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The Ragged Man

The Twilight Reign: Book 4

Written by Tom Lloyd

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THE RAGGED MAN

THE TWILIGHT REIGN: BOOK 4

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GOLLANCZ
LONDON

PROLOGUE – PART 1

Death stalked the field. As the last of the sun's rays winked out of the sky, a heavy shroud settled over the fields beyond Byora. It was followed by an unnatural hush that rolled in like sea-fog. Bird calls became distant before gradually fading into nothing, but as the gloom deepened there came other sounds: whispers and low, mournful cries from the torpid fens. Uncertain lights winked in the misty distance in cold imitation of life, but then even the voices of spirits and daemons quietened in the presence of something more terrifying yet. In the broken silence the darkness on the edge of the fens slowly deepened and took form.

A hooded head surveyed the still battlefield. The scarce fauna of the fens kept quieter than ever while the baleful creatures that roamed it nightly fled. The newcomer did not notice. They were not what He sought.

The night-robed figure strode forward, pausing a while to look left and right, as though scenting the air. The stink of decay was unmistakable: the rot of butchery that lingers on a killing ground long after the last corpse is buried. He saw the freshly dug heaps all around, unmarked barrows that would soon be beaten from the Land's memory by wind and rain. Around them hung pale shapes, the shades of those robbed of life and senses, unaware of everything but the emptiness within. In a fit of generosity He gestured towards them and watched the handful of lost fade to nothing, ushered towards the Herald's Hall and their Last Judgment.

In the centre of the mounds was a crude monument: upraised spears set in a circle, within which fresh skulls were piled. Above them all flapped a flag of black and red depicting a stylised skull with long, curved canines.

Buried beneath was a corpse, a young man killed before his time,

but that was not why He lingered. There was a scent on the air, one unsuited to a cold, muddy field where the promise of rain hung in the air. It spoke of fire and pain: an echo of horror etched into the earth.

The stench of daemons was strongest at a fissure barely twenty paces from the monument. The jagged tear in the ground was no more than a few yards deep, and stained by their corrupt touch. He stood over the rent, unmindful of the distant shrieks that shuddered up through the ground. It took one as strong as He to notice them at all; no mortal would ever be so attuned to the Land, not even the strongest of witches.

He did not speak. He had no words for the dead, or the deed – it was done now, and He was all too aware of the damage done by revenge. Instead He reached out His bone-white arms out into the night. In His left was a double-headed spear studded with glinting gems; the right was empty. The air seemed to contract and reel around Him, though His robe was barely ruffled by the assault, and when the spear cut an arc through the air the darkness was beaten back.

He grabbed with His free hand, which closed about a spitting thread of light. The night boiled off the thread like black smoke, but He ignored it, and twice more grabbed at thin air, each time capturing a new thread, a slightly different tint, in His fist. The empty black cowl regarded the three threads for a while as He stared intently at His catch.

Then, with shocking speed, He spun about and swung with the flat of the spear at the darkness behind. A momentary burst of light tore through the gloom and a fourth thread appeared. This too was scrutinised, but no further violence was required. He jerked the threads closer, and as he tugged, almost carelessly, four figures from the empty night air appeared to cower and stagger before Him.

A hump-backed wolf cringed from His presence, squirming on its belly over the blood-soaked ground until it reached His side. The others came less easily, but by the force of His will He dragged them close and wrapped the threads around the spear shaft. He ran a long, bony finger over each, and the newcomers flinched as though they had been struck, then stood still, finally resigned to their fates.

‘One is missing,’ Death said.

The Headsman raised his head, his poise subservient though his

voice betrayed no emotion. 'She has grown stronger. Our sister has made bargains to keep herself from you. She is gone far from this place.'

'Broken from my grip and teased away,' He said, looking to the northeast, 'but we all shall pay the price of such a bargain.'

He turned abruptly, heading back towards the fens. The others could not help but follow, and within a few steps all five had faded from sight. The night returned and the breeze dared sweep over the battlefield once more, the chill air empty of all now but the voices of the lost.

