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Playing with Phyre

written by

Graham Marks

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PLAYING WITH PHYRE

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PLAYING WITH PHYRE

GRAHAM MARKS



To Andrea, for the green light,
and Non for making it all come together.

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Lighting the Match . . .

The old man sat by the window, waiting. The boy would be here soon and he was looking forward to spending some time with him. His grandson was the only person these days who enjoyed hearing his stories and he wondered, as he waited, how much longer that would remain true. He was growing up fast, the boy, and soon would have other, far better things to do than sit and listen to his grandfather's tales; even though they were of the most cutthroat and savage adventures.

Sometimes he thought maybe he should write the stories down because once he stopped telling them, they would disappear quicker than morning mist and be lost for ever. But who else would be interested? Everything had changed so much since he was a boy and the world was a different

place now. It was a safer place, in many ways, but a place that never seemed to stand still; where no one had enough time. It was a world he thought of as suffering from progress like it was a disease.

There had been a world before the Union had been forged – through skirmish, battle, blood and politics – into a mighty empire, but that old world wasn't even a distant memory for most people today. They'd all but forgotten the years of brutal struggle and ferocious conflict – even his own son had only the haziest idea of what life had been like when all there had been was a wary, distrustful patchwork of Territories: the largest, Quadrine and Massenine, dominating Sektaine, Cherinna, Uskarnha and the rest. All were now parts of a larger whole, while some regions, like the Outlands, had been absorbed and had completely disappeared . . . gone, like so many of the people who had fought and died to create the Union.

Shrugging, the old man glanced across the room and caught his reflection in a mirror on the far wall; he'd been told that his white hair, long and pulled back in a thin plait, and his trimmed white beard gave him the look of a scholar and a sage. The idea, as it always did, made him smile, deep lines radiating out from the corners of his faded blue eyes.

'A scholar!' he said mockingly to his mirror image. 'Only thing *I'm* an expert on is being long in the tooth . . .'

Turning back to the window he realised how much he looked forward to spending some time, even if it was only a few hours a week, with someone young, someone who didn't always have too much to do. And then the old man saw his daughter's vehicular turn into the street and he went to the door. Today was going to be different, though. Today he'd decided he was finally going to tell the boy the truth. The time had come, and his grandson was old enough now to hear the real story about how it had all started, how everything had happened.

How he'd become the person he was today.

For the old man this story, these memories – and the people who had played such important roles in his early life – were as vibrant and strong as if they'd happened yesterday, instead of decades ago. As he opened the door he stopped for a moment, thinking what an extraordinary story it was! Unbelievable, some might say. Often, when he thought back, even he found it hard to credit that it had actually happened and that he'd had a part to play. He hoped he could truly bring everything to life and do it justice . . .

'However you chose to describe Starpoint, there was no getting away from the fact that it was a small and unimportant place. A dot on the map – if there'd been a map of the Outlands then.' The old man sat back in his leather armchair, smiling, and crossed his legs in front of him. He was going to enjoy telling this tale. 'It was, to be truthful, a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else, somewhere to forget you'd ever been,' he continued, looking at his grandson, Mykel, sitting on the sofa opposite with a tray of food on the small table next to him.

'The world then was full of villages and hamlets just like Starpoint, there not quite by mistake, but only because that was where two roads happened to cross; in Starpoint's case there were three of them, which was probably the most interesting thing about it. In this place – just a scattering of houses and farms, a handful of stores and a couple of two-bit saloons – the outside world was an echo, and time meandered so slowly it almost stood still. And if Starpoint was where you came from, Mykel, that was generally where you stayed.

'But the day Haden Akatine left, it was because there was nothing there to stay for . . .'



1 A Noise in the Silence

The early morning haze was still swirling above the ground, fingers of it clinging on in some places as the sun chased it away. The village had been devastated. Plumes of smoke were rising from burnt-out houses like the thin, departing spirits of their former inhabitants and, as the seconds ticked by and the air cleared, what had looked like discarded piles of tattered clothing became bodies. Dead bodies.

If there had been a witness to these gruesome revelations, apart from a trio of inquisitive crows, they would have been in no doubt that this no-account place had, for some inexplicable reason, been subjected to a horrific and frenzied attack. And the first question to cross the mind of this witness, had they existed, would

have been: *why?* What could this dull hamlet, in the middle of nowhere, possibly have done to deserve such devastation?

