

# RAGS AND MUFFIN



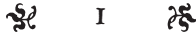
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## DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

**T**he sun had set, yet low clouds, red like smoldering coals, brooded over Godtown and cast the city in hues of black and crimson. Two Elysian runeships, their armored underbellies aglow with esoteric symbols, cut through the air above the crumbling tenements and makeshift huts of a sprawling *zopadpatti*, one of the many slums that stretched across Southside like flaking scabs across a healing wound. In the rubbish-strewn streets below, children looked up from their cricket games, men from their hash pipes, and women from the wells where they gathered water; all saw the ships, and they raised their fists and cursed.

In the foremost ship, Nurse Juliet, immaculately dressed in white, sat across from the door gunner and quietly clutched a teddy bear. She gazed out over the slum and fretted, wondering why nobody closed the door. Looking down from the sky on the tents and corrugated steel rooftops made her nervous: If she accidentally dropped the bear, it would ruin the whole night.

Even so, she was grateful for the breeze. The monsoon was late this year, so Godtown cooked under the sun from morning to evening until it was almost too hot to breathe. At night, every surface radiated back the heat it had collected over the sweltering day. But up here above the city's miasma, the air was cool and fresh, carrying none of the odors that filled the city streets—petrol fumes, monkey droppings, open sewers.

Doctor Darcangelo, wedged next to the gunner, stared at Juliet through the long, black strands of his oiled hair. His nimble, narrow fingers toyed with the fedora in his lap, and a sickly smile formed on his face, making the hollows under his cheekbones more prominent.

He was paler than usual. Juliet wondered if he'd eaten today.

"You didn't have to come, you know," he murmured.

She felt a twinge of irritation. "Just once, doctor, I wanted to see—"

"There's nothing to see."

She chewed her lower lip as she tried to read his expression. "Then why do it?"

"Someone has to."

"The soldiers—"

"They don't understand like I do."

She glanced into his dark eyes but then looked away again and stared out the door, out over the city lit and shadowed by the light reflecting from the roiling cloud bank overhead.

Needing no engine, the runeship was silent. The wind whistled past the door, and the grumbles of automobiles and trishaws rose from below. In the blood-tainted twilight, Juliet could make out the marble shikaras and minarets of innumerable temples and mosques interspersed with crumbling tenements and ramshackle

*jhuggi-jhompris*. It was such an ugly city, yet here and there, it held instances of the greatest beauty.

For reasons she couldn't explain, Juliet *did* want to see. These trips made the doctor suffer—and she felt a strange desire to suffer with him.

“She’ll really like that bear, though,” Darcangelo said. He smiled again.

She managed to smile back.



COVETOUS OF THE MAGICAL TUAOI STONES THAT GREW IN abundance in the mountains to the city's west, the globe-spanning Elysian Empire had, thirteen years ago, invaded Godtown—but couldn't control it. Nobody controlled Godtown for long.

After taking the Vindhya Range and a slice of the city's west end, the invading army had halted, forgoing endless house-to-house fighting as well as the inevitably bloody battle with the temple fortress in the harbor. For thirteen years now, the Elysians had owned the mountains and their Tuaoi Stone mines but had also dealt with an endless parade of criminals, malcontents, and guerillas. Possessed as it was of the world's most potent Runetech, the Elysian military performed well in large-scale wars of conquest, but it was unwieldy in urban combat, and when it came to police actions or counterterrorism, it was like a chainsaw cutting butter: It did little more than make a mess.

Thus, when raiding a condemned tenement to strike at a child-trafficking ring, the Elysians landed two heavy runeships on the roof, launched flash grenades through the windows, and smashed through every door with an entire company of men armed with carbines, 12-gauge shotguns, and grenade launchers.

The tenement was full of impoverished squatters whom the soldiers rounded up, cuffed—sometimes in both senses of the word—and herded into a dingy courtyard. There, Captain Swaggart, with outsized jowls and a craggy face set in a permanent frown, clasped his hands behind his back and marched past rows of the crouching, sullen, and uncommunicative natives.

They stared at him, eyes blank. They had the faces of men accustomed to being whipped like dogs.

Only one dared to speak, a fellow with a dark and heavily lined face; back home, Swaggart would have judged him to be in his sixties, but here, a man with a face like that could be as young as thirty. The man uttered several rapid words in the vernacular.

When he had first arrived in Godtown, Swaggart had received an official translator—a toothless, bhang-addicted native whose vernacular was almost as bad as his English and whom Swaggart had immediately tossed on his ear. So far, however, the captain thought he had done all right without anyone to parse the local tongue for him. He listened for a minute to the squatter's tirade and understood almost none of it, but somewhere amidst the jabber, he caught the words *bahen chod*, which translated to “sister fucker.” Without a moment's hesitation, Swaggart raised a boot and laid the man out with a kick to the temple. It didn't pay to tolerate insolence.

