

# **Heroes of Ruin: Curse of the Fallen One**

## **Prologue:**

I, being a former prince of a city known as Leomar, have seen many things. I've torn walking corpses limb from limb, I've decapitated a Leviathan, heck, I've toppled a fortress or two. But nothing I've done in the past could've prepared me for what came next.

Before all of this, I was a great and noble prince. Highly praised, every on-looker staring at me in awe. Then, in an unfortunate turn of events, a power-hungry dog became my father's advisor, and I lost my place as prince for speaking against him. I went from living the high life to fighting for my life. I've even dragged in the armor of a Skeleton just to get a piece of bread. At some point, I was even given a job to save the Lord of Nexus, a king I didn't even know. As smoothly as that went, I wasn't finished. I had one last mission...one last threat to destroy. At least I wasn't alone this time.

## **Act 1:**

Footsteps echoed through the Great Hall of Nexus. Pillars lined the walls with long, blue tapestry hanging along the walls. The floor was pure white with gold outlining the walkway, giving the Hall a very regal appearance. Though in a comfortable surrounding, a dark threat began to grow in my mind. Still, I held my head high and stepped in pace with my guide. Before a great door, my guide stopped, and gestured me to continue. I obliged. Stepping through the large, red door, I saw Lord Ataraxis and the rest of the Vanguard. Ataraxis' disposition seemed serious, setting the impression that this was serious.

"Step forth, young warrior," Ataraxis called, a strain and displeasure in his voice. "It is an honor to stand in the presence of the savior of my life once again, however, I've called you forth in dire need. Yet another curse is beginning to stretch its roots, and though it has not yet taken full hold, it is having its effects, despite being in its adolescence. I don't believe you noticed on your way in the people of Nexus. Many are falling ill, their skin taking darker shades. A few have passed on from this life to the next.

"I wish for you to go to the Haunted Woods. If my senses are correct, that is where the curse originates. I ask of you to go and break the curse, at whatever cost. And, if possible, bring to me the being, if any, that is causing this curse. I will offer any reward you desire."

"I don't desire any reward. I'll complete your request and bring you the head of the being causing this curse. If any, of course." I hesitated at my statement. Something felt different about this mission...

"You will not go alone, young warrior. I've appointed a partner for you, another wandering mercenary. I believe together, you'll have a better chance at breaking this curse."

"...As you wish, Your Highness," I replied. The disdain in my voice was very apparent, and it

seemed Ataraxis found it amusing. I did not.

I stepped outside the Great Hall into the sunlight. Although the sun was at its highest, the day seemed darker than usual. Maybe it was my current attitude. Although I've accepted alliances with other warriors in the past, I rarely take up partners with open arms. Not to mention the constant nudging in my heart. Something about this mission feels...

"So, you're the big, bad buddy I've been stuck with."

I whipped around in surprise, just noticing a slim man leaning against the outer wall of the Great Hall. He had a torn cape, a shabby, wide-trim hat, and was twirling a gun with his right finger.

"You're the guy I'm teamed up with?" I asked. His appearance was very unimpressive, and his demeanor was somewhat self-important.

"Seems so. Hey, don't look at me with that tone of voice, you're not exactly a babe in a bikini, either."

"Would you like to get going so we can get this over with?"

"Well, touchy, touchy. Sure, we can go. Just don't let this get boring."

"People are dying of a curse, and you're worried about getting bored?"

"Yeah, pretty much. You're boring me already. Let's get going, then, Lord Impatience. Just don't swing that...thing around too much. I'd like to kill something, too."

Ataraxis stuck me with this guy? An arrogant, smart-mouthed, little sadist? I can say one thing, this will certainly be interesting, but I'm not going to enjoy it.

We set out from Nexus within an hour. The field between the Haunted Woods and Nexus isn't all that large, but it seemed to be much larger because of the Gunslinger mouthing off the entire time. I nearly took one of his guns and shot him with it at some point.

"Do you ever shut up?" I finally asked, getting a chance to talk in between his topic change from pulling guns out during a coronation to robbing a bread shop.

"Nah, I don't do well with silence. It gets monotonous, awkward, and worst of all, boring. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, so the bread shop owner was yelling, 'oh, don't shoot me! I'll give you as much bread as you-'"

"I would very much enjoy just thirty seconds with your mouth staying shut."

"Hmmm...Can I go twenty?"

"For the love of-" Before I could finish my sentence, I heard a noise... a twig snapping.

