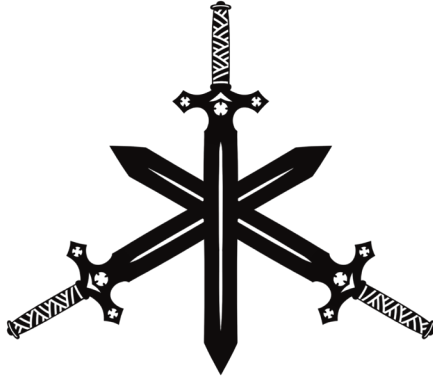


THE BLACKBURN CHRONICLES: BOOK ONE

# IN THE DARKNESS



NICHOLAS WETEMANS

# CHAPTER 1



Four months. For four months Nicholas had been searching. Tracking the item his father had sent him to find. And now, he had finally tracked down the merchant with it in their possession. This merchant was supposedly perched in a small village within the rainforests of Indonesia. Now in that village, the villager he had just gathered information from nodded and pointed into the forest, indicating the direction the merchant had gone only a few hours before. Nicholas bowed in appreciation, his hands clasped together as a sign of thanks, turning and walking into the trees, following the directions he'd been given. The villagers had warned him that some sort of monster was living in the forest surrounding the village and that they had heard screams coming from the forest after the merchant had ventured in there. So, Nicholas was assuming that whatever the monster was, it had killed the merchant and the item would be somewhere in the vicinity. Nicholas drew the sword that was strapped to his back, an onyx black claymore with three rubies embedded in the hilt.

Nicholas knelt and examined the immediate area around him. He instantly noticed the human footprints continuing in the direction he was going, smirked and continued onward. But as he followed the trail

the merchant had left, he held the sword in front of him, ready for anything. It wasn't long before he came into a clearing, the canopy overhead thinner and allowing for more light. This allowed him to better see the footprints he'd been tracking and their change from a calm stroll into a chaotic trail of panic.

*Something happened to him here*, Nicholas thought, kneeling once more to get a better look. He then noticed a set of lion-like footprints among the human footprints.

*A lion? What the...?*

Suddenly, there was a snapping of twigs from behind him. He whirled to see a dark shape diving toward him. His training kicked in and he quickly tumbled aside, but not before he felt claws raking down his arm.

'Bollocks...' he hissed in pain.

The thing landed behind him and whirled to face Nicholas. It had the body of a lion, a scorpion-like tail and an almost human-like face, a mane bordering the face.

'A Manticore, that makes sense now,' he muttered, nodding.

It growled, revealing rows and rows of needle-like teeth, and leapt at Nicholas.

But he was ready this time and he ducked under it. Raising the sword, he cut through the belly of the beast, spilling blood and guts everywhere. The Manticore crashed to the ground, almost lifeless. Nicholas approached it, raising the black sword over his head, and brought it down, cleaving the Manticore's head clean off. He quickly wiped the blood off the sword and sheathed it before examining its body. Everything about it was intact and in a healthy state. It'd not been contested for its territory. That was good.

*Don't these things usually roam in pairs?* he thought, trying to remember more of what he'd learned and what his father had told

him about these creatures.

This instantly increased his awareness again. Looking up, he spotted a much darker patch among the trees.

*A cave den maybe?*

He stood, scanning the area once more before advancing towards the cave. Scavenging its barbs and venom would have to wait until he was sure he wouldn't be ambushed again.

Once he made it to the mouth of the cave, he inspected it. It didn't take him long to find bones, decayed meat and skin littering the floor within.

*Yup, this is a Manticore nest alright.*

He spotted a tattered backpack with a variety of different items hanging off it.

'Bingo.' He breathed in triumph before making a move towards the bag.

However, before he made it halfway to the merchant's bag, he heard the faint sound of bone clinking on bone coming from the depths of the cave.

'Hello, ugly!' Nicholas taunted as the second Manticore emerged from the inky darkness of the depths. He concentrated, summoning his powers over the weather to push a gale-force wind through the cave, past himself, and into the beast. It spun backwards, trying to cling to the ground with its claws.

