

Interregnum Two – Roll The Bones

A few months later, Kevin Bishop had what had to be the strangest day in his entire life. When he'd woken up in the morning, he and Fatima had realized they both had an appointment on their calendars that neither of them remembered making or agreeing to.

"Elizabeth? What's this M&M lunch meeting that 'Tima and I both scheduled for?" Kevin asked her over breakfast. Fatima wasn't as bothered by it as he was – she had meetings scheduled all the time that she never knew what they were entirely for, and so she'd often be on her way to a meeting and having to call and ask what it was about, as Elizabeth had taken over the role of her executive assistant as well, neither Kevin nor Fatima's life so demanding that one person couldn't handle both.

"I'm not entirely sure, sir," Elizabeth told him. "But it is coded in purple in your library, which means it's a top priority, and should not be cancelled. It looks like it goes back quite some time, though, so I imagine it's an appointment you need to keep.

"Alright, alright," he sighed. "Then I guess we have a lunch date we can't get prepared for, love," he told his wife as he kissed her cheek. "I'll try not to get too freaked out about it in advance."

"I'm sure you will anyway, love, but that's one of the things I love about you – you're always trying to take control of things that you have absolutely no control over, just to try and feel like you're in charge of the ship of your life," Fatima said with a wry grin.

"I'm not?"

"You're a ship without a rudder, babe," Ashley said with a smirk. "And like the Lemonheads said, 'a ship without a rudder's like a ship without a rudder's like a ship without a rudder...'"

"It's okay, boss," Natalie told him. "Too many people try and fight the current when they should just be going with the flow. That's the thing you learn when you're learning how to surf – if you're fighting the waves, you're doing it wrong."

"Alright then, I'll just go along with it and we'll see what happens," Kevin said. The day wasn't too packed, as he had a few days before his next gig was scheduled to start, a few weeks of producing a new band in the studio in his house, so he was taking meetings, entertaining ideas and generally just trying to find something to catch his interest.

His first stop in the morning was meeting with a band called Bald Riot on whether or not he'd produce their next record, and within two minutes, he knew he needed to get the fuck out of that meeting. The lead singer was talking about how they weren't making music; they were making *scripture*, and that was point where Kevin tapped out. He was fine with musicians thinking they were making *high art* but when it turned into a *religious experience*, that was the point where he had to tap out. He would politely listen for the rest of the meeting, but they were already clearly in the hard no column, so he didn't have to pay *too* much attention, which made the band's drummer try and call him out at one point.

"Man, this fucker's not even *listening*," the drummer said, as Kevin smirked and looked over at him.

"Are you Mike Portnoy?" Kevin asked the guy.

"Who?"

"The drummer from Dream Theater, has a billion drums in his kit."

"No."

"How about Neil Peart? You writing all the lyrics for the band in addition to drumming?"

"No."

"Maybe you're more a Stewart Copeland/Danny Carey kinda guy, can keep any tempo, any signature."

"I'm not bad."

“You’re not bad,” Kevin told him. “But you’re not *them*. Yeah, I checked out of this meeting about five minutes ago, but you don’t want me anyway. Your leader singer wants someone who’s going to buy into his whole ‘congregation’ bullshit, and I’m just not that guy. I like making music. I don’t believe in movements or being a trendsetter. Write your songs, and if they connect, that’s great, but if they don’t, you pick yourself up and try again. Don’t go thinking you’re going to be the next important person joining the 27 club. That moment has passed and it’s never coming back, so it’s either write great songs or go work at Starbucks, and right now, your demo didn’t have much in the way of great songs, so maybe go back to square one and lose some of the pretention.”

“Our first album sold loads,” the drummer said.

“Went gold, did it?”

“It went silver.”

“That’s not even a real thing here... that’s a UK designate, and it means you sold sixty thousand copies,” Kevin scoffed. “And I know you’re talking UK sales, because if you’d told me you went gold, you’d get away with most people not asking where the certification was, and thinking you’d sold half a million copies, which is what it is here in the States, and a hundred thousand copies, which is what a gold record is in the UK. But the last record I worked on went platinum within a couple of weeks, and that’s US platinum, not UK. So I know what’s good and what isn’t, and you aren’t the kind of thing I could make good right now.” Kevin tossed the band’s demo CD on the table. “Track 4, Lost In The Undertow. That’s your one good track on the demo for your next record. Scrap the rest, look at what makes that one track good and maybe try me again in a few months if you can lose the egos and rediscover the joy in making music again. If not, best of luck to you with your next one, kids.”