The native sprawled on the ground, groaning. His fellows didn't flinch but merely stared at the pebbles near their feet, faces slack.

Dr. Darcangelo, a foppish pediatrician immaculately dressed in a black suit and matching trench coat, pushed past Swaggart's shoulder and dropped his heavy medical bag to the ground. He pulled off his kid gloves and snapped on a latex pair in their

place. With his young nurse hovering anxiously at his shoulder, he set about treating the cut on the native's head.

Swaggart bit his lip as he watched the working of Darcangelo's spiderlike fingers. Those fingers—too white, too long, and too bony—made his skin crawl. Indeed, Swaggart found everything about the doctor disconcerting: He could never bear Darcangelo's gaze for long on account of the doctor's liquid eyes rimmed with delicate lashes, his sallow and clammy skin, and his lips, which were too full to be a man's, and too red.

Once Darcangelo had shone a light in the wounded native's eyes to make sure he didn't have a concussion, Nurse Juliet rounded on Swaggart. "Why would you do that?" she cried, clutching a teddy bear to her chest. "That poor man didn't—"

Swaggart raised a hand to stop her. "Nurse, you and the doctor are here only because the general, for reasons of his own, allows it. If you insist on tagging along after my men, you are under my command. Is that clear?"

She squeezed the bear and thrust out her jaw. But she didn't answer.

As he helped the injured man sit up, Darcangelo asked several questions in fluent vernacular. The man answered rapidly but at length while waving his grimy hands.

Darcangelo nodded and stood. He carefully brushed his hands down his coat and adjusted his fedora.

"I don't have all night, doctor," Swaggart said.

Darcangelo languidly fiddled with his emerald stickpin as he replied, "This gentleman informs me of a secret panel in a cupboard on the top floor; it leads to an entire wing of the building that had been closed off. The fellows you want are in there—well, *were* in there. I've no doubt they've escaped by now."

Swaggart gestured to three of his men. “Stevens, Heatfreak, take the kit. Martins, you’re on point. Let’s go.”



DARCANGELO TURNED HIS HAT IN HIS HANDS AND STRUGGLED TO quell his impatience while the soldiers broke through the false wall. He wondered if things would have been easier and neater if he had come alone; alas, the military had received the tip before he did, so the military had acted first.

Three times, his right hand—as if it had a mind of its own—lifted from his hat and reached toward his ear. Each time, he caught himself in the gesture and forced it back down.

Martins tossed in a flash-bang grenade. After a loud *thump*, he dived in.

Heatfreak went next. A man probably still in his late teens, whose rounded cheeks had not yet lost the fleshiness of childhood, Heatfreak had a maniacal glint in his baby-blue eyes. His moniker—almost certainly a sportive nickname—undoubtedly recalled something unpleasant; as Heatfreak smashed through the door, Darcangelo wondered what a man with such a nickname might be capable of in a moment of desperation.

In less than a minute, Heatfreak and Martins, having fired no shots, declared the room clear. Once all had rushed in except the rear guard, Darcangelo donned his hat, shifted his medical bag to his left hand, and ducked through the small entryway. He helped Juliet in after him.

It was a broad room and low. The few electric torches had blue tissues hanging over them to dampen their beams. The feeble light filled the room with fantastic, sinister shadows that stretched up



the walls and gave the impression of enormous beasts crouching in the corners, waiting to pounce. Insect carcasses littered the dirty enamel floor, and wires hung from holes in the ceiling. In the center of the room stood an extraction chair with its standard apparatus—including a skull-bit. A grimy, yellowing plastic tube ran from the device to a nearby table where a Mason jar stood half-full of pale, shimmering fluid. Darcangelo wrinkled his nose. Beside him, Juliet put a hand over her mouth and looked sick.

The chair, an expected find, did not long occupy Darcangelo's attention. Of greater interest were the men, both human and *marjara*, who sprawled on the floor in painful-looking contortions, as if they had frozen amid seizures. Several bullet holes graced the walls.

Fingering his carbine, Stevens whistled. "Somebody already got here and took 'em out. Another mob, maybe?"

Darcangelo chuckled through pursed lips, bent over a *marjara*, and set down his medical bag. "No, take a closer look. These men aren't dead."

With his long and nimble fingers, Darcangelo probed the *marjara*'s neck. Like most *marjaras*, this one had a decidedly feline muzzle with pronounced canines protruding from his upper lip. His fur was yellow and covered with tightly clustered black spots, indicating that he was of the Vaishya *Varna*, though Darcangelo didn't know the fur patterns well enough to identify his particular caste. This *marjara* was enormous, probably seven feet tall when erect, and sheathed in thick, lean muscle. When Darcangelo touched his furry neck, the *marjara* opened his eyes and looked up at him with an unmistakable expression of distaste.

"His pulse is strong," Darcangelo said as he straightened.