The Manticore growled out its frustration, trying to get a better purchase and as soon as it did, it pointed its scorpion-like tail at Nicholas and fired the barb at him.

He cursed and dove to the side, dodging the near-invisible barb that had shot toward him, his hold on the wind dropping. This let the Manticore recover, and it charged back at the intruder, its foul maw opening, ready to feed. Scrambling to his feet, Nicholas reached out to

his power; his arms frantically spun in circles, as if he were turning a wheel in mid-air. The Manticore rose off the ground, slowing it down as it started losing traction on the ground, making it growl in confusion.

Nicholas moved his arms faster and faster, and a whirlwind began to coalesce around the beast, picking up bones and other detritus along with the monster, lifting it higher and higher. It roared in anger as it rose further into the air, chunks of its leftover meals pelting the creature.

With the beast completely off the ground, Nicholas flung his arms to the left. The whirlwind spat the Manticore out and dissolved, sending the angry beast flying into the root-covered wall of the cave. He grinned as it fell to the ground in a heap.

The victory was short-lived, however, as the thing began to rise yet again.

He cursed again, the grin dropping off his face.

The Manticore pointed its tail at him and growled.

‘Not again...’ was all he could say before another barb was shot at him.

Nicholas dove aside once more, narrowly dodging the barb, and rolled to his feet.

Holding his hands out in front of him, he concentrated again. This time, a small but violent storm crackled within his hands.

Sensing the charged air, the Manticore paused, unsure.

This gave Nicholas the second he needed. He pushed the lightning to discharge out of his hands and towards the beast. It struck home. The Manticore roared, but the lightning had not affected it, only angered it.

The storm fizzled out, leaving Nicholas more drained.

*Only one option left*, he thought as he reached over his shoulder and drew the sword again.

The Manticore roared and dove, scorpion tail lashing out at his throat. Twirling around the beast, he ducked under its tail and cut it off at the base.

‘No more barbs for you!’ he exclaimed in triumph, dancing back and away from the beast.

The creature shrieked its displeasure as it wheeled about for a brief second before charging him again.

He swung the sword with both arms and the blade came in low, taking off one of its front legs at the knee, downing the creature.

Feeling the fatigue weighing down his body, even more, he knew he had to end this soon. He rushed to it from the rear as it got to its remaining feet, and slashed down at its neck, decapitating it. But unlike the first, this Manticore’s body continued, turning towards Nicholas and lashing out at him with its remaining front paw, a couple of claws tearing at his side below the ribs.

He clutched his side and held in the scream of pain that so desperately wanted out. Instead, he darted out of the headless creature’s range as it continued to lash out randomly.

‘Why won’t you bloody well die?!’ yelled a very frustrated and rapidly tiring Nicholas. ‘I’m going to have to use the sword’s powers.’

The shadows leapt from their places and surrounded the sword as Nicholas channelled the sword’s power to summon them. He then maneuvered the shadows to surround the monster’s body. Turning the shadows sharp, he impaled the body with them, showing no mercy as he used the shadows to tear the body apart.

When he was finished, all that was left were pools of blood, chunks of wet flesh, fur and bone fragments.

As he returned the sword to its scabbard, he felt the familiar sting of the shadows leaving his arm sliced up once again. The sword exacting its price for the use of its power.

The threat now neutralised, he tore off what was left of his shirt and tore it into long strips. He quickly wrapped his wounds tightly in the makeshift bandages.

Satisfied that they'd hold till he could tend to them elsewhere, Nicholas turned back to face the bag.

'Finally,' he muttered.

After picking up the bag, he rummaged until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a torn page and grinned from ear to ear. He tucked it away into one of his trouser pockets, closed up the bag as best he could and began to slowly harvest what he could from the Manticores.

Using some of the stuff from the merchant's bag as containers, he stored the parts in his remaining pockets and slung the bag over his back.

He'd decided to trade the remaining contents of the bag for a night's stay in one of the local's empty huts. He needed to rest before he flew back home.

