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Opening extract from

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Written by

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Chapter One



In the Land of the Broken King

'QUICK!' SIMON GASPED, and pulled Flora down behind an outcrop of dark rocks that rose along the side of the road they'd tumbled on to. 'Get down! Soldiers are coming!'

They'd only gone a few paces from where they'd fallen through the hole in the fabric of the universe into the land of the Broken King. Simon turned to check if the gap was still there. It was, and for a brief moment he saw through it into the forest clearing in Sussex. There, lit by the moon of a different world, was their friend Giles Cuthbertson, collapsed on his knees.

Giles stirred, noticed them, and began to scramble

forwards. Just as he reached the gap, it closed.

There was no sign it had ever been there.

The portal home had slammed shut; how they would open it again, they had no idea.

'Well, that's that, then . . .' said Flora.

Simon suddenly realised he could see Flora. 'We're not invisible any more. The shadow's gone!'

'I bet it doesn't last between worlds,' said Flora. 'More importantly, how are we going to get back?'

Simon thought quickly. 'The shadow-spheres – we've each got two left. And we've still got the hunting horn and the sunsword. They got us here, and they might get us back. But let's not think about that now. Look!' It was getting lighter as a silver sun rose above them, casting an eerie light and bringing some small warmth with it.

It must be a star, thought Simon. *We must be on a different planet. A different world , or galaxy, maybe, or even dimension . . .*

They were in a small, stony depression by a shining black road; jagged rocks were strewn all around them. In the distance, to the north-west there rose the black glass towers of a walled city, banners and pennants fluttering from the crenellations.

To their left, pouring across the barren, dark

plain that stretched towards the city, was a company of about a hundred soldiers led by a mounted, armed knight with metal wings on either side of his helmet. On their right, a cart drawn by what seemed to be a horse was moving slowly along the road towards the city.

'Where's Pike?' whispered Simon, a little cowed by the sight of the armed men. 'Did he follow us here? *Could* he follow us?'

A splutter made them turn, and there, partly concealed by a jutting stone shard, and lying on his back, was the pale, black-haired boy who'd rescued them from danger so many times.

Flora pulled nervously at Simon's sleeve and they ran to him. Pike's eyes were closed and he wasn't moving. Flora pinched his cheek, but he made no sign of feeling it, although he was breathing shallowly. Simon remembered the bottle of water in his rucksack, found it and splashed him, but Pike did not stir.

They made him as comfortable as they could, resting his head against a smooth rock behind a small ridge where he was shielded from the wind and anyone who might pass on the road, and went back to their post. Here they could see over the plain. A little distance away from where they crouched was a

standing stone, the twin of the one they'd come from in their own world. Beyond that was a small stream, which wound its way past them, rushing to join a larger river that flowed towards the south. Hills surrounded the whole area, rising towards mountains whose white peaks seemed to merge into the sky. Strange birds with white rings around their eyes and red beaks boomed and called overhead. Their edges were blurry and shadowy, like the shadow-snake Simon and Flora had fought a few days before.

Dominating everything was the city. A turreted wall ran round the whole thing, with its black towers soaring upwards, light glinting off their glass sides. Two larger towers rose from the centre of the city, marking a starkly outlined fortified citadel on top of a low hill.

'So this is it,' said Flora. 'We're in the land of the Broken King. And I thought it only existed in a book for children . . . But it's real, all of it. And the Broken King's got Johnny.' She rubbed her nose with the sleeve of her brother's leather jacket. 'And Anna.'

Simon assessed the situation quickly. The soldiers were now formed in a tight square, ten by ten, apparently waiting for an order from their commander, the mounted knight, whose horse had

long, slender horns growing out and upwards from either side of its skull.

'Where the hell are we?' whispered Flora, drawing the jacket closer around her body. She felt thinned, somehow, as if a vital part of her had been removed, and she was hungry. The smell of the jacket brought the image of Johnny vividly back to her, gangly and cool, lying on his bed with its Union Jack duvet, reading philosophy books and smoking.

