

THE
HANGING
MOUNTAINS

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THE
HANGING
MOUNTAINS

BOOKS OF THE
CATAclysm THREE

Sean Williams



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To STEPHANIE SMITH,
for reacquainting me with magic

“ . . . serpent
mountain
truncation
factotum
eldest
homunculus
crystal
tomb
road
metropolis . . . ”

“ . . . ice
homunculus
ferryboat
wax
summit
wound
exile
obstruction
pollen
darkness . . . ”

“ . . . hand
flood
spoon
poison
vindication
fire
homunculus
forest
severence
snake . . . ”

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Year Thirteen of the Alcaide Dragan Braham



Grey clouds hung low like damp sheets over worn stone buildings and streets that smelt faintly of shit. Habryn Kail wrinkled his nose. He'd never much liked cities, and Laure only reinforced that opinion. While he could forgive much on account of its recent flooding, his patience only extended so far.

"That's an exorbitant price," he told the stall owner, "for a compass that doesn't work."

"None of them are working as they ought." The dirty-pale-skinned man pulled a sour face at the wavering needle on the dial before him. "I assure you, sir, that if north could be measured reliably, this fine piece would do the job better than any other."

The stall owner came out from his tent to pursue the sale, but Kail waved him away. Kail wasn't interested in compasses; there were other, more reliable means of maintaining a course. Food, however, he did require, along with a large hooded cloak. And a camel, if he could find one in his price range likely to live out the week. Unfortunately, Laure wasn't Tintenbar, where traders from all over the Interior gathered to meet their counterparts on the far side of the Divide. No need went unfulfilled in those markets and, for an assiduous purchaser, obtaining anything of quality was not an issue. Laure's isolation, however, meant that quality cost money—money he didn't have. He would have to work hard at stretching what he did have to fully provide for the journey ahead.

At least, he thought wryly, water wasn't likely to be a problem. Within days of the flood that had filled the Divide from side to side, ominous clouds had swept in from the east, bringing with them rain unseen in those parts for generations. The Laureans had quickly familiarised themselves with the phenomenon; where once they might have

8 THE HANGING MOUNTAINS

danced in the streets at every drop, now they muttered about flooding and cursed the threatening sky.

Atop their slender poles, the yadachi sat like crimson-plumaged, long-tailed birds, taking the measure of the weather in absolute silence. What they thought of it, Kail couldn't imagine. He didn't ask, either. His visit to Laure wasn't a social one. Once he had his supplies, he would be on his way.

A camel herder relented under heavy coercion and sold him a barely adequate old nag for more than half the money he had. Half of the remainder went on the cloak. By the time he had filled his new saddlebags with dried meat, flat bread, and salted plums—a guilty pleasure he always indulged on long overland trips—he had barely a coin left in his purse.

A pawnbroker occupied one corner of the market, his grubby stall cluttered with the detritus of failed dreams and addictions. Kail briefly considered divesting himself of the one truly valuable item remaining in his possession. In the course of asking after his former companions as he went about his business, he had learned that the Surveyor Abi V an Haasteren was organising an expedition back to the ruined city known as the Aad on the other side of the Divide, there to seek a marvellous, opalescent relic called the Caduceus. One piece of the Caduceus wasn't with the others, because it currently rested in a cloth bag suspended from a thong around Kail's neck. He knew Van Haasteren would want it, to complete the artefact, so it was bound to fetch a fair price.

A fear that he might regret too hasty a decision made him hold on to it. The Goddess only knew when he might need the money more than he did now, or if he might need something to barter with the Stone Mages—or how much attention he might draw to himself in the process of selling it . . .

"You've got a well-travelled face," called a withered old seer as Kail stood, with one hand on the camel's harness, running through a mental checklist to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Clad in a dusty

shawl that might once have been brilliant blue and red, the seer clutched shaking hands in her lap and wore brass rings on hooked toes. “Why not let me tell you what lies on the road ahead?”

Kail almost didn’t bother responding. Market seers were as likely to possess actual talent as the jewellery in the next stall actual gems.

“If you can tell me what lies behind me, old mother —,” he said, “then maybe you can tell me what’s ahead.”

“A test, eh?” The seer cackled heartily, exposing more gaps than teeth. “It doesn’t work like that, son. It’s as hard to look into the past as the future, and few people will pay me to do that. They usually don’t like what they learn.”

