



The Defenders of  
**Dembroch**  
BOOK 1: THE AGE OF KNIGHTS AND DAMES

A Novel by  
**PATRICK HARRIS**

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Summary: Four long-lost friends take on daring, lethal, and magical quests to save a queen and her cursed kingdom.

1. Young Adult Fiction / Fantasy / General
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The Defenders of  
**Dembroch**

BOOK 1: THE AGE OF KNIGHTS AND DAMES



*Once upon a time, King Arthur sought out his greatest foe, Morgan Le Faye and fought the final battle of their great war. After many days and nights, King Arthur bested the evil witch and offered her one final bequest. Rather than confess her crimes or show repentance, Morgan Le Fay cursed King Arthur and his lineage so that, by the age of thirty years, each would be stripped of their lands, people, and titles, and spend the rest of their days, however long, however short, fruitlessly seeking what they had lost.*

*King Arthur slew the witch and, burdened with this curse and his spoils of war, returned home to Camelot. There, he assembled the finest knights of his Round Table and, together, they scoured the globe for a way to break the curse. They sought many relics and artifacts, even the Holy Grail, until at last, the good king discovered the secret means to break the curse. But it was too late. Shortly after his discovery, King Arthur perished to his curse at the hands of Mordred, and he passed on to Avalon.*

*If only, if only, King Arthur had known earlier to seek out the kingdom of Dembroch, so that he and his family would have been spared the curse. For Dembroch is a wondrous place where a people toil, where the fairest magic burns around a castle royal. Where defenders protect flames six strong and seek out the helpless in need of healing their wrongs.*

*Seek it if you must, hunt its distant shores. Waiting for you, good men and women, will be the timeless kingdom of Dembroch forevermore.*

– From the collection of recovered writings of  
Sir Percival, the last of King Arthur's knights  
Circa 557 A.D.

# PROLOGUE

## *A New Tale of Dembroch*

On a cold winter's night fit for carols and cheer, he told them a summer's tale of a queen and her kingdom. Wild red flames crackled in the fireplace. The room swelled gently with light; the grandfather clock ticked softly. Flurries of white collected on the sill.

Grandpapa sat in his chair, one giant bear claw of a hand holding up a book, the other twirling his gold-flecked pocket watch that always seemed to be stuck in the nine-o'clock hour. A key dangled from the other end of the chain.

On the couch, the grandchildren listened raptly, eyes wide, ears perked, hearts thudding. It may have been past their bedtime, but sleep was the last thing on their minds.

The night had started like any other. After supper and games, Grandpapa had ushered them to the living room. From the shelf, he had pulled out a worn blue book and let it fall open wherever the pages

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would lie. As the grandchildren had curled up on the couch, he had begun another bedtime story of Dembroch.

But just as he'd began, Robbie and Lucy stopped him. The winter winds outside seemed to hush.

It wasn't that the grandchildren didn't want to hear a story, least of all one about Dembroch. They loved the Timeless Kingdom, you see, with its wild woods, towering castle turrets, wondrous magic, and nail-biting battles. But they had heard every story from Grandpapa's blue book at least a dozen times. They knew by heart the battle of Lady Ansel and the dragons, Sir Solomon's exile, Sir Tamas' quest to touch flames without being burnt, and King Arthur's search to break the curse on his lineage. The grandchildren loved these stories, one and all, but this night, they had longed for something new, something more.

"Tell us a new tale of Dembroch," the grandchildren pleaded. "A new bedtime story. One we've never heard before."

And so, with a sparkle in his eye and a mischievous grin, their Grandpapa left the room and returned with a new book, one the grandchildren had never seen before. It was a black leather journal, one you'd find in a used bookstore or left on the back seat of a bus. But the leather was dried and shabby, its cover dinged, scrapped, and burnt. Some of the pages were torn.

On its cover was a castle silhouette inscribed in flames. Now that, the symbol, the grandchildren knew well.

"This is not a tale for the lighthearted," Grandpapa told them, holding up the black book. "You'll have wished I'd told you a sweet story you knew so you would be rocked gently to sleep. But this tale is only for those of brave stock, thick skins, and bold hearts."

"What is it about?" Robbie asked nervously.

"Dembroch, of course," their Grandpapa replied, "but so much more. Within, you shall hear of the last knights and dames, magic and a terrible curse, a queen and kingdom in peril, lies that comfort and truths that scar. In these pages, magic dies and dead men walk. There are fires and fights, a monster of your worst nightmares. Clocks that don't tell

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time. Eyes that don't see. Invisible doors that take you far away. A witch... Is that adventure enough for you both?"

Robbie shuddered, but Lucy beamed.

"Tell it to us, Grandpapa," she pleaded. "Please."

"Only if your brother wants to listen, too," Grandpapa said.

Robbie hesitated. His sister elbowed him, and then he nodded vigorously.

"Alright then," Grandpapa said. "Let's begin."

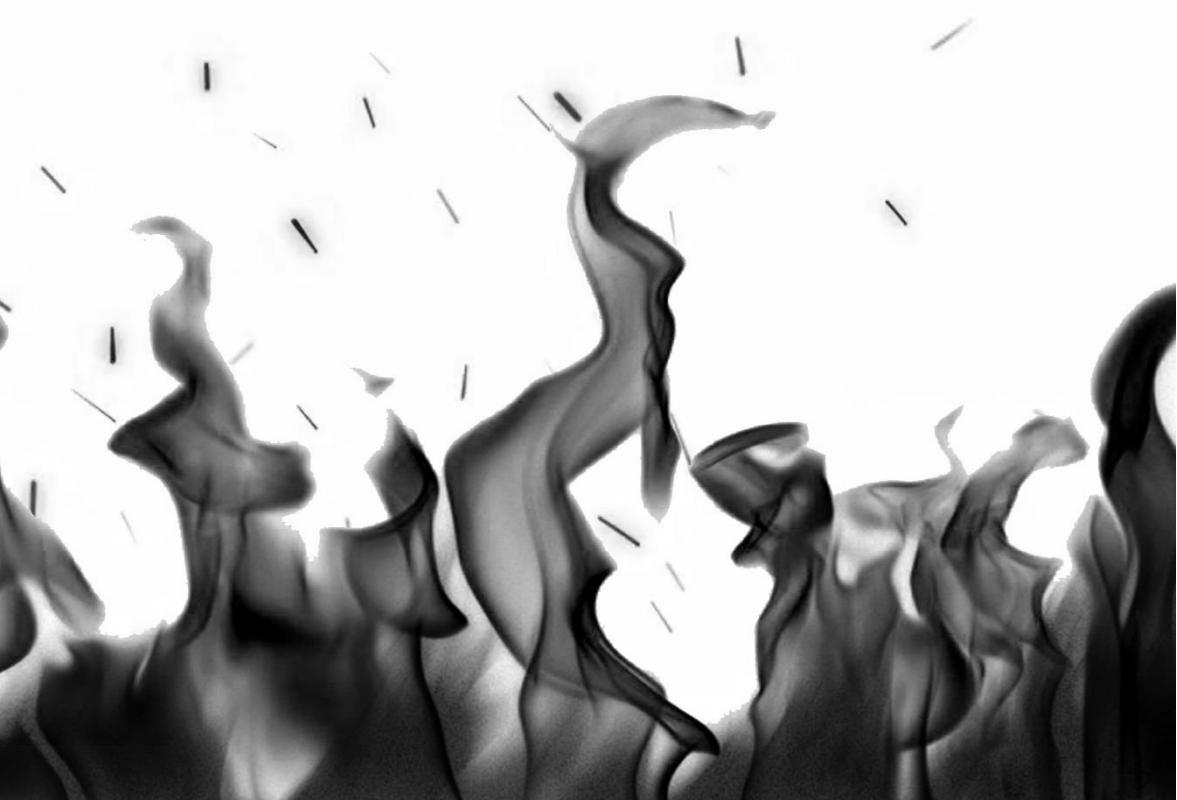
He pulled their blankets up to their chins and took his place in the seat by the couch. From his pocket, he again pulled out his tiny, funny watch with the key on the end, and in his other hand, he cracked open the black book.

