

# **PROLOGUE TO DARKSPIRE**

Rick Buchanan

## Chapter 1

The old men sat on a weathered bench beneath the great oak. The first was tall and broad. His leathery skin was dark brown from years of hard work under the mid-day sun. An unkempt mess of white hair flowed into a full beard that was braided and tied with strips of colored ribbon. His kind eyes crinkled with lines that, paired with a booming laugh, were at odds with his fierce appearance.

The other was tall and gaunt. He peered owlshly through a thick pair of spectacles perched on his beak of a nose. He huddled deep within his thick robe to offset the crisp fall chill.

Despite the many other distractions the Harvest Festival offered, children sprawled haphazardly in the grass around the pair listening raptly as the men wove their tale.

“The bastard was deeply fortified in the castle,” the larger man said.

The children snickered at the profanity.

“Clem!” rebuked his brother Leonard. “They’re children, not tavern wenches.”

Clem’s grin broadened as he settled into the story. “It was an impossible approach. Darkspire sat at the summit of a sheer mountain cliff. The only way in was a single stone road cut into the side of the mountain, twisting back and forth as it ascended the heights. The road ended at a huge gate, standing the height of five men. An impenetrable wall of stone surrounded the castle, and an army of bloodthirsty trolls entrenched in fortifications on the mountain walls waited. A direct assault on the castle would force our soldiers through dozens of bottlenecks; easy prey for the archers and stone throwers above.”

The children's eyes were wide, as they pictured the mist-shrouded castle fortified atop the cliff. Trolls leering down at the human army, knowing it would pay in blood before reaching the gates.

"Our forces numbered over five thousand and were led by Pallen the Wise, main military adviser to King Kallidin. General Pallen had divided the army into two lines. The first was made up of foot soldiers and captained by Tell Strongarm.

Children's hands shot up.

"Yes," confirmed Clem. "The very Tell Strongarm who wields the legendary war axe, Treefaller. It's said he can fell an oak as thick as a man's chest with three blows."

"Captain Strongarm stood grimly at the head of the army, ready to sweep back any enemy too slow to escape his reach," Clem continued.

"As mighty as Strongarm's soldiers were, they were backed by the powerful magics of the second line. Dozens of gem wielders followed Sarrett of the Sixth Stone, whose beauty was as unrivaled as her mastery of the arcane arts.

"She's actually a bit of a snit," confided Leonard in a hushed tone. "Always going on about her marks at University, thinking she was so much smarter than the rest of us."

"Uh hmmm," interrupted Clem before he started down this familiar rant. "Even with all of that power, there was nothing to do but hold at the base of the mountain as Pallen sought a way to break the siege."

"They could've climbed the outer cliffs," interrupted a girl, wiggling in excitement.

The old man's smile grew. "A worthy strategy miss, if not for the circling dragon."

The children let out a collected 'oooooh' in appreciation of the sudden development.

"Pitchwing was the size of a barn; her scaly hide as black as the bottom of a mine,"

Clem said.

The old man stood and spread his arms wide. “Her wingspan blocked the very sun as she spun above Pallen’s forces. Occasionally, the beast would fly along the cliffs, releasing a torrent of flame, blackening the walls. A clear warning, she would roast anyone trying to make the climb.

“But surely the wielders could’ve used their magic to get to the castle,” said a thin boy, picking up a pebble and pointing it at the old men.

Leonard leaned down and wiggled his fingers, letting the light dance across the five gem-studded rings he wore. “Normally, magic would have been our strongest advantage. Other races, monsters and even beasts can possess magic qualities, but only men can use the gemstones to manipulate magic to our bidding.”

Leonard’s face turned grim. “However, dragons are naturally resistant, and centuries of Malik’s dark experiments had made Pitchwing invulnerable to all but the strongest enchantments. Magic flowed off her scales like water.”

Leonard continued, “Also, Malik had his acolytes to counter any magic Sarrett’s forces used against them. No, they wouldn’t take the castle with magic alone.”

“They should have tunneled under,” said another boy. “Dig beneath the walls where they couldn’t be seen.”

Clem’s eyes narrowed and his voice lowered ominously.

“The mountain beneath Darkspire is riddled with caverns that are home to the goblin hordes. Small but deadly, the goblins would have the advantage over the soldiers deep in the dark. It’s said the spirit of any man who dies within the depths of Darkspire is trapped there to serve the will of the Dark Lord forever.”

A couple of the smaller children's bottom lips quivered; a sure sign that tears were soon to follow. However, the men were skilled storytellers. They'd told this tale enough times to gauge when it was time to bring in the heroes.

"General Pallen had considered all the options. A frontal assault would be a bloodbath, but there was no other solution." Clem gave the children a quick wink and added, "which is exactly what Pallen wanted Malik to think."

