

fiction

FIRE FLOWS DOWNHILL

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stay on the right side of them.

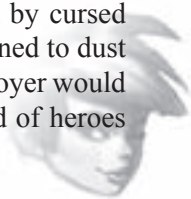
ALEX LANGER

On the morning we gathered to murder a god's child, the city was quiet except for the shriek of wind off the mountains and the patter of rain. The checkpoint guarding the gate out of the city was lightly manned, a queue dragging down the street past the walls of the Outlanders' District, where Breshaar's government forced foreigners like us to live. Bored soldiers went through the motions of checking passes for outlanders leaving the city. It had been an awfully long time since anyone had brought war to this wretched country's doorstep.

For the soldiers, I thought, it must have hardly felt necessary. And why would it not? They had a dragon on their side.

I shifted my shoulder bag nervously. I thought I could hear my carbine's disassembled parts rattling around, planning to rat me out to the army who'd made them. The nasty looks from passers-by didn't help. We stuck out, brown skin where it should be pale, fine hair where it should be thick to protect against the chill. Breshaar's wealth and power pulled in labour from across the continent, but they were a suspicious people. They raised up walls and expected everyone else to stay on the right side of them.

My brother and I had helped build those walls, brick by cursed brick, but I hated them. I dreamed of the day they'd be burned to dust and ash. When the nation who'd sold the world to the Destroyer would be brought low, just like the rest of us. And our little band of heroes was going to do just that.



“Oh, come on, Temar! That’s not what I meant,” Bee said.

“Well then speak clearer, *please*, if you still know how,” Temar sneered. “Spending all your time next to molten metal must be baking away your brain.”

I turned around. Bee and Temar—a twinned pair of freckled cheeks and long black hair—stood close behind me, their faces contorted with irritation. I’d felt a fight brewing like a thunderstorm since we packed our gear this morning, and it was finally rolling through. Temar was probably responsible for starting it, but their voices had risen enough that the people around us were starting to give them looks.

“Shut it, both of you. Think for a damn second,” I said.

“Fuck off, Mel,” Bee seethed, showing her teeth. Our elders said the people of Noroon were born with magma in their veins. Breshaaris preferred to call it “a barbarian instability,” one that made our homeland chaotic and violent and poor.

Well, fuck them too.

“Why don’t we all give it a rest? It’s early, it’s raining, we’re cranky,” Naia said, putting her hand on Bee’s shoulder and giving Temar and me stiff looks. She and Bee worked together at the foundry and shared an apartment, and probably more. They’d never made an announcement, but it wasn’t my business who shared beds with who anyway.

Bee relaxed under Naia’s touch. “Sorry, Mel,” she said.

Naia was a good influence. Relentlessly kind and a gentle soul—a strange fit at times for our mission—but under that softness was a steel backbone.

Many minutes later, we reached the front of the line. The pale teenager, acne visible across his broad nose and through his beard, eyed me lazily.

“Where are you going?” he said in Breshaari.

As commander, I did the talking. My Breshaari was fluent, but I’d kept enough of Noroon’s lilting accent that the guard would assume that I was a simpleton. After decades here, their language still felt sour in my mouth, its tenses disjointed and the word order all wrong.

“Western Mountain Reserve, we go. Fishing, we are,” I said. We’d been ‘fishing’ together many times since our mission began, on our own and joined by proper soldiers from the homeland, come to train us. But we’d be making the final climb alone: the elders needed plausible deniability if something went wrong.

“Who with?” the soldier asked.

“Three friends,” I said, pointing to the group behind me. They waved and hefted their bags. I handed over our travel passes, pink paper cards that always wore out long before their expiration date.

“How long since you ascended to Breshaar?” he asked, squinting at the documents.

Ascended. Like a splinter in my tongue. Children of the gods, they called themselves. Bastards always thought they were above us.

“Twenty-five years, after here,” I said, then added with a smile, “Beautiful land, it is. Thank the gods, I do.”

The guard eyed me with a familiar condescension as he stamped our passes. I closed my eyes and imagined him melting down to his bones in a torrent of dragonfire, mouth gaping in a grotesque scream.