He didn’t generally like being so dismissive, but he’d taken a number of these meetings, and he was now at a point in his life where he was in such demand that he could afford to only take on the projects that he liked and was interested in. If people were going to be too much of a pain in the ass to work with, he didn’t need them, and he didn’t want to waste their time by leading them on that he was passing on them in order to drive up his prices. There were only two kinds of people he ever found trying to make albums. Either he heard people trying to make art, or he heard people who formed a band hoping it would help them get laid.

The latter folks could go figure out their personal problems on their own.

An hour or so later, Miriam was pulling up outside of some LA popup Kevin had never seen before called “Fiddler’s Green,” just around the time Jackson was pulling up with Fatima. Kevin smiled at the synchronicity of it. “Looks like we made it here the same time,” he told his wife, who moved over and kissed his cheek.

“And we still have no idea what it’s for?”

“Not a scratch,” he told her.

They headed into the restaurant and were surprised twice – first, by being met at the door and being told the place was closed for private parties today, and second by being asked if they were there for the private party.

“We’re here for an M&M meeting?” Kevin asked, cautiously.

“Mister and Missus Bishop?” the maître de replied.

“That’s us,” Fatima said cheerfully.

“Right this way madam.”

The man lead them through the empty restaurant filled with plenty of tables and chairs and across the room to the far back, before through a set of double doors into a small back room with a cozy little table, and a couple of familiar faces to Kevin, although he’d never seen them together before.

“So, it seems like you figured out the first stage of my game, boy,” Merlin said to him with quiet confidence. “And faster than I expected you to, much to my annoyance.”

“Come come now, love,” Morgana said from her position sat next to him. “Don’t be a spoilsport

because he's smarter than you expected him to be."

In looking at the two of them, Kevin was surprised to see Merlin leaning against Morgana, almost doting on her, until he realized they must be back in one of their on-again phases of their off-again, on-again relationship. Merlin has his hand on Morgana's back, and was moving in small circle there, and she was leaning back into him. The two made an odd if somewhat delightfully mismatched couple. "I mean, look at him," Merlin said with a laugh. "When you look at him, he doesn't exactly jump out at you and scream 'I saved one of the two most important people in the entire history of the world,' now, does he?"

"From humble beginnings come great things, my love," Morgana said, snuggling in against Merlin, reaching up to stroke his beard gingerly. "And dear Kevin here was smart enough to do the right thing when he was at the right time and place. That's all we can ask of any woman or man."

"Mmmm," Merlin said, as Kevin and Fatima moved to sit down at the table across from them. "And you, m'dear?" he asked Kevin's wife. "Do you feel like you've come out well in this deal?"

"I've got the best husband a woman could ask for, and he came with his own collection of female joytoys for me to play with," Fatima said with a smug grin. "What could I possibly have to complain about?"

"Well, the fact that my partner keeps mucking up his life, I would've suggested," Morgana said with a wild laugh. "Which is part of the reason we sort of got back together again. I wanted Merlin not to constantly be poking and prodding at one of the most elaborate pieces of spellwork I've ever crafted in hundreds of years. So he asked me to make a compelling argument—"

"—which she did—"

"—and now we're back together again. For a time, I'm sure."

"Not for good?" Fatima asked.

Morgana smiled, much like a parent would when being asked by her child if a divorce was permanent. "Merlin and I... we're good in phases, but never in seasons... we come together and connect for periods of time, but they never last, and we both learned long ago not to try and force it. So we will see how this time goes and how long we remain in parallel orbits, but when the time comes that we need to part ways from each other's company, we both know it won't be for good, and we'll be back to doing this dance before they've even had the chance to change the fashions again."

"I've had relationships like that," Miriam said from her place on watch near the door to the back room. "Too good to let go of, too rough to hold on to."

"I meant to ask you, dear Miriam, how has Strazo been treating you?" Merlin asked her with a wry smile. "It's been a long time since one of the fey dragons wanted to cross over into this realm, and I'm hoping he hasn't come to regret crossing over."

Strazo poked his head out from beneath Miriam's large coat and offered a quick series of smoke rings, three small, three large and then three small again, followed by what Kevin could only describe as a sort of reptilian laugh.

