

True Heroes: A Dime A Dozen

by Cole Horman

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Chapter 4: Hit The Ground Running

Reese Farron stood outside the desolate Starbeans cafe, her face pale under the night sky. In spite of the evening's warmth, she felt chills crawling up her spine, leaving her with a feeling of discomfort only compounded by the day which she had had. All alone, she'd hidden away in her flat, with nothing to do but think again and again about the day that had come before.

The question posed to her seemed impossible and terrible. How could anyone, anywhere, deal with a monster like the one she had seen? It wasn't just that she was scared, but that she doubted that any living being, much less a human, could stand up to a force of such magnitude. What kind of power, magic or otherwise, could hope to prevail?

Power. The word almost seemed foreign when she stopped to think about it. No matter how much a person had, if someone else had more, they'd lose every time. And when losing meant death... they could never be too cautious. Yet, by some infernal force of fate, she had still come back to the forest. It might have been the part of her that wanted to be heroic, or the guilt she'd feel leaving Zach to face such peril alone, but that hardly mattered. It almost seemed out of her hands, like she was just a spectator looking in as she approached her own demise.

As a small orange truck pulled into the empty parking lot, she willed herself to be optimistic. Her friend had arrived, and he would need all the help he could get in the coming hours. They were in the same boat, and if he felt anything like she did, he would need a friendly face to give him some comfort. If anything, she was good for that.

Zach walked gingerly toward the small cafe, trying to ignore the worried smile that crossed Reese's lips. She wore a faded purple jacket with her hair tied back in a ponytail, her look disheveled and eyes tired.

"Hey..."

"Hi..."

The silence that followed seemed only to add tension, despite how much already lingered around them. They both knew what they needed to do, and yet neither wanted to make a move, either towards or away from their looming destination. However, if they were really going to take the plunge, Zach wanted to take it in stride. The monsters weren't going to defeat themselves, so they would just have to go, before they could convince themselves otherwise.

“You ready?” Zach asked, trying to portray a sense of confidence.

Reese shrugged. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“And you’re sure you want to go?”

“Nope.”

Though she kept a joking tone, it was clear that Reese wasn’t the least bit happy with their situation. It was easy to understand why. The chances of them making it in and out of that forest the first time were so low, going back felt like testing fate. It made Zach mad that they had been shoved into such a choice, forced to make the best of an impossible situation, but there was little they could do about that now.

He looked around as they began their walk, trying to keep his mind off of things. “You know, it’s going to be pretty cool,” he said, “using magic and stuff.”

“With what we’re doing to get it, I don’t think it’s particularly worth it,” Reese said, squeezing her hands together.

“So... where exactly do you think we need to go? I don’t see any river near here.”

“Well, it’s not called *Westwood* because it’s known for its water,” Reese joked half-heartedly, looking up at the trees in front of them. “I’m sure it’s just a little ways in. Gabora’s probably waiting there... right?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

As they pushed forward into the forest, it became apparent that *Westwood* was a very different place at night. The trees cast long, looming shadows, and a cold wind swirled near the ground, giving the place an unnatural sense of foreboding. The effect only grew once he considered the real horror that stomped around, hidden somewhere just out of sight.

With each passing minute, Zach found himself looking again back the way they had come, hoping to see some sort of trace of the owl they were looking for. He couldn’t help thinking over all the awful scenarios that could occur when they finally faced off against the monster. It might have been the forest getting under his skin, but something felt unmistakably off.

Giving the surrounding tree’s a hesitant second look, he stopped. “Hey, let’s head back and wait near the entrance. Maybe Gabora passed by us somehow-”

A loud screech suddenly echoed through the treetops, silencing the forest animals without a single to spare. It wasn't quite the call of a bird, or of any identifiable animal, but a garbled collage of noise that served to convey distress. Given how unnatural it sounded and who must have made it, Zach nearly cracked a smile. "I think we just found Gabora," he said, only to be corrected by another, much more menacing screech. From the same direction which Gabora had called, an unholy roar shook the trees, making the owl's noise seem tame by comparison.

Glancing nervously to each other, the pair continued onward towards the source of the sounds. The further they went, the more noise began to erupt from an area much deeper in. Zach scowled. Though Gabora hadn't given them much reason to care for him, he was the only being in the world with the magical knowledge they required. Without him, they didn't stand a chance of winning against the monster, or anyone else for that matter.

Swallowing his fear and reluctance, Zach prepared himself for the long haul. "I guess that's our cue," he said, motioning to Reese. "Let's go!"

"Wait!" Reese exclaimed.

Stopping at full sprint, Zach almost tripped over himself. "What?"

"This is it. If we go, we can't turn back. Are you absolutely sure about this?" Reese pleaded.