Arriving in the foothills just before dusk, we set up tents and made a fire. It had been fifty years at least since the last time someone tried to slay the Destroyer, two centuries since anyone came close. Temar’s inquiries into the War Ministry’s books found that they’d cut their defensive patrols to the bone. *They’ve gotten greedy and lazy*, he’d said with a grin. *They expect their treaty with the Destroyer will protect them even as it’s about to expire.*

Food frying over the fire, I inhaled deeply and smiled. The smell of Norooni cooking filled me with good memories. I could see the same contented firelight glow on Naia’s round face. Bee sat next to her, their fingers intertwined.

We gathered around, eating out of the pan with flatbread. Temar had volunteered for the first watch, so Bee took him a dish. Warm laughter floated from their direction, their earlier fight long since forgotten. I took a bite. The fried snapweed and eggs were good, even though the powdered fire peppers tasted like a pale imitation of home.

“So, Mel, what will you do when all this is over?” asked Naia.

I thought of my father’s long-dead shop, smelling of leather and solvents and barely hanging on. “If this all pans out, Breshaari factories won’t control the market anymore. We’ll need people who can make shoes again. You?”

“I’m going back to my family’s land. We’d been there for a hundred

generations, practically since Creation. But since the Burning..." Naia trailed off, staring into the fire, before clearing her throat. "I'll start by ripping up the weeds and growing something good. The world needs more green life."

Bee, returned, nudged her ribs. "Didn't you kill your last three potted plants?"

Naia waved her hand airily. "When you get your hands in the soil, the rest doesn't matter. Just you and the earth. And you'll be there to help me, won't you?"

"Never been home. I'm excited to see it," Bee said, her sparkling eyes making her response plenty clear.

The fire crackled. We sat in quiet, the shriek of the wind off the mountain our foreboding companion.

Before there was a world, there were Grandfather Storm and Grandmother Magma, who despised one another with a mindless hate. Only when their wars threatened to consume them did they cease their struggle. It was then that they found that their primordial hatred had turned to love. They birthed Father Earth and Mother Sun, Father Wind and Mother Sea, who built our world from clay and water and salt and fire, and us, the greatest of their children.

But Grandfather Storm and Grandmother Magma looked upon us with jealousy. They made monsters to destroy their first offspring: the many-tentacled leviathans of the deep, the giants of thunder and frost, and the dragons, whose wings spanned the skies and whose breath burned the land and boiled the sea. And they sought to destroy their children.

The battle lasted countless years, the skies alight with unholy fire and continents ravaged by the weapons of cataclysm. The gods eventually claimed victory but found that they could not kill their own parents. Instead, they separated them, forcing Grandfather Storm to wander among the stars and Grandmother Magma beneath the earth. There they would learn their lesson, reasoned the gods.

But when a hurricane strikes, or a volcano erupts, or the last of the great beasts burns a trail of death across the world at the bidding of the mountain men, we in Noroon know their error, and mourn their mercy bitterly.

On the first day of our ascent, we woke before dawn. I tried to help Naia pack before we left, but she barked at me to leave her shit alone. As we climbed, she apologized sheepishly. Packing isn't only a man's job, and she was tired, she said.

On the second day, we reached the first bridge, tattered concrete and rusted steel. Faded signs warned of mines if we strayed from the path. The bridge creaked as we crossed, cables wobbling. Bee, near the end, slipped. She cursed as her bedroll and heavyweight coat slid out of loose bindings, tumbling against the wind as they fell down the rocky gorge.

Dread settling in my stomach, we kept moving.

On the third day, the chill set in and Bee started to shiver. The cold crept up on you here, but it could turn lethal fast. Naia nattered over her but got back only terse replies.

Temar, ahead of me, stopped. He took off his pack and coat, then trotted down the path to Bee. "Take it," he said, offering his coat.

Bee, teeth chattering, shook her head. "No, you'll freeze," she said.

"I'll be just fine, Bee. You know I'm more like Papa. I got his mountain blood; I run like a furnace when it's cold," he said, smiling.

After a few more limp protestations, she gave in. He returned to his pack, and we kept climbing. Temar rubbed his arms, only allowing himself to shiver when he thought no one was looking.

That night, in our shared tent, Temar bundled himself up as though he could build up a reserve of heat for the next day. I stretched to unwind my sore muscles. "You did a nice thing for your sister," I said.