“He’s simply been immobilized by a *Sastravidya* nerve strike. Be aware that he can hear everything we say.”

Looking around, he added, “At first glance, captain, I’d say all these men appear to be either temporarily paralyzed or unconscious.”

Swaggart scowled. “Then who—?”

“I don’t know for certain, but my first guess would be the Ragamuffin. This is her style.”

Swaggart cursed under his breath.

Darcangelo walked to the extraction chair and peered at the skull-bit; poised on its tip was a clump of burnt hair clotted with blood. Then he turned to the jar on the table and opened it.

Juliet, eyes wide with horror, pinched her nose. “Doctor, do you really want to—?”

The tangy stench stung his nostrils and poured straight into his brain, making his head pound.

“Heaven Seed, and it’s fresh,” he said with a cough as he clamped the lid back into place. “Half an hour at the most.”

Swaggart’s craggy face brightened. “So the Ragamuffin could still be here?”

“And the victim could still be alive, though this is a large extraction—large enough to kill some hybrids outright. If she’s here, we need to find her right away.”

With a series of terse orders, Swaggart assigned fireteams to search. “Get me the Ragamuffin,” he said. “If she’s in the building, I want her—alive.”

“And the victim?” Darcangelo asked.

With an impatient growl, Swaggart added, “If you find the victim, radio for Darcangelo. Don’t move her until he gets there.”

Darcangelo cleared his throat, straightened his tie, and put a hand on Swaggart's shoulder. Swaggart winced.

"Captain," Darcangelo murmured, "I thought the military had an unofficial policy against interference with the Ragamuffin's vigilante activities."

"That's not *my* policy," Swaggart answered through clenched teeth as he brushed the doctor's hand away. "I don't give special privileges to criminals—*any* criminals."

He tapped a finger on Darcangelo's chest. "As for you, doctor, I want you to stay right here. Got it? No wandering around."

"Right here," Darcangelo repeated, offering Swaggart a thin smile. "I'm happy with that, captain. I wouldn't want to get my suit dirty."

Swaggart's lip curled. He turned away and took his own team through a low doorway. Only a few soldiers remained behind to place plastic ties around the wrists of the incapacitated men strewn about the floor.

Darcangelo put a thin finger to his lips before taking Juliet's arm and pulling her swiftly and silently into the shadows.



## CHILDREN AND PETS

**B**efore she knew what he was doing, Darcangelo had drawn Juliet into a narrow hallway. There were no lights here, and it was almost pitch black.

“Doctor!” she hissed. “Captain Swaggart said no!”

“Captain Swaggart says many things,” Darcangelo whispered in her ear. “Approximately half are worth heeding.”

His breath tickled. She swallowed.

Still tugging her arm, he led her, and she followed. She could barely see, but rotten floorboards creaked under her feet. Darcangelo made no sound as he walked.

She drew close to him and shivered. She squeezed the teddy bear. “Shouldn’t we wait?”

“We are running out of time.”

“But I’m frightened.”

“Don’t be.”

He disengaged his arm from hers, and she heard rather than

saw him reach under his trench coat to draw the Smith & Wesson 629 V-Comp from the holster on his hip.

“You’re with me,” he said, “and I assure you that nothing in here is more dangerous than me.”

Afraid he would slide away from her in the darkness, she threw out a hand and gripped his shoulder. She heard his thin, anemic chuckle. Then he continued gliding silently down the hall, and she could do nothing but follow.

When they turned a corner and entered a tiny room, she could see again. Shafts of reddish light poured through a series of high, narrow windows in the far wall. Shattered furniture in a corner suggested that this room had once been a flat, but the smell suggested that it had been a latrine.

Darcangelo muttered to himself and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. He said, “You may come out now, Mademoiselle Anne.”

Juliet gasped when a small figure dropped silently from the overhead pipes.

It was a girl. She looked ten years old at the most—petite, short, and clad in an outré pink dress covered in ribbons and flounces. That dress reached to her ankles and flared around several petticoats. Cocked at an angle on her brow was a miniature top hat adorned with silk flowers. Her soft, braided brown hair twined at the back of her head around a pair of what at first appeared to be hair sticks—but on a second glance proved to be stilettos.

In contrast to her otherwise elegant clothes, she sported a pair of plain, rubber-soled white tennis shoes a little too large for her. She looked like a sweet and adorable thing with a feminine taste in dresses and a childish taste in shoes, but one feature of her

face indicated she was not quite fully human: From the sides of her head jutted fur-covered, feline ears.

“Bonsoir, *Docteur*,” Mlle. Anne said with a curtsy. Then she called up to the ceiling, “Nicky, Muffin, come down.”

A large, gray animal with a serpentine body and clawed limbs dropped lithely to the floor and took its place by the girl’s side. It glared at Darcangelo and Juliet with intelligent eyes. The long tendrils extending from either side of its doglike snout whipped menacingly.

