. You're a good person."

Rhen wanted to argue the point, but then the mountain exploded. Shards of rock and dirt showered Bane. The dragon reared up, his feet crashing into the ground just feet away. Kael, ignoring the knife at his throat, pulled Rhen against him, sheltering her from the debris as he dragged her back from the lumbering dragon. Bane roared and fire erupted from his maw, spraying the rockface until it turned molten, the crack dissolving into lavafall.

Rhen found herself clinging to Kael, in order to keep her balance. His body was hot against hers, all hard lines and soft edges. As soon as she found her feet, she fumbled to get away from him and dropped the knife. Dropped the fucking knife. There was a first time for everything.

"Vouring is almost through!" Kael shouted. He released her and ran towards Bane. Like he was born to do it, he ran up the dragon's foreleg, grasping the black spines that decorated the ridge of the beast's spine, and hauled himself up. Turning to Rhen, he held out his hand.

"We can do this," he said, when she looked at him blankly. "Trust me."

Rhen hadn't trusted anyone since she was a child. Lute had asked her to trust him in the cavern, and now he was dead. But it was harder than you might imagine to resist a handsome man astride a dragon. Swearing under her breath, Rhen ran towards Bane.

Dragon flight was revelatory. Bane rose into the air faster than Rhen had thought possible, leaving her stomach on the ground. She clung to Kael, her arms wrapped firmly around his waist as he effortlessly guided Bane higher and higher into the sky. It was the only way to stay seated. There was no saddle. No stirrups. Only the strength of Kael's thighs kept them in place, a thought Rhen found deliciously enticing, even as Bane rolled left and the ground became the sky.

"I assume you have a plan?" Rhen said, when the dragon finally slowed his wing beats to circle high about the Citadel. Below, the houses had become toys, the mountain a hummock. Vouring was still buried within the rock, still tunnelling his way through to reach Rhen. But it was clear from the clouds of dust rising from the second entrance, and from the way the mountain had collapsed in on itself in a path leading directly to it, that Vouring was almost through. He wouldn't reach Rhen, but there was a whole town of people for him to tear through instead.

"Not exactly. I'm not supposed to be doing any of this. I'm a Watcher."

Rhen's eyebrows hit her hairline. Not many people knew about Watchers. But Telgin, the pit boss Rhen still had nightmares about, had a contact in the ministry of the Quiet Realm. The ministry was responsible for liaising with the Watchers of the Quiet Space. Beings who lived between realms. Not in the aether: an empty, lifeless void. But in

the... soil, for want of a better word, from which worlds grew. The quiet space is life itself. And the Watchers were sworn to observe the realms, never to interfere or alter the course of their paths. Watchers were ancient. Other. The man beneath Rhen's hands seemed too real to be one of them.

"You know of us," Kael said, interpreting her stillness as he scanned the mountain.

"You're not supposed to engage with humans," Rhen said.

Kael looked over his shoulder and met her eyes. "I never have before."

Why now? Rhen wanted to ask. Why trip the Avarax as it chased her through the forest? Why scoop her up on the back of his dragon when all she'd wanted to do was run. But there was no time.

"We don't have Vouring's heart," she said instead, looking down at the town below. Magi had infiltrated the houses. They must have circumvented the Citadel and come up through the streets. They were turning people out of their houses; children, the elderly. And they were slaughtering them in the streets. "We have no weapon that can harm Vouring."

"I cannot do more than watch," Kael said, his voice thick with pain. "By helping the nine I have already untethered myself from the quiet space. If I could give my life to stop Vouring, I would. But it would achieve nothing. Before I could act, my time here would be ended by the other Watchers."

"Jesus fucking Christ, will people please stop talking about giving their lives for the greater fucking good! It doesn't work! Eight out of nine assholes have already tried it and look where we are! No one is asking you fall on your own sword, dickhead. We're looking for solutions here, not problems!"

Kael's lips quirked upwards in a smile.

"There!" Rhen pointed to other side of the mountain where, almost invisible across the distance, the fangblade she'd shattered earlier still lay in pieces on the ground. Close by was Nicki's body, and as Bane flew closer, Rhen could see the glint of gold in her pale outstretched palm. The leprecoin. Hope flaring in her chest, Rhen relaxed her grip on Kael's waist and twisted around towards the cavern she and Lute had hidden in. There in the rubble of Vouring's passage, was the handle of the righteous blade.

"Drop down!" Rhen said, and with a gentle tilt forwards, Kael instructed Bane to do just that.

Rhen's spine almost shattered when Bane hit the floor of the courtyard and she gratefully slid from his back, before Kael could offer to help her. Leaving him behind, she ran across the courtyard, gathering the three items that started all this mess. She kept her eye open for Magi as she ran, or for the sight of Vouring backtracking through the mountain. But the area was quiet, abandoned as the fight moved on to the town itself.

"What are you thinking?" Kael asked, as he strode over to meet her. She was sitting on the ground; all three items scattered on the floor in front of her.

"I'm thinking that Vouring wouldn't have needed these things to break free, if they didn't hold some serious power. I'm thinking that with everyone else dead, and you fucking useless, these three things are the best chance we have of ending Vouring once and for all."