As the fire crackled and the grandfather clock ticked, as snow gathered on the sill and the cold winter's night grew colder, he told them a summer's tale they had never heard.



# PART 1

*Finding Dembroch*





# CHAPTER 1

## *The Siege of the Shallows*

**D**eep in the castle library, the witch appeared out of thin air. Her blood-slicked hands clutched the king's chroniseal.

She was an atrocious creature, human by all accounts, but ravaged by age and time. Her skin was thin and spotted with scabs. Her eyes were hard and cruel. She was the woman death had forgotten, a terror that no man or woman dared follow, a witch named Sorgana.

It took a moment for Sorgana to gather her bearings. One second, she'd been surrounded by corpses and killers, caught in a vicious battle, and the next, she'd arrived here. The eerie calm after the chaos was unnerving. But she couldn't help it. She smiled, her lips curling devilishly.

She'd finally made it to Dembroch.

*The old fool was right*, she thought. Good thing, too. She'd shed plenty of blood to get the answers. But her joy was fleeting. There was much to be done.

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She went on her way, as familiar with the library and the castle as a citizen of Dembroch would be. Before long, and after slaughtering anyone who crossed her path, she had exited the castle and gone to Coral Canyon, a deep fissure on the western side of Dembroch's main isle. She descended the canyon and, at the bottom, found turtles and fish playing among shallow pools. She snatched up a baby turtle and bit off its head, chewing ravenously. When she swallowed, her skin became fuller and her hair darker. The wrinkles disappeared; scabs healed.

Reinvigorated and visibly younger, the witch strode through the pools to her prize. Amongst the shallows was a strange black rock, and on its flat top, a bright, orange flame. Golden sparks, small as the eye could see, hung around the fire like frozen fireflies.

She approached the flame, holding a hand to it. Her fingertips grew warm and she had to pull away before she was burnt. But it was no matter. She had no need to touch the flame really, only to extinguish it.

She began to bend the reality of the world around her, manipulating the magic to unveil the true nature of the flame—it was not an ordinary fire. Not by any accounts.

No sooner had she discovered how to extinguish the flame—it was, as the old fool had said, quite complicated—the witch sensed a presence behind her. A large presence. She turned to find near one hundred of the kingdom's defenders standing at the ready, swords brandished, armor shining, all focused on her.

The witch could barely contain her glee. Formidable fighters though these knights and dames may be, they would be no match for her magic, her might, and...her monster.

The defenders called for her surrender. The witch cackled, thirsty for more blood, and with a snap of her fingers, her monster was released and the battle began.

In the massacre that followed, which would be known as the Siege of the Shallows, the witch decimated the forces of Dembroch's defenders. Her magic, both quick and razor sharp, cut through dozens. The witch's unleashed monster, the horrific Dreadnaught, devoured

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bodies whole before charging up the canyon walls and disappearing over the side to wreck more havoc.

The battle raged on. The flame on the black rock seemed to flicker with each fallen knight and dame.

Not long after it had begun, it was just the witch and a half dozen of the kingdom's last, best defenders. They were as talented at combat as the witch was at sorcery. She fought cruelly, but was soon subdued and at their mercy. After a lengthy argument about whether to kill her or not, the defenders took her back to the castle and to the queen.

Only the witch saw that, amongst the corpses and reddened shallows, the flame atop the black rock had diminished in strength and was now a flickering, wavering tongue, sputtering for life. A second later, it died. The frozen fireflies of sparks fell like stars from the sky.

Sorgana was dragged all the way back into the castle to a grand chamber with tables for dining and a throne for two. Only one person sat on the throne, a slender woman with long, golden tangles of hair, a sword hanging from her hip, and a fine metal crown atop her brow. In her hand, she held a metal contraption covered in dried blood—the king's chroniseal, the device that had brought the witch to Dembroch, which she had dropped in the library.

The witch sneered at the woman. This was Dembroch's last living monarch, Queen Coralee.

The remaining defenders, a scant half dozen, informed the queen of the witch's transgressions, including unwelcome infiltration of the kingdom, the murder of numerous defenders, the release of the Dreadnaught, the tampering of the flame, and the attack on the king, whose true fate was yet to be discovered.

"Lies! All lies!" the witch cried. "I have come to this kingdom to free you. All of you. A curse looms and anyone who remains shall be consumed by it."

There were murmurings, a stirring of fear.

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“Silence,” the queen interrupted. She observed the witch, measuring her words before speaking. “How do you know of this kingdom and its flames?”

“Your secrets are not so well kept,” the witch replied.

“And who, pray tell, has shared the secrets of Dembroch with you?”

“Anyone will speak when enough blood has been shed,” the witch replied, eyeing the king’s chroniseal.

The queen screwed up her face to mask her true emotions. She kneaded her hands.

“What have you done with the king?”

“Wait and see,” the witch simpered.

Queen Coralee jumped to conclusions: “Why would you dare strike this kingdom? Its people? Its leaders?”

“Have you no inkling?” the witch snarled. “Have you no memory of your transgressions? Don’t you even recognize me?”

Queen Coralee’s brow furrowed.

“I do not know you, witch,” the queen said. “Enough with your trickery. What do you intend for my people?”

The witch’s expression was the only answer anyone needed. It was full of bloodlust and contempt, a thirst for suffering.

“Take her away,” the queen instructed. “Lock her in the last cell, seal it against any magic. I shall speak with her in due time.”

And so, the witch was taken away, but she didn’t mind. Her work was done for the time being. No cell could hold her any longer than she wanted to be held, and when the moment was right, she would strike again.

Back in the throne room, the queen consulted her viziers about the ongoing crisis. While the witch had been apprehended, the Dreadnaught was running loose on the main island and the flame in Coral Canyon was out.

“We must act quickly,” Queen Coralee said. “Call upon the Watchmaker. He must find this witch’s watch and discover what she

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intends. Consult the seer, see what must be done. Recover the fallen from the canyon. Prepare a proper service for the *catacombs*.”