A bruised and exhausted-looking boy fell from the ceiling with a thud and slumped to one knee. In his arms was another girl—delicate, big-eyed, and cat-eared like Mlle. Anne but with a manic expression and flushed face. Blood trickled from a wound on the back of her head, making a broad stain on the boy’s shirt.

Darcangelo holstered his gun, set down his medical bag, and took the girl from the boy’s arms.

“Is she a *kumari*?” Juliet whispered.

“Probably not,” Darcangelo replied. “Probably not consecrated, that is.”

He rounded on Mlle. Anne. “This girl’s had most of the Heaven Seed sucked from her brain. Didn’t you notice?”

Mlle. Anne crossed her arms and pouted. “They already had ’er in that chair when we got here—”

“You knew she was seriously injured, but you just hid out?”

“All the soldiers showed up—”

“How long were you planning to hide, M’selle Anne?”

“Don’t call me that here,” she snapped with a stamp of one foot. “My name is *Rags*.”

“Very well, Miss Rags. Sooner or later, your antics are going to get your friends killed. And by the way, that awful school has ruined your pretty French accent.”

Darcangelo laid the girl on the floor and said to Juliet, “Give her an AVPU. Then point-seven grains of morphine and an IV with lactated Ringer’s.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Juliet’s fear disappeared. She had clear instructions, so she was a nurse again.



ONCE JULIET WAS TREATING THE SICK GIRL, DARCANGELO turned to the battered young boy and touched his face.

Cold and clammy. The boy breathed heavily, smacked at Darcangelo’s hand feebly, and tried to stand but collapsed back into a squat. This was Nicodemus Saunders, a regular patient with glycogen storage disease type 0. He was often in Rags’s company.

Human-*marjara* hybrids like Rags were usually frail, but for complicated reasons, Rags had extraordinarily heightened levels of the mystical energy called prana—levels typically found only in advanced Yogic masters. The unnatural attributes that raised her prana also enabled her to pass some of her abilities, such as her skill in the martial art *Sastravidya*, on to others. However, she could not give others her tirelessness or her ability to heal rapidly—nor could she seem to understand that her friends were less resilient than she was.

Darcangelo pulled a glucose meter from Nicky’s belt and pricked Nicky’s finger: As expected, his glucose was dangerously low. Darcangelo reached into his medical bag and pulled out a syringe prefilled with the pediatric dose of dextrose; he encountered Rags and her companions often enough in his work that he knew how to prepare.

Taking Nicky's arm and swabbing it, he said, "Nicky, you are presenting symptoms of hypoglycemia. Hold still, please."

Despite Nicky's squirming, Darcangelo gave the shot with perfect accuracy—*Sastravidya* training came in handy even in the medical field.

"I hate shots," Nicky grumbled.

"But you're behaving quite well for all that," Darcangelo answered.

When he finished with Nicky, he turned back to the delirious girl, who was now more aware of her surroundings. Darcangelo checked her IV and put a thermometer in her mouth. "She'll soon begin exhibiting false symptoms of severe meningitis," he told Juliet. "The next stages are seizure, coma, and death. We need to get her to hospital."

Rags stood behind Nicky and rested her hands on his shoulders. Sitting on the floor with his legs splayed before him, Nicky munched the end of a sandwich he had taken from his backpack. Behind them stood the gray, dragon-like dog: Its long, serpentine tail curved around the children to form a protective circle, its burning eyes watched Darcangelo keenly, and every so often, its lips twitched to expose sharp canines.

Darcangelo paid it little mind.

"I'm disappointed in your decision-making skills, Miss Rags," he said, still bending over the sick girl.

"We were fightin' purty hard, an' Nicky forgot to eat 'is snacks," Rags answered.

"Did you eat your cornflour before bedtime?" Darcangelo asked.

Nicky grimaced. "Yeah."

"Then why aren't you at home *in bed*?"

Nicky shrugged.



Rags tapped her chin and turned her large green eyes toward the ceiling. “Those guys had an awful lotta guns for a few dacoits—”

“Those weren’t dacoits,” Darcangelo answered. “You just hit a big-time expat mob that holds grudges. I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

Rags giggled. “Yeah, I am!”

“That was sarcasm, miss.”

The sick girl murmured, “*Kripaya* . . . please, sahib . . . my sister . . . she was, they were . . . they were hitting her and . . .”

Rags sucked in her breath. Darcangelo glanced at her again to see that her tiny fists were clenched, knuckles white.

Juliet tucked the teddy bear under the sick girl’s arm and cooed, “Shh, you’re gonna be okay, sweetheart. Dr. Darcangelo’s going to get you out of here—”

With a heavy sigh, Darcangelo rose to his feet. “Right. Miss Rags, I am calling the soldiers in here. If you wish to escape, I suggest you do it now.”

