Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Keeper of the Realms: The Dark Army (Book 2)

Written by

Marcus Alexander

Published by

Puffin Books an imprint of Penguin Books Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



1
Rusty Manacles

Charlie Keeper was not happy. Not by any means.

It had been two days since the Stoman army had killed the Treman guards assigned to protect her. Two days since they'd separated her from her friends and two days since they'd left her in a rotten, rat-infested cell.

'If you chumps don't let me out of here this instant,' she screamed, 'I'm going to get really upset and, trust me, you don't want to deal with me when I'm angry!'

To underline her determination Charlie kicked her heels against the wall. (She would have preferred to stamp her feet, but the spiteful guards had left her hanging two metres above the floor.) For the hundredth time she screwed her eyes shut and tried to focus her Will, but nothing happened. Since she'd crossed the divide from Earth to the realm of Bellania, life had been nothing more than one hard lesson after another. Now with her magical ability refusing to materialize, it appeared she was undergoing yet another painful and inconvenient lesson.

'Why don't things ever work like they're supposed to?' she muttered irritably to herself.

It felt like a lifetime ago that she had been living in

London, but in reality it had only been several weeks. And in those short turbulent weeks she had discovered that her house was a Gateway between realms, that her parents had passed on a secret to her that people were more than willing to kill for, and that her family name was more than just a name; it was a title. With that title came a genetic talent known as the Will and the Way that granted her the power to open portals to travel through and to increase her own strength to the point where she could hold her own against foes who were bigger, badder and more vicious than her.

But the Will and the Way had not been an easy thing to study. It had taken long days of gruelling practice before Charlie had been able to wield the writhing golden energy that burst from her hands . . . But now, when she needed it most, it refused to appear.

Dull weariness and a constant, throbbing headache pounded at the inside of her head, making it impossible to summon the concentration that her Will required. The fatigue from opening a Portal to the University of Dust in Alavis, the beating she'd suffered at the hands of the Stoman soldiers and having to endure hanging by her wrists for so long had all taken their toll upon her body. All she could muster were little bursts of yellow light that frittered and fizzed from her fingertips. And without the power of her Will to tear the manacles from her wrists or open a Portal back to Sylvaris she knew she wasn't going anywhere.

She felt drained and useless.

Why had she been left for so long and what had happened to her friends Jenson, Kelko and Nibbler? Why hadn't

anyone come to see her or even interrogate her? And why did prison cells always have to have creepy-crawlies and mouldy straw strewn across the floor?

'I hate stereotypes,' she grumbled.

Muttering to herself she began to grind her heels against the rotten brickwork so that mortar and small shards of plaster crumbled to the floor. The rats scurrying beneath her feet squeaked as they dodged the downfall.

Charlie peered blearily down at the rodents. 'I hate rats.'

As she continued to kick and grind her feet, the movement caused the iron manacles to rub deeper into her skin. She scowled up at the restraints. 'Handcuffs, manacles, Isiris Bracelets and chains . . . I hate them too! I hate all of them! I hate them!'

Realizing that she was growing close to losing her temper Charlie took a big, deep breath. And another . . . and then another. Gradually she felt her anger receding.

'That's better . . .' she murmured.

One of the rats, unhappy with the amount of dust and debris raining down on it, chose that moment to scamper up the wall, on to Charlie's foot and up her trouser leg.

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!' she screamed in disgust. She kicked and thrashed her legs, dislodging the rat so that it fell to the floor. The motion caused the manacles to cut deeper into her wrists.

'Gaaaaaaaaaah!' That was it. Charlie really lost her temper. 'Get me out of here! Get me out! Out! Out! OUT!'

Kicking and screaming, she jangled on the end of her chains as sputters of Will fizzed from her fingertips, and her face went red then purple.

'Let me out of here you low-down, good-for-nothing, chumpaholic idiots –'

A rumble and creak of stone from the opposite wall stopped Charlie mid-flow as small fractures appeared across its surface.

'Huh?'

The cracks grew, the stonework moaned and Charlie could hear the faint sound of what seemed to be whale song mixed with the distant rumble of thunder. As the song grew in volume, the wall began to bulge and shake. A large circular hole peeled open in the brickwork to expose a dark and forbidding tunnel. The singing stopped and a bulky figure wrapped in a black hooded robe strode confidently out of the passageway.

'B-Bane!' stuttered Charlie, feeling the blood drain from her face. The Stoman Lord was the reason she was in Bellania. It was, after all, his twisted ambition and his shadowy servants, the Shades, who had chased her from London, intent on trying to kill and even eat her. Bane seemed to think that the pendant Charlie had worn round her neck ever since her parents went missing seven long years ago was key to controlling the realm. With the pendant in his power he could ensure his mastery over Bellania and, knowing this, he would stop at nothing to get it. It had become clear that keeping it in her possession and discovering its secrets was the only way Charlie could save the realm from his evil rule, as well as her only hope of seeing her parents again.