Her body trembled in place as if she were a soda bottle about to burst, her face beet red. Zach opened his mouth to comfort her, but no words came. After all, she was absolutely correct. They would be going all in, leaving their fears and doubts behind and jumping into the mad world of magic and monsters. But there wasn't any more room left to think about it. The time for that had passed.

"Yeah. I am," Zach said. "Now let's go!"

As Zach ran through the trees, guided by the sounds of explosions, roaring, and stomping, a thought emerged. What were they going to do when they got there? Gabora had only said that they were to learn magic and fight, but if the monster wouldn't allow that, they would need a plan of attack. However, without any form of otherworldly assistance to speak of, the idea of combat seemed completely infeasible. There was no way for them to win, not without magic.

The further they progressed, the more familiar the forest became. The darkness grew more palpable and the trees more tightly knit, the very same way it had when they'd visited the first time. Zach

cringed. They'd already passed the lake which had held them previously. Just how far had the shadow come, if it was beyond even that?

After more running, and a few trips over some particularly large roots, the pair arrived at a hill overlooking the scene. The air smelled of sulfur and chemicals Zach couldn't rightly identify. To their left was a great stone building that rotted with age, surrounded by the scattered remains of other, smaller structures. Their walls were composed of an ancient carved stone made into once-intricate patterns, falling apart into an abstract mess along the ground. On the building's front stoop was Gabora, furiously launching what appeared to be bottles at the shadow, which stood only a short walk away. Slowly, the monster inched forward from the edge of the clearing, but as the bottles shattered against its fur, they caused explosions which knocked it backwards. The exchange seemed similar to the one he had witnessed on the cliffside, when they'd been saved by a blast of fire from above. But while the bottle's packed just as much punch as they had before, the monster still seemed to be gaining ground.

"We've got to get over there," Zach said. Reese nodded her agreement, her eyes alight with apprehension. Though there hadn't been time to think of a plan, it was clear that something would have to change, or Gabora would become an appetizer for the shadow's dinner. To him, the path was clear. They would make a break for the temple, and hope the beast couldn't catch them.

"We go on three," Zach said, motioning with his fingers. "One. Two. Three!"

With his teeth tightly gritted, Zach ran at full sprint down the side of the hill, dodging around the boulders that lay on the ground and putting all his energy into not thinking about what he was doing. As he entered the clearing, he could clearly see the bewilderment displayed on Gabora's face followed by a bottle exploding only a short ways behind him, spraying dust and pebbles directly onto his back. The Shadow also seemed to acknowledge his presence, letting out a roar that was deafening at such close range.

Collapsing forward onto the deck of the temple, he sighed with relief, picking himself up only to shrink back down as one of the smaller buildings collapsed behind him. Briefly panicked, he risked a look back at the carnage, only to see that instead of following him, Reese was sneaking along through the trees. She was completely unharmed, and sporting her own look of bewilderment. At this, Zach couldn't help but feel embarrassed. Not even she would follow him through such a dangerous plan.

"You really know how to make an entrance, don't you?" Gabora said as he continued to assault the beast with a barrage of jars and bottles. His feathers were in disarray, their dignified sheen completely

gone. Behind him sat a pile of containers carved from wood and stone, all labeled in a language unfamiliar to Zach.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“Start throwing!” Gabora exclaimed. His voice was small and gravely, like he had just finished a shouting match, and he several bruises along his wings and back. It was clear that they would have to get inside, if only so they could give him a rest, but that came with its own problems. Even if they barricaded the doors or set some kind of trap, the shadow would give chase, and the temple wouldn’t be able to withstand the damage that would follow. And without magic, even restraining the monster was likely impossible. Zach’s mind churned with the possibilities, ideas melding together without any hint of a solution.

Running down along the trees closer to the temple, Reese quickly found the pair. After giving Gabora a concerned glance, her eyes darted to Zach. “That was not what I thought you meant by ‘go!’” she exclaimed, grabbing a bottle and throwing it rather harshly towards the monster.

Before Zach could respond, the monster leapt forward, its thundering roar drawing nearer as it doubled down on its assault of the temple grounds. It would soon be upon them, and they didn’t have much time left to react!

Swallowing his desperation, he quickly gave the area another look around. To the front of the deck, Gabora reinforced the barrage of bottles that kept the Shadow at bay. Beside him, Reese was now standing idly by, attempting to assist but unable to keep her eyes off of the monster’s impending attack. Despite their efforts, the bottles would soon run dry, and they would have no other solution to the problem at hand. But how could they keep such a creature at bay without the aid of magic? They couldn’t wall it out, and they had no means with which to properly kill it. Then, could they somehow disable it? Was that even feasible?