"Oh, ha ha, Straz," Miriam said with a smirk. "He's fine. He's taken a liking to deviled ham, weird little critter that he is. His favorite thing in the world. Wants a can for breakfast and a can for dinner, each and every day."

"Well, I realized that in bringing him over so hastily, I forgot to ensure that he would be completely taken care of," Merlin said. "So I intend to rectify that. Kekira, come meet the only other fae dragon not in hibernation."

From within the folds of Merlin's robes, another small dragon, similar in size and shape to Strazo but with a dark blue hue to her scales, climbed free and flew over towards Miriam and Strazo, the two little dragons beginning what a more innocent pair of eyes might construe as a playful wrestling match, and a less pair of innocent eyes would suspect was a rather intense makeout session. It didn't last long, however, and eventually two tiny dragon heads poked out to keep an eye on the surroundings, Strazo returning to his duties, at least for the time being.

"I'm pretty sure he says thank you," Miriam said. "Although I hope you aren't expecting anything from me in return."

Merlin tapped his temple with one fingertip. "Good thinking, Miriam, but no. This one is simply me settling a red mark in my own ledger, and honoring the terms of my agreement with Strazo when I brought him over here. Crafty little devil included a loophole in his side that I didn't spot, and which he didn't point out, knowing I'd eventually come across it on my own and feel honor bound to abide by the letter of the agreement. Clever fellow that one. You two are well suited for each other."

"I hope that's intended as a compliment, m'lord."

"It is, m'lady," Merlin said with a slight chuckle.

"And your man Jackson?" Morgana asked Fatima. "He and his new bride are doing well?"

"They are, m'lady," Fatima replied with a broad grin. "It took him so long to ask that she was impatient and couldn't wait for the wedding, so they just did so quickly and are enjoying their time as newlyweds."

A waiter came over to take an order from them, and it took Kevin nearly ten seconds to realize that the waiter had long fangs and a pallor candor. When the pale man shuffled off, Kevin tilted his head to look at Merlin. "Is our waiter a vampire?"

"He is," Merlin said, "but don't hold that against him. Vladimir makes excellent food, and he only has pop ups once every few years or so. Keeps his exposure minimal. He hasn't ever violated the accords, but some in the hunter community haven't been holding up their end of the bargain as of late, and he doesn't want some overzealous vampire hunter thinking he's fair game, when he's done everything in his power to respect the accords."

"I swear," Morgana said, taking a sip from her wine. "The hunters truly have gotten rather bestial over recent years. I'm not sure quite why, unless it's frustration that the accords have worked as well as they were intended to, and they haven't had their sport anymore."

"I suspect that's it, my love," Merlin answered. "Anyway, we didn't bring you two here to discuss the current political state of affairs regarding the supernatural community. We brought you here to discuss the current state of my lovely partner's gift to you, and my tampering with it."

"Did you *enjoy* the struggle of Merlin's adaptation to your gift, Kevin?" Morgana asked.

"Parts of it, I suppose," Kevin said with a laugh. "I didn't mind feeling insanely wanted, but when it crossed over from 'being highly attractive' to 'being the only human alive in a zombie movie,' maybe you might say you went too far."

"Alright then," Merlin said. "What I'm going to do then is make some alterations to my addition to your gift, to make it more palatable and manageable. It will still retain a certain level of unpredictability, because I *am* Merlin, and I *do* have a reputation to uphold. But we will dial down the frequency of it, and instead it will be more aligned with how I suspect my partner would prefer. Once a season, a new partner will pursue you relentlessly, and after you have fucked them once, you may decide to bring them into your family, or simply pass and send them on their way. When you have selected six more to keep, bringing my gift in line with the seven partners Morgana gifted you with, then they will stop arriving and you will be free to do as you see fit. But I shan't be outdone by my dear partner in showing off how much her life means to me, er, us, to all of us in the magic community."

"You old softie," Morgana laughed. "You're not fooling anyone, you know?"

Merlin smiled sweetly, a look that Kevin found odd on the old mage. "I'll do what I must to keep things in the right balance, my love," Merlin told her. "Speaking of which, I have to ask Kevin... how are the merfolk?" The magus grinned rather impishly at him. "I've been known to be adventurous, but I've never fucked one of the sea folk, so I hate to be boorish... but what's it like?"

