

THE NYVERIAN CURSE

Legends of Naraxus



J.F. MARSHAL

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CHAPTER ONE

REVENANTS

21ST REDEMBER 1137 NW

A TAVERN IN GODSPARK

THE TAVERN WAS DARK AND QUIET. A single candle burned with a gentle flame in its far corner, upon a dusty wooden table. The dim orange glow on the walls flickered with the breathing of a man sitting there, the fire dancing like a cobra before him. He was a round, dark man with black, curly hair and brown eyes like mahogany that glistened in the light. He looked up at his listener and smiled with a mysterious twinkle in his eyes.

“Have you ever heard about the legend of Two Young Gods?” he asked, raising a glass of a glimmering, amber-coloured drink. “No? I didn’t think so. I could tell by your face, you see... the way you’re sitting here, your eyes upon me. Funny... everyone knows the story around here. You must come from quite a faraway place.”

He took a sip of his drink. “I am a bard, and like any dutiful bard, I, Xeros, cannot stand for stagnation! We’ll be here for a while after all, so, please... allow me to tell you a tale...”

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The candle gave out an excited spark, and Xeros began, “This land, Imeria, is a good and peaceful corner of the world, but it wasn’t always so. About four hundred years ago,” Xeros raised a hand and pointed to the dark ceiling, “a strange celestial event occurred above the kingdoms of Karak, Goban and our very own Ranghai. Strange lights in the sky, a spectacle to behold! ‘A harmless cosmic flare’ our wise men called it, ‘an abhorrent aurora’. Life carried on, oblivious of what the lights had done... unaware of what was to come as they all returned to their homes and tucked themselves in for slumber...”

Xeros leaned over the candle so shadows appeared upon his face.

“Some people changed. Their skin—their very touch—had been cursed. Imagine that physical contact with such a person’s skin turned you into something horrible the next time you fell asleep. A monster with no sense of itself, no humanity, only a blind and destructive drive to kill any human in sight.

“Now imagine thousands of these people with cursed skin. Imagine how many of them shook hands at work, kissed their loved ones at home. Imagine—if you possibly could—the devastation that awaited at the end of a day like that.”

Xeros looked upon his listener solemnly. “It would come to be known as the Nyverian curse. Thousands perished as monsters appeared across our nations and ravaged our cities. Killing all—well... all except for the ones with cursed skin. It was selective extermination, and no one knew how to stop it—there was no time! Only panic. Entire nations were being torn apart from the inside as cursed people unwittingly caused whoever they touched to turn. Nobles, beggars, farmers, soldiers... no one was exempt. Cursed skin appeared in every level of society, and so did their victims. Things became so calamitous that the kingdoms teetered towards their self-destruction, but then... two mysterious figures intervened.”

Xeros’ lips slowly curled into a smile and his eyes flashed with a spark of the candle flame. “They were only rumours at first, but as weeks went by, it became known to all. The cursed were being removed from societies... gathered... kept hidden... kept separated from those who they could harm, by two very powerful beings.

“Eventually, a small nation of cursed humans was being led away from their broken, burning homelands and towards the Karaken Mountains. The two ghosts that led them would come to be known as the Two Young

Gods. They showed the world a kind of power never seen before, the power to split mountains, decimate armies with a single stroke of their hands... and break the moon.”

Xeros grinned eagerly at his listener and took a sip of his drink.

“I’ll explain,” he continued, his eyes shining. “The humans, now free of their cursed brethren, regrouped and mobilized. They were hell-bent on destroying the curse that took so many lives. Three nations came together under their kings who led the armies to the mountains.

“We ambushed them. We curtained the sky with our arrows, we flattened the earth with our cavalry to try and kill the cursed exiles and their two guardians. But none died. The gods protected them and then showed their power.”

Xeros swiped his hand across the air. “We were decimated! Obliterated in a single stroke. A mountain was torn into two, a king slain, along with thousands who marched beside him. The fury of the Two Young Gods was so great that it broke the moon. A power unheard of, a warning unprecedented. The guardians then led the cursed people to a valley on the other side of the split mountain... Their new home.”

He took another gulp of his drink and exhaled. “When the dust settled that day, the gods had disappeared and the young kingdom of Nyveria was born. Though the gods were never seen or heard from again, they left their mark to be remembered by. The endless stretch of graves across the Reclusive Plains and, of course, the scar in the sky... If you step outside right now, you will see it—the moon cracked like glass.”