He looked at me quizzically. "Wouldn't you do the same?"

I nodded, and Temar continued. "We fight sometimes, but I'd do

anything for Bee. It's been just the two of us since Mama died. Papa never had much time for us. And the rest of the family..."

He trailed off, but I knew what he meant. Their mother was Norooni, their father a Breshaari man who, despite his affair with an outlander, had rigid ideas about the proper place of things, our people included. Most Breshaaris didn't like half-bloods any more than they liked full-blooded outlanders like me. "It took until we were grown to figure out which side of the wall we belonged on," he said.

We kept talking. Temar asked me for stories of a homeland he'd never seen. Naia, from a family of storytellers, knew our nation's lore, while I remembered our country, rocky shores and sun-drenched orchards. Temar and Bee drank up my and Naia's stories like whisky, bittersweet and intoxicating. Love for a place they didn't know was why they'd joined our journey up the mountain.

I had more personal reasons. I wanted to take from Breshaar what they took from me.

Everything.

That night, I dreamed of my brother. Fuck, I missed him.

On the fourth day, an evil wind howled wordlessly, telling us to go back where we came from and pinning us against the mountain slope. Our crampons came out, and we anchored each other with ropes as we trudged up the narrow path.

A gust came as I took a step, and my foot landed awkwardly. I felt myself tumbling, every attempt to steady myself adding to the fall. I managed to grab hold of an outcropping before I dropped, my legs dangling as I screamed murder to the sky.

I looked down at the chasm below, and my memories began to run together in the face of doom. The taste of iced sunfruit juice and its sting down my chin. My marriage's end, dashed against the rocks of too much pain and too much cold in a foreign land. My father's tuneless humming as he fixed shoes. My brother, coughing congealed blood, wasting away, bemoaning the day the dragon brought our people low.

I felt my grip failing, dragging the others with me. I could see Bee and Temar near to the edge, slipping and straining against the

ice and snow. No. After decades of suffering in Breshaar, years of planning, seasons of training, it wouldn't end like this. Not before we finished what Breshaar had started, before we took from them what they'd taken from us.

"Cut me loose!" I screamed. "Go on!"

I felt a tug around my waist, and I began to rise. Naia and Bee and Temar, digging in, pulling me up inch by inch. As the ledge came within reach, I wrenched my arms into the ice and scrambled up like a madman, heaving panicked breaths.

Lying against the snow, I felt empty, my feelings thrown over the edge to make me lighter. Naia approached me. She was the oldest other than me, the second-in-command should something happen. Her eyes crinkled as she leaned down.

"Cut you loose, Mel? Never. We'd all go plummeting down before we did that," she said.

"You should have," I mumbled, glad though that they hadn't.

"If life is so cheap to us, what are we doing up here?" she said, to me and to the wind.

We stayed there until I caught my breath, then kept climbing.

On the fifth day, we could see our destination on the next peak.

I'd expected a fortress from my childhood legendaria, black towers exuding clouds of dread, but the Dragonhold was just a drab concrete gatehouse, shoved against the hollowed mountain like a splint to a fractured bone. Up the ancient steps, there'd be a half-hidden service entrance to the complex. Temar had found it plumbing the depths of the Public Works Ministry's archives with the help of faked papers and a bribe or three.

As the sunlight faded to orange, we reached the second bridge. Where the first had been elderly, this one was decrepit. Abandoned guardposts with grime-covered glass waved to us from the other side.

We made camp, and I started dinner. Midway through building the fire, I heard raised voices. "You're such a condescending little bastard, Tem!" said Bee.

They'd been arguing all day about what Noroon should be like after our mission was complete. They may have rejected their father's identity, but not his confidence that what they believed mattered to

anyone.

“You know I’m right,” said Temar, his voice a razor-sharp sneer.

Bee paused. “You’re just like Papa,” she said, taking a shot that made even me wince.

“I am not!”

“Yes, you are. You said it yourself a couple days ago,” Bee said.

“Fuck *you*.”

There was a crunch of gravel as Temar stormed off, then Bee came around the corner. She looked familiarly angry. “What a shitweasel,” she muttered to herself.

“Temar?” I said.

She nodded her agreement, kicking at the floor. “He’s so arrogant. Thinks that being a government clerk means he’s smarter than me. We’ve both read our books, but Tem wouldn’t last a *day* at the ironworks.”