She held up the blood-coated chroniseal.

“And someone find my husband.”

The viziers and remaining defenders did just that, heeding the queen’s instructions to a tee. But much was for naught. Shortly after the Watchmaker received his instructions, the Dreadnaught attacked and every watch was taken, including the *witch*’s. Defenders sought out the king, only to find his body lifeless and savagely beaten. His corpse was returned to the kingdom, as were his guard of defenders. A service was organized, but all the while, the kingdom was on high alert. A monster roamed their woods and a witch, unwilling to spill her secrets or admit to killing the king to gain access to the kingdom, remained locked in the *castle*’s prison. Worst of all, the other flames of the kingdom were starting to flicker. The queen consulted the seer, but she had seen such a terrible future, she refused to look again and offered only tidings of doom. Desperate, the queen turned last to the mage, the elucidator and observer, first born of the island and long forgotten by its people, and he alone saw a path forward. He laid out four tasks that must be accomplished. They were daunting and nigh impossible. The few remaining defenders began to fall. Only a few remained. Civium began to whisper nervously to one another in the halls.

With nowhere else to turn, Queen Coralee issued the order. The kingdom needed help, and they needed to prepare for the worst. A scant trio of defenders could not protect Dembroch domestically and abroad, let alone hope to accomplish the *mage*’s proposed courses of action.

“Send out the call to every corner of the *globe*,” the queen commanded. “Every able-bodied, good-spirited man and woman, whosoever believes themselves worthy and able, are asked to become defenders of Dembroch and save our timeless *kingdom*.”



## CHAPTER 2

### *We Four Friends*

**D**embroch's request for aid was published in every paper around the world. Millions saw it, a few took it seriously. And my friends I were one of them.

We were about ten or so, little firecrackers of energy and imagination. There was Clay, taller than the rest of us and bold as brass, an all-American kid who had everything going for him. He liked Jenn, the new girl from the big city, who was brilliant and beautiful and happy. We came to tease Jenn for her uncanny eye to spot all things sparkly and shiny and her equally strong dislike of mud, goop, and germs. Meghan was my younger stepsister, a little pill sometimes, a couple years younger than the rest of us, but so confident and cool and sure of herself. She often did her own thing, but when it came down to it, she stood with us through thick and thin. And then there was me, Nick, the starry-eyed adventurer always looking to escape my classes and play in the woods with my friends.

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We couldn't afford much back then, so playing pretend in the woods was our favorite thing to do. But if there was one thing worth saving up for, it was the orange cream malts at Dave's Diner.

Well...that was, until Dembroch.

We were in Dave's Diner that fateful day, sipping our well-earned malts, when Clay came charging through the door. Normally quite reserved, Clay was beside himself, insisting we read the listing he'd found in the newspaper's classifieds:

### Immediate Assistance Needed

*Dead is the king of Dembroch, as are many of our knights and dames. We call upon the noblest members of the public to aid our kingdom during this trying time and volunteer for our sovereign military order. Defenders are expected to guard the kingdom, the dowager queen, and her people at any cost. If you find yourself willing and able, deliver your statement of intention, letters of mark, \$125, and a lock of your hair by post.*

Ah, I still remember the feeling when I first read it. I couldn't wait to be a knight. A defender of Dembroch. I yearned for it with every fiber of my being. And, in my heart, I thought about the queen, the desperate dowager seeking help. How I wanted to be her knight, I realized. How I needed to be. And all I had to do was save \$125. That would be worth every penny.

My friends must have felt the same way. Jenn, Clay, Meghan, and I helped one another save up our money. Once we'd made enough, we collected everything we needed to apply and mailed it to Dembroch. We waited for ages it seemed until, finally, we received a reply.

We'd been accepted. Each of us were given a certificate naming us knights and dames of the kingdom by authority of the ruler, Queen Coralee. She gave us metal brooches, the seal of Dembroch, to wear at all times. They were beautiful, shining medals of a castle silhouette,



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encircled by a ring of flames with the kingdom motto, *Omnia Aeterno*, inscribed in the bottom. Lastly, she wrote each of us a letter. I thought for sure it was our summons, our call to the kingdom. But in it, we discovered a less amazing truth. Though my friends and I had been named knights and dames of Dembroch, we were placed in the Reserves.

I looked it up later just to be sure. To be in the reserves was like being benched during the game. You were there in case of emergency, a last call of sorts, doomed to sit and watch while the stars took the center stage. A couple hundred people had volunteered to help Dembroch, and the queen had called several of them into service. But not us. Not my friends. Not me.

I took it in stride, or tried to. Though we hadn't received a direct summons, we pined for the day in which we would be called. I still longed to go there, even if it took longer than expected. So, in the meantime, I started writing letters to Queen Coralee, promising to find her one day and save her kingdom.

Yeah, ~~that's~~ right, I liked her. Or the idea of her. I wanted to be her knight. And I felt sure that, if I kept writing to her, one day, she would call upon us. One day, Dembroch would need us.

But, someday never came. Dembroch, and the queen for that matter, never called for us. Years passed. My friends and I grew older and, worst of all, we grew apart. We stopped talking about Dembroch, then we stopped talking all together. I started spending more time alone, filling my time waiting and hoping for the kingdom that would never call...

Then, one day, out of the blue, near the end of high school, we received a package from Dembroch. I got the gang together and tore open the envelope to find—just a book. It was entitled *The Knights and Dames of Dembroch*. There was no letter, no explanation, just the book. I poured over it, suspecting a secret message or summons lay within, but there was nothing.

A few days later, the worst happened. We received a letter from Dembroch. I gathered my friends once more. Within was not a

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summons, no, nor an explanation of why we had received the book. It was a dismissal. The queen renounced our titles and disbanded the order of defenders. There was no clarification, no reason, just a dismissal and request we send back our medals.

I was so angry and ashamed. My friends laughed it off, admitting that they'd always thought this "Dembroch thing" was just a scam to get money from kids. Deep down, though, I knew it was real and I knew why we'd been removed from the order. My letters. I was positive that my letters, which had started innocently enough and perhaps turned into chaste little love letters to the queen, had spurred her to take our titles.

With no other evidence to the contrary, I lived with that guilt. Because of my childhood crush, we were dames and knights no more. I tried to make it up to my friends. I wrote many more letters, begging the queen to take us back, or at least my friends, but we never heard another word. All the while, my friends and I drifted further apart. A few years later, we graduated high school. Clay and Jenn ran off to Seattle and got married. My sister and I remained strong, promising to stay together through thick and thin. And then, as if fate had turned against us, we too were torn apart.

I remember it too well. Our parents arguing and shouting. The word 'divorce' being thrown out like a knife. The papers arriving. My stepmom moving out, dragging Meghan with her. The long talks with Meghan in the woods, consoling one another, promising that no matter what, we would stick together, brother and sister. And then, a few weeks later, when the divorce was finalized, Meghan's mom decided to move to Seattle. Meghan and I met in the forest, and she begged me to come with her. At that point, Jenn and Clay had been married a few years. Meghan was a year away from graduation. Dad was kicking me out of the house to live on my own. There was nothing left for me in little, ol' Midvale. Except Dembroch. What if they sent for us? No one would be left in Midvale to answer their call.