Kael smiled. A languid smirk, like the one he'd worn as she stumbled away from him in the Avarax's forest, still determined to rob the beast of its weapon. Like he'd always known she'd make this decision. Like he was proud of her for choosing to fight.

Rhen rolled her eyes.

The fangblade was in bits. The yellowed teeth scattered around her knees, the bronze housing forlorn without its bite. The righteous blade was broken at the tip, snapped in half by some last lunge of Lute. But the leprecoin was perfect, still gleaming, the Celtic cross emblazoned on one side still clear as the day it was minted. It hummed with power. Even Rhen, who was no spellcaster, could feel it.

"I have an idea," she said. "And I doubt you're going to like it."

Ten minutes later they were back on the other side of the mountain, having flown on Bane to return to the site Vouring was about to emerge from.

Kael slid from Bane's back first, then helped her down with the artefacts, his hands tight on her waist.

"If we live through this," she told him. "I know a great little bar on the southern tip of the Citadel. It does breakfast too."

Kael lips curved, and he ran his fingers over the swell of her hips, before releasing her and stepping away.

"Don't go too far," Rhen told him. "This won't work without you."

"I'm here."

Rhen knelt down in front of the crumbling mountainside. She lay the fangbade down, hastily aligning the teeth with the bronze. Next came the righteous blade, Lute's weapon, the silver tip she'd dug from the rubble lain against the flat edge of the silver. In her hands she held the leprecoin, but before she say anything more, Vouring exploded from the rock.

Rhen bent forwards over her broken weapons, shielding them from the flying debris. Bane screeched and with a powerful thrust, launched in to the air, leaving his rider behind.

"Rhen Kaegan," Vouring boomed. His scarlet skin glowed hot and red, his eyes were bloodshot and slitted. His anger was a physical thing, thundering across the space between them. "Now you die."

"Now!" Rhen shouted, and she threw the leprecoin high into the sky.

Kael caught it, cross up. There was a burst of light and shockwave of power slammed into them all. Vouring stumbled backwards, but Rhen was ready for it, and she didn't hesitate. She caught the coin as it fell from Kael's fingers. The dragon rider collapsed behind her, his immense power stripped by the coins magic as she'd hoped. Because if the Watcher couldn't use his power to save the Realms, Rhen would. The moment the metal came into contact with Rhen's skin, the magic flooded into her. It was like freefalling through the night sky, surrounded by stars and space, with the centre of the universe drawing her closer with every spin of the descent. For a heartbeat she was lost to it. To the magnitude of Kael's power, and to the quiet spaces that fed the realms with life. It was so expansive that it almost tore her apart. But Rhen was no ordinary human. Kael had known it. Morin Hast had known it. Though there had been no words to describe the knowledge then. Rhen wasn't just a thief. And she wasn't a hero. Rhen was the last of Vouring's foes. Raised on pain and blood. Forged in the darkest streets of broken realms.

Born to kill a god.

Rhen slammed her hands on to the two blades, and Kael's magic rushed through her. It re-forged the weapons, binding teeth to bronze, silver to silver.

"No!" Vouring growled, his enormous hands reaching Rhen, but it was too late. She was already standing, the fangblade in one hand, the righteous blade in the other.

"Time to die, asshole."

Rhen moved in a blur. With Kael's borrowed power thrumming through her veins, she was faster than lightning. Darting forwards, she cut into Vouring's calf with the fangblade. The teeth tore through flesh, and the god cried out, stumbling forwards. Before he could right himself, Rhen struck again, driving the righteous blade deep into the Vouring's side. Blood, thick and black, poured from the wound and onto her hand. It smelled foul, like a millennium of death had been stored within the god's corrupted vessels, but she didn't slow as she gagged on the rot. As Vouring fell to one knee, she spun and slammed the hilt of the fangblade into his temple.

“Rhen!” Kael cried out, and she ducked just in time as Vouring’s flailing fist flew past her head.

The god fell onto his side, the impact shaking nearby houses. Glass exploded from window frame, spraying across the grassy square. A roar from above made Rhen glance upwards. Bane was circling and as she stared, his huge maw opened and flames spilled from his throat.

Vouring screamed as the dragonfire engulfed him. The smell of burning stung Rhen’s nose, and scarlet flesh melted before her eyes. But it wasn’t enough to keep the god down. When Bane drew breath and circled back over the town, a scorched Vouring clawed his way to one knee.

“You will die for that,” he hissed. Skin dripped from his bones, which were blackened and charred.

Rhen shrugged. “There are worst things to die for.”

She lunged for him again, avoiding the reach of his now skeletal fingertips to pass beneath his huge frame. Before he could defend himself, she drove the righteous blade straight into his solar plexus and twisted.