As Bee vented, I thought about my brother Krill. We’d fought too, about more quotidian things than politics. He’d died a few years ago. Years spent insulating Breshaari homes—without proper gear, safety for outlander workers was an afterthought of course—had caught up with him, his lungs turned to pulsating stone by the asbestos.

There wasn’t anyone left who needed me. One more reason to climb the mountain and watch his killers burn. Watch Breshaar burn. *Make* Breshaar burn.

“Bee, he really cares for you,” I started.

“Well then why does he do this shit?” she snarled.

Before I could answer, we heard the crump of an explosion outside, and our training kicked into gear. Carbines in hand, we hurried out into the near-dark to screams coming from up the slope. My guts writhed as I recognized the voice, and Bee’s face went white.

Temar.

We converged on him at the same time as Naia, and I flinched as I saw him. Temar’s upper legs and abdomen were a shredded mass, dark and wet with welling blood. As we approached, he shouted at us. “Don’t! Bouncing mines!” he choked out through clenched teeth.

We froze, except for Bee, who ran to her brother and began to drag him towards us. “Fucking help me!” she screamed, her face contorted with panic. That was Naia’s cue to ignore Temar’s protests and help Bee, picking him up and hustling back to the guardpost.

They laid him near the fire as I got my medical kit. When I returned, Bee cradled his head as Naia tried to stanch his bleeding. Temar's eyes were wide with fear. "I don't want to die," he said in a tiny voice.

I uncorked and poured a pain draught down his throat. He choked at it, but within moments his body relaxed. Naia gave me a long, meaningful glance. Temar wasn't going to make it, she said wordlessly. We kept the pressure on, holding him together until his blood-choked breathing finally stopped, and for a long while after that, huddling in the frozen air to keep his soul-warmth from dissipating.

Before ascending the next morning, we said our prayers and lit a candle, then buried Temar wrapped in a tarp, digging a pit from the gravel. We'd collect his body for a proper burial on our way back down, if we could. If any of us remained.

"We're going to end this," Naia whispered, looking towards the far peak.

I closed my eyes and imagined Breshaar's cities as pillars of smoke and fire. That we would. We'd end it all. For the Burning. For my brother. For Temar.

The grey-white light of high altitude illuminated our steps as we began our last climb. Bee, her face a puffy mask with dark circles underlining her eyes, said nothing. There wasn't anything left to say.



Inside the Dragonhold, the darkness was complete. Light wasn't just absent, it fled from the malignant air. It smelled like rust and scorched flesh slithering off exposed bone.

I flicked my torch on, and the others followed suit, snapping into military order. As I counted my steps to the floor plans Temar had provided, the darkness greedily swallowed our torches' light. I felt a low, rhythmic rumble. Naia tapped my shoulder. I'd left my pack outside, but Naia had kept hers, the leather straps straining against her shoulders. "Do you feel that?" she whispered.

I nodded. "We're close," she said. I shivered as a wave of terror swept me. Of course. It was breathing in its sleep.

Two hundred forty-nine. Two hundred fifty. I held up my hand, flat. Stop.

I pointed the torch at the ground, illuminating a web of symbols daubed in fading red paint. Naia hurried forward and kneeled, checking their integrity and brushing fresh paint where disuse had eroded them. She might be an ironworker, but her family had been lorekeepers for generations. She knew the ancient ways, slipping away from us with time and decay, better than most.

Then she removed a scroll from my pack, handing it to me. As the leader, it was my weight to bear. I stepped into the center of the circle created by the symbols and began to read. The words were the sound of burning and freezing and the slow chaos of mountains moving. The words of creation. They scorched my throat, but I kept choking them out. Then, loudly, I said a name, one that was the same in Norooni, Breshaari, and any other tongue of this world.

“Rh’t’h’ykl, child of Grandmother Magma, awake!” I cried.

The stench became all-encompassing. I felt my gorge rise, and before I knew it, I was on my knees retching. Light flared into being, as torches—real ones, not their electric substitute—ignited in long rows.