"You heard it, too?" the Gunslinger asked.

"Yeah. We're not alone... put up your guard."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

We stood back to back for what seemed forever. The anticipation of an attack began to become unbearable. Just as quickly as the twig snapped, six Skeletons in thick, brass armor surrounded us. Some were unarmed, some had swords, some had clubs. The rank of their breath stung my nostrils. The sound of their individual moans fell into an eerie harmony, adding to the horrific feeling of the scenery. We stood just before the Haunted Woods, and the sunlight was fading. The fear factor began to take effect.

"I'll take the three on the left," said the Gunslinger, not even a slight bit of fear in his voice.

"Why does everyone always want the ones on the left?" I asked.

With nothing but a blur, the Skeletons attacked. Though devastating, their attacks were slow and cumbersome. Both the Gunslinger and myself were never touched. Though the armor was thick, the Skeletons were easily dispatched. I swung my sword powerfully, the sound of pistols blasting behind me at blinding speed. This guy may have been idiotic, but he could hold himself in a fight. One after another, each of the Skeletons crumbled to the ground until none but the Gunslinger and myself stood.

"Huh...for a big guy, you're pretty good," said the Gunslinger.

"Well, for a little guy, at least you can take three Skeletons," I replied. He snorted in response.

This mission may have just begun, but it is most certainly getting interesting already.

## **Act 2:**

The sunlight began to fade. The Haunted Woods now surrounded myself and the Gunslinger. Disembodied whispers chanted all around us. Each step we took felt like one step closer to death. Screeches and howls filled the air, the night sky now pitch black. Occasionally, we'd see what looked like a fire burning just through some brush. However, every time we made our way in that direction, there was nothing there. At one point, we even heard a high-pitched, demonic laugh right between us. Then, we realized something. The Woods were toying with us. Something was attempting to frighten us away.

"You scared yet, kitty cat?" asked the Gunslinger.

"Asks the tiny little man hiding behind his pair of pistols," I replied. "These woods are treacherous. I've been here before, so I hold no fear of them. Whatever I've ever come across has rarely been bad enough to frighten me away." As I spoke, the faceless whispers seem to become louder...more agitated.

"I don't think they like it when you talk."

"I could say the same about you."

"Can you understand what they're saying?"

"Their speaking in an ancient tongue, one long forgotten, even by the Ruinlords."

"Doesn't sound like they forgot it."

"You here that? That's ancient forgotten language for shut up."

The Gunslinger snickered, but after that, we continued on in silence. We meandered through the forest at an easy-going pace. The further we moved in, the more we came to realize, we weren't the only ones moving through the forest. Around us, footsteps dragged at leasury paces. Whenever we stopped, the dragging would stop quickly after. I grasped my blade in anticipation. The Gunslinger armed his pistols quickly, but silently. As quick as a lightning flash, I swung my blade to my right, cleaving a ghoul in half. Simultaneously, the Gunslinger swung around and blasted two ghouls directly in the forehead, dropping them quickly. However, once again, we were surrounded by what seemed to be an army. The number of them seemed to fade in the distance in all directions. How could we be surrounded by an entire army so quickly? Did we drop our guard? It only sounded like a few of them were following us. As if in some sort of wicked harmony, many of the ghouls began to moan aimlessly, and they moved in to attack.

We wasted no time. I swung my sword with all the might in my arms, and the Gunslinger blasted his pistols so quickly, the sound nearly deafened me. Left and right, before and behind, the ghouls came as quickly as we killed. Sweat beaded my forehead, and the Gunslinger began to wear a rather weary expression. Still, we fought on. The fear of death crept into my heart stronger than ever before, and, suddenly, my arms were filled with strength. A fire began burning deep in my soul. I suddenly felt full of vigor. Without a glint of hesitation, I swung and slashed my blade through corpse after corpse. To my left, ghouls were dropping quickly thanks to the Gunslinger's trigger-happy fingers. I looked forward only to realize a ghoul was directly in front of me, it's arms outstretched. Instinctively, I grasped the closest arm, flipped the ghoul over my back, and drove my sword into it as it fell to the ground. For a few more moments, we fought on and on until finally, the numbers slackened. Eventually, all that surrounded us were piles of ghoul corpses. The battle was over.

"C'mon, we've gotta find a place to rest," yelled the Gunslinger.