Xeros shrugged, “But as you may know, hundreds of years later, the lines between history and myth become muddled. Did two so-called ‘gods’ truly come to the aid of a plague? Would divines truly protect an evil, murdering blight? Nonsense! Tis but a bedtime story spun by men like me! Tis but a legend!

“Did we really have something to fear? The descendants of a cursed people, their skin still as deadly as their ancestors, prospered too well for our liking. Their bastardly borders inched down the mountains, pressing against ours, harder and harder... until we finally shoved back.”

Xeros hesitated for the first time, regarding his listener nervously. “...The 1135 Autumn War. It was a brief and bloody conflict, but it forged the frontiers we draw on maps today. Funny I should mention it,” he added with a pang of apprehension, “since that was where we lost the

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Dakusin. Brave and noble warriors they were!” he added quickly, his eyes earnest now. “Both fierce in battle and feared among our enemies, they were Ranghai’s pride! The tragedy of their undeserving fate—the sheer abruptness of it all; it doesn’t even make a good bard’s tale! They’re dead I tell you... *dead*.”

Only then did the listener finally speak, and it was a voice like a dry, haunting wind. Skeletal, black smoke cascaded out of the lipless mouth with every word it uttered.

“Then it seems the dead can walk...”

Xeros looked upon what sat across from him. At a glance, this creature that called itself ‘Morgue’ would have looked human, with ragged bone-white hair and dark blue eyes, but beyond that, there was nothing more inhuman that Xeros had ever seen walk into his town. It was neither man nor woman, but had features that were masculine and feminine at the same time—though not in the manner that exuded beauty. Its skin—if it could be called that—was constantly shifting in the dim light. It was as if the creature was wrapped in a blanket of ink that flickered between solid and liquid wherever Xeros was not focused on it. Then there was that grin—that unmoving, lipless grin out of which black smoke curled and coiled in the air when it spoke.

“But then again... that isn’t extraordinary now, is it?” the creature continued, turning to look over its shoulder.

The dark tavern floor was full of people sitting or kneeling, knives at their throats, at the mercy of blurry shadows that had faces exactly like Morgue’s. The shadows that weren’t holding hostages were occupying themselves; some paced impatiently, others drank at the bar, and some sat in the corners, clutching their heads and rocking back and forth.

Morgue looked back at Xeros. “Tell me, bard,” it rasped slowly, “do you know what really happened at Roslo?”

“Roslo?” Xeros turned his gaze to his drink. “I’m... I’m unfamiliar with the place.”

“Oh, come on now. How far do you intend to take this charade?”

Xeros, who shifted in his seat and began staring into the candle’s flame, waited a long time to answer. He threw a glance to Manny Oakson, the innkeeper, who was on his knees with his hair clasped in the hands of one of Morgue’s shadows. Manny was looking back at Xeros with anguish, the slightest hint of a warning in his eyes.

“There was a massacre towards the end of the Autumn War. Terrible losses on both sides of the siege,” Xeros replied. “Everything was burned to the ground. It was where the Dakusin died.”

“And yet...” sighed Morgue, its breath curling around the lonely candle, its glassy eyes swaying to the window by which they sat, “...I was there, bard. Invisible to mortal eyes, and watching... I saw it all.” The curtains were pulled all the way, shutting out the evening light, but Morgue stared into the fabric as if it were fascinating. “I can relive the moments at will. I can watch those people dying over and over again... and I see them, the ones you lie for, at the centre of it all. It’s remarkably curious that I can’t quite catch their demise. Do you think I missed it? Perhaps. I glide among the burning people and I do not see your two ‘heroes’ screaming with the others.”

Morgue turned his piercing, glassy gaze on Xeros, who felt a shiver crawl up his spine. “But there was a remarkable likeness between the ‘heroes’ I saw and your two friends.”

Xeros cleared his throat and nodded to the people being held hostage around him. “I don’t get why you have to go through all this trouble. You look like a very capable... person. Stealing an ancient sword doesn’t sound like a task that’s too difficult. Why not go and steal it yourself instead of sending my—might I add—hopelessly foolish friends?”

Morgue rolled its eyes, and smoke billowed through its bared teeth as it replied, “You call them foolish... They certainly looked quite foolish. Claiming false names, feinting ignorance, insisting innocence, but what did all of that matter to me? I didn’t find them for their sins... I don’t care what they call themselves today or tomorrow. They have the talents I need. They will not fail me like the others did.”