“This is for Lute!” she screamed. And releasing the silver, she spun, dragging the teeth of the fangblade across the gods ragged throat. “This is for Morin and Myra! For Damon!” Vouring choked, great rivers of blood spilling onto the dry grass. Rhen ducked from beneath him and slammed the blade of Avarax’s weapon down onto the god’s skull until it cracked. “This is for Nicki and Yas, who never got the chance to understand their power.” The god fell forwards, gurgling sounds erupting from a gaping mouth. With his eyes wide as he stared in disbelief, Rhen made sure he watched as she bent down and said with finality. “And this is for Hoji and Greton, who didn’t deserve to die because your minions sent us into a forest of madness, as well as for me,” she whispered. She slid the tip of her own rusty blade into back of the god’s spine, Kael’s power driving it towards the soft, vulnerable cord between the god’s bones. “Because the world you made is rotten and I experienced every last stinking bit of it.”

Kael’s shadow fell over her, and Rhen looked up at the dragon rider as she severed the spine of the god at her feet.

“This is the end,” she said, as Vouring gasped his last foul breath.

“No,” Kael smiled. “This is just the...”

“Don’t fucking say it,” Rhen groaned. She climbed to her feet and wiped her blade on her trousers as Vouring slumped forwards, his bones sinking into the grass as the putrid tissue that held it together fell apart. “Don’t you dare be such a hideous cliché.”

Kael grinned and handed her one of his own blades to compliment her own.

“Ok, thief,” he said. “This isn’t the beginning. It’s just the start of things to come.”

THE END

Thank you for reading our collaborative venture, we hope you’ve enjoyed Realm Raiders!

If you have, please share the good news on social media! As #indieauthors, we appreciate the opportunity to get noticed. Share your favourite character or chapter or simply what you liked about the story as a whole.

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Look out this autumn for the Creative Commune’s online magazine – Writers’ Voice

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Alex S. Bradshaw is a fantasy author of gritty, character-driven stories. He loves epic tales with unforgettable characters and whenever he's not writing you can probably find him reading, playing games, or daydreaming about dinosaurs (not necessarily in that order).

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Ed Crocker

Renowned moron Ed Crocker hails from Manchester and writes speculative fiction; the first book of his epic fantasy trilogy with vampires & werewolves, *Lightfall*, was published earlier this year in North America. By trade he's a freelance book editor whose clients include award-winning indie authors, Sunday Times bestselling writers & acclaimed small presses. He reviews SFF & horror for *Grimdark Magazine* and *FanFiAddict*.

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Frank Dorrian

'A grimdark fantasy author from Liverpool, Frank Dorrian writes character-driven stories set in unforgiving worlds. A professional fighter, fitness fanatic, tech enthusiast, tattoo collector, and heavy metal fan, his work focuses on human nature, choice, consequence, and the greyer shades of morality.'

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Rachel V Green

Rachel V. Green is a British author, writing YA and Adult dark fantasy. Drawing on a deep love of mayhem and the question of morality, Rachel builds worlds where, in the midst of chaos, love may bloom. Rachel writes from her home in the hills, surrounded by books and a family she adores. Her stories are shaped by feminine strength, a desire to challenge the norm, and the belief that fiction can be both refuge and reckoning. When she's not writing, she's probably reading something strange and beautiful, walking in the rain, or planning her next book somewhere quiet, where new worlds can continue to unfold.

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Simon Kewin

Simon Kewin has over 100 short stories in the wild. He's also the author of the Cloven Land fantasy trilogy, cyberpunk thriller *The Genehunter*, "steampunk Gormenghast" saga *Engn*, the Triple Stars sci-fi trilogy and the *Office of the Witchfinder General* books, published by Elsewhen Press. Find him at simonkewin.co.uk. He lives deep in the Herefordshire countryside.

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Damien Larkin

Damien Larkin is an Irish science fiction and fantasy author. His novels *Big Red* and *Blood Red Sand* have been longlisted for BSFA awards for Best Novel and an anthology he contributed to, *Sky Breaker: Tales of the Wanderer*, was shortlisted for a BFS award for Best Anthology (2023). His latest novel *Lizard Skin and Sharpened Steel* was a SBFBO 10 semi-finalist.

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Phil Parker

Phil hasn't stopped writing since his parents bought him a typewriter as a teenager. That's a long time ago, (think fossils). He's written books for Drama teachers (he used to be one) and journalistic articles on education. He's now abandoned reality and writes fiction based on British folklore, portal fantasy and broken characters seeking redemption.

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Derek Power

I'm the author of Filthy Henry, an ongoing fantasy-comedy series blending Irish mythology with a healthy dose of comedy while being set in the modern-day Ireland. There is also a Filthy Henry podcast, featuring never before published short stories. I've also dabbled with sci-fi noir in my stand-alone story Duplex Tempus, along with being involved in a few anthologies.

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Patrick Samphire

Patrick has worked as a teacher, an editor and publisher of physics journals, and a web designer. He has a PhD in theoretical physics, which is about as much use as you might expect. As well as writing, he works as a freelance editor and book cover designer. His first book for adults was SHADOW OF A DEAD GOD.

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Phil Williams

Phil Williams is an author of fantasy, horror and dystopian fiction, including the Blood Scouts epic military fantasies, the Ordshaw urban fantasy thrillers and the post-apocalyptic Estalia series. He also writes bestselling reference books to help foreign learners master English. Phil lives with his wife and impossibly fluffy dog by the coast in Sussex, UK.

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