"You see, while Pallen's forces marched west to lay siege to the fortress, Leo and I embarked on a secret mission. It was a long and perilous journey through the northern wastelands to the Elven valleys of Nerum. We'd been personally selected by King Kallidin to secure the aid of the elves in the fight against Malik," Clem said.

"The negotiations were long and arduous, but in the end, the Elves refused to send their own forces against Malik. They considered it a human problem, far from their borders, and would see no Elven blood spilled in a futile attack on Darkspire. But my brother's reputation for craftiness held true, and he negotiated a deal giving us the means to victory." Clem slowly scanned his audience, the suspense building.

"Unbeknown to the dark forces in the west, the army was only a diversion to allow Leo and I the chance to remove the head of the serpent ourselves. With Malik dead, his army would be in chaos, allowing our army to storm the castle." The children jumped as Clem smacked his fist into his open palm with a meaty smack.

"Leo and I would fly on great eagles over the amassed forces and infiltrate the highest tower of the castle, where we would end Malik's long reign of terror. The whole plan hinged on stealth. If the dragon discovered us flying into its lair, one blast of her fiery breath would be the end."

Clem picked up the mug beside him and took a long swallow. In the moment of silence, Leonard's thoughts flew back to that fateful day.

## Chapter 2

“WHAT?” screamed Leonard Marshall, Wielder of the Fifth Stone. The wind ripped the word away as he clutched miserably to handfuls of feathers. This was such a bad idea.

“If you stand up in the stirrups, you can see over the wings!” Clem yelled back excitedly. Leonard cracked open one eye, just enough to see his brother leaning precariously over the side of the giant bird to get a better view of the landscape sailing by below.

Leonard quickly squeezed the eye shut and went back to convincing himself that he was simply riding a pony, not soaring hundreds of feet in the air, clinging to the back of a monstrous crow.

They’d gone to the Elves for eagles. What they got were these giant foul-smelling birds who seemed to take a wicked delight in sudden drops he was sure were meant to unseat them.

He, of course, blamed his brother. Once Clem came up with the insane idea, Leonard couldn’t talk him out of it.

“The story will be legendary! They’ll write songs in our names after it’s all over,” he’d said. Clem had argued these merits and a dozen more. At the time, he’d been convincing.

Now?

Leonard started counting the many ways the plan was likely to go wrong.

“Falling to our death is the most probable scenario,” he assured himself. “A dragon could incinerate us. That bared repeating, a hell’s damned dragon.” Leonard shook his

head miserably. “If by some miracle we make it to the tower, we’re likely to be skewered by the guards patrolling the walls. Let’s not forget, an unimaginably horrible death at the hands of the immortal dark wielder himself.”

“Hhrrrrck.”

His thoughts derailed; Leonard glanced down at the road winding behind them. He peered suspiciously at Clem. “Did you spit on that wagon?”

Clem’s wide grin breaking through his shaggy beard was all the answer needed. He always knew his lummoX of a brother was going to get him killed one day, and here it was. Leonard pulled his cloak tightly around his head and waited for the end.

Long hours passed, and Leonard realized they must be close. He smelled smoke even this far up and the light grew feeble in the haze. Squinting, he could make out the island in the distance. He looked down at the wide channel separating the Isle of Darkspire from the western coast. Jagged columns of black stone jutted from the sea like spearheads, and he recognized the wreckage of hastily built rafts crashing against the stones with each wave. How many men had lost their lives attempting to cross the deadly waters? A thick, spiky tentacle rose from the deep and plucked at a piece of wreckage lodged against a column. He paled at the thought that a quick death against the rocks would be a mercy compared to facing the monstrosities living in the water below.

As they reached the island, Leo saw the wide swath of destruction cutting through the thick forest surrounding the base of Darkspire. Unnatural beasts were rumored to inhabit the forest. Sarrett’s wielders had used their magic to clear a path wide enough for the soldiers to march through unmolested.

They urged the crows higher, hoping the additional altitude would make them harder to spot. The heavy fires from the soldiers' camps below filled the air with thick, gray smoke, helping to conceal them.

"There it is!" shouted Clem, pointing at a dark silhouette barely visible through the haze obscuring their approach.

Realizing he might survive the journey after all, Leonard scanned the skies for signs of the dragon. Although a talented wielder, he knew his limitations. The combination of flame and talon would be more than he could stop. Still, if he held the beast off for a few moments, Clem might make it to the safety of the castle.

Through the occasional gaps in the smoke, he saw the army gathered at the base of the winding road leading to the fortress. Men worked to clear massive boulders that blocked the path while trolls fired arrows down from their outposts above. The wielders cast shields of air to deflect the arrows, but it slowed the soldiers' work. Anyone stepping too far from beneath the shield's cover would find themselves with an arrow embedded in a shoulder, calf, or worse. Further up the path, trolls rolled large stones out of alcoves and down the road. They piled onto the blockade further down, frustrating the efforts of the army below. Odd that the trolls hadn't set up catapults or chutes to drop the large rocks onto the army itself. Instead, they continued adding to the dam of stones barricading the road.