That was an odd comment. Intrigued, he led the camel closer. It snorted and resentfully butted his shoulder.

He ignored it. “Why wouldn’t they like it?”

“Some say the future is a book we haven’t read yet.” The old woman appraised him with one eye as he approached, the other screwed shut as though dazzled by a bright light. “The past is a book too, but not one we’ve read. It’s one we’ve *written*. That’s why I don’t like telling the past. People object to hearing that their book contains lies of their own devising—lies they tell themselves to make sense of things, to make it all bearable, to go on living. No one likes being caught out in a lie, do they?”

He smiled. Talented or not, she was no fool. “No, they don’t.”

“People lie about the future, too,” she said, squinting even harder, “calling it hope or faith. I’m willing to bet I can’t catch you out at that. A pragmatist like you lives in the moment. He knows that life is just a series of moments, one after the other. They come and go like beads on a string. If the string ever breaks you’ll be lost, and—ah!” She leaned back with her mouth open in triumph. “Yes! Got you.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, although he knew full well. He’d felt his face tighten at her comment about being lost, and she—trained charlatan and observer of faces—had spotted the slip.

|| THE HANGING MOUNTAINS

“You’re on a journey. A long one.” Her expression sobered. “It may not be the one you originally set out on, and your destination might not be the one you hope for . . . But a journey it is, and you will be changed by it in ways you don’t expect.” She paused. “Pull up a seat, son. Let’s talk.”

A light rain had started outside the canvas covering of her stall. The weather didn’t faze him, but it did unsettle the camel. His curiosity pricked, Kail tied the restless beast to a post and folded himself into the seat opposite the woman. Reaching into his purse, he produced a coin and put it on the table between them.

She waved it away. “Pay me afterwards. For now, just give me your left hand.”

Kail did so, and she took it in both of hers. The skin of her fingers was rough with calluses as they explored his palm. Her eyes flickered shut.

He felt a tingle not dissimilar to pins and needles shoot up his arm. He almost pulled away, recognising the feeling—she was Taking from him!—but curiosity held him still. If she genuinely had some facility with the Change, perhaps her other claims weren’t completely false.

“You said I was on a journey,” he prompted, “a journey that would change me.”

“No great revelation there. Anyone could tell that much from your clothes. And journeys always change us, otherwise there’d be no point going on them.” Her attention wandered as though she was concentrating on something distant and hard to make out. “Your home lies far from here,” she went on, and he felt the tingle again. “The sea calls you, but you don’t hear it. The ones you serve have lost your respect. You follow them no longer. You’re seeking your own path. You—” She stopped. A sudden, indrawn breath hissed between her teeth. “You have been touched by darkness. A darkness I cannot see through. Not death. Not the Void. The darkness of—of ending. The ending of all things. I cannot—”

A deep menacing hum rose up as though an invisible cloud of bees was swarming around them.

She pulled free of him and clutched her hands to her chest.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, shaken by her reaction.

“I don’t want to see,” she said, shaking her head. Her voice quavered. “It’s too close!”

“*What’s* too close?”

“The darkness!” She took a deep, shaky breath. “I’ve seen it before, but never so near. Your shadow stretches before you, blacker than night. You’re walking to the end of the world and do not know it.”

“Where?” he asked. “How?”

She opened her eyes slowly, painfully. “That you’ll have to find out for yourself. I can’t see it. It is utterly beyond my ken.”

Kail wanted to press her for more information, but he took pity on her. She seemed abruptly to be much older now than earlier, and weary with it. Her gaze wouldn’t meet his.

“My apologies,” he said, adding another coin to the one already sitting on the table. “I didn’t mean to burden you.”

“That is so often the way, son.”

He stood. The rain hadn’t eased. It had strengthened, if anything, falling in hot, heavy waves over the market stalls. People scurried for shelter and covered their wares. The drenched camel snorted and stamped its feet.

“Blood will run like water,” the seer whispered, her voice so soft he could barely hear it over the downpour. “Blood will run like water ere the end comes.”

Chilled despite the dense, humid air, Kail took his leave of her and made haste from the city.

Hungrily, in the distance, a wolf howled.

The twins shivered.

Do you think—? Hadrian started to say.

Best not to, his brother cut him off.

