

The Voidbounder's Door

By: Marc Mercure



One

Alexander wanted to sit in the cool shade of a sycamore tree in the park across from the museum. The summer heat shimmered off the high-rises in waves, making the cityscape ripple like a mirage. Beneath the tree, though, the shade offered a refreshing oasis to read and eat lunch.

Unfortunately, a steep stone staircase barricaded the sycamore and any other patch of shade. The only ramp was at the far end of the park. Alexander told Ms. Overlocker he could wheel himself there alone. He had seen the longing look his teaching aide was giving the cigarette slung from their teacher, Mr. Valdez's lips, and knew it was futile to make any serious effort to convince her.

Alexander clenched his teeth and didn't object when Ms. Overlocker pointed to a table in the sun. His hands squeezed the wheels until he felt the metal frame cut into his palm. *I don't need anyone to say anything or offer to help, and I certainly don't want their pity.*

Inside the museum, Alexander managed to break away from Ms. Overlocker. The soaring ceilings and echoing halls were filled with dazzling distractions: Roman and Greek bronzes, Renaissance masterpieces, and glass cases housing fragments of ancient lives. He drifted from exhibit to exhibit, losing himself in the stories each artifact told.

Eventually, Alexander found himself in a room littered with sarcophagi. It looked like a crowded room of giants facing in all different directions. The air felt cooler here, and a faint smell of dust lingered. He wandered between the elaborately carved coffins, pausing to read the descriptions on small bronze plaques.

One sarcophagus caught his eye. It was smaller than the rest, encircled by towering neighbors. Its intricate carvings seemed ordinary at first, but along the edge of the lid, something stood out—next to some sort of symbol was the word *HOME*, etched in bold, uneven letters.

“That’s not an Egyptian hieroglyph,” Alexander muttered, frowning. He ran his finger over the rough stone as though he was trying to uncover its meaning.

The thought of home immediately made his finger tremble. He heard Ruth’s laughter, clear as day, like she was right beside him. He saw her running through the halls, seamlessly part of the daily symphony of shouting, slamming doors, and his father and uncles muttering under their breath. But then he heard her screaming, a sound etched on his brain. Alexander’s breath was ragged and in rhythm with Ruth’s final breaths. Her eyes closed and the expression of fear frozen.

Home. The accident that took his cousin Ruth’s life and gave him a wheelchair to memorialize his blame had twisted the word. His family’s anguish was raw, their glances heavy with unspoken words. He knew what they saw—that he was disappointed to be alive, and that some part of him wished he could trade places with Ruth.

I survived, and Ruth didn’t. A wheelchair and a lifetime of pitied stares are what I deserve. Ruth was more like a sister than a cousin. They were born six weeks apart sixteen summers ago. He sighed, realizing he’d been holding his breath, his trembling finger still tracing the word etched on the sarcophagus.

Before he had time to pull away, the lid groaned. He rolled back as it swung open, revealing a flash of sunlight. A rush of warm, damp air swept through his hair.

Then, a man in a purple cloak burst out, colliding with Alexander. The man nearly tumbled into him, but Alexander shoved him away. As he did, Alexander felt something fall on his lap.

“Hey!” Alexander shouted, spinning around. But the man didn’t stop. He disappeared into the maze of exhibits, leaving Alexander alone with the open sarcophagus. He turned to give chase, but then looked back at the sarcophagus.

Heart pounding, Alexander wheeled himself closer. The sunlight inside the coffin flickered curiously as if beckoning him. Something on Alexander’s lap flickered as though responding to something on the other side.

What is this? He held up some sort of necklace—a leather lanyard holding a figure eight. Two orbs in the center of each loop began whirring, and soon the necklace tugged towards the bright burst with the wild strength of a spooked horse.

Alexander was pulled inside. The last thing he heard was an angry scream, then the lid slammed shut, and the world disappeared.

Two

Alexander instantly regretted his curiosity. The initial thrill of discovery was replaced with cold fear. He frantically tried turning around, back to the museum, but couldn't. Once the door closed, the only way was forward, like when light flashes from a light bulb—a fact he grasped too late. A fact that Alexander would later wish he'd known sooner. And so onward he went.

Second guessing his decisions wasn't surprising. It was a habit rooted in one fateful night. What was surprising was the space Alexander now found himself in. Alexander held his hands out. He could feel them wiggling or touching his face, but couldn't see anything. *Where am I?* He tried saying, but only heard the words in his mind. There was nothing but darkness and eerie silence. Alexander felt a spark of panic, fierce and threatening. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on his breathing. The breath is the gateway to calmness, he remembered his grief counselor, Dr. Buddy, saying. Alexander stayed like this for what felt like months or possibly years, but what he hoped was just a couple of minutes.