'Not hell, I hope,' said Simon. 'Too cold for that.' The cool breeze rustled his hair.

'And no devils,' said Flora, looking at the knight's horse.

'Yet,' said Simon, under his breath.

Another procession, this one of riders, was coming from the city, apparently to join the soldiers. Only the cart was heading towards the city.

'We'd better keep out of sight,' Simon said. 'We don't know who we can trust. How can we get to the Broken King? Those soldiers might do anything to us. And we can hardly march up to them and demand to be taken to him, can we?'

'We have completed the tasks,' said Flora. 'That's what the messengers said. Complete the tasks, and get your siblings back.'

'I don't think it will be that easy . . .' said Simon.

Only a few days before, at home by the sea, he'd said the rhyme that had started it all, and it now rose unbidden in his mind:

I call the Broken King

Walk backwards thrice in a ring

He felt deeply afraid and pressed his forehead into the rock. He remembered his sister Anna being annoying. He'd said the rhyme to frighten her, and she'd been stolen away to this land. He remembered the golden messenger on the winged deer – the bird-deer, he'd called the beautiful, delicate creature – who'd appeared and told them what to do to rescue Anna and Johnny.

To get your siblings back, you must eat the shadow, steal the sun, and break the air . . .

And we did those three tasks, Simon thought, *to reach the Broken Kingdom. We ate the shadow, and got the shadow-spheres. We stole the sun, and gained the sunsword. We broke the air with the hunting horn. And that brought us here.*

Simon raised himself from the stone.

We are only at the beginning, he thought. He sensed a long road stretching out in front of him, through thick fog, never-ending. Suddenly overwhelmed with

fear, and by the thought that they might never return home – and still less find their siblings – he clasped his hands over his head. What could they do? They had no plan, no idea where to go.

Flora slumped beside him. 'What about that knight who was after us – Sir Mark, the Knight of the Swan? Did he follow us in?'

'I hope he's not here . . .' said Simon, remembering the Broken King's sinister helper. Once more he peered carefully over the edge of the rocks. There was a swan swimming on the stream, and Simon watched it warily, recalling how Sir Mark had attacked him in that guise in his kitchen at home. The swan simply paddled away, and Simon, thinking of the knight's cruel face, couldn't help but feel relieved.

The cart was coming nearer to them, and Simon could now see that it was pulled slowly by a horse that had horns like a ram on both sides of its head, and a wide, heavy, black and white body. With gentle weariness, it blew air through its nostrils and shook its mane. A hooded man was hunched over on the cart's driving seat, his hands lightly on the reins. Sometimes he would swat the horned horse with a small whip, but the beast didn't move any faster.

As the cart trundled past them on the road, Simon

felt in his pocket and pulled out Hover, the little golden bird-deer he'd been given by the messengers. Hover was inert and drained of its golden sheen. It looked like a silver ornament of the kind Simon's granny kept on her mantelpiece.

'Is he moving? Is he telling you we can trust that carter?' Flora's breath was coming deep and fast.

Simon shook his head. 'Maybe things from the Golden Realm don't work in this world.'

Simon wished Hover would come alive again. He stroked its folded wings, and kissed its nose. Then he pressed it to the welt on his cheek where the golden messenger had struck on that first day by the sea.

Was it his imagination, or did the little creature stir slightly? He waited a second, but nothing further happened, so Simon put Hover back into his pocket.

Flora's head was between her knees, and Simon shifted and bent towards her and whispered her name.

Blinking, Flora looked up, and gulped back her tears.

'Are you all right?' asked Simon.

'I just . . . It's true! All this time I kept thinking maybe it was some kind of dream . . . even when we were running away from the Knight of the Swan

– but look, we're here! I'm not sure I can take it in properly . . .'

'It's OK,' he said, though he didn't feel it. 'We're almost there. That city – it must be the Broken King's city. Don't you recognise it from the book?'

Flora nodded. 'Have a look at the map.'