I looked up. Staring at me was an enormous green eye with a spiraling pupil. The dragon’s form stretched into the next chamber, its back stretching towards the top of the cavern one hundred feet in the air. Its legs were numberless, and its many wings were furled gracefully against its scaly body, the colour of a decaying corpse. Its fleshy mouth bared row upon row of yellowed teeth, razor edges forming nightmarish fractal patterns.

Vomit spilled past my teeth, and my head spun. In every direction, metal shone. Coins and ingots, goblets and jewelry. Gems the size of cabbages. Marble and ivory statues. Royal death masks screaming in captivity. Paintings moldering and eaten by worms. Piles of treasure from civilizations living and dead. Then there were the filing cabinets, wealth in a more modern form. I knew they were filled with paper: maps and stock certificates and bank records, payment Breshaar had taken from the dragon and turned into the factories and armies that let them rule the world even when the monster slumbered.

“What do the maggots want?” said Rh’t’h’ykl the Destroyer. Its voice was like polished crystal, and it dripped with malice. I pulled myself to my feet, head spinning.

“We come with an offer, from the people of Noroon!” I managed to choke out.

“Noroon....” Rh’t’h’ykl rumbled. “Noroon burned.”

I steadied myself and prayed to the ancestors. “But here we are, with an offer. The five hundred years of your treaty with Breshaar are coming to an end. By the primordial laws of the creators, you are bound to receive and consider all proposals and pacts, including ours, Rh’t’h’ykl,” I said.

The beast’s nostrils flared. “You dare to invoke the laws of my mother and father!” it growled, and snapped at me, but was seized in space for a moment, as though by an invisible vise. The glyphs held.

Rh’t’h’ykl snarled. “Your offer. Speak it,” it said, its tongue lolling with the promise of violence.

I bowed. Respect, even to a monster. “Of course,” I said, unfurled the scroll, and began to read our offer. Rh’t’h’ykl would be granted a home in a dormant volcano at the tip of our peninsula. Noroon would protect the monster as it rested. But unlike Breshaar, we wouldn’t ask for a share of the plunder. Instead...

“We have one condition.”

Rh’t’h’ykl looked at me greedily. Its mouth drooled with poisonous bile.

“Your first act under our Treaty shall be to destroy Breshaar and take its treasures,” I said. Children of the gods, indeed. Breshaar would suffer as we had. Starving in desolate ruins, all things good and green about their world turned to ash. Its surviving people would find work where they could in other lands, dying young and sick from neglect and malice. “Raze their cities to the ground!”

The dragon snorted. “You creatures have always been vicious. Your terms are favourable and well-considered,” it said in its hellish drone. “You must already have the promise-marks?”

I laid the scroll out on the ground. The elders of our assembly had signed in pen, and in their blood too: brownish-red streaks stained the parchment. Rh’t’h’ykl sniffed the parchment, and its blue-green tongue grazed its lips. “Another, it needs. One of you,” it said.

We looked at each other uneasily. Legend said that only the king of Breshaar had promised with his blood, that the blood of a ruler was sufficient to bind their kingdom.

“I’ll do it,” Naia said, the look on her face unreadable.

Bee broke in. “No!” she said. “What will it do to you?”

I nodded and pulled out my own knife. The stories said it could

be dangerous for the one who made the pact. “Leave it to me, Naia,” I said.

“I said I’d do it,” Naia snarled, and shoved me aside, standing in my place among the glyphs. The dragon’s eyes were hungry, and snapped towards her, licking its lips. As it did, Naia pulled something from her bag: a jagged obsidian blade with a bejeweled hilt. It looked ancient and horribly familiar, scratching at the back of my mind.

Naia slashed her hand, wincing as blood spurted out. She threw it at the parchment, a spatter of drops that expanded as blood dripped from her closed fist. “Your blood as well, Destroyer,” she said.

Rh’t’h’ykl dipped its head close to her, sniffing the blood. It bit its tongue, fetid black fluid dripping out. It came closer.

Then, Naia leaped gracefully to the side. “Thank you, Rh’t’h’ykl,” she said, and stabbed its eye.

The dragon froze for a moment. All of us stopped breathing. Then Rh’t’h’ykl began to scream.

I had never seen a monster die before. Howling green flames emanated from where Naia sank her dagger, like fire eating at the edge of a paper. The dragon shrieked and thrashed, smashing into the sides of the cavern, tumbling treasures to the floor. Naia stood amidst the chaos, grinning madly, before Bee tackled her and dragged her towards the exit.