A half-baked idea suddenly forming in his head, Zach gritted his teeth. His hand slid to the floor and grabbed the largest bottle he could find. As he did so, he looked around for anything nearby that was large or heavy. Aside from the large piles of rubble dotted about, there was only the remains of a small watchtower. So, with everything he had, Zach sent the bottle shooting through the air, and watched as it detonated below the building's supports.

The group stood in disbelief as the tower tattered and fell, its stone pillars landing directly on top of the monster's back. With a cloud of dust, it was sent crashing to the ground, crying out in pain. For a moment, it thrashed about wildly, but soon went limp with its mouth agape.

Eyes wide, Zach stared at the scene, waiting in silence for the monster to move again. "Is... Is it dead?" he asked.

"Goodness, if only," Gabora said. "Nothing we have right now could hope to fully defeat it. We should be happy that we've managed to subdue it, at least for now." The owl fluttered raggedly over to the door and pulled out a rusted key from the folds of his feathers. Holding it in his beak, he pushed it through the giant stone slabs that comprised the main doors. The sound of gears grinding echoed from within, and slowly but surely, the doors began to open.

Wasting no time, Gabora scuttled inside. "Come, you two, we must go. Through here, quickly!"

The temple was like nothing Zach had ever seen. The vaulted central hub was the size of a cathedral, almost glittering with the natural light that came down through a circular opening in the ceiling. At the center sat a large grassy courtyard overgrown with trees and flowers, with pillars standing all around the outer edge to hold up a carved marble ceiling. Along the room's walls were openings that led to other rooms, and a large stone door barring a final room out the back. The whole place looked like something straight out of an adventure movie.

As the trio entered through the front, Gabora collapsed onto the dusty stone floor.

"Hey, are you okay?" Reese asked, hurrying over to help him.

Looking up at her, the bird almost seemed to smile, despite how impossible that might be with a beak. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine," he said. "Though I might not be if I had kept at it much longer. You did very well with that attack, Zachary."

Sighing with relief, Reese's attention turned back to Zach. "However cool it was, you should've been more careful," she said. "If you'd gotten hurt during your 'big entrance,' there's no way we'd be able to handle the monster."

Zach shrugged. "At least I got to look cool doing it."

“But what if you’d tripped and fell, or a bottle had hit you, or the monster had clawed you, or some other terrible thing!” Reese scowled, opening her mouth to continue before second guessing herself. “...Anyway, shouldn’t we be a bit more worried about the time we’ve got left? I doubt that thing’s going to stay down for long.”

“You’re quite right. We must push forward, post haste,” Gabora said, slowly rising onto his talons. “Oh, but do be warned, there may be a few surprises left for us. This area may be hidden from the general public using magic, but even still, I haven’t come near here in a very long time.”

Zach paused. “If you were put into stasis after Sialus died, how’d you wake up? When did you wake up?”

The owl tread gingerly across the temple floor, beckoning for Zach and Reese to follow behind him. “I don’t know all the details myself,” he said. “I imagine I came to because of the presence of the shadow on Earth, but all I’m certain of is that I awoke in the treehouse only a few hours before I found you two.”

As the group crossed along the speckled granite walls, Reese seemed preoccupied with twenty other things. She had a solemn, almost awestruck look about her, gazing around and analyzing anything that caught her eye. To her, the temple surely appeared as an array of panoramic drawings and a thousand different storybook settings all wrapped into one. Seeing her enjoyment, Zach tried to rid himself of his own lingering questions, only for them to pop up again and again. How did Sialus build an entire temple without any other humans to aid him? If he remade humanity thousands of years ago, how could a temple of this size remain intact after so long?

“So what do we need to do, exactly?” Zach finally asked.

“Well, I had originally planned to show you around a bit before I got to them—”

“And who’s them?”

“If you’d let me explain,” Gabora said, giving Zach a look that displayed distaste for his apparent rudeness. “You’re going to be meeting the kindred spirits who have decided your current fate. The five students who fought alongside Sialus in ages past rest within this very temple.”

Raising an eyebrow, Reese looked to Gabora with intrigue. “But that can’t be. They lived way back in Sialus’s time, right? How could they be here?”

“If you’ll recall, the heroes were contained within jewels, and later put into stasis after Sialus passed. That means that they are, in fact, alive and well. At this moment, I assume they are sound asleep in their gems, waiting for us to awaken them.”

Zach’s eyes narrowed. They were going to meet with Sialus’s prized pupils. People like them would surely know him better than anyone else, and if the owl’s words were true, they were incredibly powerful magic users. If anyone could shed light on their current predicament, it was them.

“That’s great and all, but shouldn’t we learn some magic and fight the shadow *before* we go asking them for help?” Reese asked.