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“We’re not defenders anymore!” Meg had cried. “We haven’t been for years. You’re waiting for nothing.”

But I couldn’t bring myself to leave. Sure, it had been more than a decade since we’d first volunteered, but someday, they would send for us.

“I’ll stay,” I had said. “I’ll stand guard. I’ll wait for the summons and call you all back when it’s time.”

She called me stupid, I called her a traitor. And in the end, Meghan stormed off and I was all alone in Midvale, pining for a kingdom that had never needed me, for a life I had wanted but been refused.

As the days and weeks passed into months and years, I thought often of Dembroch and its queen, wondering what had happened to her. I wondered if and when they would call upon my friends and I. Surely it would be the next day. Or the next. Or the next...



## CHAPTER 3

### *The Clash at Cliffside Tower*

Fifteen years later, the defenders of Dembroch huddled in the tower, awaiting the worst. Swords were held with the loose grip of inexperience. Haphazard pieces of armor clung to their bodies as sweat moistened their foreheads.

These men and women were most of the remaining members of the Reserves, volunteers from all walks of life, aspiring heroes, cowards, and charlatans. They hid in the Cliffside Tower, waiting for Sir Kenneth. Of these last Reserve defenders, Sir Kenneth alone had devised a final, desperate plan to save the kingdom and his fellow knights and dames. And though Sir Kenneth had come upon a great idea, it was ultimately ill-informed, shallow, and—to be blunt—stupid.

Sir Kenneth was deep in the Horror Hollow. His brilliant plan? To retrieve the fortissium blade, a sleek sword of black, indestructible

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metal. All around him, the monsters of the hollow hissed as though warning him to not take the blade from the Storm Stone. The blade too resisted him, sending jolts of electricity through his fingers. But, at long last, he rent the sword from the stone. As he did, the stone's dial was wrenched out of place and a blast of winter winds came out. The gales blew Sir Kenneth, sword in hand, out of the Horror Hollow. He found his feet and ran, headed for the skybridge. Around him, the mountainous terrain of Ryderwyle, normally green and lush, was quickly coated in snow and ice from the winter wrath unleashed. The monsters of Horror Hollow shrieked after him.

Huffing and puffing, Sir Kenneth made it to the skybridge, the path connecting the mountain island of Ryderwyle to Dembroch's main island over a channel of deep ocean. He sprinted across it. The fortissium blade was heavy in his grasp.

Just then, when the knight was almost across the skybridge, the Dreadnaught arrived. It slammed into the bridge, smashing it to smithereens. Like dominos, the bridge began to collapse. Sir Kenneth leapt just as the structure crumbled beneath him. He crashed into the water. Salt bit at his wounds and the cold cut to his bone, but he did not stop. Sword still held tightly, he swam along the channel to a calm inlet. He scaled the cliffs and ran deep into the woods.

Miraculously, Sir Kenneth made it back to Cliffside Tower. His fellow defenders cheered heartily at his arrival, but there was little time to celebrate. The Dreadnaught appeared right behind him, crashing through the trees. Sir Kenneth, too far away from the tower to beat the monster in a race, turned and stood his ground to face the beast. He bore his new sword offensively. The black metal glinted in the summer's heat.

The Dreadnaught kept charging. It roared. There was the buzz of a million ticks and clicks. And then, the sky turned black. Sir Kenneth's bravery faltered ever so slightly.

The monsters of Horror Hollow, repugnant beasts of fangs and fire and flight, had followed Sir Kenneth, the thief of their treasure. They

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bore down on him now, the Dreadnaught scuttling into the fray too, a million teeth aching to sink into the **kn**ight's flesh.

Sir Kenneth swung mightily with the fortissium blade, that indestructible sword that could cut through anything—should have cut through anything—and it glanced right off the monsters like water off a **duck**'s back.

The knight did not get a second chance. He was swarmed by the monsters, lost in a sea of teeth and blood.

It was the last anyone saw of Sir Kenneth. There were shrieks and squelches, rips and tears. A second later, a severed arm, still clutching the black-bladed sword, flew high into the sky, fell through the **tower**'s window, and landed with a splat in the upper room amongst the defenders. The blade was spattered in crimson blood. The fingers twitched.

No one tried to grab it. It was all too clear: the sword would not aid a thief, let alone these cowardly defenders.

Beyond the tower walls, the world seemed to rumble. No one had to look to know what was coming.

The monsters of the Horror Hollow landed on the **tower**'s top. They clawed through, breaking into the upper room. At the same time, the Dreadnaught assaulted the walls, breaking large chunks away. The defenders fought for all it was worth, but they were indeed ill-equipped and inexperienced. Some were gobbled up by the Dreadnaught, others were skewered by the monsters of the hollow. It was an extermination, and the cries of terror and agony were the stuff of nightmares.

Across the island, in the **kingdom**'s castle, a new nightmare was unfolding. Free of her prison cell of the last twenty-five years, Sorgana the witch burst into the throne room. There, the queen was begging her last remaining citizens to stay in the kingdom.

The witch cackled as she entered and, with a snap of her fingers and curt wave, sent the citizens flying to their deaths.

“**Witch!**” the queen shouted. She made to draw her sword.

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But Queen Coralee was too slow. The witch had already spoken an incantation and a weave of thorns wrapped around the queen tight as a blanket. She fell, crying out as the thorns stabbed her sides.

“How did you escape?” Queen Coralee cried.

“I had a hearty meal,” the witch replied with a smack of her lips. “Magic lives in my veins as it lives in your island.”

The queen seemed confused for a moment. “You do not manipulate Dembroch’s magic? You dare hold magic—your own magic—*within* you?”

The witch giggled at the queen’s lack of vision. “It’s a power you would never dream of holding.”

“How—why would you dare?”

“Tales for another time, my queen,” the witch simpered. “Come with me, dear queen. Your kingdom cries for you.”

The witch dragged the queen to the top of the castle’s tallest tower. There, on the open-air balcony under the Reliquary, they saw the unfolding calamity.

All across the isles, the land itself seemed to be dying. Trees rotted and fell. Vineyards and grassy hills yellowed. Rumbles pulled the earth apart in deep fissures.

But the true horror was at the Cliffside Tower on the northeast headland. The tower was burning. An inferno blazed from its top. Rivers of boiling blood spilled out of the upper room and down the broken walls. The Dreadnaught was still tearing away, snatching up bodies.

“The defenders of Dembroch are dead,” the witch proclaimed. “With it dies your kingdom’s magic, and so too shall you.”

She grabbed the queen by the head, squeezing her face. Savoring this perfect moment, Sorgana let the magic course through her. Her fingernails bore into the queen’s skin. She declared the incantation she’d been reciting for more years than she could count.

The air seemed to be vacuumed from the world. The witch’s youthful beauty decayed away, revealing her true, hideous form, as her

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magic was put to the test. In her grasp, the queen writhed in agony, screaming wordlessly.