As the crows, emboldened by the lack of movement, began to inspect one of the bodies, its sightless eyes staring at the dusty horizon, the hand of the corpse next to it moved. The abrupt jerk sent the birds skittering into the air, along with puffy clouds of fine, grey ash.

The 'corpse' hauled itself up, first onto its knees, then stood and stared at the destruction, shivering. For a long time the lone, ghostly figure was like a statue, only its eyes moving, darting here and there, trying to make sense of the completely inexplicable.

This was no dead man walking though, no spirit trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead. It was a thin, muscular boy, tall for his age, with long hair and piercing blue eyes, and, as he stood looking at what was left of the only place he'd ever known, a tear welled up and cleared a path down the boy's ash-dusted cheek. He blinked the next one away. This was no time for crying.

The boy began to move, his feet raising clouds of ash as he stumbled first right and then left, unsure of what he should do or where he ought to look. There might be other survivors . . . there *had* to be . . . and he wanted more than anything to find them . . . to find his father, his mother, his brother – *someone*.

He had never felt this alone and abandoned. Ever. Seconds turned into minutes and as the minutes piled

up it became obvious that no matter how hard he searched, the boy wasn't going to find anyone alive in the smouldering ruins of his village.

Sinking back down onto his knees, Haden Akatine finally allowed himself to grieve . . .

Starpoint was one of the smallest, most insignificant specks in the Outlands. Or at least that's how those who passed through often described it. Haden had no idea if this was true because he'd never been anywhere else. What he did know of the outside world came from the travellers and traders, always on their way to or from somewhere more exotic and interesting. Some of the stories they told fired his imagination, while others filled him with dread. The world far beyond the edge of the sky sounded both fascinating and dangerous. Like the snakes you came across out on the plateau: beautiful, but deadly.

And then yesterday, as the sun was setting, someone had spotted the riders coming in from the west. By the looks of the dust they were throwing up there were a lot of them, which should have meant some good business. This late in the day people tended to stay rather than ride on through the night to wherever they were going.

At around the time the dull rumble of the horses' hooves could finally be heard, someone in the small crowd of watchers also spotted the dull glint of dusk-

light on steel: the riders had, for some reason, unsheathed their swords and unholstered their pistols. Not a good sign. To a man the watchers turned and ran.

But their warnings came too late.

The attack had been as vicious as it was short. As random as it was destructive. As bewildering as it was brutal. These riders, as the villagers had realised far too late, were a band of marauding Sardar, a breed of men who had a heartless disregard for life – their own and everyone else's – that was legendary.

And in the end Haden only survived because, in the heat of the frantic, lethal melee, he'd been battered to the ground and left, in a crumpled heap, for dead.

He didn't cry for long. There wasn't much point. His whole world was in ruins, his entire family – his younger brother, Quinn, his parents – were gone, along with neighbours, friends. Everyone. Shedding tears wouldn't help to bring any of them back. Nothing could do that. Then the thought struck him that he hadn't searched *every*where and it spurred him into a burst of frenzied activity that achieved little except to appal him at how cruel men could be.

Standing surrounded by his broken world, Haden found there was nowhere he could look that didn't give him pain, and it was then that he decided he had to leave. If he stayed there could be no vengeance, and he needed that like he needed air to breathe. He might die

trying to get it, but no one was going to stop him finding the killers and tearing their hearts out.

Revenge. Payback. Satisfaction. He would have all three.

As the idea crystallised in Haden's mind, forming a clear picture of the punishment he would mete out, he heard a noise in the unearthly silence and he whirled around. Was it a door creaking in the lazy breeze that had come to worry the embers and the piles of ash? Or was it someone moving? Was someone alive?

'Who is it?' His voice was hardly more than a whisper and Haden almost didn't recognise it as his own.

Nothing moved, no one's reply broke the hushed, keening silence.

'Is anyone there?'

Slowly the shattered door to the cellar of a store some way down the street was pushed open and a head of badly cropped, soot-covered red hair poked up. Even from where he was standing Haden could see the familiar, slightly bewildered expression on the face staring back at him.

'Decker?' he muttered under his breathe.

Decker. Haden shook his head. Of all the people who lived in Starpoint, why, of all people, had the Fates chosen to save the village idiot? He looked away, feeling bad about thinking of the six-foot-five-inch mute this way, but that was how they'd always treated him, and now here he was, the only other survivor.

And he couldn't talk to him.

It didn't make any kind of sense but then, Haden thought as he walked towards Decker, his gaze wandering over what was left of the village, not much did any more . . .