Simon found the skin-map, and Flora huddled next to him. 'There must be walls between the worlds,' she went on, jabbering slightly to cover up her nervousness, 'and somehow the sunsword and the hunting horn and the shadow-sphere all together make a split . . . I wonder how it works, physically? Light, sound and darkness . . . The walls came tumbling down . . . You see? Like Jericho.'

Simon smoothed out the skin-map on the rough ground. There was a green circle on the left. 'That must be where we've come from. I guess we'll have to get back here to reach home. Look!' He pointed to the standing stone near them. 'That must be the connection point between the worlds. And this,' he continued, indicating a line on the map, 'must represent the road leading to the city.' The city was on the right-hand side of the map. In its centre was a black dot, pulsing. 'And that's where they are.' Simon felt excitement bubble through him. 'We're there!'

'Almost,' said Flora. 'Now,' she continued in a more business-like tone, 'how are we going to get to the city? And what about Pike?' He was lying there, head at a slight angle, looking as if he'd been knocked out.

'Let's do a recce first,' said Simon. 'And then we'll try to wake him up again.'

They both peered over the rocks. On the broad, black plain in front of them, the mounted knight was addressing the band of soldiers.

The silver sun had moved higher up into the sky; the shadows had shortened. Axes and blades glinted in the silver light. They heard the mounted knight's orders.

'Attack the earth! Attack the trees! The king commands it!'

The soldiers split up. One half of them ran shouting towards a small scraggy copse. The trees had dark, purplish leaves and black bark. The other half began running in a circle, making swipes at the ground with their swords.

'What are they doing?' said Flora.

Waving their swords in the air, looking for all the world as if they were charging, the first group reached the trees and started hacking at the trunks, splitting the bark.

Meanwhile, the second group of soldiers was slashing at the turf, filling the sky with cries as if they were engaged with a deadly foe.

Across the plain, the column of riders on horned horses from the city was advancing nearer, mounted in six pairs and adorned in black and silver clothes and trappings, with a lone rider in green behind them. Following the rider was a litter draped with fine silver material, carried by eight tall men all dressed in white, and behind it came more riders, all bearing deadly weapons.

The mounted knight barked his orders with new urgency. Simon gripped Flora's arm. With a clattering of hooves and a swish of horse tails, the procession arrived beside the mounted knight, and came to a halt about twenty paces away from Flora and Simon.

The green rider, a willowy woman, theatrically pulled back the covering of the litter.

'Thank you, Andaria,' came a female voice, carried on the breeze. Inside the litter was a familiar young woman, wearing a glittering silver tiara and a long, black and silver gown. Her hands, also shining with gems, were clasped in her lap, and she raised one of them imperiously whilst Andaria helped her down.

'It's her!' exclaimed Flora. 'The girl in the lion mask! What's she doing here?'

'I thought she was dead!' said Simon.

'You thought Mithras killed her? That doesn't sound right. I don't think Mithras would kill anyone.' They'd left the lion-masked girl underneath the church in Walbrook Street in London, flat out on the ground after they'd fought her for the sunsword. That had been the last they'd seen of her. Mithras of the Golden Realm had been bending over her, apparently about to kill her.

The mounted knight waited nervously for some instruction from the girl. As the soldiers continued to run and hack, the young woman said, 'The king has given his order. And what he said is right.' Her voice was strong and rang out across the plain.

'And what he said is right!' came an answering chorus from the soldiers and the mounted knight.

The girl spoke again. 'I, Selena, the Silver Princess, daughter of the Ruler of the Silver Kingdom, deliver this his royal edict to his captain of arms, the Knight of the Hawk. The earth and the trees have been conquered. This unit is to take all spoils of war to the treasury. The battle has been won!'

'She's the *daughter* of the king?' whispered Flora to

Simon in a shocked undertone. 'The girl we fought? The girl we almost killed?'

'Revel in your conquest! The bards will sing of your prowess!' Selena motioned to Andaria, who hurled some coins on to the ground carelessly, as if they meant nothing to her. She might have spat, for all the expression of generosity on her face. 'A hundred crescents for the men!'

The Knight of the Hawk signalled to a soldier, who bent down and picked them up. The others watched him hungrily, but all waited.