"I'm standing two and a half meters from you, I can hear you just fine. Sarcasm aside, I agree." At this point, I could barely keep my sword stabalized in my hands. I began to feel dizzy. We had used way too much energy.

I followed the Gunslinger to a small alcove. I sat down hard, my back resting against the wall of the alcove. the Gunslinger did the same on the opposite side. I put the tip of my blade to the

ground, my hand still grasping the hilt. I didn't realize how drained I was from the battle. I could barely breathe. Sweat dripped from my forehead to the ground.

"That was fun," said the Gunslinger, finally getting a chance to talk in between breaths.

"The kind of fun I never want to do again. You've got a good eye to have been able to see this alcove through all of that foliage." For once, I was slightly impressed by this guy.

"I've always had a talent for spotting places like this."

"Speaking of which, what's your story? How did you become a mercenary in the first place?"

"You really wanna know? Alright, I'll tell ya, but my story will have its price."

"Very well."

"I don't remember much of my childhood. All I remember is ravaging through trash cans to find a decent meal. I had to steal to get anything I wanted. Clothes, food, the occasional piece of jewelry, you name it. I know that it wasn't much living, but I enjoyed it. It felt adventurous.

"At one point, somewhere in my teenage years, I came across a gun totter. Being at that particular age, I thought he was the coolest thing since Frosty Peaks. He noticed my awe and enthusiasm somehow...maybe because of my constant squealing, but he came over to me and he said, 'You! You are my next apprentice.' He took me in, fed me, clothed me, and taught me how to use these guns like a pro. And, after a while, he passed away. Natural causes. After that, I left that little dung hole village and became a nomad. Now, I sleep wherever I can find shelter, I eat whenever I can find food, you know, the works. I know most people would complain about this sort of lifestyle, but I don't mind it. It feels...free. I like that. So there's my story, now what's yours?"

Now I knew the price he was talking about. I didn't feel like paying this particular price, but he told his, I suppose it was fair I told mine.

"I used to be a prince of a land called Leomar. I lived in a city called Sanctum. Beautiful place. Sparkling fountains, lush greenery, gorgeous palace. For a number of years, everything seemed perfect. My father ruled the land with a just hand, crime was a rarity, everything was perfect...until corruption entered the fray. My father asked the people of our land to provide an advisor. Someone with much wisdom and a love for justice. We recieved the exact opposite. Nalimar, a greedy, evil monster took up the spot of advisor.

"I remember this incident more vividly than any other that has happened in my life. We were in the War room. Imps were moving toward our lands, and we planned on driving them out. Nalimar suggested to put five thousand of our recruits in direct battle against the imp infestation. However, he knew those recruits, being inexperienced in the art of battle, would all fall, and positioned more experienced troops west of the battle, hiding in the foliage until the imps were tired out, then attack. That hit a chord inside of me. I stood up and said he couldn't do that. Destroying the lives of the young men of Leomar is a betrayal in itself. These young men enrolled in the army because of their love for this land. Taking their lives in a diversion was just

plain wrong!" I felt tears welling in my eyes. I fought them and kept on with my story. "After the War meeting, Nalimar went to my father and stated that my outspoken nature was not in the best interest of our kingdom. That I should be banished. My father couldn't do it, so Nalimar did what was in his power. He exiled me from my land. It wasn't until after my exile that I found out his plot to take the throne from my father. I've been doing everything in my power to be re-established as Prince of Leomar so that I may save my father and my people."

"Wow. That's rough buddy. I'm not exiled from Leomar...yet. I could go in and fill this Nalimar guy full of bullets for ya," the Gunslinger suggested. There wasn't a hint of sarcasm in his suggestion, which just made me chuckle.

"Thanks for caring, but you'd cause more harm than good. Fulfilling this mission is the only way I can see Nalimar punished for his crimes."

"Well, the offer's on the table."

Once again, his light-hearted nature just made me laugh. We sat in silence for some time. After feeling fully recovered, we both stood up. As soon as we rose, however, the ground beneath us crackled.

"You heard that, right?" asked the Gunslinger.

"Yeah, I heard it. Maybe if we step lightly, we can-" Before I could finish my sentence, the ground beneath us crumbled. We slid down a rocky tunnel. The tunnel was nearly vertical the whole way down, but it curved occasionally. It curved left, then it curved right sharply. After some time of sliding and screaming, we dropped into a dark chamber.

