

The World Serpent

A Raimy Rylan Hunt

Kenneth B. Humphrey

THE WORLD SERPENT: A RAIMY RYLAN HUNT

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Dedication

This book is for Cameron, and for all the other 10 year old boys who spend their summer hunting demons.

Preface

It started with a parent-teacher conference. She said: "It's hard to find books that keep young boys interested in reading."

I thought: "Really?"

So I figured, why not just write one? Mind you, I have never written a book targeted at the young reader. I had no idea what would keep them interested. I don't even know what keeps me interested. So I came up with short chapters, lots of action, maybe some sense of a larger scheme. How's that for brilliant? Everything else was just stringing sentences together.

This story drew inspiration from the works of the *Younger Edda*.

PRELUDE

Then will occur what will seem a great piece of news, the wolf will swallow the sun and that will seem a great disaster to men. Then another wolf will seize the moon and that one too will do great harm. The stars will disappear from heaven. Then this will come to pass, the whole surface of the earth will tremble so violently that trees will be uprooted from the ground, mountains will crash down, and all fetters and bonds will be snapped and severed. The wolf Fenrir will get loose then. The sea will lash against the land because the Midgard Serpent is writhing in giant fury trying to come ashore.

At that time, too, the ship known as Naglfar will become free. It is made of dead men's nails, so it is worth warning you that, if anyone dies with his nails uncut, he will greatly increase the material for that ship which both gods and men devoutly hope will take a long time building. In this tidal wave, however, Naglfar will be launched.

Thor will slay the Midgard Serpent but stagger back only nine paces before he falls down dead on account of the poison blown on him by the serpent.

Thereupon Surt will fling fire over the earth and burn up the whole world.

~Younger Edda

CHAPTER ONE

Oh boy, here we go again.

I sit up, pulling my legs over the side of the bed. The February morning is stiff and cold. And a Sunday of all things. This is supposed to be my sleep in day.

The dream hangs with me, hard in my memory. When these dreams come, they never leave. They become part of my history, changing from images of a sleeping mind to memories of something that never happened.

I grab the notebook off the table next to my bed and start scribbling down everything about the dream.

The mournful blast of an ancient horn; an echo of warriors marching forward with determined resolve.

Silence echoes in my ears, like waves slowly washing up against the shore in a never ending rhythm. My heartbeat pounds

away in the same slow fashion.

Then another wolf will seize the moon and that one too will do great harm.

Carefully I write down each detail as it comes to me. There is no worry about losing them; these details stay sharp long afterwards.

At that time, too, the ship known as Naglfar will become free.

It's important I capture the way the words appear to me. Sometimes there is as much meaning in the order as there is in the language.

The army marches, crossing a bridge and breaking it into a thousand pieces flashing all the colors of the rainbow.

My hand is starting to cramp. Writing has never been my strong suit. I grip the pen tightly. Almost done.

Giant drip of ice, a burning sword hangs in the sky. The number nine.

Finally I set the pen down and shake my fingers loose. Three pages of notes stare back at me. I don't bother to read them, I know they are accurate.

I also know there's no sense to be made. The images are just a jumble strung together. I've learned over the years not to try and figure them out. Smarter people than me do that.

By the way, I'm Raimy. Raimy Rylan. Fourteen years old and feeling like fifty. I don't stand out. My hair is brown, my eyes

are browner, and my skin is pale. I'm kind of skinny, average height, I only mouth off every once in a while and I'm not some super smart kid.

The only thing that stands out about me - that people notice anyway - is my legs. Or what's left of them.

Grabbing the crutches propped against the wall, I heave myself out of bed and take a second to scrub the last remnants of sleep from my eyes.

Why couldn't I have the dream on Monday when I have to be up early for school anyway?

Outside, snow drifts through the Chicago sky, lean flakes swirling in a dance with the wind. Past experience says that wherever the dream takes me, it will be just as cold and windy. That's how these things work. Maybe one day I'll end up in someplace cool like Miami or Hawaii.

A small clank sounds from the right crutch as I walk out into the hallway. The quietness of Uncle Abe's top floor condo seems at once weird and comforting. At fifty stories in the air, the wind always pries at the windows and doors, creating a constant background whistle. It's become a normal sound to me.