“Well, ideally we could,” Gabora said, “but if Sialus’s predictions did indeed come to pass, the humans he created have a lesser capacity to generate mana with each passing generation. This means that, even given Sialus was one of the most powerful magic users to ever exist, his offspring would completely lose their natural magical abilities within a certain amount of time. That’s why your kind hasn’t seen magic before. You must have lost the ability to use it through the centuries. Then, in order for you two to begin learning magic yourselves, you must rely on a different supply for the mana needed to cast spells. Thankfully, we just so happen to have some very convenient millenia old magic users available for that very purpose.”

“Oh, okay. So we’re using them as batteries,” Zach said, underwhelmed.

“Hm? Batteries?” Gabora mumbled, confused.

The group walked to the back room of the temple, and as they went, the smaller details of their environment became much more apparent. A little trinket here, a stack of boxes there. They all stood out thanks to their intricate designs and otherworldly appearances, yet could be easily missed in a grand place like the temple.

“What’s all this stuff?” Zach said as he picked up a ring with a white marble fitted on its face.

“Well, Sialus did spend many years on earth before he passed, and in that time he became a tinkerer of sorts,” Gabora said. “He would always be testing and working with the natural elements of this planet, infusing mana into them and creating the magical items that you see before you. It probably made passing the time much more bearable for him.”

Continuing through into a dead end room, there were yet more gadgets scattered around the floor and on stacks of old wooden shelves. A dusty old furnace sat in the corner, though it was doubtful that it worked.

“And here we are!” Gabora declared.

Reese looked around, squinting her eyes as if looking for something. “Um... are you sure?”

Zach frowned. Not just the room, but the temple as a whole did not seem like the place to keep the all-important magical experts of the past, much less a human life enclosed in a gemstone. Seeing their confusion, Gabora waved his wing back and forth. “No, no, this is only the entrance to the vault containing Sialus’s most precious relics,” he said, “though I’m sorry to say you won’t be entering the place yourselves.”

“Why not?” Reese asked, disappointed.

Gabora shrugged. “Listen, I’ve seen you kids in action. You aren’t irresponsible, and I know that you are very capable, but for something this important, I just can’t trust you yet. Stay here, and stay out of trouble. I’ll be back in a moment.”

With that, the owl took out his rusted key and shoved it into a small hole that was fitted into the wall. In an instant, he was gone, disappearing with a small poof of dust. This left Zach and Reese alone in the peaceful, but ultimately creepy temple. The silence and low lighting seemed to solidify an uninviting tone.

“So... What do you think they’re like? The heroes, I mean?” Reese asked, looking around the room.

Zach paused. Beyond their use as warriors, he hadn’t stopped to think of who the heroes might be as people. He had to assume they were wise and knowledgeable, not to mention confident in their own abilities. But if they were taught under Sialus, they also would have been in their gemstones for an incredibly long time, and that wouldn’t even include the thousands of years they’d spent sleeping within the temple. What would that do to a person, being trapped for so long, unable to move, and only speak to the person who imprisoned you? “I’m sure they’re fine people,” Zach said, unsure of whether he was comforting Reese or himself. “Anyone willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good has to be someone worth knowing, right?”

“Yeah, you're probably right...” Reese said, eyes narrowing on her hands before looking back to Zach. “You know, there’s been something that’s been bugging me for a while. If what Gabora said was true, then wouldn’t that mean-”

Suddenly, the owl himself popped into reality just a few feet from them, startling Zach and putting an end to their little conversation. “I’ve returned,” he said curtly.

Reese crossed her arms. “Yeah, we noticed.”

Under Gabora’s wing was a small satchel with two large jewels sticking out from it. The first was a diamond that sparkled in the low light, completely clear and absent of impurity as if it were a tinted piece of glass. The second was an emerald that, while not as refined as the diamond, boasted more facets and a kaleidoscopic swirl of greenish hues. Both seemed to draw Zach’s eye as he looked over them.

Balancing them in his wings, Gabora held the jewels up for the pair to see. “These two gemstones each house one of the latent students of Sialus. You will take one to keep with you, and the spirits inside will probably help you in your training.”

“Probably?” Zach asked.

“Well, these events were planned thousands of years ago, and I was only told exactly what I needed to know in order to fulfil my duties. At this point, I know about as much as you on this matter.”

Zach looked suspiciously at the diamond. If even Gabora was clueless about these people, it couldn’t lead to anything good. What kinds of secrets were they hiding? Would they even be willing to teach them? What kind of people were they? There was nothing certain about any of it, and it bothered him.

Ignorant to Zach’s worry, Gabora lifted the jewels to them cheerfully. “Well then, without further ado, here are your heroes!”