Looking around, the room was light enough to see in. Some unworldly enchantment filled this cavern. The air was rank with the scent of rotten wood and dirt. Looking up through the way we came, then around the chamber, we silently agreed that the only way to move was forward. We trodded lightly through the tunnel, weapons at the ready for whatever crept in the dark caverns before us.

### **Act 3:**

The tunnel was considerably dimmer than the chamber we landed in. The foul scent lingered through the tunnels. Navigating through felt like wandering a labyrinth. We had little light, the tunnel had twists and turns, and every now and again the tunnels lead us to junctions. We meandered through the tunnels for what seemed like hours. Our patience began to wear thin, and just when we began to lose hope of finding our way out, we entered a chamber with seven separate entrances.

"Maybe this is a good opportunity to rest. We'll scout each passageway once we've recovered," I offered.

"Not a bad idea. You know, I think I'm actually starting to like you," replied the Gunslinger.

"I never even asked you your name, Gunslinger."

"I was gonna say the same thing to you."

"I'm Borom, former Prince of Leomar."

"Dekar, current Wanderer of Wherever."

His childish humor was amusing, especially in a dark cavern possibly full of ravenous beasts looking for a fresh meal. I would say we sat in silence, but that wasn't the case. Dekar began telling stories of Savage tribes, and an elf girl, an Architect, that he thought was quite attractive. Needless to say, that wasn't quite the way he described her, but it's close enough. After some time of chatting, we both stood and began scoping each passageway. I started toward the right and moved left, he did the opposite.

After only a few moments, Dekar yelled, "here it is!"

"How can you tell?"

"The air smells the worst through this one."

"Hmmm...you're right."

"Let's get going so we can break this curse and go home."

"Very well."

We began moving through the tunnel, and in no time, we came to a large, spacious room held up by hundreds of rows of pillars, all standing at least a thousand feet high. All of them had markings and symbols carved in from floor to ceiling, which was so high, neither of us could see. The sight was bewildering.

"This is most certainly a sight you don't see every day."

"No, it most certainly isn't. However, it brings to mind a story my father told me many years ago."

"Do tell!"

"Long ago, before even Lord Ataraxis was a Ruinlord and during the high point of the Great War of Veil, there was a battle that was so intense, it supposedly shook the entire world. Nexus, Ataraxis' father, called upon spellcasters from a hidden city, a city whose beauty stood in its pillars. But when Nexus' need was most dire, when the battle took a turn for the worst, the spellcasters fled into their city, hiding in the crevices. Because of this, Nexus cursed their leader, and in turn, the leader cursed his people so they would feel the pain he felt. His pain, however, exceeded anything anyone has ever known. He and his people became wraiths, but he became

known as the Fallen One."

"If this story is true, do you think the Fallen One is the one that put the curse on the people of Nexus? Revenge, perhaps?"

"If so, why wouldn't he put the curse entirely on Ataraxis?"

Dekar thought for a moment. "Maybe this is his way of making Ataraxis suffer. Ataraxis cares for his people above anything else."

"Then, if he's making Ataraxis suffer through his people-"

"He's saving the Big Tuna for last."

"I think it's time to move."

We began moving through the pillared city quickly, searching for the center. If there was a sacred ground of some kind, or at least what used to be, it would be at the heart of the city. If the Fallen One were to lay a curse such as this, maybe he would start at the place his power was at its greatest.

We sprinted through the city, passing pillar after pillar. This had to be one of the biggest places I've ever been in! There didn't seem to be any end to it. Finally, we came to a small, circular area without pillars. What we saw filled us with horror.

At the center of this area, what looked like a short, black tree stood, its roots stretching in all directions. Some of the roots even wrapped around the bases of close by pillars. Around it loomed an eerie blue fire. Wraiths surrounded the tree. I stepped forward, and all of them simultaneously turned to face Dekar and me. From behind the dark tree, another wraith emerged, but this one was different. It was considerably larger than the rest. As quick as the eye could blink, they surrounded us. The big one stood near the tree, as if to protect it. Luckily, there were only a few wraiths surrounding us. Eight of them, tops.

"I'll take the four on the left," I said.

"They're all yours," replied Dekar.

Without further delay, we charged at the wraiths. They struck back quickly. Though they weren't too powerful, they were definitely quick. They zipped left and right, giving small and quick opportunities to strike back. I cut down two, but the other two got on top of me, slashing my ribs and chest. I shrieked in pain, and swung my sword, cutting them both in one slice. I turned to face Dekar, who had also been slightly wounded, but had already finished them all off.