Elsewhere, the last defender on Dembroch crawled across the inner room of the Cliffside Tower. She reached for the fortissium blade, which was pinned under a fellow dame's burning body. When she tried to pull it out, it shocked her and refused to be wielded. She died that way, pulling on the sword, as the monsters of Horror Hollow mobbed her.

The witch sensed this final death, felt the last breath as though she had been cheek-to-cheek with the dame. The kingdom felt it too as the mighty isles tremored.

And just then, as the witch's spell on the queen should have been completed and the witch should have been triumphant, it all stopped. The spell seemed to hit a wall, an unseen barrier. A blast of pain shot through the witch's hands and up into her temples. She gasped and released the queen. A deep cut had split across her forehead. Blood dripped from the wound.

Spitting with fury, the witch looked beyond the balcony's edge. The Cliffside Tower was a firestorm. No person could have still been alive. The magic must have been—

A flicker caught her eye. The witch spotted a different, smaller flame burning in the southeast. It was one of the magical flames and it was still alive.

"No!" she cried furiously.

She spun on the queen and was nearly skewered. The queen, unharmed by the botched spell and freed from thorns, had gotten to her feet, drawn her sword, and tried to stab the witch.

"Dembroch will never fall," the queen declared, pressing forward and swinging expertly. "So long as I am queen of these isles, and the defenders of Dembroch stand, this kingdom and its magic will never fall to you."

Queen Coralee swung again. Weakened from her attempted spell, the witch could only dance away. She circled the balcony, waiting for



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her energy to return, for her magic to flow once more at a level that would allow her protection and defense.

“You have shown your hand too soon,” the queen said confidently. “Dembroch will not fall this day, if that is what you hoped. The poor defenders in the tower are not the last.”

“You disbanded the order,” the witch seethed.

“Their titles may be gone, but their duty and bonds still remain,” the queen corrected. “The last defenders eagerly wait on distant shores for their summons. They are the fiercest warriors. Beyond compare. They know Dembroch’s every secret, know every cavern and tree and blade of grass. They will know what happened on this day and they will come for your head, witch.”

Sorgana did not seem intimidated by this. If anything, she looked ready for the challenge, happy to know why her spell had failed, and anxious to go about completing her plans.

“Let them come,” she said gleefully. “I will slaughter them, and then your kingdom will truly fall.”

Queen Coralee charged with her sword. The witch drew on what little strength and magic she had left to her devices. The castle quaked. The isles of Dembroch tremored. The Cliffside Tower burned. The defenders’ bodies burnt to ash. The blood of eighty-some souls saturated the tower’s grounds. And there, in the southeast Gate Grounds of the kingdom, one small, magical flame continued to burn.



## CHAPTER 4

### *The Summons*

He pushed through the crowds. His brow was slick with sweat and he longed to rest, but time was no friend to him.

As he pushed past, people stared. Maybe it was his clothes. Maybe it was his bright green eyes. Maybe it was the blood. No one was brave enough to stop him, and he was in too much of a hurry to care.

He made it—*finally*, he breathed, dark splotches passing through his eyesight—and hurried inside. The building was taller than any he'd ever seen and made of shining metal and glass. Inside, he begged to see her, insisted, shouted, but the gatekeeper would not allow it. He begrudgingly left the package, instructing the receptionist to give it to Lady Meghan at once.

And he was off again, bulldozing through the crowds, breathing hard, wiping the blood from his eyes, hurrying every chance he could.

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But it was for naught. The next two recipients, Sir Clayton and Lady Jennifer, were also unreachable. He left their packages, trusting that fate would deliver them to the right hands, and hurried on, marching into the forest, heading south. He had to find the one who would listen. The one who would unite the last defenders. The one who could save Dembroch.



I was the last person anyone would call, even as a last resort. No one sought me out intentionally. That’s why it didn’t make any sense to find someone waiting just for me.

I was halfway up the stairs to my condo—just a fancy name for my tiny, dingy, studio apartment on the fourth floor. Bangs were echoing down the stairwell. They were loud, incessant.

“Sir Nicholas!” someone shouted, their cries so desperate, I thought someone had died.

What was going on? I wondered. Was someone trying to break down a door? Were they calling for me?

Fearing a drug-addled trespasser or loathsome landlord demanding rent, I slunk back down the steps. I must have made a noise, because a head rose over the top of the stairs. It was a man, masked in shadow, but obviously big, burly, and angry. His eyes seemed to glow in the dim lighting.

Upon seeing me, the man ran toward me, descending the flight at a rapid pace.

I did the one thing I was good at in the face of danger: I shrunk on myself. I couldn’t even bring myself to turn or run, let alone prepare for battle. I cowered, fearing the worst.

The person came to a stop a few steps above me. His breathing was labored. Dried blood covered his forehead and was smeared down his cheeks.

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“Sir Nicholas Hutchinson?” the man said, his voice aged, gruff, and twanging with a foreign accent one-part Scottish and another unknown to my ears.

“Yes,” I said nervously, though I’d never been called a sir before. Plenty of other names, but never sir.

I dared to look up.

Towering over me was a man with deep set eyes so green they seemed to glow, bloody and blistered cheekbones sharp as mountain bluffs, scrapes and scuffs all over his body from a long journey, and bristles of white hair poking out of his scalp and ears. He wore mustard yellow clothes made of leather and felt. I thought I saw something shining on his chest, but I didn’t dare look anywhere but directly at him. He had the air of a man who had traveled too far for a glass of whiskey.

“Sir, are you—?” I stammered, eyeing the dried blood smeared over his cheeks. “Do you need an ambulance?”

Unexpectedly, the man swept into a deep, gracious bow.

“I have traveled quite far to see you,” he said, his voice still deep, but carrying a note of jubilation. “I am Page Hybore of Whittlesea, servant of Queen Coralee and citizen of the Timeless Kingdom of Dembroch.”

I couldn’t help it. I gasped. Fireworks shot off in my mind. It felt as though I’d been shaken awake from a twenty-year slumber. Had I just heard right?

My eyes flew to Page Hybore’s chest. The shine on his tunic was a medallion, circular in shape, a castle silhouette inscribed in a ring of flames. My heart seemed to freeze.

It was the sigil of Dembroch.

The name of Dembroch had not passed my lips in several years, nor had it crossed my mind much. My knight’s brooch, first received at the age of ten, was tucked away four flights up, stowed in a box of knick-knacks, its allure forgotten alongside my hopes of regaining my physical fitness or achieving financial stability. The child who had once hoped and believed in Dembroch was now a grumpy old man, thirty-three

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years of age and at least three hundred in spirit, sharp in skepticism and forgetful of youth and joy.

“This is a joke,” I said flatly.

The man named Page Hybore cocked his head.

“This is no joke, I assure you,” he said. “Hear my words, Sir Nicholas. Dembroch summons you.”

He reached into the breast pocket of his mustard tunic and withdrew a bound scroll and a pocket watch. He held them out to me.