A clatter of stones made them jump. Their connection to the world was growing stronger every day, but details remained sketchy beyond a few metres of their unusual body. Their four legs spread wide, they scanned the area around the campsite for any sign of trouble. It seemed to them that the light had dimmed, but whether that was because of cloud cover or nightfall they couldn't tell. Far-off sounds might have been rain falling or wind sweeping across the barren earth outside their shelter. They were fairly certain it wasn't anything more sinister than that.

The wolf's call was a little closer this time.

Hadrian shivered and the Homunculus skin containing him and his brother rippled. Set up under a stone slab as large as a three-storey building, their campsite offered protection on just two sides. Despite this, Kail had assured them they would be safe, that no one would dare bother them, and they had accepted the Sky Warden's assurance readily enough. Nothing had prepared them for the sound of a wolf.

I don't feel secure here.

Seth agreed. *We could move, I suppose—but where to?*

Keep on going, Hadrian suggested. Northeast. Kail would follow us. He knows how to.

We'd be more vulnerable out there than we are here.

Do you really think if we stay still and don't move, it'll just go away?

Both Seth and Hadrian recovered the same memory at exactly the same moment. Their minds had been so intimately entangled in the Void that they had started thinking as one. Independently yet together, they reached for the words Pukje had spoken to them, a hundred lifetimes ago: *Wolves know how to wait.*

Neither of them knew how much credence to give that particular statement. But the fear was very real, and so was their ignorance; they understood too little about the world as it existed now. Talking to their guide only made the situation worse.

The sound of rattling rock grew louder. They pulled fur ther into

the shadows, instinctively raising their arms to present a more threatening figure. Their legs tensed to run.

“It’s only me,” called a familiar voice.

A large shape pressing out of the gloomy myopia surrounding them resolved into Habryn Kail leading a camel under the overhang.

“We weren’t sure,” said Hadrian, letting down his guard. “We didn’t know *what* you were.”

Seth remained as taut as a bowstring. “Did anyone follow you here?”

“If they did, they’re a better tracker than I am.”

“You were gone a long time,” said Hadrian.

“I had a lot to do.” The rangy, tall man settled the dripping camel and eased himself down to a squatting position. His dark skin blended almost perfectly with the shadows. “I found out that Marmion and the others have gone upriver along the Divide looking for the cause of the flood and the man’kin migration. And you, I presume. They’d be fools to presume you dead without evidence.”

“Are they still hunting us?” asked Seth.

“Not actively. They have no trail, and no hope of finding one. The flood has proved a stroke of good fortune for you.”

Seth finally began to relax, allowing the Homunculus’ s many-limbed shape to move. Together they sat and addressed the tracker face to face.

“How are they travelling?” asked Hadrian.

“That’s the interesting thing. Our maps become increasingly unreliable the further east you head, so overland journeys can be dangerous and slow. Given the resources of the Strand, if I was still with them I would have suggested following the course of the Divide when the initial turbulence of the flood died down—but Laure doesn’t have boats, and probably lacks the infrastructure to make one in a hurry. So I assumed that Marmion had taken the hard road and wouldn’t be far ahead of us.”

Kail’s words came with an unfamiliar bafflement, as though for once the long-limbed tracker’s instincts had led him astray.

“Tell us,” said Seth.

“Three days after the flood, the Engineers in the expedition found the skeleton of a hullfish in the torrent. They hauled it ashore, cleaned it, and tested its fitness. Apart from a couple of minor breaches, it held water. They must have worked amazingly fast to get it ready but that’s how they’re travelling; exactly how I least expected them to.”

“Hullfish?” asked Hadrian.

“Sometimes called an ivory whale.” The tracker adopted a cautious expression they had come to recognise. “You don’t know what that is?”

The Homunculus’s head shook as both twins indicated their ignorance.

“It’s a beast normally found in the deep ocean. Ten, twenty metres long, and almost impossible to kill because of their thick, bony hide. The carcasses are airtight, so they occasionally drift ashore when they die. Five of the largest ever found became *O’s*, the Alcaide’s ship of bone. You’ve never heard of that, either? Well, you only need to know that one hullfish is enough to make a perfectly serviceable vessel. Especially with the Change strong in the Divide.”

The twins struggled with the explanation. Kail obviously thought it made sense, and they supposed it did, in a way. There had been minds to talk with in the Void—desperate, dwindling things that had told stories among themselves in order to prolong existence before the endless hum ground them down. The twins had sometimes moved among them, and learned of the world outside through those stories. Their memories were confused, though; it was sometimes hard to disentangle the distant past from the stories of the Lost Minds after an eternity of sensory deprivation.