"You charge the Fallen One, I'll shoot him from afar, and I'll get the tree whenever I have the opportunity." After stating his strategy, Dekar motioned for me to move in. I obliged.



I charged in at the Fallen One, sword poised for a downward swing. He stood ready to intercept. Just before I struck and he blocked, Dekar attacked from the side, shooting at undeterminable speeds. With the Fallen One's attention diverted, I struck. It recoiled, and I followed. Swinging wildly, I struck the Fallen One multiple times, Dekar shooting him from the side, getting an occasional shot at the cursed tree. I swung a very heavy blow, and the Fallen One vanished before I made contact.

"It's coming over here! Go for the tree, I'll hold it off!" Just after he finished his sentence, the Fallen One appeared a mere three yards from him. He backflipped to space himself from the Fallen One and began shooting maniacally again. Without further hesitation, I ran to the tree and began slashing it. Every place I sliced, a blue light began emitting from the crevice. I kept slashing. Left, right, up, down, every other way I could slice, I sliced. I raised my sword to finish the cursed tree, and from behind, I felt a cold sting through my back. My body lifted into the air, and I flew across the area and slammed against a pillar. The Fallen One came in my direction to finish me off. I couldn't stand to defend myself. Whatever he hit me with, it was draining my life force.

Behind the Fallen One, Dekar began shooting the tree, and before the Fallen One could reach me, it turned and flew from me to Dekar in a blur. Before Dekar could react, the Fallen One reached its hand into Dekar's chest. Dekar screamed in pain. Holding him there, the Fallen One let out a demonic laugh...a very familiar demonic laugh. Looking at me, Dekar spoke.

"Finish the tree...hurry! Befo-" His body went limp. the demonic laugh from the Fallen One resounded even louder than before, but it held him there. I willed myself to stand and run at full speed. The Fallen One took no notice of me, and seizing the opportunity, I swung my sword, severing the cursed tree in two. The tree flashed in that same eerie blue light, and the roots retracted. As quick as the flash, the tree imploded in a small, final flash. I turned to face the Fallen One, only to see Dekar drop to the ground and the Fallen One to seize my chest and push me against the pillar behind me. I felt my life draining into the Fallen One...there was little I could do.

In one last gambit, I lifted my sword into its chest, then pressed in with all my strength. In a demonic screech, the Fallen One dropped me to the floor and wretched about. The spirit that filled the wraith's cloak vanished, and the cloak fell to the ground in front of me. Willing myself to stand, I took the cloak and moved over to Dekar.

With a half-hearted chuckle, he looked at me, tears in his eyes. "We had a good run, didn't we?"

"Don't speak like that. We'll make it out. We'll-"

"No, we won't. At least I won't. It doesn't look like you've got much time either. Do me one last favor..."

"Whatever you need." I couldn't hold in the tears any longer.

"Take my body out of here. I don't want my body to be taken into the Haunted Woods and used

as a puppet."

"Very well..."

"Oh, quit sobbing. You really are just a big kitty cat...ugh. I guess I won't get that chance to shoot up that Nalimar guy..."

I laughed through the tears. Even at his deathbed, he was still making jokes. "I guess not."

"...I would've followed you home...my brother..." His body went limp, and his breathing stopped.

Tears stung my eyes. "Be at peace, my brother in arms." I used my fingers to close his eyes for the last time.

Willing myself to stand, I sheathed my sword, threw Dekar over one shoulder, and held the cloak in the other. On the far side of the room, I saw an exit. Through the exit, I found a staircase. Past the staircase, I found myself outside the Elder Forest, a short walk away from Nexus. Willing myself forward, I limped toward the great city. However, with every step I felt weaker.

Finally making it to the Great Hall, I fell to the floor. Two members of the Vanguard picked me up and helped me to the large, red door. They opened it, and there sat Ataraxis. When he saw me and the body of Dekar, his expression began to wear heavy.

"We broke the curse...the cloak of the Fallen One..." I threw the cloak to the ground before Ataraxis. "Place me against that wall." The Vanguard obliged. I placed Dekar beside me and slumped against the wall. "Free my city from Nalimar...protect my father..." I looked at the body of my friend...my brother. "My quest is complete...I will go to the place of my friends...and my ancestors..."

With one last smile, I closed my eyes...for the last time.

### **Epilogue:**

"Maybe we know our heroes,

Maybe we've never met them.

But one thing is for sure,

We'll never forget them."