A quick bathroom stop, some tooth brushing, and then I limp my way towards Piper's room.

I should probably take a second to give you some more info. My legs were crushed in a car accident when I was eight. The docs didn't have to cut anything off, but they told me I'd never

walk without aid again. I remember crying and screaming how they were wrong, how I would work harder than anyone ever in history to walk normal again. Well, here I am. Sometimes the promises we make as little kids don't mean much.

There's nothing more for me to say about that.

Piper is my cousin. Her real name is Philomena, but no one calls her that, unless it's Uncle Abe when he wants to talk serious. And he does, too often. You want to talk about a guy who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, that's Abe. He passed that gift on down to his daughter.

I came to live with Abe and Piper when my dad disappeared three years ago. Here one day, gone the next. It didn't hit me as hard as it would a normal kid because I knew what he did was real dangerous and that someday he wouldn't come home. Still miss him though. He was great. We'll circle back to the normal kid comment at some point.

I never knew my mom. Or at least don't remember her.

That must be something in our family pool. Abe no longer has a wife either. He and Piper's mom have been apart for years and she rarely visits. I don't really remember what she looks like.

"Piper? Hey, you awake yet?" I tap on her door, pushing it open with a crutch.

The room is large and dark. She likes it that way, with blinds drawn shut and heavy curtains over those. Even the walls are painted a deep gray color. It makes me depressed just to

step foot in there.

A muffled groan comes from under the lump of covers on her bed as she stirs. I can't understand what she says.

"I had a dream." That's all that needs to be said.

Piper sits up right away, rubbing a palm against her head.

"Why on a Sunday morning? Is it snowing?"

I give a snort of laughter. We're not really alike, or have much in common, but every now and then we hit the same wavelength. She knows it's going to be cold and snowy.

Piper is a year younger than me, small and super book smart. She's also shy and rarely talks to anyone she doesn't know well, which is pretty much everyone. Of all the people that have passed through my life, she knows the deepest secrets that I'd never tell any other friend, or even some family members.

She knows what it means when I have one of those dreams and unlike me, she does not look forward to them. I do, only because they are my escape for short periods of time.

"C'mon," I say. "Out of bed. Meet you downstairs."

I shuffle back past my bedroom to the elevator. Uncle Abe's place is three stories, and after he took me in, he had one installed so I could get around. I know he owns a company and though he never talks about it, he's pretty rich. Matter of fact, he really doesn't talk about much at all. That's where Piper gets it. He's a good guy and all, just quiet and serious, but I guess you have to be if you are a successful business

owner.

He's always been kind to me.

In the kitchen I've almost finished my second batch of waffles before Piper finally comes down. Without a word she sits across from me. I slide the notebook across the table and she scans the pages filled with my scribbles.

"Number nine?" She asks, twisting a finger in her hair.

"Yeah," I reply. "That one's obvious. Nine left."

Piper doesn't look convinced. "Nothing is ever obvious," she mutters, as she gets up to pour herself some cereal.

I get up and stomp through the living room to the study. It is classic old-world wood and leather, with bookshelves lining the walls. It even has one of those rolling ladders for the high up shelves. Wish I could ride it.

In an alcove off to one side sits a book on a pedestal. Covered by a glass lid and reflecting the spotlights from overhead, it looks like an ancient book of spells.

Actually, that is probably the best description.

It's called the *Tome of Lesser Bishops*. A book of my ancestors, a dusty record of what those who came before me did. Filled with the knowledge of five thousand years, it's older than any other book. The wooden covers hide pages made from some kind of cloth. Paper would have dissolved centuries ago. If anyone knew it existed, we'd be famous, but no one does and it needs to stay that way.

Sometimes it's better not to know things.

I lift the glass lid and set it down by my feet. The smell of musty material fills the air and soft sounds echo in the empty room as I turn the pages. Just handling the book makes me feel a part of something larger; part of an ancestral duty tracing back centuries. My family is old and we've played an unknown - but really important - role in history.

This is probably a good time to tell my secret.

I hunt demons.

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