Right now she could feel its reassuring presence round her neck. Whoever was holding her captive clearly didn't know

what the necklace was. It seemed like the only piece of good luck she'd had since she'd opened the portal to Alavis.

Striding forward, the figure loomed over Charlie. Large hands reached up and pulled down the hood to reveal the characteristically gnarled skin of a Stoman. The stranger's face was hard and rigid and he had the coldest grey eyes Charlie had ever seen.

'No, not Bane,' said the large visitor. 'My name is Darkmount. Edge Darkmount.'

Charlie blinked in astonishment. Edge Darkmount was the Stoman bishop she'd been trying to find: the one person who could reveal the secret of her pendant. The bishop was rumoured to be one of the most powerful Stomen in all of Bellania, with stonesinging abilities that could manipulate even the hardest rock as if it were nothing more than clay. Now that Charlie was face to face with him she was relieved that it wasn't Bane, yet she didn't necessarily feel any safer for she could see that he carried his own darkness. However, as she stared back at the hulking figure, instead of fear she felt the familiar stirring of fury within her. It was like the welcome return of an old friend.

'You chump! You sold us out! You were supposed to help us, but you stabbed us in the back!' she shouted. Lashing out, she tried to kick the looming Stoman, but he was out of reach. 'If I ever get down from here I'm going to rip that cloak off you and stuff it up your nostrils, you lousy backstabber!'

'Silly Humans, you are all the same,' snarled Darkmount. 'Only an idiot chained to a wall would insult a stranger.' Raising a clenched fist he sang a powerful note that caused

his hand to glow a deep, baleful red. 'Indeed if you aren't careful you might be forced to learn a painful lesson.'



Jensen groaned and did his best to gain some control of his torn and bruised body. Spitting mud from his mouth, he clenched his fingers into the dirt, pushed his knees under his chest and struggled to his feet.

'I won't ask again. Tell me wot yer've done with Charlie!' he demanded through swollen lips. He staggered defiantly upright to face the Stoman guards in their shining armour. 'Where is she?'

The Stomen were tired of the repeated questions. Grown used to the Treman's plucky determination, they did what they always did. With a nod from a nearby sergeant one of the Stoman soldiers stamped his way from beneath the shelter of the overhanging roof into the pouring rain. Casually he lifted his heavy war axe and, using the thick shaft of the handle rather than the sharp business end, clubbed Jensen back to the ground.

The soldier stared down at the captive. 'You better stay down and be quiet!' he growled, nudging his boot into Jensen's ribs.

'I'm getting tired of repeating meself,' mumbled Jensen. Raising a shaking arm he waved it in the general direction of the astonished guard. 'Tell me where me little Hippotomi –'

The guard slammed his foot into Jensen's head, cartwheeling the Treman over on to his back. As Jensen lost consciousness, the courtyard finally fell silent.

The Stoman grinned and raised a thumbs-up sign to the rest of his squad.

'Ya didn't answer the man,' said a voice interrupting the moment. 'Where's the girl? Where's Charlie?'

Snarling, the soldier snapped round. Furious, he broke into a run that quickly covered the distance between him and the second prisoner. Slamming shoulder-first into the girth of Kelko's stomach, the guard once again brought the shaft of his axe into play and knocked the fat Treman into another unconscious heap. When the chubby Treman was down the soldier ruthlessly kicked him several times.

This was getting way beyond a joke. The two Tremen were insulting the might of the Stoman army with their lewd jokes and constant demands to know where the young Keeper was. A sound beating was the least they deserved. The other Stoman soldiers looked on in approval as he continued to kick and grind his heel into the unconscious prisoners.

A flurry of activity at the far end of the courtyard announced the arrival of a lightly armoured messenger. Ignoring the beating, the messenger jogged past the ranks to the colonel.

'At last,' snorted the colonel once he had absorbed the message. 'I thought we would have to babysit these fools all season long.'

Indicating that two of his men and the messenger should follow him, he strode over to the prisoners, who were slowly regaining consciousness. 'I would like to thank you for gracing us with your constant wit and banter, but we no longer require your presence. Lord Bane has commanded that you be taken with all haste –' the colonel punctuated

his speech with a well-placed kick in Kelko's stomach – 'and ceremony –' and another kick for Jensen – 'to the Soul Mines of Zhartoum, where you will work till your fingers are worn to stubs, your teeth drop from your mouth and your hair withers like rotten wheat. Welcome to the end of your days.'

With a nod of his head he watched his men drag the two Tremen off.

'The dog too?'

'Yes, Colonel.'

'Good, that beast was a real pain in the neck. It mauled three of my men before we could muzzle it. So what about the Keeper and the Hatchling? Can we get rid of them too?'

'They are to remain here, Colonel. Lord Bane has further plans for them. He has dispatched a pack of Shades to usher them to the Western Mountains where he will oversee their fate in person.'

'Excellent,' muttered the colonel, who felt that guarding prisoners was a waste of his time. 'And then what of me and my men?'

'What else but back to the fray? The Human cities are almost ours for the taking and once they have fallen we can turn our sights to Deepforest and that cursed city, Sylvaris.'