Rags turned to her dragondog and stared hard into its eyes. The dragondog stared back just as intently and uttered a low growl.

Rags looked away from the creature and announced, “Muffin says there’s an entrance to an un’erground tunnel in a building nearby. We gotta get to the roof.”

“There’s one stairwell with roof access,” Darcangelo answered as he yanked the latex gloves from his fingers. “It’s lined with soldiers, and there are two heavy runeships at the top. Good luck.”

He leaned out the door and shouted into the hall, “Captain! Captain Swaggart! We found the victim!”

When he turned around, Rags, Muffin, and Nicky were gone.



## ARMED AND ADORABLE

**H**eeding Darcangelo’s shout, Swaggart rushed into the room with Stevens and Heatfreak close behind. They had a stretcher and an unnecessary first aid kit.

“Doctor,” Swaggart snarled, “I thought I told you—”

Darcangelo stopped him with an upraised hand. “Forgive me, captain. I’ve picked up many childish habits from my young patients.”

Stevens and Heatfreak lifted the girl, teddy bear and all, onto the stretcher. They carried her rapidly and smoothly out of the room.

“Darcangelo,” said Swaggart through clenched teeth, “you’ll ride out with those two. The rest of us will clean up here and look for the Ragamuffin.”

“That’s good,” Darcangelo replied. “The girl needs my serum to survive, I think, and I have to mix each dose individually.”

“You know, if you’d teach other doctors your formula—”

With a pat on Swaggart’s shoulder, Darcangelo said, “Please

don't presume to debate medical ethics with me, captain. You'll embarrass yourself." Touching the brim of his hat, he added, "It's been a pleasure. Good evening."

With that, he took Juliet's arm and stepped out.



UP IN THE PIPES, RAGS WATCHED THE DOCTOR, NURSE, AND soldiers leave the room. After a few beats, she turned to Nicky and Muffin and said, "We're goin'."

When she leaped noiselessly to the floor, Nicky hissed, "Wait! Rags! Shouldn't we wait till Dr. D an' the others leave?"

Rags grinned and cracked her knuckles as Nicky dropped gracelessly behind her. "Now they're distracted. *Then* they'll have the buildin' sealed."

"But they're soldiers!"

"Right, so go easy on 'em. An' remember, no guns, 'kay?"

She ran to the door.

Behind her, Nicky said, "I can remember. Can *you*?"

Rags raced down the dark hall and into the room where Swaggart's men guarded the disabled mobsters.

"Rags an' Muffin!" she announced. "Comin' through!"

When two of the startled men rushed her, she jumped into the air, somersaulted off one's head, and neatly clotheslined the other with a hooked arm.

A private drew a Taser from his belt and fired. Rags slid forward on her knees, arched her back to duck the flying electrode, and then snapped forward into a handstand. With both feet, she kicked him in the stomach and sent him flying across the room. Still on her hands, with her skirts twirling like a pinwheel, she spin-kicked her way through several more men

before smashing through the broken wall in the back of the cupboard.



NICKY AND MUFFIN FOLLOWED. MUFFIN, FASTER ON HIS FEET and more fearsome besides, used his weight to plow through every man who faced him until he slithered after Rags through the hole in the wall.

Nicky wasn't so quick. Confronted by an angry soldier, he muttered an apology, kicked the carbine out of the soldier's hands, and used the butt to cold-cock him.

Others moved in. Finding himself surrounded, Nicky rapidly slid through a series of *Sastravidya* forms to get the prana flowing through his *nadis*, and then he jumped back against a wall and kicked hard. Flying headfirst across the room, holding his hands out and spinning like a corkscrew, he scattered the soldiers and burst through the cupboard.

He landed on his hands and flipped to his feet between two more armed men. He hopped, did the splits in midair, and kicked them both in the face.

Once he alighted on the floor, lethargy and weakness threatened to overwhelm him. He slung his backpack off his shoulder, pulled out a juice box, ripped the top off, and downed as much as he could; the rest he threw into the face of a man attempting to grab him. He followed the splash of juice with a prana-enhanced left hook that sent the man reeling into a wall.

As he half staggered and half ran down the hallway, Nicky found Muffin snarling with his teeth buried in a lieutenant's flak jacket. Since Muffin had already bitten clean through the barrel

of his carbine and swatted away his sidearm, the lieutenant was trying to beat the dragondog off with his fists.

“Muffin, c’mon!” Nicky shouted as he ran past.

With a growl, Muffin dropped the man and sprinted after. They followed the path of knocked-out or knocked-over soldiers Rags had left behind until they reached the dark, narrow stairwell leading to the roof. Men lined it as Darcangelo had promised—but, having met Rags, they had all collapsed. A few groaned.

Breathing hard and sweating profusely, Nicky stumbled onto the roof. With a gleeful yelp, Muffin ran toward Rags, who was slugging and kicking her way through yet more troops.