Then a streak of colors whizzed through the dark behind his eyes and was followed by the deafening sound of static. He felt a pull begin at his hands and then spread until the incessant pulling, oddly free of pain, seemed to have hold of every part of him. He was certain one more tug and he burst into countless pieces.

There was a sudden bump, and Alexander felt like he was falling forward and onto his feet. His subconscious mind knew what to do, and before he realized it, he had moved several feet toward a window ahead of him. A humming sound like a beehive filled the room. He felt a tickle in his palm and realized it was coming from the amulet. He opened his hand to glance at it, then turned to survey his surroundings.

The faint morning sunlight crawled through the window, casting long shadows across the floor. Alexander glanced down, rubbed his eyes, and looked again—his shadow was upright.

He stamped his feet and felt the resistance of the ground, the tension in his knees, and the weight in his hips. *That can't be right. It's impossible and no one would be that sick to play this*

kind of trick. Alexander didn't know who would pull such a terrible prank, or how, but steadfastly refused to believe what he was seeing and feeling.

But his shadow remained upright, standing tall. Alexander felt his nerves come to life, tingling, tickling like ants tracing a well-worn path up his legs. His muscles tensed and twitched—old friends waking from a long nap, sore and restless.

He took a stumbling step forward and then another, still rough and with forgotten ease. His legs buckled, teetering, and his breath caught. Then two more steps, this time filled with familiar certainty. Then another, nearly like he used to. Alexander's next step, confident and sure, hit something he knew it shouldn't have. The joyful tears streaming down his face stopped cold, frozen on his cheeks.

His foot struck something solid but somehow still squishy. A sickening slurping sound pressed beneath his sole, cold and wet even through his shoe. His breath hitched, a jolt of dread coiling up his spine. *Please don't be what I think it is. Please.* A dozen dreadful possibilities popped into his mind, each one worse than the last.

The room smelled of two mismatched memories—redolently sweet like the gardenia shampoo his mother used, and a cutting sterility like chlorine in a hospital. His stomach clenched, and his eyes followed the instinct.

A muffled voice outside the room broke his concentration.

“Chantress Clio? Chantress Clio, it's Starbo. Chantress Nun sent me to check on you.”

The halting clang of unfamiliar syllables sounded like *Ughmpht*. Although he didn't recognize the language, he knew it was a man's voice. That alone hit Alexander like a knock-out punch. His chest began heaving.

Not meaning to, he looked down. Slowly, his eyes saw just a woman. Then his mind caught up, filling in the horrid details—crumbled, contorted, mouth half-mummified mid-scream. *Oh! Oh, that's definitely a dead body. This is just a really bad dream where you can walk again, and dead bodies litter the floor.* This was far worse than the dozen of dreadful possibilities Alexander had imagined.

He staggered back, his whole body shook, trapping his breath in his throat. Alexander had never seen the woman before, or any woman like her. But it wasn't her beauty, though she was beautiful, nor her wealth, which her jewelry made it plain to see, that drew his attention. A

particular gold pin on her cloak caught Alexander's eye: a ram's head emblem, strangely familiar from an exhibit he'd seen at the museum.

He stifled an urge to scream, and his legs were too trembly to run. Rooted to the spot, he pieced together the implications. *This woman is Egyptian, proper Ancient Egyptian. But how is that possible?* Before he could think further, voices approached. Two more people had joined the man outside—a woman and another man. Their tones were urgent.

The door flew open with a resounding thud. A tall woman stormed in, her eyes fell to Clio, and immediately her posture changed. Anger radiated off her like long arcs of electricity lashing toward Alexander, sending the hairs on his arm on edge. Behind her was a man as big as a bison. But it was the woman's raptorial stare, so piercing it made Alexander feel like his skin was being peeled away, that commandeered his train of thought.

"What are you doing in Clio's quarters," the woman said in a clipped voice. Alexander still only heard a harsh combination of sounds that made no sense.

He stood hapless watching the woman. She wore a flowing white tunic with pleated straps. Her gold jewelry accented her sharp features. Her grey eyes, rimmed with indigo, locked onto Clio's corpse. The eyes narrowed in a flash. The woman moved a hand slowly to her wrist.

"I don't know who you are, but you better have a good explanation for what happened," she spoke slowly, but it was of no use. She scanned his face for some sign he understood her. Alexander's face was blank, inscrutable.

She closed the distance between them in quick strides. They were toe to toe—the sweet fragrance of lavender and sage washed over him. "Speak." She sounded frustrated by Alexander's silence, unsure if it was tactical, menacing, or something else. Her eyes flitted to his hand.

Alexander sensed danger—he reached down for his wheels, which were no longer there. *Run!* The thought was an urgent command from the depths of his subconscious. He backed away, turning to run.

"Stop or I'll..." the woman's hand caught a fist full of his sleeve. He pulled, but her grip was firm. She caught his arm.