“But—but I’m not a knight anymore,” I stammered. “The queen—”

“The queen regrets her actions,” Page Hybore said. “We saw a time of peace, a calm in the eye of the storm. But the kingdom is in dire straits, more so than ever, and on the verge of collapse. We have reclaimed a temporary calm, but it shall not last long, or so long as the last period. I was sent to collect you. I have traveled over land and sea, through bitter cold and blazing heat, to find you. If we—if Dembroch—is to survive the coming nights, it needs its last defenders.”

My brain seemed to be short-circuiting. I wasn’t fully understanding the page.

“Dem—Dembroch,” I stuttered. “It’s in trouble?”

Eyes glowing green, Page Hybore gave me another look, a suspicious one that seemed to wonder if I was playing a game and kidding him or testing him somehow.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just... What’s happened?”

“There is much to explain, as you well know,” the page replied. “Suffice it to say a terrible famine of sorts has befallen our kingdom and a witch threatens our lives every moment she breathes. Now, please, come with me.”

“What about my friends?” I said, though I hadn’t called them *friends* in years. These were surely the other Reserves he spoke of.

“I have already reached out to them,” the page replied. “By now, they have received their summons and their chroniseal—”

“Their what?” I interrupted.

Page Hybore seemed impatient now. He held up the pocket watch.

## THE SUMMONS

“This is your watch,” he said, then pointed to his chest. “When you affix it to your Dembroch sigil, it creates a chroniseal.” He said the word slowly as though I were a child. “Press the winding crown and you shall be taken where you need to go. Now, if you please, Sir Nicholas, time is of the essence, a commodity we cannot afford to waste any longer. Come with me! Now!”

His last word caught in his throat. He clutched at his gullet and made a weird rasping noise. The next second, he fell onto me. He was heavier than I expected and we crashed to the ground. I wiggled out from under him and turned him over.

The man lay deathly still. His eyes, once vibrant and alive and flecked with green, were hazy and distant.

It took me a moment to realize it. The man was dead. Just like that. Dead. Gone.

“No,” I said to myself. This man had more to say. He could not die. Not like this. I needed to know more.

Before I fully knew what I was doing, I was hammering on his chest. After several pushes, I gave him mouth-to-mouth. I breathed for all it was worth, willing the page to come back from the brink.

Suddenly, just as I was about to compress his chest again, Page Hybore jolted back to life. He coughed and spluttered before looking right at me. His eyes were a soft blue, which was odd considering how green they’d been before.

“Sir Nicholas,” he gasped, holding his chest. “I—”

The words caught in his throat again. He shuddered violently and lay flat. His breathing became sickly and shallow. Trickle of blood ran from freshly opened blisters on his cheeks. He stared at the ceiling, mouthing without sound.

“Sir?” I stuttered. “Page Hybore? Are you—”

“Listen,” he murmured, finally finding his voice, the words quiet and weak. “My Sinclair. My Emily. They lie hidden in Dembroch. They need your help. Tell them I love them. That I did this for them. Help her to find the safest shores. It’s where...” His voice lost strength and I

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didn't quite hear the words. He took a rattling breath and, louder, said, "And the witch—"

Page Hybore grimaced and shook violently again. His eyes flashed green.

"Page Hybore!" I cried.

"Beware, Sir Nicholas," the page managed to say as he convulsed. "Save the kingdom. Save my—"

And suddenly, he lay still again. The green light left his eyes and they were blue once more, fading in vibrancy until they were dull and lifeless and blue. Bruises began to form under his chin, spreading up into his face. His bloody cheeks flowed red.

I sat in stunned silence, unable to process what I'd just seen. Page Hybore was dead again, and this time, deep down, I knew he wasn't coming back.



Wheels squeaked as Page Hybore's body, zipped up in a black body bag, was borne away on the coroner's stretcher. The police asked me what I knew, and I lied through my teeth until they had gone. Pushing past my curious neighbors, I locked myself into my apartment room and, from my pocket, pulled out the two items Page Hybore had given me.

Examining them, my heart beat fast. It was as though with Page Hybore's death, the child within me—that young, resilient, adventurous Nick that had been buried deep under my adult logic and sense—had risen once more, eager for the quest ahead. For the watch and the summons. For Dembroch.

The watch was made of a metal I'd never seen, a shining black speckled with gold flecks. It seemed an ordinary pocket watch, though it read eleven-o'clock when the correct time was seven, and the time would not change when I tried to reset it. Additionally, curiously, the

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back was not enclosed. I could see all the inner gears that clicked and spun in mechanical precision.

I turned my attention to the scroll. It read something like this:

*Dead are the last defenders of Dembroch, helpless is the queen. In this, our darkest hour, we call upon you, our last knights and dames of the Reserve. Set your affairs in order and fly to the defense of your queen, her people, and this land. We pray for your safe voyage and shall expect you by first light of summer. Fly to us, our last knights and dames, and save your Timeless Kingdom of Dembroch.*

I folded the note and sat on the edge of my bed. My hardened heart thudded away, breaking free of its skeptical shell. My mind spun like a leaf twirling down a river in the woods.

“It’s real,” I breathed aloud.

After all this time, Dembroch, my renounced knightship, the queen—they were all real.

My brain screeched to a halt as I thought of the queen named Coralee. I remembered my youthful yearning, my letters, and my childish crush. My cheeks burnt red though no one was around. For the first time in my life, I prayed she hadn’t received any of my letters.

But it *didn’t* matter. Not anymore. Dembroch was real and its queen was calling for help. My friends and I had to answer.

I recalled the faces of Clay, Jenn, and Meghan, my old childhood friends and stepsister, my fellow ex-defenders of Dembroch. I wondered if we could still be considered friends, now that they were all big wigs in Seattle and I was still here in Midvale. Clay ran his **parents’** store, Jenn was a psychiatrist with more problems than her patients, and Meghan was a CEO of a booming tech company. They seemed like strangers, and it *didn’t* help we hadn’t spoken in years.

Time to change that, I told myself, standing from the bed and reaching for my phone. After fifteen years, it was time to get the gang back together.





# CHAPTER 5

## *A Reunion of Friends*

A week later, as the longest day of the year gave way to night, Dave's Diner—the childhood haunt of my friends and I—was packed to the gills. Lagers crowned every table. Hearty laughter echoed off the walls. Friends and coworkers clinked glasses in cheers to the weekend. OI' Dave, the bartender who seemed to outlive any customer who walked into his diner, greeted visitors with a cheery bellow.

For the first time in twenty-some years, four orange cream malts sat on the bar counter, thawing slowly. I sat at the farthest seat, keeping an eye on the diner's front door, thinking I should have ordered beers instead of our old childhood drink.

Over the arm of my chair hung my old satchel, one from my youth that I'd worn to look like a suave, swashbuckling adventurer. In the satchel, I had packed the book about Dembroch knights and dames, the gold-flecked pocket watch from Page Hybore, the handwritten summons from the queen, and my Dembroch sigil. It was everything I

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thought I'd need if my friends arrived and we really made it to Dembroch.