After a deep breath, Nicky rushed in. He flipped into the air, wrapped his legs around a soldier’s neck, backflipped, and brought the man’s head straight into the rooftop. Nicky spun, kicked, and punched in every direction; unsure what to do with so many enemies in such close quarters, he counted on memorized forms to get him through. Muffin picked up the slack, sweeping men into the air with his tail or snapping his teeth into their Kevlar and tossing them to the ground with bone-crunching force.

A runeship, bristling with guns and psi-blasters, silently lifted off in front of them, the runes on its underside shining with eerie blue light. Framed in the runeship’s open door was a young man with bright white teeth clenched in an ugly grin.



## FACE OFF

**T**he young man was Simon Achilles Palmeiro. An idealist in love with the romantic vision of a world stripped of barbarism and united in a single civilization, he had eagerly enlisted in the Elysian army at the age of sixteen. Not long after, he had embarked on his first tour of duty in Godtown. Once he arrived in the holy city, he became intrigued by the mendicants he saw seated blissfully on their mats in the dark corners of parks and courtyards: Their peacefulness and self-mastery stirred something in him—yet, at the same time, their passivity repulsed him.

For a long while, he could not sort out these feelings, but everything became clear when he saw a demonstration of *Sastravidya*. On a broad platform among the ghats beside the Ganga, under the searing noonday sun, he had gaped as two thickly muscled *marjaras*, stripped to the waist, drove at each other and fought with a combination of open-handed strikes and

acrobatic grappling. They flipped through the air and swung their arms in sweeping, showy arcs, yet they never lost control or let down their guard.

Simon decided then and there that he wanted to learn their techniques. He found a guru, and he was soon spending every spare minute in meditation or breathing exercises, focusing his mind and learning to control the prana flowing through his body. He balanced for hours on one foot or one hand. He gave up meat, and he gave up booze. He even gave up women. In time, his ascetic disciplines generated so much *tapas* that he often returned to the barracks at night with a blazing heat radiating from his body. Thus, he earned his nickname—*Heatfreak*.

As he gained steadily in power, he found yet another master, one less spiritually minded, who taught him to focus his prana into a weapon, for Heatfreak sought neither to cleanse his karma nor to realize Brahman. Heatfreak wanted to fight.

Now, as the runeship lifted, he saw on the roof below him a worthy enemy on whom he could demonstrate his skills.

It was against orders. He was risking a court-martial.

He didn't care.

Heatfreak glanced over his shoulder at Darcangelo, who crouched by the sick girl to check her IV. "You'll make it to hospital okay, doc," he said. "I'm gonna take care of the witch."

Darcangelo snapped his head up and reached out to grab him, but Heatfreak slipped from his grasp and leaped out the runeship's door. After landing on the roof, he unstrapped his helmet, ripped open his flak jacket, and tossed both to the ground.

Raising his fists, he called out, "Hey, little girl, you wanna play with me?"

With rapid chain punches, Rags was pummeling one of Heat-

freak's squadmates. She paused, looked up, and tossed her victim aside like a doll.

"Okay," she said, "but I play rough!"

Her pink dress flared as she ran toward him.

Heatfreak slid across the roof in a crouch and aimed a sweep for Rags's legs. She leaped and kicked toward his head. He blocked with a raised forearm. After twisting in the air, she landed on her hands, flipped to her feet, and delivered a hook kick. He blocked with a cross-kick and spun into a hook kick of his own.

Rags ducked and jumped onto her hands again. She shot her feet over her head toward Heatfreak's torso, catching him in the side. He slid backwards and grabbed his ribs.

It stung. He winced.

Forcing a smile, he said, "How does a girl your size get that strong?"

Rags pushed a loose strand of hair behind one ear. "I work out."

Heatfreak dropped into a basic resting stance and chuckled. "You're a cheeky little thing. Didn't your mum ever teach you any manners?"

"Didn't *your* mum ever teach you not to hit girls?"

"She said I could hit naughty girls who are out past their bedtime."

A grin spread Rags's lips, exposing canine teeth too pointy to be human. She licked them with her tiny tongue. "Funny. I do the same thing to naughty boys."

Heatfreak made hooks with his hands and closed again, hoping that, with the Eagle Claw Technique, he could incapacitate her with dislocations or pressure-point strikes.



His limbs were longer than hers, but now he realized how seriously she had him at a disadvantage: A *Sastravidya* practitioner learned always to watch his opponent's eyes, but Rags was a hybrid, so Heatfreak didn't dare: Hybrids could do strange things with their eyes—more than once, hers began to draw him in, so he had to check himself.

That slowed him down.

Besides, despite his love of fighting, he couldn't bring himself to go all out. She was an infamous criminal, tough as a tank and with a punch like a sledgehammer, but she was still a little girl. Maybe if it weren't for her curly hair, her bright voice, and her nancy outfit, he could make himself hit her as hard as he wanted.