\*\*\*

Nicholas flew below the cloud cover, coming out of the slip-stream he had created. He looked down and saw the beginnings of the outer suburbs of the city of London.

'Ah, good to be home.' He sighed, spinning through the air. *But better to be hidden from prying eyes.*

He briefly concentrated and a cloud formed around him, hiding him from view from anyone who happened to look up. He followed the River Thames below until he flew over the city centre. Flying over the London Eye and Big Ben, seeing plenty of tourists milling around both attractions.

He veered his course and took off in the direction of the Lord's Cricket Ground. His father's mansion was not too far from the world-famous stadium.

Approaching the grounds of the said mansion, Nicholas then nose-dived, enjoying the freefall before he righted himself and landed on the front lawn. The cloud had evaporated from around him as he fell. He ran his hand through his short, dark hair and walked towards the front door.

The Quinzel Mansion was a three-storied sandstone marvel on a rather large estate that was completely surrounded by a tall stone wall made of the same sandstone as the mansion. Glorious gardens dotted the land with a run of garden beds leading up the driveway and to the front door.

Off the front door, a large, triple-height entrance hall and sitting room greeted you; a huge commercial kitchen, also found on the ground floor, supplied three separate dining rooms, one on each floor, adjacent to the nearby elevator. The master's eloquent library and study was on the second floor with two accompanying rooms for business. On the third floor: a cinema room and a gaming room. A large swimming pool, spa and sauna steam room were also on the ground floor, but separate from the rest. The mansion had twelve bedrooms and six bathrooms – four bedrooms and two bathrooms on each floor, one of those bathrooms being an ensuite to the master bedroom of that floor. There was also an extensive wine cellar underground and a hidden secret room. A detached five-car garage completed the whole property.

Nicholas opened the front door and walked into the glorious entrance where he instantly ran into Adam, the butler of the mansion.

'Ah. Good afternoon, Master Nicholas.' Adam lowered his duster. 'It has been a while. Was your mission a success?'



‘Yes, it was, thank you, Adam. Did I miss much?’ Nicholas said.

‘No, sir. Master Norman has continued his research, as usual, and I continue to perform my duties here,’ Adam replied.

‘That’s good to hear.’

‘Miss Ryan also has been around a few times, just to “say hello”,’ Adam teased with a small smile.

‘I will see her after I have spoken with Father,’ Nicholas replied, not giving Adam the satisfaction of seeing him squirm. ‘Is he in?’

‘Yes, he is expecting you.’

‘Thank you, Adam. Where is he?’

‘In his study.’

Nicholas spun on his heel and walked up the stairs leading to the second floor. He knocked on the main study door and waited for an answer.

‘Come in,’ answered a strong voice from inside.

Nicholas opened the door and stepped inside. He found his father sitting at his desk, conducting research.

‘What do you want?’ asked his father without turning his head.

‘I’ve returned, Father,’ Nicholas answered.

‘Oh, Nick! I thought you were Adam,’ replied Norman, surprised.

He turned in his chair and stood up from behind his desk. He was a tall, muscular man with short, close-cut white hair, a short, neat white beard and a long scar stretching down his face beside his right eye. The man crossed the room and wrapped his arms around his son.

‘I’m glad you are home safe!’ Norman said, holding Nicholas out and inspecting him for any injuries.

‘I am fine,’ Nicholas replied, trying not to groan as he reassured his father.

‘So did you find it?’ Norman asked excitedly.

Nicholas smiled and reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the

page and handed it to his father.

‘Finally...’ Norman breathed, examining the page, walked back over to his desk and placed it on the wood.

‘Aren’t you going to look at it now?’ Nicholas asked.

‘I can look at it later. Now, come and sit,’ Norman said as he gestured over to his small lounge within the study.

They both walked over and sat down in the armchairs that were set up at the fireplace, Nicholas having removed the sword from his back and laying it across his lap.

Norman picked up a bottle of scotch that was sitting next to his chair and poured himself a glass.

‘Now, what happened?’ Norman asked, taking a sip of his drink.