"Hel..." he began to shout.

There was a metallic clink, followed by a sharp sting. Pain lanced through his arm as he cried out, stumbling backward. The woman released him, her lips a grim line.

Alexander pumped his legs desperately, trying to run. But he didn't seem to be moving forward, but downward. Or was it upward? The world slewed, then spun. Alexander couldn't decide if he was running or riding an out-of-control roller coaster. It suddenly didn't matter which direction he thought he was going as pain in his arm hit every nerve like a sledgehammer. The pain was unbearable, and soon darkness closed in.

"Sobek's teeth. Did you really need to knock the kid out, Solon?" Alexander heard one of the male voices ask. His head rang, even his teeth buzzed, but he could understand what he said. The sting on his arm had dulled to a faint throb. He also had a peculiar taste in his mouth, but every time he tried to describe it, he could only think of a color—cerulean.

"I didn't know Chantress Clio had already been murdered," Solon replied, her tone frigid. "I don't like this Babef. That incident at the festival looks like it was just the first attempt at Clio's life."

"But is he really an assassin?" Babef said sardonically. "Commander Temo is always telling cadets there's a difference between someone looking disarming and actually being harmless. I guess he's right."

"Did you see what he was holding?" Solon asked, but exchanged a look with Babef—be quiet—when she heard Alexander groaning.

Alexander blinked, his vision slowly clearing, but his mind was still foggy. Humid air thick with the smell of algae pressed against his face. The woman from before knelt beside him, holding a glass of water. Her expression was unreadable. Alexander didn't need all his wits about him to know he didn't trust her.

"No more poison. Just water," Solon said flatly, seeming to read his mind. But it didn't require her prescient gaze to read Alexander's expression. The creases around his eyes and the stern, pouting frown made his distrust blatantly clear.

Does she poison people every day? I can't think why anyone would need to have a poison bracelet handy. Alexander tried to understand the woman. She watched him intently, rubbing one of her owl earrings, as was her habit, trying to understand him.

Standing a few feet away was Babef, who filled the width of the doorway. He wore a tunic and kilt trimmed in fiery orange, the color of the temple guards. A brass chain circled his waist, holding an indigo faience vulture at his hip. The vulture gripped a Was scepter, a symbol

of Babef's rank. The chain rested on a sash pleated and tied with military precision. The man had the tightly clipped hairstyle of a soldier, the bony brow of a boxer, and an oafish, toothy grin.

Alexander didn't notice any of the signs of Babef's status, and he ignored the disarming grin. He was focused on all the intimidating parts—biceps as big as boulders, hands like bear paws, and legs that could kick down giant oak trees. *I wonder if it's local custom to bludgeon someone after poisoning them.*

"I'm Captain Babef," he said, his tone light but his posture alert. Babef held Alexander's stare, searching the young man with an expression that seemed familiar—like an older sibling who was trying to play parent. Alexander steeled his eyes, trying his best to show the man he was perfectly fine. "She's Solon. You're not dead, so I'd call that progress."

Alexander hesitated, then accepted the glass, taking a cautious sip. The water was cool and refreshing, easing the burning in his throat. "I'm Alexander," he croaked. "Why did you attack me?"

Solon arched an eyebrow, gesturing to the body on the floor. "You were standing over a murdered woman. Can you blame me?"

Alexander's stomach churned as he remembered the mummified woman. He tried leaping to his feet but was still too groggy to do anything more than stand up shakily, his eyes darting between Solon and Babef. *How could they have a conversation over a corpse? A corpse...do they think I murdered her?* "I didn't...I," he struggled to quickly defend his innocence.

Babef tittered. Solon stared expectantly, waiting for Alexander to explain.

"I didn't...I was at the museum. Then, someone burst out of a sarcophagus. A man in a purple cloak. When I looked inside, I saw sunlight and...I don't know. I just followed it here. Wherever here is, and then I saw... her." Alexander turned to Solon, eyes wide. "And I can walk again."

Babef and Solon instantly stiffened and glanced at the rangy teenager. His auburn hair was neatly groomed, and his olive skin appeared spared from any scars, scrapes, or tattoos. He undoubtedly didn't fit the surly criminal type. And whatever explanation Solon and Babef expected to hear from the foreigner, it wasn't this. This was alarming, but Solon managed to keep her reaction from showing.

Babef frowned, exchanging an anxious look with Solon. “A Voidbouncer,” he muttered, the word heavy with meaning. “You crossed the Void?” Lines tensed along his brow even though his tone made it clear he already knew the answer to his question.

“Voidbouncer? The Void? Do you mean time travel?” Alexander asked, his voice cracking. “That’s...it’s...I don’t know what I did...I just want to go home.”