Maybe.

For a moment, he wished he'd stayed in the runeship. He wanted this fight over quickly, and he figured the best way was to move in close, avoid her eyes, and break a couple of her limbs. But she knew what he was doing; keeping loose, she slid out of his grasp and slapped aside his every attempted strike, giggling like a child petting a dog.

She was toying with him.

He felt a twinge of panic, so he again changed his technique and moved into quick punches and chops. Forcing her to fight more vigorously, he drew nearer. Twice she tried to kick, but he counter-kicked to keep her feet on the ground.

It didn't work. Rags slipped through his defenses, smashed a fist into his gut, and doubled him over. She tried to plant an uppercut on his chin, but he blocked and recovered.

He now had an idea of her preferred methods; in particular, the move she used to land her first blow was an extravagant one:

She had no doubt practiced that maneuver until it was almost automatic.

He fainted with a roundhouse kick. As expected, Rags dove onto her hands to duck his foot. Arresting his kick midway, he twisted his hips and drove his heel hard into her back, sending her sprawling face-first into the roof. Her tiny top hat came unpinned from her bangs and rolled away.



THE FIGHT HAD LASTED ONLY A FEW SECONDS, AND THE runeship, still making its silent liftoff, now hovered a hundred feet above the roof. While Juliet saw to the patient, Darcangelo, with lips womanishly pursed, stared out the open door. At last, he sucked in his breath and slapped a hand against his knee.

“Nurse,” he said, “take over. I’ll join you later.”

“Doctor,” Juliet cried, “what about the serum—?”

Darcangelo replied with a weary shrug and a faint smile. “I’m sorry, but there are some things a gentleman cannot witness without making reply, and one of them is the sight of a lady being struck.”

He tipped his hat before pulling it down firmly over his ears. Snatching up his medical bag and umbrella cane, he leaped out the door.

“Doctor!” Juliet shrieked.

Being in a hurry, Darcangelo didn’t bother to use the flying technique, which could have slowed his descent and allowed for a graceful landing. Instead, he raised his prana and counted on his hardened body to absorb the impact. He fell swiftly, trench coat flaring, and cracked the roof when he struck.

He had miscalculated. The blow drove the wind from his lungs. With a faint groan, he slumped.



HEATFREAK STOOD OVER RAGS. SHE RAISED HER HEAD AND wiped a hand across her nose as tears gathered in her eyes.

“You lose, Ragamuffin,” he said. “Now come quietly, or a bad little girl’s going to get a spanking.”

Her tears glistened in the reddish light. The light caught Heatfreak’s attention, and then his eyes met hers. He had only the briefest moment to realize his mistake; he tried to twist his head and look away, but her green irises flashed and arrested his gaze as if she’d locked his neck in a vice.

Then her *Sammohana* overwhelmed him.

His thoughts ceased. The little girl lying on the rooftop evaporated into thin air. In her place arose a goddess, tall and stately and clothed in flaming red, terrible and beautiful beyond any concept he had previously had of terror or beauty: Her shapely lips pressed together in a stern but silent rebuke, and her eyes pierced through to his heart; seven of her eight hands held her weapons and the symbols of her office—the conch, lotus, bow, *chakram*, sword, trident, and thunderbolt—but the eighth hand pointed an accusing finger.

Breath ragged, he sank to his knees. All his ablutions and rigors had been mere child’s play, mere dabbling. He had denied himself so that he might gain power, but it was empty. It was not enough for the goddess.

Nothing he could do was enough.

Towering above him, her incomparable face impassive and

severe, she spoke to him a single word of command, and he had no choice but to obey.



RAGS COULD SENSE THE GLAND IN THE BASE OF HER SKULL squeezing tight as it pumped Heaven Seed into her brain. She could feel energy flowing from her eyes, out of her and into Heatfreak. With his own eyes wide and running with tears, he dropped to the roof and mumbled like a halfwit.

She climbed to her feet, smoothed the front of her dress with her hands, and told him to beat his head on the rooftop until he passed out. She crossed her arms and watched, bored, while he completed the task.

Her head throbbed as the Heaven Seed wore off. Heatfreak lay prone, unmoving, on the roof before her. Leaning down, she pulled her hair back from her face and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She straightened, stuck two fingers in her mouth, and whistled for Muffin. Snarling, he whipped his long tail back and forth to knock the soldiers aside as he ran to join her. Nicky threw a few more punches, disentangled himself from the arms trying to grab him, and stumbled after.

Rags sprinted toward the roof’s edge, but Darcangelo, staggering from his fall, was there to meet her.

“Is this how Rags and Muffin behave?” he demanded as he rose to his feet and brushed the dust from his sharply creased trousers. “Are you as ruthless with good men as you are with criminals?”

“I dunno what ‘ruthless’ means,” Rags said. She giggled as she ran around him.

