THE REPUBLIC OF DREAMS

RICHARD LAMBERT



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Prologue

How the Villain Arrived in Our World

A man fell out of the sky. He wore a long black coat and its tails streamed and flapped behind him in the wind. He fell very fast but his limbs flailed slowly, like the limbs of a man in a dream. But this man was not in a dream, he was in the real world – our world – and he was hurtling towards the ground.

If you had glanced up you would probably have looked twice to make sure of what you had seen, and by the time you did look twice the falling man would have disappeared from view. And you would probably have decided, as several people who glimpsed him did decide, that he was not a falling man but something else.

A religious woman thought that with those flapping tails he must be a demon, an angel chucked out of heaven, but having a fair amount of religious doubt, she shook her head insistently and told herself she was mistaken. A birdwatcher thought the flapping coat-tails must be flapping wings, and that they probably belonged to the off-course Eurasian eagle owl that had been spotted recently in town; she immediately took out her phone and alerted other birdwatchers to the sighting. And a man with an extremely rational mind reasoned that people do not fall out of the sky unless they have jumped from something like a balloon or an aeroplane, and as the blue September sky was empty, he concluded that the falling object must be a meteorite, and he rushed home to report it to the Natural History Museum.

The other person who saw the falling man was a boy. His name is Toby and he is the hero of this story, although there are other heroes, which you will discover as the story proceeds. Toby did not see the man exactly, it was more that he was aware of a dark shape at the corner of his eye and by the time he whirled about to check what it was, the shape had fallen below some trees. But the glimpse made him uneasy.

'Come on, Alfred,' he said to his cat, who walked beside him, and he quickened his step, as if he might escape the dark shape even if he could not lose the memory of it.

*

The man who fell out of the sky woke up. It was night and in front of him whooshed illuminated carriages, each full of people. The carriages swept on into the darkness, leaving behind a hiss in overhead wires.

Nicodemus Malladain is the name of this man and he is the villain of this story. For the rest of this chapter we will follow this villain, so you can see the sort of villainous man he is and the sort of villainous things he does. He had been flung out of his world and into our world, and now he lay on the slope of a railway cutting, listening to a train dwindle into the night.

What sort of world is this that I have fallen into? Nicodemus Malladain asked himself. A thistle poked his cheek. The air was warm and dirty. He decided that this world was, like nearly everything else he had ever experienced, ugly.

Malladain gazed up at the clouds, filled with urban glow, and remembered what had caused him to be ejected from his own world – a boy named Toby, and his white cat. Those two plagues had been assisted by a girl from Malladain's own world, a girl named Tamurlaine. Malladain had been the most powerful man in his world and now he lay amongst tin cans and rubbish in some other world, all because of that stupid boy Toby and that

stupid girl Tamurlaine. And that damned cat. And he fixed his mind upon revenge.

*

When Nicodemus Malladain limped into the Accident and Emergency Department of the local hospital, everyone who was in the waiting room, including the receptionist and the doctor flirting with her, looked around. None of them had ever seen anyone remotely like Nicodemus Malladain.

If you had seen Nicodemus Malladain you would not forget him. Not because of the injuries – his face covered in claw scratches and one eye crusted with black blood – but because of the hatred. The hatred radiated in waves. And each person whom Nicodemus Malladain passed in the waiting room drew back as far as possible from this hatred. One woman even pulled her legs onto her chair so she didn't risk being brushed by the man's long black coat.

That coat – it was made of leather and appeared to be tailored, cinched at the narrow waist and going all the way to his black leather boots. It had been ripped and shredded, as if by a cat's claws, and the blue satin lining poked through. It had black buttons down the front, ending at his waist so that when the fan in the waiting room blew, the skirts of the coat opened out behind him on the air. And it was fixed at the collar by a white

clasp in the shape of a swan, with a diamond for the swan's eye.