“You found a Voidbouncer’s Door that brought you to another world, not a different point in time,” Solon said, pacing. Her gold bracelets caught the light, their symbols glinting menacingly. “The chances of finding another one... are well, slim, at best. Unless...”

She let the word hang in the air, waiting for a flicker of recognition to register in Alexander’s eyes. There was none. That meant either he was clueless or incredibly cunning. Both were dangerous.

Alexander jerked his head to look outside. *How can they sound so certain? I found the first door without even trying. How hard could another be?* “I have to find a way back,” Alexander said under his breath, feeling a second cold sting just as staggering as the first.

“Voidbounders travel between worlds,” Babef said. “No one knows how, no one knows why. But when they show up, people usually end up dead.”

Solon scoffed, “*Travel* is too polite. Voidbounders aren’t crossing for a day at the beach. The last one that was cornered used a weapon never seen before to blind three guards. Their faces looked like ground meat.”

“That’s...that’s horrible,” Alexander said, nearly retching. “And you think I’m one of them?” His voice cracked.

Solon folded her arms. “You arrived through a Voidbouncer’s Door and landed next to a murdered priestess. Forgive me if I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Alexander, did this person get a good look at you?” Babef asked, his bony brow pinched with concern.

“More importantly, where did you find that amulet?” Solon pointed to the figure eight strung on the lanyard.

“Amulet? It’s just a necklace,” Alexander fought a reflex to try and hide it. “I don’t know...I mean, it all happened so fast,” Alexander sighed, feeling frustrated about the mess he had stumbled into. “I remember when I first got here, there was a smell like someone had

cleaned a pool and something gritty on the floor. Then I heard a man's voice at the door, but it wasn't you, Babef."

"That was Lieutenant Starbo," Babef said. He looked at Alexander intently. The pupils of his honey-brown eyes reflected a fear that he'd so far kept from his voice. "Think carefully, it's important. Did this person see you?"

Alexander shrugged, wishing he could say more.

"The Voidbounders are the most ruthless criminals I know of," Babef's lips twitched. Like everyone, he knew very little about Voidbounders. But he did know they were dangerous, and the fact that no member of the order had been captured alive made them even more deadly. "Solon, if the Voidbounders think he knows something," Babef shook his head. "That puts him..." his voice trailed off as he made a subtle gesture toward Clio's corpse in a way suggesting Alexander might join her.

Solon said nothing. She claimed to know a great deal more about the criminal networks operating in the Two Lands and knew only two things about the Voidbounders. They were extremely dangerous and even more secretive—only a fool would ever pretend to have gained any knowledge about the group. This teenager looked lost more than anything else, which meant he had a target on his back. He also offered Solon a unique opportunity to either gain insight into the Voidbounders or possibly finally capture one of them. She stalked the Chantress's quarters, her eyes scanning for clues.

Alexander's head spun. He'd thought he'd stumbled into the past, but this was something entirely different. "Why would they come after me? I don't know anything!"

"That amulet was glowing when I first came," Solon said, waiting for some subtle sign of deceit. Something that would give him away. Again Alexander's face remained a sheet of surprise. "If it's nothing then we need to only protect you from being framed for murder. But if it's—"

"Sobek's tiny teeth," Babef brushed a hand over his face. "Solon, if that's what you're thinking it is, then the Voidbounders will stop at nothing to get it back. At least the Voidbounder you stole it from."

"I didn't steal it," Alexander replied defensively. "It must have fallen onto my lap when he bumped into me."

Solon weighed the earnest words and confused looks to try to understand what was truth and what was misdirection. She nodded to Babef, a small gesture, but he had known Solon for more than a decade. He knew how her mind worked and what she was already planning.

“Alexander, if you’re telling the truth, then you must recognize the danger you are in,” Solon stopped pacing.

“But all that happened was some guy ran into me,” Alexander said, shaking his head.

“If the Voidbounders believe you’ve stolen one of their secrets, they’ll come for you.” Solon exhaled sharply, rubbing again at her owl earring. This wasn’t the case she was expecting. She operated on her own, occasionally with help from Babef and others, but they all knew the risks. They could cope with the danger. Solon had been in a similar spot before, putting someone in danger as a means to an end. She had vowed never to do it again, but now she didn’t see a choice. “We can use you to draw them out. But that would mean trusting me.”

Babef softened, his voice almost kind. “You can trust me.”

But can I be trusted? Ruth trusted me once. He thought of the weight of a dozen relatives’ stares expecting him to be someone he could never be again. The life waiting for him on the other side of a door he might never find again. Alexander’s hands felt clammy even though he felt his heart thumping against his chest. His body screamed *run, fight, escape*—but where would he go? Who else would believe him?

He swallowed hard. “I... I need to think about it.” But as the words left his lips, he knew it wasn’t a choice.