As I sat there, a thousand thoughts ran through my mind. Was it really real? Why had Dembroch and the queen and Page Hybore waited so long to call us? What dangers did they face? Could I dare to stand and fight whatever it may be?

I'd gone looking for Dembroch. After high school, after my friends went their separate ways, I'd collected all my savings and gone hunting. I saw such beautiful sights—mountains so high they touched the clouds, oceans bluer than the sky—and met people of new cultures, different worlds, and unique faiths. Every moment was like a spark from a raging fire in my soul, but the magic soon faded. For all my searching, I never found Dembroch. Never found anyone who had heard of it.

The money ran dry after a few years. So did my hope. I returned back home, the only place I'd ever known, and lived with my Dad. The love for Dembroch I'd harbored since a child started to rot. A few months later, Dad died. I was on my own then. For good. With nowhere else to go and no one else to depend on, I'd finally grown up. I stopped writing letters to the queen. I got a job as a local handyman, sold the house, and hid away from the disappointing world in my tiny apartment.

I didn't look back fondly on those times. I sank low. Even lower when the Internet had come around and I'd searched for Dembroch. All I'd found was an entry from an old encyclopedia, citing that Dembroch was a small island fishing community with less than a dozen citizens.

Such a small, boring, little land couldn't possibly need protection, I decided. Deep down, I started to wonder if, all this time, I'd been a naïve, gullible child, seeking a fairy tale in a sewer.

But here I sat, some ten years later—fifteen since high school, twenty-five since I'd first heard of Dembroch—and the kingdom was back in the forefront of my mind. How had I never found it? What could this tiny little island need help with?

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It all circled around, but it all kept coming back to Page Hybore. It was difficult to deny a dying man's final words.

The door to the diner opened. A motion-sensing frog croaked loudly to announce a new guest. I spun around—but it was just Old Sal from three streets down. He already looked several sheets to the wind, maybe even a whole comforter set.

“You look much harder at that door, you’ll have to buy her a drink,” said Ol’ Dave.

I snapped out of it, exchanging a smile with the barman.

“What you thinking about so deeply?” he asked.

I shrugged. There was no sense in keeping it a secret.

“Remember that ad we found when we were kids? About the knights and dames?”

Ol’ Dave grunted in remembrance. We’d caused quite a ruckus that day when Clay had shown us the newspaper clipping.

“It was real,” I explained. “A guy from there found me last week—”

“Must have been the bloke who came ‘round here looking for you,” Ol’ Dave mused. “Sent him that way.”

“—and he died to tell me...that place we volunteered to protect...it’s real. It’s in trouble.”

The bartender leaned closer to me, losing interest in his clientele further down the counter.

“I know, it’s crazy,” I said. “I’m not even sure if I believe it. It could be a lie.”

“I’ve heard crazier. Seen stranger,” Ol’ Dave mused. “The way I see it, every story has a grain of salt, even the tallest tale. Every one of ‘em has just a bit of truth. So maybe you were right when you were younger. Maybe that place is out there. So why haven’t you gone yet?”

I shrugged again. “I know how to get there, but I don’t want to go without...you know, the gang.”

The door opened again, and I spun around again, but it was just some mill workers.

## A REUNION OF FRIENDS

“Good of you to keep your word and get everyone together,” OI’ Dave said. “Promises—real promises—are difficult to make and even harder to keep.”

“They have to get here first,” I said.

“And if they don’t show?”

I didn’t know how to answer that.

Down the counter, shouts came for more drinks. OI’ Dave hurried over to fix them up, leaving me with my thoughts. All the while, I kept an eye on the door. Several more patrons arrived, but none of them were my friends.

Another hour crept by. My spirits fell. I drained my malt and pushed my chair back from the counter, resigned to head home and figure things out on my own. At least then, if it was a prank or lie, I would be the only witness to my foolishness and gullibility.

Just then, as I threw my satchel over my shoulder, the diner’s door opened. The frog croaked. I looked around, prepared for disappointment, but instead, I did a double-take. In the doorway stood my stepsister Meghan.

She had grown a foot taller since I’d seen her. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and her face looked even tighter. When she saw me, she smiled a thin little smile and strode toward me, her pantsuit swishing crisply.

I met her halfway, wrapping her in a warm hug. She embraced me slower. It felt like hugging a cardboard cutout.

“Doing well, Nick?” she asked.

“Fine,” I replied. “It’s great to see you again, Meghan!”

“It’s Meg,” she corrected.

“Sorry,” I said apologetically. “Come on, Meg! Have a malt! Or a beer. I can get you a beer if you want.”

I led her to the counter. She accepted the malt and we toasted, making faces at the strong taste. Without abandon, I launched into conversation, asking how she was, what she’d been up to, how life was

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going. She wasn't incredibly talkative, and I sensed a tenseness in the air between us. When I asked what was wrong, her eyes narrowed.

"Why are we really here, Nick?" she asked.

I stammered, not yet ready to bring up Dembroch.

Just then, the door to the diner opened again. A croak of the frog ushered in a potbellied man and a skin-and-bones woman. The couple glanced around the bar, spotted Meg and I, and made their way toward us. The woman ambled along, but the man strode with purpose. His personality seemed to fill the room. It was obvious he was headed right for us, though I didn't know why until, with a jolt, I realized the couple was Clay and Jenn. Geeze, we'd all gotten old.

Clay practically tackled me with a hug. I was stunned to see how different he was. Age hadn't been kind. His buttoned shirt and tie strained around his potbelly and fleshy neck. Worry lines crisscrossed his face and grey peppered his hair, but despite it all, he seemed full of energy and life.

"Gosh, it's been too long!" Clay exclaimed, his voice louder and more confident than I remembered. "Would you look at us all? It's like we never left."

"Meghan?" asked Jenn, who had finally arrived beside us. Her voice was slow and sad.

"It's Meg," my sister replied.

Jenn acknowledged this sadly and the old friends greeted one another stiffly.

Like her husband, perhaps like me too, Jenn had grown significantly older. Though she had done up her hair and wore fancy clothes that outclassed the patrons of Dave's Diner, she had a distant look in her eye and a well-practiced frown. Her hair was thin, her face weary. She wore a wedding ring fit for a queen, its diamonds shining like a flashlight. Jenn had always like the shiny stuff.

"Thanks for coming," I said to her when we greeted.

"Clay insisted," Jenn replied. "I'd rather have stayed at home."

I tried to chuckle, but I realized she wasn't trying to be funny.

## A REUNION OF FRIENDS

Suddenly, it hit me: we were all together. The four of us were once again at Dave's Diner on a Friday. And yet...only Clay was smiling. And he was the last one I'd expected to be ecstatic. Growing up, he'd always been the quiet, thoughtful, stoic friend. His energy and bravado seemed...well, I wasn't sure at the time, but he didn't seem like the Clay I knew.

So there we were, the four friends together again. We all stood opposite each other, Clay grinning, Meg crossing her arms, Jenn staring off into the distance, an atmosphere of uneasiness hanging amongst us like a faint, unpleasant stench that wouldn't go away.