The twins remembered skyscrapers and a world overflowing with people. They remembered machines and power grids and television and ballpoint pens. Now the world’s inhabitants had buggies and airships and the Change. The Lost Minds had told of empty ruins and depopulated wastes, and spoken of cities as fearful, haunted places.

It seemed utterly preposterous to the twins that the corpse of a fish as large as a whale could be fashioned into a ship, but Seth remembered an equally preposterous vessel called *Hantu Penyardin*—and Hadrian had used the Change to fashion a pencil into a spear in order to kill the energuman, Volker Lascowicz. They could accept strangeness as fact if they had to. As far as they knew, Kail had no reason to lie.

“Could we travel that way?” they asked. “Upriver?”

Kail shook his head. “Even if we could find another hullfish, I couldn’t make a ship of it on my own, not in time. No, we’re best sticking to the original plan: I ride the camel while you walk alongside, disguised under the cloak. That way, we’ll be slow but steady. And we won’t have to worry about what the flood’s left in its wake.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hadrian.

“Well, the Divide was home, or prison, to more than just man’kin. And sometimes a burial ground for creatures that might not be completely dead, even now. The water will stir all manner of things from their rest.”

Kail stood and went to the camel. He opened a saddlebag and took out a handful of small, nutlike objects. He picked at them, flicking seeds out into the darkness, and paced as he talked.

“I worry about the others. They’re rushing into a situation for which they’re ill prepared. I know you’ve tried to explain what’s growing up there in the mountains, but I still don’t entirely understand what it is. It’s dark and dangerous, you say, and it eats people. It comes from before the Cataclysm and isn’t really part of our world. If I called Marmion with this information, he’d think me mad—and then he *would* be hunting you again, because he would have good reason to. So I can’t tell him that he’s putting himself and the others in danger—and I don’t like that.”

The twins let him think aloud. Their thoughts were full of dying cities and worlds rent asunder, of billions dead and more to come.

“They’re too far ahead for us to catch up, even if we walk our mount into the ground,” the tracker said. “We can’t steal a buggy

because it won't work with you aboard. There's no point in calling Shilly or Sal, since Marmion won't believe them either, not without evidence. We don't have any other options that I can see, but to walk. Do you have any suggestions?"

Features blurred in the Homunculus's face as the twins shook their heads.

Kail nodded. "I've promised to get you to the mountains so you can deal with this thing, whatever it is. My path and my conscience are clear. I just wish there was more I could do to help the others. There has been, as you said, enough death already."

The howl of a wolf cut the air like a knife.

"What?" asked Kail, head snapping around as the twins jumped in fright. "What is it?"

"Didn't you hear it?" asked Hadrian.

"Hear what?" The tracker's brows crinkled.

Kail didn't hear it, said Seth, his internal voice brittle. *We're not imagining it, are we?*

Perhaps he can't hear it.

It's just for us, then? A warning?

Or a threat, said Hadrian. Another thought struck him. *Perhaps the time isn't quite right yet.*

For what?

For the gloves to come off.

"We think we should get moving," they told Kail. "Standing still for too long probably isn't a good idea."

"Want to explain why?"

Hadrian tried to explain. "There might be people out there—"

"Things," Seth added.

"—who remember us and the way the world used to be. Some of them good, some of them . . . less so. I'm not sure they count as evil, but they don't always want the same thing as us. And we hurt them, a long time ago."

Kail studied their strange black features for a long moment. “You’re not talking about this Yod creature. This is something else entirely.”

“Yes.”

“An ally of Yod’s?”

“No.” Hadrian’s memories of Volker Lascowicz’s brutal death and the snarling of Upuaut, the demonlike creature that had inhabited him, were painfully clear to both of them. “Not an ally, but just as deadly.”

Kail nodded wearily. “Then I guess we need to get moving—and talking. The more you tell me, the more I’m going to understand. And the more I understand, the better I’m going to be able to keep us out of trouble.”

“We’re trying,” the twins said. “We really are trying.”

“I know,” said the tracker, pulling a thick cotton cloak out of a pack and holding it up for them to slip into, two arms into each sleeve. “Believe me, so am I.”