PROLOGUE – PART 2

As the light began to fade in the Great Forest, miles east of the closest Farlan outpost, bloodlust broke the silence and an old woman ran through the rising shadows, then vanished. They pursued with eager abandon, spreading left and right to sight their prey once more and run her down. Orders were called; sharp and ugly syllables barked in an alien tongue. She crouched low behind a tangled briar for a while longer, hands pressed flat on the damp carpet of leaves, and listened to their confusion. Not waiting for one to chance upon her the woman broke cover, her feet kicking up a flurry of debris as she raced through the trees.

She plunged downslope, her ragged dress billowing in the wind as she skidded down a channel cut by the rain, then slewed left to drop over a rise flanked by a pair of tall beech trees. With a howl the rider in front recklessly followed, only to find the ground fall sharply away. Horse and rider pitched forward and dropped ten feet down the vertical bank. The creature's desperate kicks twisted it around and as it fell on its rider a brief scream pierced the air.

Their voices changed in an instant. The game had become serious and now they drove forward with mounting anger. Again the woman disappeared, melting into the shadows like a will o' the wisp, while they cursed and screamed threats at the empty forest. The flanking riders wheeled in a circle, furiously searching for a flash of movement until, finally, they were rewarded. Fifty yards downslope she broke from cover again and the chase was on again, the riders crouching low over the necks of their horses as they closed the gap.

They grinned when she darted over another rise and scabbled down the slope on the other side, trying the same lure again, only to find herself penned in on three sides. The old woman lunged for the only escape route but one rider was quicker and cut her off.

She headed in the opposite direction, but floundered in the soft, sodden earth that sank beneath her feet. She slithered down on her belly to the floor of the gully, ending up behind a long stone protruding from the bank, and there she cowered.

The riders approached at leisure, two with arrows nocked on the off-chance she might find the strength to try the slope again. Teeth bared and weapons raised, they formed a half-circle as the woman cringed behind the stone. Her face was covered by a tattered shawl and her fingers tapped the stone's surface, as if seeking reassurance in its strength.

At a guttural command from the leader one rider awkwardly dismounted and lurched towards her.

The Elf was more deformed than most of his kind, his shoulders twisted so that his shield almost dragged along the ground, but his spear was swept back, ready to stab. She flinched and peered up at him through a long tear in her shawl. Her fingers were still dancing over the stone. As he neared he heard a frantic whisper, too quiet and hurried to make sense of, but he guessed what it was.

'She prays,' he announced to his comrades, sharing a grin with the nearest. 'Do they hear, human?' he called out to her in poor Farlan, his malformed throat mangling the flowing sounds of each word. He switched back to Elvish. 'Where are your fucking Gods now?'

Abruptly she stopped.

He cocked his head at her, suddenly aware of eyes like pale blue ice shining up at him through the twilight gloom. Her hands flat against the stone, she pushed herself up with a strange, crab-like movement, stopping only when he levelled his spear and held it inches from her face.

'Where are my Gods?' she repeated softly, peering out through fronds of matted grey hair. 'I am more interested in your Gods now.'

He took a step back; she had replied in perfect Elvish, something he had never heard from a human before. The Elf glanced back at his commanders, the warleader and his sister, the mage. Sensing danger the mage wasted no time in summoning the spirits bound to her; three wispy forms like puffs of smoke, one black, two white, appeared in the air near her.

'And there they are,' the old woman announced with a smile. She offered the spirits a bent-backed bow.

‘Kill her,’ ordered the mage.

The soldier turned and lunged, but the old woman dodged his spear somehow. As the shaft slipped past she caught it and tugged it, jerking the soldier off-balance and within reach of a backhand slap that sent him crashing to the ground.

‘We are not so different,’ the crone mused as she turned to the others.

The two archers drew back their strings as she edged forward, grinning toothily. One bow shattered in the hands of its owner. The other managed to fire before his did likewise, but he snatched at the shot, and it skewed a yard wide. A spear was thrown, but she twitched it aside with a flick of her long fingers and it buried itself deep into the soft earth. When no more were thrown she took a step forward and grinned down at the dazed Elf at her feet.

‘Not so different indeed,’ she continued. ‘Both once tied to the Gods, both now free to learn a new way.’

She hesitated, her tongue flicking out like a snake catching a scent on the breeze. The fallen Elf touched a grimy hand to his face then held it up for inspection. His eyes widened as a discoloration on the skin deepened before his eyes and swelled in an instant to become a bleeding sore.