The waiting room was full of sick and injured people who had been waiting for up to twelve hours for a doctor. They sat quietly, with the deliberate stillness that pain often requires, although from time to time there were murmured conversations, but when Nicodemus Malladain appeared, everyone fell silent and stared.

Boom! went the drinks machine. Malladain spun round. A young boy stood beside the machine. The boy gulped at the sight of Malladain and, with a shaking hand, retrieved his fizzy drink and ran back to his mother.

'What are you peasants looking at?' spat Nicodemus Malladain. Then he made eye contact with the nearest person, who was a rugby player. The sixteen-stone sportsman wilted beneath that glare, as frightened as the little boy had been. 'You lot are pathetic,' said Malladain.

After being checked in by the receptionist, whom he despised for her kind smile, Malladain was immediately taken to see a doctor, his eye injury was so bad.

Dr Trish Urquhart was as tough as a good pair of boots and her mind was as quick as a fish in the sea and she glided into the bay to find her patient, rather surprisingly, stood at the desk, and rather bizarrely tapping his forefinger on the computer screen. Not at the keyboard but at the monitor. Trish thought he looked like a toddler tapping at a fish tank.

'Mr Malladain,' she said, 'why don't you sit down and I'll examine your eye?'

'*Regent* Malladain. Are you the doctor?'

'Last time I looked. Sit down, please, so I can examine you.'

Scoffing at the idea that a woman, and a young one at that, might be a doctor, Nicodemus Malladain sat. Trish whisked the curtain round, put on a pair of surgical gloves, and studied the bloody eye.

'How did this happen?'

'A cat clawed me. The cuts were made by a boy with a knife. And my leg was hurt in the fall to your world.'

Whoever heard of falling between worlds? Trish decided that the mental health liaison team should see him before he was discharged. 'A cat clawed your eye?'

'The boy's white cat. And when I find that boy, I am going to snap him in half – like the wishbone of a roasted chicken.'

'That's against the law, I think you'll find, Mr Malladain.'

'*Regent* Malladain.'

'Ah, yes,' she said, cleaning the congealed blood from around the wound. 'I can see the cat's scratches now.'

When she touched the eye socket, Malladain felt such pain he gnashed his teeth. And when she used a pair of surgical scissors to snip off a flap of skin, he had to stamp the floor with one of his big boots, the agony was so

intense. But he did not let pain get the better of him. He would not give pain the satisfaction.

'That's a nice brooch,' said Trish as she worked.

Malladain grunted.

'What is it?'

'Emblem of the Order of the Swan.' He stifled a moan of pain. 'And this particular one – with the diamond – is reserved for members of the royal family.'

'Right, that's your eye cleaned. So, your leg …'

He yelped as she touched it. 'You stupid—'

'Yes?'

He clenched his teeth, hating Dr Trish Urquhart. He added her name to a mental list that he kept, the names of people on whom he would have his revenge.

Trish went to the computer. 'I think the leg's broken,' she said, completing online forms. 'We'll get you X-rayed to make sure. You've lost the eye, I'm afraid. But we'll get you into surgery. Don't want that infected.'

'Lost the eye?'

'Yes. You're blind in one eye because of that cat. I'll give you something for the pain.'

'Pain?' he said. 'I don't have any pain.'

'Sure. Any other injuries?' She swung round in her chair and prepared a needle.

'No.'

'Do you mind needles?'

'What? Of course not.'

'Roll up your sleeve.'

He yelped as she jabbed him.

*

Trish had nearly finished with Malladain when another doctor entered the bay.

'Corny!' said Trish. 'What are you doing here?'

'You're looking at the new Deputy Director of the Brain Sciences Unit.'

'You got the job? Congratulations!'

Nicodemus Malladain observed this new doctor named Corny. The man wore a double-breasted suit and the badge on his lapel stated that his full name was Dr Cornelius de Windt, and he had roughly the same build and height as Nicodemus Malladain himself. That was interesting, thought Malladain.

'I came to say goodbye,' said Dr Cornelius de Windt.