“Come back here, miss!” he shouted. “I’m not through speaking to you!”

Rags and her companions reached the edge of the roof and gazed out into the night. Another dilapidated tenement, its fifteen-story façade covered in makeshift balconies, stood across the wide street.

“Where to, Rags?” Nicky asked.

Rags grabbed him by a belt loop and the back of his collar. “Across.”

“What? Rags, no!”

Rags heaved and sent Nicky flying into the darkness. Then, with Muffin by her side, she turned to face the angry and ruffled Elysian soldiers, who approached cautiously with their guns raised. In their midst, Darcangelo crossed his arms and glowered.

A man with a captain’s insignia shouted, “Stop right there, miss! You have nowhere to go, and we *will* shoot if we have to.”

Rags pouted as she took a step backward. “Miss?” she hissed. “*Miss?*”

She reached under the large pink bow on her back, and her hands found the hollow in her bodice. Her hands wrapped around the grips of her steel-framed Jericho 941 handguns.

The soldiers leaned forward, fingers on their triggers.

Rags stood still for several seconds with her hands behind her back. She looked up to see Darcangelo swallow hard and struggle to remain impassive as a drop of sweat ran down one side of his thin face.

*That* made the whole night worth it. She grinned.

“My name,” she said, “is *Rags*.”

She didn’t draw her guns. Instead, she leaped up and back,

arcng into the air with arms outstretched. Muffin, too, made a powerful jump.

The night enveloped her. The wind rushed through her hair and blew the folds of her dress around her shins. Overhead, the clouds shone red and black. All around was cool darkness, a coolness rare in this city of sweltering heat. She was floating, flying—

And then falling. Rags twisted, stretched out her feet, raised her prana, and alighted on another roof, separated from the soldiers by sixty feet. Muffin landed beside her. Nicky was already there, spread-eagled on the tar shingles and groaning.

They were almost free. Time to disappear.

“Lead the way, Muffin,” Rags said as she hauled Nicky to his feet.

Muffin did. Soon, they would reach the tunnels, and then the legendary Ragamuffin would slip away into the depths of the city that sheltered and protected her even as she defended it.



DARCANGELO OPENED HIS MEDICAL BAG AND BENT OVER Heatfreak.

Standing beside him, Swaggart cursed. “Who taught that girl *Sastravidya*?”

“Impossible to say, captain,” Darcangelo replied. “This city’s full of martial-arts masters. For example, your man here is clearly one: He’s out, but he’s otherwise unhurt. Are you going to pursue the Ragamuffin?”

Swaggart stared into the darkness. The thick muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched. “No.”

“How will you explain to the general that your company failed to apprehend two children and an exotic dog?”

“I’ll think of something.”

“What now?”

“We have to get you to hospital to treat that girl, and we need the other runeship for that.” Swaggart chewed his lip as he glared down at the doctor. “I really wish you’d learn to *stay put*, Darcangelo.”

Darcangelo turned away from Swaggart and, his face hidden under the brim of his fedora, allowed himself to smile.

**The adventure of Rags and Muffin is just beginning!**

Join us for our release on December 10, 2021  
Paperbacks, hardcovers, and eBooks available

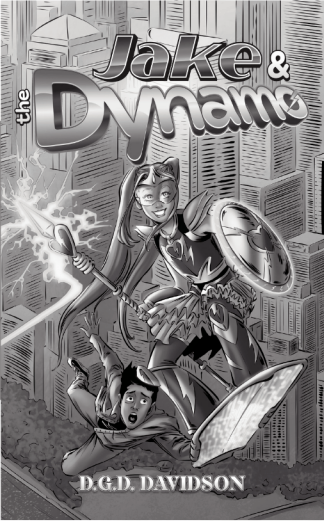
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The image is a promotional banner for the book 'Rags and Muffin' by D.G.D. Davidson. It features a dark background with a light-colored, textured pattern. On the right side, there is a 3D rendering of the book cover, which shows a character in a dark, tactical outfit standing next to a large, dark, furry creature. The title 'RAGS AND MUFFIN' is at the top of the cover, and the author's name 'D.G.D. DAVIDSON' is at the bottom. Below the text, there are logos for Amazon, Kindle Unlimited, and Barnes & Noble.





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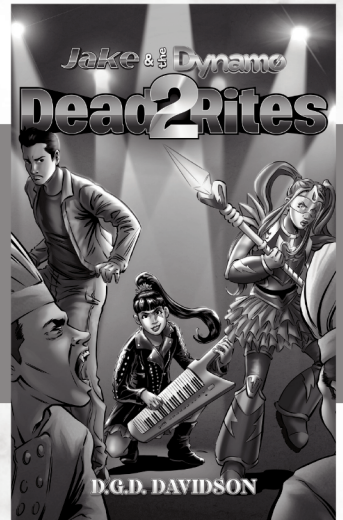


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GIRLS AT WORK