I gestured to the malts.

"A drink for the good old days?" I asked.

"What good old days?" Meg asked.

"I'll say," Jenn mumbled, looking nonplussed.

Clay shrugged his shoulders. "Jenn and I can't stay long. Places to go, people to see. We just wanted to swing by and say hello. You've all been well?"

Meg mumbled in agreement. I didn't know where to begin with the recap of the last decade of my life, but I didn't have to try. A second later, Clay zipped up his coat and waved a farewell.

"Anyhow, it was great seeing you all. Have a great evening!"

"Hold on, wait," I said. "Do your old friend a favor and hang out for a minute."

"Favors take longer than a minute," Jenn said morosely.

"Maybe another time," Clay said. "Catch you later, buddy."

There was nothing else to be done, I realized. I had to make them stay. I had to tell them.

"Did you get the message from Dembroch?" I blurted out.

The reaction was small, but instantaneous. Clay tensed as though he were scared—his bravado vanished, and I could have sworn some hairs on his head went grey. Jenn groaned a sad little groan that only ghosts and abandoned puppies should make. Meg rolled her eyes ever so slightly.

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“That’s what this is about,” Meg muttered.

She turned to go.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Didn’t you get the note?”

Meg rummaged through her purse and pulled out a rectangular piece of paper.

“This?” she asked, her voice mocking. “It was left at my office’s front desk by a man who had to be escorted from the building. Who did you pay to do it?”

“What?” I said, completely confused.

“I know you wrote the note, Nicholas,” Meg said, brimming with irritation I had never seen before. “Who did you pay to deliver the notes? The Renaissance Faire? Old Sal?”

“Aye!” Old Sal grumbled groggily from two tables over.

Clay pulled a similar note from his pockets.

“Wait. This was from you?” he asked softly, a deep hurt in his voice.

“Told you,” Jenn said sullenly. She dug into her purse, but instead of pulling out a note, withdrew hand sanitizer. She squeezed a generous amount on her hands.

“No, no!” I shouted. I rummaged through my satchel and withdrew my own note. “I got one too, just like all of you. I asked you all to come here so we could go together.”

Meg laughed harshly at me. It was like a car backfiring.

“Go?” Clay repeated.

“Very risky, Nicky,” Jenn grumbled at me. “We could have died in a car accident on the way here, just for you to have your fun.”

“That’s a bit extreme,” I said.

Clay hung his head.

“This is why I don’t like people,” he mumbled under his breath.

There was the Clay I remembered.

I stammered, frustrated. I couldn’t believe how they were reacting. Weren’t any of them the least bit interested or intrigued? Maybe it was because Page Hybore had only talked directly to me. If I could tell them what he’d told me...

## A REUNION OF FRIENDS

“This is a waste of time,” Meg said. She turned to leave again.

“*This* is an emergency,” I said, jumping in front of her. “This note was delivered to me by a guy named Page Hybore. He was *from* Dembroch. And he died in my arms.”

Jenn let out a dramatic gasp. “You killed him?” She took a step back as though I were diseased.

“He was already weak,” I explained. “But he told me everything. Dembroch is in danger. The people who live there need our help.”

“Help?” Clay interjected. “What type of help?”

“Like we could do anything to help them,” Jenn groaned.

“It doesn’t matter! There is no Dembroch to begin with!” Meg shouted, her cheeks flushing.

Clay put a hand on my shoulder, his puffed-up personality returning to the forefront.

“Nick, buddy,” he said. “I know you’re all worked up about this, but...even if Dembroch is out there—”

“It’s not,” Meg interjected.

“—we don’t know where it is,” he continued. “Or how to get there. It’s a wild goose chase. We have better things to do with our time.”

“Actually...,” I said.

From my satchel, I pulled out the pocket watch Page Hybore had given me. I showed it to all my friends.

“Did you all get one?” I asked. “Page Hybore told me how to use it. I think it can get us straight to Dembroch.”

Clay shook his head adamantly. “Be sensible, man. We can’t just...leave. We have responsibilities.”

“And we have a duty to Dembroch,” I insisted. “We signed up to help them.”

“And then they kicked us out,” Jenn said. “Remember, we’re not knights and dames anymore.”

“It never existed!” Meg exclaimed, eyes bugging out. “Am I the only sane person in this room?”



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“Aye!” Old Sal grumbled at us. Our shouts were drawing glares and firing up the feisty drunks.

“It *does* exist,” I insisted, my voice a bit quieter but no less pleading. “Dembroch is out there. And they need us. You guys gotta believe me.”

Meg sighed heavily. I knew what that meant. She was about to go to any lengths to prove I was wrong and make me see reason.

“And a pocket watch will get us there?” she asked.

“I think so,” I guessed, realizing how ludicrous it sounded.

“Okay, then,” she said coolly. “Let’s go.”

“What?” Clay and Jenn said in tandem.

“We’re going,” Meg said. She gestured at me. “Right now. Take us there.” She stopped just short of saying, “Prove me wrong.”

“This is a bad idea,” Jenn said tonelessly.

“I don’t care,” Meg continued. “Nick thinks he can trick us all by sending cute little messages and forcing us to meet. Well, I’m calling his bluff. There’s no Dembroch. He should know because he wasted five years of his life looking for it. But if he still insists otherwise...”

She fastened the buttons on her suit and crossed her arms again.

I shrugged innocently and held up the pocket watch again, showing my friends the exposed gears.

“He said to connect the watch to our Dembroch sigils,” I explained.

“Together, they form a chroniseal.”

“Great,” Meg commented.

I pulled out my Dembroch medal and snapped the pocket watch onto it. The watch gears and sigil fit perfectly together.

“Then he said to press the winding crown,” I explained. “That should be this button here on the top.”

“Guys, wait,” Clay said, his bravado disappearing again, his face a wrinkled wreck of nervousness.

“I don’t want to die,” Jenn bemoaned.

Unsure what would happen, fearing that nothing would, I pressed the button on the watch. This would have normally unclasped the

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watch's front and revealed the timepiece. Instead, the watch remained shut. But...nothing else happened. The gears within cranked loudly.

For a split second, dread filled my heart. I panicked—had Page Hybore lied? Had he forgotten to tell me something? Was I a fool? Was this all a lie?

Suddenly, a jolt of electricity shot out of the watch and passed through my whole body. A dizzy-spell hit me. Horizontal streams of color began to form around me.

“What in the world?” Clay murmured.

Assuming something big was about to happen, I reached out to my friends. Meg pulled away, but I grabbed a fistful of her suit and held tightly.

The world began to spin. Dave's Diner lost its detail, running into blurred lines. I felt my feet leave the solid floor.

And just like that, we disappeared from the bar. Not a single person noticed except Old Sal, who hiccupped and returned to his lovely liquor, and Ol' Dave, who *humphed* in interest before he returned to tending his clients.

Like Ol' Dave had said, bartenders tended to hear and see stranger things. To the observant, sober eye, four adults disappearing in a flash of color was just another Friday night at Dave's Diner.