'Goodbye?'

'Yes. I start tomorrow. Can you believe, I haven't even visited Freyhampton yet? The Director came to *me*. Headhunted!'

So no one at the Brain Sciences Unit except the Director had met him, Malladain thought to himself. That was interesting. Very interesting.

'I want to say goodbye to Doug too,' Dr Cornelius de Windt went on, giving Nicodemus Malladain an

uncomfortable glance, because the man was staring. 'Where is he?'

'Probably chatting up the new receptionist. He was last time I looked. What a creep. I'll come with you, I've got to arrange an X-ray. Stay here, Mr Malladain, I'll be back shortly.'

'*Regent* Malladain,' he corrected her. He watched the two doctors walk towards the reception, admiring the smart blue suit of Dr Cornelius de Windt. He noticed that as Dr Cornelius de Windt walked, the man rubbed at the back of his neck, as if he knew he were being watched. The doctor glanced back uneasily over his shoulder at Nicodemus Malladain. And Nicodemus Malladain, not liking the look the doctor gave him, immediately added the man's name to his revenge list.

When the two doctors had gone, Nicodemus Malladain limped to the desk. He studied, then lifted, the monitor. He shook it, as if papers might fall out. Finally he put it down and sat in front of it. He examined the keyboard and mouse. Awkwardly, he dragged the mouse. Slowly, he used one finger on the keyboard to spell out *Brain Sciences Unit* and *Freyhampton*. A new picture appeared on the screen. He read and clicked, read and clicked. Finally, he twisted his head to scan the bay. His one eye glinted. He lurched to the open case of surgical instruments and chose a wickedly curved scalpel.

*

Dr Cornelius de Windt – Corny – had parked his burgundy-coloured Jaguar in the staff car park, which lay beyond a hedge. There was a gap in the hedge that everyone used, and when he slipped sideways to go through, he noticed behind him, in the distance, a figure. It was darker in the staff car park and he didn't like the dark, it made him scared, so he walked fast.

Surprisingly soon, the figure who had been in the distance came through the gap in the hedge and Corny heard footsteps crunch on gravel. It sounded like a man, a man with a limp. Corny sped up, taking out his key fob, wanting to get into his car as soon as possible. Ahead, the locks clunkingly withdrew, warm lights flashed, and a friendly alarm blipped. The crunching, limping steps quickened. Corny had to stop himself from breaking into a run. He reached his car and turned. The man had gone. Corny held his breath to listen. There was a distant wash of traffic on the ring road and in the car park silence. He turned back and the man was standing in front of him.

'What do you want?' Corny blurted, so fast it came out as *Whadayawon?*

'To congratulate you on your new job,' said Nicodemus Malladain.

For a moment nothing happened, then Corny said, 'Excuse me,' and tried to get to his car but Malladain

blocked him. The two stood close. Corny's mouth was parched but he knew it was imperative not to gulp, not to show fear.

'You have a handsome carriage,' said Malladain. 'Tell me, how do you operate it?'

'What?'

'How do you make it ... travel?'

'The car?' Confused, Corny held up his key fob.

The corners of Malladain's mouth rose but no other part of his face moved. It was such a frightening smile, Corny almost shouted for help. But he didn't. And that was his first mistake.

'Tell me,' said Malladain. 'Have you met anyone else apart from the Director of the Brain Sciences Unit at Freyhampton?'

Corny, heart racing, trying not to betray his fear, said, 'No'. And that was his second – and last – mistake.

A few minutes later, Nicodemus Malladain drove from the car park in the burgundy-coloured Jaguar, wearing Dr Cornelius de Windt's smart blue suit. It fitted him as if it had been made for him. He drove towards the Brain Sciences Unit at Freyhampton. He had begun his climb back to his rightful place in the world – the top. And now he trained his thoughts on revenge. Revenge on Toby, revenge on Tamurlaine. And revenge on that cat. He always took his revenge. Just ask Dr Cornelius de Windt.