We ran, fleeing clouds of poisonous smoke that poured from the dragon’s writhing body. Bee collapsed, coughing uncontrollably. I scooped her up in a ladderman’s carry over my shoulders and kept running, barreling through the door to the outside with Naia just behind me. No time to think. Only enough to survive, maybe.

Fresh air hit me like a rogue wave. I sputtered and stumbled, nearly tumbling headfirst down the staircase. I fell on my rear instead, sliding and smashing against the railing until I regained my footing and kept running, reaching a causeway before I stopped to look up.

The mountaintop was imploding. The roar cracked the rock through like the shell of an egg, and the screech of the dragon could be heard through the stone. The doors of the gatehouse blew open to a tide of bilious fluid, and even with the cold and distance, I could smell it.

I laid Bee on the ground. She coughed feebly. Every bump and bruise on my body began to complain all at once. I sagged to the ground. My eyes closed as warmth swept over me.

The next thing I knew, Naia was lightly slapping my face. “You’re in shock, Mel, you need to stay awake,” she said, as though from far away.

Something soft was shoved into my hand.

“Eat,” she said. It tasted like cleaning solvent, but with my hand forced gently towards my mouth, I continued to chew. A jolt of energy rushed through me, and my eyes came into focus. The pain was still there, but it was shoved back into its corner.

I stood. Bee began to stir, Naia tenderly helping her to her feet. Bee’s eyes fluttered open. Then, she punched Naia right in the face.

As she staggered back, clutching her nose, Bee stood and began hitting her. “What! The! Fuck! Did! You! Do!” she screamed, punctuating each word with a blow while Naia protected her face and abdomen.

Naia, stronger than Bee, recovered enough to grab Bee’s arms. She was trying to be gentle as she held Bee at a distance. Bee’s face was a mask of fury.

“Why?” she screamed.

As the consequences of Naia’s actions sank in, the same question burned on my lips: Why? Years of planning and training, an incredible risk taken by ourselves and our people, all to free ourselves from the Breshaari yoke.

What had Naia done?

“It’s over now. There won’t be another Burning. Not for us, not for anyone,” Naia said.

“Those were not our orders,” I barked. I had never felt anger like this, not even when Krill died. It was magma pouring through my veins. Our elders had given us a plan to execute, and Naia had betrayed them. Betrayed *us*.

“I’ve only ever seen a blade like that in a museum. A giantslayer, they called it. A myth. Something a hundred generations old, made by Father Earth to fight monsters. Where did you get it?” I said.

Naia shrugged. "It's been in my family for a long time," she said.

Naia's bravado boiled through me, and my fists clenched. Bee looked at Naia with disgust. "Temar died for nothing, because of you!" she said, then lunged forward with her head.

Naia dodged the headbutt and pulled Bee closer, wrapping her in a bear hug. Bee struggled and sobbed while Naia held her close. After a long minute, she released her, and Bee crumpled back to the floor, shaking.

"I killed the dragon because it needed to die," Naia said.

"So does Breshaar!" I yelled, fury pounding at my temples. "How many of us have died because of them? In their factories and fields, or from the ruin they unleashed on us?"

Naia nodded. "Breshaar is dead. Its people will live, but their power and its cruelty will fade. What are they without their boot on the neck of the rest of the world?" she said, her legs crossed in an image of quiet defiance. "Could we survive having a power like that? How long until we negotiated for our 'fair share' of the plunder?"

The sun shined serenely through the chill as I stared up at the Dragonhold. Stone continued to fall as the mountaintop crumbled. A great plume rose towards the heavens, a burning sacrifice.

My rage kept me warm, but the magma began to cool. The Destroyer was dead. Nothing would bring it back. And nothing would pay the debt. It was unpayable.

I helped Bee to her feet, then Naia. I tightened my coat, and we began to descend. ■

Alex Langer is a Canadian Jewish writer and lawyer currently based in Brooklyn, NY. He lives near the park with his wife and fluffy mobster of a cat. His short fiction has previously appeared in *On Spec*, *Dream of Shadows*, and the *Upon a Once Time* anthology from Air and Nothingness Press. You can find him at @AlexLanger1993 on Twitter.