‘And how well have you learned!’ she cackled, gesturing towards the spirits circling the mage. ‘You have found new Gods, ones weak enough to be controlled and enslaved – and so you become the thing you hate most.’

The Elf at her feet began to keel in fear, pawing at his face as the disease spread, ravaging the skin faster than the eye could follow. He tried to howl, but his throat was already ruined and in moments he was unable to even whimper like a dying puppy.

None of the rest noticed; they were transfixed by the sight of the old woman shaking out her ragged clothes and straightening. Her appearance changed in seconds as she grew taller before their eyes. A thick stink of putrefaction filled the air and her skin paled to the chalk-white colouring of a corpse as her body juddered like a plague victim. Then the transformation was over and she looked up, her blue lips twisted into an uneven smile. A tarnished crown appeared in the tangled thicket of her hair.

‘So I shall learn from you all,’ the Wither Queen announced to the terrified Elves. The quickest-witted of them wrenched his horse

around to flee, but the Wither Queen was faster. She raked her nails through the air in his direction and was rewarded with a scream from his horse. She followed it with a flurry of slashes directed at the remaining soldiers and in a heartbeat they were all lying on the ground, some crushed, others merely dazed. The Wither Queen spat on her palms and flung the spit out with an incantation and riders and horses alike coughed bloody foam. The horses reeled, sinking jerkily to their knees.

Only the mage was left, almost paralysed with terror as she cringed in her saddle. She was oblivious to the bound spirits darting frantically around her head. The Wither Queen stepped forward, a terrible hunger in her face. The mage's horse collapsed and she was tipped forward to sprawl flat in the dark forest mud, senseless for a moment. When she came to, she tried to scabble away from the advancing Goddess, knowing it was far too late. Convulsions began to wrack her body.

Above her the spirits raced around in frenzied fear until the Wither Queen reached out a hand, fingers splayed as though to pluck them like fruit. The spirits stopped and hung in the air above the mage's corpse, their shapeless forms coalescing into vague shapes of smoke. They sank to the ground and submitted without a fight, offering obeisance until they were mere puddles of mist.

'They find themselves new Gods and bind them like slaves,' the Wither Queen whispered with cold tenderness to the spirits. 'That shall be their undoing. The dead one sought to use me, then leash me. I could smell his betrayal even as I could see Death's hand reaching for his shoulder, but I will be a slave no longer. He freed me. He forced me to learn new ways and now he is not there to limit me.'

She reached down and stroked her fingers through each of the spirits in turn, bringing a piece of each to her mouth to suck down eagerly.

'There are more of you, so many more – enough to carry my plagues to every corner of the Land,' she said to her new Aspects. With them following at her heel, the Wither Queen began to drift forward on an unseen breeze, her body fading like mist until it was barely an outline in the shadows. By nightfall the first Elven encampment had been scoured of life.

PROLOGUE – PART 3

Doranei watched as shadows stole through the streets below, slipping through the alleys and coalescing into darkness. He blinked, and the curved avenues of Byora faded from his perception as the stepped city was swallowed by the dark.

Been taught my whole life to look for shadows, he thought. *Now they're all I see.* 'I saw another prophet today,' he said aloud, the sound feeling out of place in the high, silent room.

'I'm sorry? You saw what?' Zhia Vukotic came closer, her sapphire eyes shining in the light of a single candle.

'A prophet, didn't you hear?'

She ignored the edge in his voice. These past two weeks there had been an ever-present air of anger and antagonism about the Narkang man, even in bed. The scent of violence would have frightened any normal woman, but Zhia feared only for him. She tried to remember how long it had been since grief had consumed her every thought.

'I was watching your face,' the vampire admitted; 'I wasn't paying attention to the words. Tell me about the prophet.'

Doranei remained silent for a time, his face twitching slightly, as though words were fighting to get out but couldn't quite force their way through. Tsatach's eye had only just sunk behind Blackfang and the striated clouds over the mountain were tinged a startling burnished orange. It was a beautiful sight but Zhia realised he saw nothing, barely noticing even the bulky silhouette of a dragon, rising to circle on the high thermals like a hunting hawk.

There was a black need for destruction fizzing through Doranei's blood, not unlike that in the maddened beast Kastan Styrax had awakened and left to devastate the Circle City. Zhia and her brother, Koezh, had caused its slumber; the spell they used had corroded

what had already been an unknowable, unpredictable intellect. Now hatred filled its mind, arbitrary and unquenchable.