Leonard refocused as the walls of the castle approached. To his amazement, there were no trolls visibly guarding the parapet. Clem had been right! They'd come in completely undetected. The bird beneath him shifted and angled into a steep dive toward the top landing. Leonard yelped as he momentarily went weightless and

clutched desperately to his feathered handhold. Glancing at his brother, he noticed Clem pulling his feet from the stirrups. The idiot was planning to leap from the bird onto the landing as it skimmed just feet off the stone surface.

Leonard cursed silently. Clem had broken an arm trying to do the same stunt from a horse years previously. His combat master had called it one of the dumbest maneuvers he had ever seen a student pull and promised Clem that he'd run laps until he dropped if he ever tried it again.

Lunging from his mount, Clem hit the landing in a hard roll, absorbing the impact across his hip and shoulder. He was instantly back on his feet in a crouched position, sword drawn and held ready in a combat stance. Relieved Clem had somehow not killed himself, Leonard spent the next few minutes directing his bird to land lightly at the corner of the landing. Stepping onto shaky legs, he stretched, hearing his tense spine crack as things settled back into place. Satisfied his legs would carry him properly, Leo found his brother leaning casually against a wall, chatting with a goblin.

Leonard had never seen one outside of crudely drawn illustrations while researching the mission. He studied the compact figure as he walked over to join the two. The goblin was just shy of four feet tall and looked to be male. His skin was porcelain white, shiny, giving the appearance of a marble statue brought to life. He dressed in a pair of dark linen pants and a gray shirt but wore nothing on his oversized hands or feet; probably because each digit ended in a thick talon. Leonard knew they were for climbing in the burrows that the goblins traditionally called home, but they looked strong enough to do serious damage in a fight. He noticed each talon was painted with a golden lacquer. The goblin's face was narrow, with a long, pointed head. Large, dark eyes set into a

deep brow, and no hair visible on his body. The goblin held a smoking pipe in one hand and wildly gestured with the other.

“Knowing the keep was impenetrable from the ground, we used our forces as a diversion while Leo—” Clem pointed toward his brother “—and I entered the fortress through its highest tower.”

“Damn good plan,” exclaimed the goblin. “I mean, everyone’s attention is at the bottom of the spire and here you are slipping in the back door while everyone’s distracted. The way you came in on those giant birds. Brilliant! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Um,” Leonard said.

“I’ve practiced that roll a dozen times, but that was the first off the back of a bird. The wings change the dynamic. The trick is to pull your sword just as you roll up from the shoulder, so you don’t accidentally stick it into something... like your foot.”

The goblin nodded in appreciation of the feat.

“Well done.”

The goblin looked at Leonard. “Scared the life right out of me. I mean, here I am catching a quick smoke,” he pointed toward a door held open with a fist-sized rock, “and thought it couldn’t hurt to check on the progress below.” The goblin elbowed Clem’s thigh, “then *this* guy drops out of nowhere.”

“Can we -,” Leonard attempted to interrupt.

The goblin pushed the pipe into the corner of his mouth and extended a hand to Clem, “the name’s Beckett by the way, I’s so caught up in the moment, I didn’t even introduce myself.”

“No worries at all,” Clem assured him, returning the surprisingly firm grip. He tilted his head toward Leonard. “We’re the adventuring brothers, Clem and Leo Marshall. Perhaps you’ve heard of us?”

“AHEM!” Leonard pointed toward the propped door. “The mission?”

“Riiiiiggghhht,” Clem said.

He looked at Beckett, “Do you know where we can find Malik, the Undying? We need to talk with him about a matter.”

“The boss? Yeah, him and the Council are in the middle of some big magic.” Beckett glanced over the wall at the armies churning below. “I don’t know if he’s available, but I can take you to the ritual chamber and you can sort it out there.” The goblin snuffed the pipe and he and Clem walked into the castle.

Unbelieving, Leonard followed them through the door.

“Can you kick the rock to the side on your way through?” the goblin called over his shoulder. “No one’s supposed to be up here during the siege.”

### Chapter 3

A soft light cast from fist-sized gems embedded in the walls illuminated the corridor. Leonard stopped and marveled at the glowing red stones. He was able to cast a light enchantment, of course. It was one of the first things learned when a student obtained the second stone, but like any enchantment, it required a constant flow of magic. Somehow, *these* gems were maintaining the enchantment without a wielder's presence.

"How is this possible?" Leonard asked.

"What?" Beckett asked.

"The gems," Leo said. "How are they glowing without a wielder?"

The goblin shrugged, "I dunno, they just do."