Nicholas told his father of what had happened over the four months, tracking the merchant to Indonesia and what had happened there.

‘How many Manticores did you find there?’ Norman asked, curious.

‘I found two. One was near the village and then I tracked the other to their lair,’ Nicholas replied.

Norman nodded and took another sip.

‘Well, it is good you killed them. They are very dangerous creatures and shouldn’t be near humans. Did they give you any kind of trouble?’

‘The first one was easy to subdue and kill, but the second gave me some trouble.’

‘Ah, right. Did you have to use that?’ Norman asked, pointing to the blade.

Nicholas nodded.

‘And is it still attacking when you use the darkness?’

Nicholas rolled up his sleeve and showed the now-fading cuts on his dominant arm. Norman nodded again, swirling the drink around in the glass, his face pensive.

‘Why does it do that?’ Nicholas asked, lowering his sleeve once again.

‘I am still trying to find that out, but I think it has something to do with the prophecy in the book,’ Norman replied, briefly looking at his desk.

Nicholas nodded and looked down at the sword on his lap, pondering.

‘I have figured out a few more things, however,’ Norman said as he leaned forward.

‘Really?’

‘Yes, I have managed to whittle it down to which country and possibly even the region of where the next one is located,’ Norman replied, excitement now in his voice.

‘So does that mean you are close to finding the Sword of Light?’

‘Yes, I am very close. And now you have got that page, I should be able to pinpoint the location.’ He stood, placed his drink on the table and walked back over to his desk.

‘So, you have a rough idea where it is then?’ Nicholas asked, turning in his chair.

‘Yes. It should be somewhere in the southeast of Australia. Which does bring us to where you are going next,’ Norman said, pulling out a map from the organised chaos on his desk.

‘Excellent,’ Nicholas replied.

‘You are to go to Australia and search for the Sword of Light,’ Norman declared, walking back over and sitting down, handing Nicholas a map of Australia.

‘So, I need you to fly to Victoria,’ he stated, pointing toward the south-eastern state on the map. ‘We have a safe house in one of the western regions of the state there. I’ll get Adam to give you the details when you decide to depart.’

‘Right, and once you have more information, you will call me?’ Nicholas asked, looking down at the map.

‘Yes, of course, I will,’ Norman replied.

‘Alright, I will leave in a few days then,’ Nicholas replied.

‘Excellent. And once you find the sword, bring it to me,’ Norman commanded.

‘I will,’ said Nicholas, standing up, strapping the sword back into place and turning to leave.

‘Rest up and good luck in Australia, my son,’ said his father.

Nicholas walked out of the study and went to his room, quickly disarmed himself, changed into a plain shirt and a pair of faded jeans, and then made his way down the stairs once again.

‘Goodbye, Adam,’ said Nicholas as he walked through the door.

‘Off again, sir?’ Adam asked.

‘Off to see Kate.’

‘Ah, good luck, Master Nicholas. Take care.’

‘Thank you, Adam.’ Nicholas nodded his thanks and walked through the now-opened door. Running toward the open grounds, Nicholas prepared to take off yet again when someone jumped onto his back. He was about to flip whomever it was off him when he realised that person was giggling.

‘You’re back!’ yelled the person on his back.

‘Kate!’ He laughed, dropping her to the ground and kissing her. ‘Yeah, I’m back.’

Kate Ryan was Nicholas’s girlfriend. A beautiful, slightly taller than average girl with crimson-coloured hair, streaked black, and deep brown eyes that he could look into all day if he was able. She was quite fit and strong due to her martial arts training and was a first-year university student at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. She also didn’t know about his secret life or his powers. Luckily, she’d jumped on him before he took off.

‘Good!’ Kate smiled.

‘But I have to go again,’ Nicholas replied.

'Aww, when?' she asked, sadness now crossing her face.

'In a few days, so we can spend some time together,' Nicholas replied with a grin.

'That's great!' Kate replied with a clap of her hands.

They walked down the path to the gates leading out of the property, Nicholas ordering a taxi on his phone as they walked, their plan to head towards the city centre.