Selena nodded, held out her arms, and two of her bearers lifted her gently back into the litter. Andaria, the green rider, pulled the curtains of the litter back across, and smacked one of the bearers out of her way with the flat of her hand, before remounting her snorting steed and leading the procession back to the city. They moved off, trappings jingling, and the Knight of the Hawk bit his lip, his horse whinnying, and a bead of sweat rolled down his cheek. He visibly relaxed, before straightening almost immediately and shouting out, 'At the ready!'

'Well . . .' said Flora, as the soldiers began to gather into a marching formation. 'That doesn't look like it was a . . . normal army thing.'

Simon didn't reply, but lifted a finger in warning.

'What?' said Flora, raising her eyebrows. 'Have I got something on my face?' She rubbed at her cheek, which only served to make it dirtier.

Simon pointed behind her.

Standing there was the hooded driver of the cart, holding a long, bright dagger. He'd noticed them as he'd driven past. His cart was pulled up a little way away from them. He stepped forwards and drew back his hood to reveal silver hair and a lined, tired face, his mouth twisted into a curiously off-putting smile. There was a tattoo on his neck, spidery and long. He was wearing a loose, brown tunic to his knees, and baggy cloth trousers.

He flourished the dagger casually at Simon and Flora. 'What are two bratlings doing outside the walls of the city? Show us your permit.'

'We . . . we lost it,' said Flora, as innocently as she was able, glad he hadn't seen Pike.

A white-eyed bird soared by, casting its shadow on the plain. In the distance they heard the soldiers marching back up the road to the city. They'd struck up a chant in time to their feet beating on the ground.

The carter came nearer, his expression now severe and glittering with calculation. 'Anyone found on the

road without a permit is to be brought in. For fifty crescents' reward.'

'And then what?' said Simon.

'And then,' said the man, 'hurled in deepest, darkest prison, gnawed at by rats, and swung from the neck till they are no more.' He described the shape of a noose around his own neck with his left index finger. His gaze hardened. 'If you'd heard the decree, you would know.'

Flora gripped the sunsword's handle. But should she bring it out now? She was not sure. She inched it out of the sheath. As ever, she felt the warmth of its energy and a gentle hum in her mind, as if it were whispering to her somehow.

The carter, noticing the movement, grabbed Simon by the shoulder and held his dagger at his throat. Simon tried to wriggle free, but the man was strong.

Flora thought quickly. The carter was big, and he might kill Simon. But there was also the chance that he might lead them somewhere useful. A small chance, but a chance nonetheless. She pushed the sunsword back into its sheath. Perhaps they should go along with him, for now. He might even be able to gain them an audience with the Broken King, or

know how to get to him. Pike would wake up and he might be able to find them later. She considered leaving a sign of some sort, glancing around covertly for anything she might use.

The carter took in Flora's leather jacket, and then her backpack. He winked leeringly at her, which made her shiver inside. 'You two are interesting. You look soft. Strange clothing. Palace bred, no doubt. So maybe you're rebels. Children of rebels, I'm thinking.' He snapped his finger, decisively. 'You're going to come with me.' He pushed Simon onwards, and Flora, biting the inside of her cheek, followed warily.

'You hurt him and it'll be the last of you,' she snapped.

The carter snorted disapprovingly, and as if to prove his point, stuck the tip of his dagger into Simon's arm. Simon yelped with the sharp pain.

'You leave him alone!' said Flora heatedly.

The carter swung round suddenly. 'Fifty crescents alive or dead,' he said. 'And what are you going to do about it, little girl? You show me.' He pushed Simon again, and Flora ran to keep up.

Chapter Two

Concerning Pike



Flora's anger and sense of dislocation got the better of her and she began to argue with the carter. Her voice reached into Pike's mind where he lay by the stone, and prompted him to wake up with a start. Unsteadily, he got to his feet. Something was happening, nearby. Someone was in trouble.

Pike recognised the girl's voice through the roaring confusion of his consciousness. He saw Flora and Simon with the carter, and recognised his friends with a jolt. Without thinking, he crept forwards as quietly as he could. Then a terrible sickness took hold of him, seeping deep into his stomach and making

his whole body shudder, and he had to stop to vomit on to the stony ground.