"I'm *so* tempted not to tell you, Merlin, but I suspect if I did that, it would only come back and bite me in the ass, so instead, let me just say that it was a remarkable experience, albeit one I felt very much out of control under." Kevin smirked a little bit, rubbing his chin. "I would advise that while they have great beauty, the smell was a bit unpleasant. Nothing they would have noticed as being unnatural,

but the smell of the sea is quite strong, especially to a landlubber like myself.”

“Fun at parties, but bring air fresheners,” Merlin said, almost as if taking notes for himself. “Got it, check.”

“Anything else you’d like me to fuck that you haven’t had the courage to stick your dick in?” Kevin asked Merlin, feeling just a little bit smug for the moment.

“Oh, lad, don’t tempt me like that, or I’m going to throw all sorts of things your way,” Merlin said. “Could you imagine, love, if I made him have to go through all seven tribes before my portion of his gift ended? That’s simply too good. Maybe I’ll just—”

“Merlin, you will do *no such thing*,” Morgana scolded as she reached up and grabbed his hand, pulling it down. “This is a *gift*, not some idle spell you’ve put into the world you can eternally monkey with. If you want that sort of experiment, you need to start on your own base, Merlin’s Graft or some such. I will not have you causing such problems with what is meant to be a gift.”

“Oh *alright* my love,” Merlin sighed in a highly overly exaggerated motion. “I suppose I’ll just have to find someone else in the world ready to find someone from each of the tribes and—”

“One of the new Captains already has that idea,” Morgana said.

“Oh? Which one?”

“Tommy, the new Captain of the Green Wizards.”

“Hmmm. Well, I’ll have to have a chat with him then, shan’t I? See if I can give his life a little bit more extra meaning,” Merlin chuckled. “How did you hear about this?”

“As it turned out, the Dragonborne owed Tommy’s family a favor, and Silversmith came to me to ask for my help in making sure the spell he was gifting Tommy was the sort of thing that would truly make an epic splash,” Morgana giggled. “I’m told it had *quite* the impact, even if Silversmith did pass off the spell as his own and made no mention of all my assistance in the matter.”

“Let the man have his pride, love,” Merlin said with a smug grin. “He’s not one we’d like as an enemy anyway. I don’t doubt that the two of us unified could handle him quite hastily, but should we be apart?” He shook his head cautiously. “That isn’t the sort of thing I’d like to gamble either of us on, you nor I. So let’s not poke that bear unless we have good cause.”

Kevin felt a little bit like he and Fatima had drifted into the background as the two magicians carried on their chat, and on one hand, he wanted to desperately eat his lunch and excuse himself, but on the other, there was so much power across the table, and such fickle personalities behind it, that he didn’t want to do anything to possibly offend either of them. Then, of course, the conversation came back around to him once more.

“I’m surprised you went in for allowing the wedding to be televised, Kevin,” Morgana said to him in between bites of her steak. “You always struck me as the sort of performer who preferred to let the work speak for itself and didn’t have any real need to be standing in the spotlight.”

“That’s on me, I’m afraid,” Fatima said with a smile. “My father made quite the stink about it, insisting he get to film part of his show there, and Kevin agreed, as long as he had complete and total control over the soundtrack for the episode. He used that to make my father pay through the ass for all the music rights needed to air the episode, all of which went to underexposed artists. Kevin also threw in some of his own music for it, which resulted in a few more scoring gigs for him. It’s remarkable how quickly he went from a respected but, frankly, D-list washed up musician to one of the most popular scoring musicians in Hollywood. All your doing?” she asked Morgana.

Morgana smiled, waving her hand slightly. “I have only a hand in connecting the dots,” the sorceress said. “The talent was always there and it just needed to be put in the right ears. Once it got there, Kevin’s remarkable skills spoke for themselves.”

“Well, they do say in Hollywood, it’s all in who you know,” Merlin said with a laugh. “I keep trying to find someone to get a much better version of mine and Morgana’s story committed to film, but I can’t seem to find a screen writer who’s willing to take on the project.”

“Everyone’s more interested in the old King Arthur days rather than what we’ve been up to for,

oh, the last couple thousand years,” Morgana sighed. “As if Arthur’s time wasn’t boring enough as it was. Besides, that story’s been told more than enough times. It’s time for new stories to be told, more interesting and unusual ones.”