The nonchalant response to what Leonard knew was impossible shook him deeply. The king had been right to order the siege. What other secrets did the castle contain?

None of the goblins they passed in the corridor seemed concerned about the two humans wandering through the castle. Leonard was about to ask about it when they entered a chamber and saw a man at a table playing a game of bones with a pair of trolls. The trolls crowded around the table on each side, dwarfing him. Their skin was obsidian black and shared the polished stone appearance of their goblin cousins. Each wore brightly colored trousers and a vest that emphasized their muscular frames. When they entered, the man gave a quick wave to his fellow humans before returning his attention to the game.

"A human prisoner!" accused Leonard, pointing to the man at the table.

"What? You mean Dave?" Beckett asked. "Nah, other than magic wielders, humans

aren't very useful." The goblin laughed and then realized his mistake. "Er, no offense, really. It's just, there ain't much that a man can do that a troll or goblin can't do better."

"What's he doing here?" Clem asked curiously.

"Dave's from one of the human settlements across the sound. He comes by every couple'a months with news and trade items."

Beckett elbowed Clem in the thigh and gave a sly wink.

"Rumor is, he has a 'friend' in the troll quarters."

Restraining a shudder, Leonard studied Dave curiously.

"Poor bastard got trapped when the castle came under siege. Been stuck here for weeks with nothing to do but gamble and wait the whole thing out," Beckett continued.

Leonard glared at his brother. "So, there was no need to fly here on the back of those infernal beasts? We could've posed as traders and infiltrated the castle?"

Beckett shrugged, "I suppose so. Most humans aren't willing to risk the journey, but there are usually a few hanging around."

They continued winding their way through the labyrinth of corridors until they finally arrived at a massive pair of wooden doors. Each was inscribed with intricate copper runes inlaid in the wood. A massive troll stood at each side of the doors holding a pike.

"Halt! The Council is in session," one of the guards growled.

"Well, we aren't just anyone," Beckett argued, "I mean, sure I understand wanting to keep out every goblin dropping in with a noise complaint, but I brought special guests."

The goblin swept his arms grandly toward Clem and Leonard.

"Surely, the boss would want to talk to these two. They infiltrated the castle and made it all the way down to the ritual chambers. How often does something like that happen?"

Beckett asked.

The two trolls bent their heads together and began whispering. Occasionally, one would look over at the three suspiciously. Eventually, the two separated. Finding no flaws in the goblin's logic, the guards shrugged, and one held up a hand to wait.

The other troll pushed the door open just enough to step halfway in and loudly cleared his throat.

A frustrated voice carried through the doorway. "We're right in the middle of the most complicated part of the ritual. What possibly warrants an interruption?"

Sensing this was exactly the moment they were waiting for, Leonard channeled a blast of air, flinging the guards into the room beyond. He and Clem rushed into the chamber. There was a blinding explosion of light and...

## Chapter 4

The story trailed off as Clem sat staring into the distance.

“Then what?” asked a child quietly.

“Uh, then we...,” he scratched his head, looking at Leonard, who furrowed his brow in concentration. “There was a huge yellow gem, right?”

“There was a boy,” said Leonard.

As the brothers struggled to collect their thoughts, a young woman walked up from behind and wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders.

“Then my uncles stormed into the chamber and fought valiantly against overwhelming odds before finally slaying Malik. With his dying breath, Malik sealed Darkspire behind a barrier of magic and cast a terrible curse. He stripped the heroes of their youth, aging them forty years in an instant. In recognition of their sacrifice, King Kallidin awarded them stewardship over the township of Marshall’s Landing where they preside to this day as our governors.”

“What of the boy?” asked another child.

“I was getting there,” assured the woman. “After defeating Malik and his monstrous council, they discovered a small child. No doubt snatched from a nearby settlement and meant to be sacrificed to power whatever dark ritual Malik had planned that day. The men brought the boy back to their home and raised him as their own.”

“My Pa says that Ben failed the gems test and can’t do real magic,” said a boy unpleasantly.

Her face grew stern, and she raised one eyebrow at the young boy, who shied back

from her attention.

“Now, Esme dear,” Clem said, patting her arm. “It’s a small town and everyone knows about Ben’s condition. The boy meant no harm.”

Clem grimaced as he leaned forward and stood with the help of his cane. Despite his age, he was still a giant of a man. He towered over his niece, whom he kissed affectionately on the top of the head. Esme pulled her Uncle Leonard to his feet and offered an arm to each of the men.

“Thank you dear,” Clem said. “Now how about you walk with us to the baker’s tent. Widow Aimes is sweet on your Uncle Leo. I bet she’d let us sample a few of the pastries if your Uncle Leo shows her some attention.”

Esme laughed at Leonard’s sputtering discomfort as she escorted her uncles across the town green.