When he'd recovered, he wiped away the vile-tasting bile, and looked up to see that the carter was now leading Simon in a headlock, and Flora, helpless and drooping, followed beside him.

Something was tugging at his brain. He felt as if he was on the verge of an abyss. He searched for his knife, which was still in the pocket of his trousers. The texture of the clothing seemed wrong somehow. A bird's low booming made him look up, and the sound reminded him of something forcefully.

Fragments came into his memory; so many and so fast that they were almost overwhelming.

Flora began to shout, to beat her fists on the carter. Simon scrambled away from him, and the carter, surprised, knocked him to the ground. Simon landed on his back, spread-eagled. Flora jumped at the carter, and he reached for his dagger.

Pike remembered. The silver sun. A magehawk booming when warmth returns at the Festival of the Coming Rains. Something good flowed through him as the pale sunlight caressed his limbs. The fragments in his mind began to come together.

Simon was on his feet once more, lifting the hunting

horn from his neck, and holding it in front of him as a shield, just as the carter swiped his long knife. It bounced off, ringing. The carter took a step back.

Simon put the horn to his lips. The carter looked at it strangely.

He musn't blow it, thought Pike suddenly. And without thinking further, he ran, shouting, just as Simon blew. The vibrations bounced in his ears and the dust flew up underneath him as he went, hoping he could prevent the worst.

Something fell to the ground with a sickening thump. The carter's horned horse bellowed, more like a cow than anything else.

Pike reached Flora and Simon. The carter was lying on the earth, his silver hair spread out beneath him.

'Oh my God,' said Flora, her hand over her mouth on seeing Pike. 'And . . . oh my God! The carter! What happened to him?'

'Pike!' Simon looked very white and afraid.

The three of them embraced for a moment.

'I'm so glad you woke up . . .' said Flora.

'Ditto,' said Simon.

Pike felt a rush of tenderness, something he hadn't experienced for a long time. He released himself

from their grasp, and they all three stood round the carter, looking down.

He was lying stretched out on his back, and he wasn't moving.

'Is he alive?' whispered Simon.

Flora bent down and touched the carter's tattooed neck, holding her finger there for a few seconds, before nodding. 'Just about.'

'I didn't mean to hurt him . . . I didn't know . . . Was it this?' Simon said, looking at the horn. 'It was this, wasn't it? Take it away!' Simon felt a sudden horror of the hunting horn and thrust it at Pike. Pike looked at it for a long moment, and then refused it, pushing it gently back at Simon.

Simon let the horn hang back against his ribs. He was shivering. He pulled himself together.

'No time to talk now,' said Pike. 'We need to get on to this cart and head to the city. But first, let's deal with this man.' He'd never sounded so decisive before. The silver light gleamed off him.

The three of them hefted the carter up and carried him off the road, leaving him hidden behind a rock. After pausing for a moment, Pike took the carter's trousers and top, and put them on. He left the carter a sack for warmth.

'What will happen to him?' asked Simon, worried, as they came back to the cart.

'He'll be all right,' answered Pike, getting into the driver's seat. 'He'll wake up soon enough. The only problem is that he might tell someone about you two. He doesn't know who you are, which is good, but the hunting horn – that's distinctive, and he might have heard stories about it. And then there's the odd way you two are dressed. It could raise suspicion. We'll have to hope he won't remember, or that he's too embarrassed about what happened, and he'll just slink home to his village with some story about bandits.' Pike set the horned horse moving. 'If anyone approaches, you two duck down,' he said.

'Firstly, though,' said Simon, 'thanks for rescuing us. Er, again.'

Pike blushed.

'But secondly,' continued Simon, 'you have a lot of explaining to do!'

'Yes,' said Flora. 'And you can start by saying where you're taking us! And how you know so much . . .'

Pike's face was grim. With a flick of the reins, he set the cart in motion towards the black towers that glittered ahead. 'You'll find out soon enough.'