‘A man this time. It struck him in the middle of the street,’ Doranei said abruptly, no louder than a whisper. ‘No warning. I thought he was drunk when he staggered into a wall.’ Unconsciously he raised his goblet and drank. She saw his lips twitch just before the rim touched, a name spoken silently.

They stood alone in the high room on the topmost level of a warehouse known as the Velvet Cup. Doranei had pulled open the shutters on one side of the room to watch the sun set – at least, that was what he would claim. Zhia knew it was the sight of the Ruby Tower wreathed in shadow that obsessed him; that and watching the junction where his friend Sebe had died. The choice of vantage point had been pure chance, as was the direction Ilumene and Aracnan had taken as they went to lead Byora’s soldiers against the Farlan. When you were angry at chance, and Fate had been murdered mere miles away, who could you take it out on?

‘That’s something I have never witnessed, not in all my years,’ Zhia said, ‘but I do not envy you it.’

‘He didn’t hurt anyone,’ Doranei continued, more to himself than in response. ‘There was a detachment of Ruby Tower Guards at the crossroads; one of them laid him out as he made for a beggar. They manacled him to a pillar while they sent for orders, he stood there for an hour snarling like a rabid dog before they worked out what to do with him.’

‘Did he say anything?’

Doranei turned to face his vampire lover. Zhia frowned under his scrutiny as Doranei appeared to search for something in her face. Her black hair was tied up in a way he’d not seen before, braids woven together and bound by a thin copper band on the top of her head. It wasn’t quite the style many mercenaries used, but it was similar.

‘It was fast, too fast to follow properly. I only heard one scrap.’ He gestured at the Ruby Tower, now just an outline in the evening gloom. ‘What your friend will have to say about it I don’t know.’

Zhia didn’t rise to the bait, knowing he was looking for an excuse to rage, to vent the grief he felt over Sebe’s death. He didn’t want

to hurt her, she knew that, and anyway, any confrontation between them would leave Doranei injured, not her, but she suspected he'd prefer a beating to the pain of grief.

'Ruhen is not my friend; you know that's not the reason I cannot join your assault.'

Lord Isak's death had resonated throughout the Land with enough force to turn a dozen men and women in Byora alone into prophets, but it was a death less than an hour before Isak's that had cast this veil of anguish over the King's Man. Zhia had seen the destruction of the junction of roads not long after; she could easily picture the wild storm of magic unleashed there by a maddened Demi-God. Buildings had shattered at Aracnan's touch; the cobbles were torn up as though fifty-foot claws had ripped through the street.

Sebe's body was buried in the devastation, and the wrecked houses were still burning fiercely when she returned to the city and found Doranei, filthy and soot-stained, tearing his hands on the rubble, alongside dozens of others. Only fifty bodies were recovered in the end; hundreds more, Sebe amongst them, had been lost to the ferocity of the flames.

Zhia had dragged Doranei to safety, all but imprisoning him in the tavern's cellar to keep him off the streets, but he had barely slept since. He would lie in the bed they shared, his eyes wide; staring at nothing, while she lay powerless to help. At times he looked almost frantic, bewildered, as the tears refused to come, undone by a lifetime of stoicism and detachment.

From his own position three streets away Doranei had heard Aracnan's crashing response to Sebe's poisoned arrow, increasing in violence as the seadiamond venom burned ever hotter in the Demi-God's veins. It was a weak poison compared to most, but Aracnan had made the mistake they had been counting on. When he'd been struck in the shoulder he'd realised the bolt might be poisoned, and had used magic to counter the effects – but this particular venom was magnified by the presence of magic.

Witnesses had reported the stones cracking under Aracnan's feet as he screamed in agony – the flesh of the nearest bystanders had blackened and burned even before he started lashing out with arcs of fire. The house where Sebe was positioned, most likely levelling a second crossbow at Ilumene, had exploded under the magical

assault. Only Aracnan's collapse into unconsciousness from the mounting pain had saved the district.

Zhia's voice forced its way into his thoughts. 'Doranei, what did the prophet say?'

The King's Man looked down, knuckles white as his hand tightened on the window sill. 'A great lord falls, a new God rises.'