“Try telling that to a screenwriter, or, worse still, a lawyer who thinks he’s a screenwriter. He’ll continually try and argue the minutiae of a point while failing to realize the entire argument has burned down around him,” Merlin sighed. “It’s arguing placement of silverware on the sinking Titanic as the boat’s already upturned. I do not understand people who refuse to look at the bigger picture on such things.”

“Some people just like to argue,” Kevin chuckled. “We had an A&R guy like that with Truth Knife at first. Didn’t care about the bigger argument at hand, just winning on the technicalities, and never seemed to give a shit about what actual earthly impact it had on the people *in* the argument. He was basically going to fuck up our album release until I convinced the label head to give a listen to my opinion and what the A&R guy was telling us to do.”

“What was the A&R guy telling you to do?” Morgana asked in amusement.

“He wanted us to release ‘Misery Torrent’ as our first single,” Kevin chuckled.

“Wait. Wait wait wait,” Morgana started giggling. “Your old A&R man wanted you to release the *sixteen-minute track about sleep is the only thing keeping you from death... AS YOUR FIRST BLOODY SINGLE?*”

“Your reaction seems quite a bit similar to mine,” Kevin said. “I think I described it as ‘commercial suicide’ while the A&R guy said it wasn’t about being successful – it was about taking a stand and saying that long depressing songs have a place on modern radio now. He said any band with the balls to rerecord Iron Butterfly’s ‘In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida’ and release it as a single would make a killing, but until then, this would have to do.”

“And the label head?” Merlin asked, mischief in his eyes.

“Thought the A&R guy was out of his fucking gourd. Sacked the man immediately, gave us a new A&R man and our first single, ‘Midnight Survivors’ started getting serious radioplay two weeks before the album came out.”

“I kept meaning to ask you about this, Kevin,” Merlin said. “I’ve heard the album. It should’ve been a massive success the first time around. What happened?”

“The label went broke the day before the album was released, the label’s founder absconded with most of the money to parts unknown, but probably without an extradition treaty. We were scheduled to play opening gigs for some big bands for about a week, and then launch on our own tour, but the money that had been set aside to *pay* for the tour was gone with the label’s founder, and the last night we were playing an opening gig, our lead singer was so drunk he couldn’t remember the words and our bassist was so stoned, we unplugged his bass before the show started and he didn’t even notice there wasn’t any of his sound coming through his in-ear monitors. After the show, I pulled the band aside and told them either they wanted to make music, or they wanted to get high, because they clearly couldn’t do both. And the people who wanted to make music could call me the next day. Only Kerry, our drummer, called me, and she said she understood the band was breaking up, but whatever I was doing next, she was in for. And so she and I still work together, and the rest of the band went their separate ways. Our old lead singer died several months back. I’ve actually been working on a series of songs that I think Kerry and I might do another Truth Knife record for, about the people we lost along the way.”

Morgana smiled at him kindly. “I knew I made the right choice in giving you such a powerful gift,” she said, reaching across the table, patting the top of his hand. “And I think that sounds like a lovely record to make. Daniel, troubled soul that he was, would’ve loved the idea of it. What happened to the other guys in the band?”

“Charlie was just a guy we took with us on tour to handle the basic rhythm stuff, and he never really cliqued with the non-druggie members of the band, and Kelly,” Kevin said, pausing to whistle.

“After I caught him selling some of my effects pedals to pay for his drug habit, I never wanted to fucking see him again. People who get so caught up in their addictions that they start taking advantage of other people’s kindnesses, they gotta get cut off sooner or later.”

“You know, I was going to offer to try and magic away his drug addiction for you, but I don’t think it’s worth it, and I don’t know that it would take,” Merlin said. “Opioids are a terrible plague brought upon man.”

“Yeah, well, we gotta keep blowing ourselves up somehow,” Kevin said with a chuckle. “Thank you for the dinner. It truly was excellent.”

“No hard feelings?” Merlin asked, extending his hand to shake.

Kevin took the hand and shook it, offering a wry smile. “You have to take your fun where you can get it,” he said. “I should also tell you, Ms. La Fay, that I do have a song dedicated to you on the next Truth Souls album we’re working on in our spare time.”

“Indeed?” Morgana smiled. “What’s it called?”

“One Woman Universe,” he replied.

“Brilliant.”