



# THE HEROBORN

MIKKO RAUHALA



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SAMPLE CHAPTER

# 1

SASHA CAST A NERVOUS LOOK around the cemetery. The grounds had been well-kept until a couple of weeks ago when the groundskeeper vanished into thin air. Still, the grass was green for an inner-city churchyard, and the trees made for a welcome change in scenery. Rows of gravestones spread out from the center, walkways between them leading straight to the central mausoleum.

*Let's see, if I were a secret entrance to the catacombs, where would I be?* The maps she'd seen had shown no corridors under the building, but that was neither here nor there.

Sasha traced a pattern on her staff. A brief green glow indicated readiness. She squeezed the weapon resolutely, her fingers settling into the well-designed grooves among the woodland themed decorations.

She opened the door to the mausoleum carefully, the staff at the ready. She didn't expect any trouble yet, but better safe than sorry. The room was indeed empty except for the central grave with the slab of stone on top. The walls were covered in simple pictographs representing the achievements of whoever was buried here.

The dust on the cover was disturbed. *Anybody could've found this by now if they'd only dared to look.* Sasha took hold of a corner and managed to lift it just enough to get the slab out of its groove. She

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pushed the cover aside, and it crashed onto the floor. She grimaced, hoping that she hadn't woken anyone up. As for the priests, if they'd try to give her trouble for messing with the grave, she could easily blame it on the undead.

Miraculously, the grave was empty. Sasha felt around the box, suppressing the queasy feeling of violating someone's purported resting place. The bottom seemed to wiggle a bit when pushed from one end. Her eyes turned towards the carvings. *There must be a trigger somewhere.*

Judging by the muck on the floor, the left side had seen more use recently than the right. She went to poke at the wall, especially at any round or otherwise enclosed pictographs. In the middle, something clicked: the moon among the stars that a stick figure was worshiping.

The bottom of the grave started pivoting slowly around a central axis. Sasha rushed to grab it lest it make more noise, then remembered caution and looked down, brandishing her staff. There was no movement.

Still, waiting quietly until somebody came down would be within the capabilities of the creatures that had terrorized the neighborhood for a week or so now. She awkwardly pulled an oval of Dust off her belt with her staff hand, pointed at it with her wand, and made the gestures for the Wardstone spell. The Dust lit up briefly, acknowledging her command. It would hiss quietly if it noticed any creatures larger than a mole aside from her.

Sasha dropped the stone into the darkness. Nothing in the immediate area. She cast the Light spell on another oval, dimmed it a bit, and tossed it in as well. Still no hissing, and the bottom was visible now, not very far down. There were steps dug into the wall for easy access.

It was time to make some of the riskier preparations. Sasha enchanted her ovals of incendiary Red Dust. They'd go off on impact after being thrown at least a few meters first. Merely dropping one on the floor wouldn't cost her a leg, in theory.

Sasha stashed her wand under her belt and clambered down the shaft. The staff made it awkward to climb, but she managed. She got to the bottom and picked up both of the ovals she'd dropped.

The corridor was dark and dank. There was no ornamentation on the walls or evidence of burial use. The church catacombs would commonly be used to house the earthly remains of noteworthy

people who were not quite close enough to the top of the ladder. This must have been just a side tunnel.

Opposite the tunnel there stood a large black obelisk, embedded just far enough into the rock that she'd missed it from above. Sasha'd seen a couple of them before. They were spread here and there around the realm, but usually in secluded places in nature. The smooth columns were more than two meters high and more than a meter wide. They seemed to be made of black stone, but somehow treated with a strong, glossy finish, not unlike her elven staff. They were widely suspected to be magical and to have some grand purpose aside from being imposing, but they never did anything nor reacted to any investigation, be it with a wand or with a pickaxe. They were also stuck to the bedrock with fierce insistence. It'd probably require a mineful of dwarves to get one unstuck, but what then? People just left them alone these days.

Sasha drew her focus back to the task at hand. She kept the dim light and the wardstone in front of her while carefully proceeding forward. Soon she came upon a wooden door. The corridor itself turned and continued to the left, toward the mapped regions of the catacomb. If there were zombies lying in wait behind the corner, they'd certainly have seen the light. Sasha carefully rolled the wardstone toward the bend while holding the staff ready for attackers.

There was a light hiss. Her heart jumped. She edged slowly along the wall towards the bend. Strangely soft breathing began to register. Then she saw it: a human figure in dirty, ragged clothing slumped on the floor. As if on cue, it snorted and turned. She could see its face now. There was the telltale green-hued discoloration, but not much of it. It was probably a recent acquisition.

She had, of course, known that zombies slept. That was part of the reason why she was here at high noon. The news was that they'd sleep while on duty as well, if indeed this one had been ordered to guard their lair as seemed likely. Zombies clearly made lousy substitutes for wardstones. Luckily for her, necromancers had a limited repertoire.

She approached the corner with great care, but there were no more guards. The side corridor was shorter than the one she'd come through and ended in a large wooden door, as wide as the corridor itself. The door was closed with a bolt. She was pretty

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sure the mapped areas were right behind it. Maybe the other side was camouflaged somehow, concealing the lair.

Now there was the question of what to do with the poor zombie. The obvious answer seemed a bit harsh and unheroic now, the thing being fast asleep. But a zombie was a zombie, and the horde had already wreaked havoc on the city. It needed to be stopped.

Sasha comforted herself with the thought that the zombie had never been a proper person to start with. Necromancers could only turn people into thralls, and people lives were cheap, to be sure. This very church was just preparing to sacrifice a few, in fact. Not that Sasha much liked the sacrifices either, and not only because of their doubtful utility. The practice just seemed ... uncivilized, somehow.

Regardless, she could hardly leave the zombie be, and she'd be doing the poor thing a favor, really. Even if she let it live, if she somehow subdued it instead, the clergy would still destroy it as unclean. Probably more painfully than she would.

Gathering her resolve, she pointed the staff at the creature's head. It would be clean, quick, and hopefully quiet. Her fingers moved hesitantly along the grooves of the staff, but move they did. A bolt shot out from the hollow end, and with a thud and a whimper, the breathing was gone. Averting her eyes from the mess, she touched the top of her staff with a fresh oval from her belt. The Dust shed its shape and flowed inside.

Before trying the first door, Sasha thought it better to check the end of the corridor. She unbarred the large door there, slowly opened it, and then tossed the wardstone through the crack. Nothing, as she expected. The necromancer barring his own zombies out into the public areas while he rested wouldn't have made much sense. He'd want them handy in case of an attack.

Stepping through the opening, Sasha found more traditional catacombs. There were rows upon rows of small doors, just large enough to fit a casket. The door itself was disguised as a wooden shelf. There were some urns on it, placed in depressions and behind small railings that kept them in place as the door opened and closed. Sasha picked up her wardstone and closed the secret passage. It occurred to her that it was probably not the only one. There might be other secret escape routes in the catacombs proper. She could block this one, make it only traversable by her.



She took a couple of ovals of Dust off her belt, pressed them on the latch, and flicked her wand at them. The ovals melted together and flowed to envelop the latch.

She then backtracked to the door that the zombie had been guarding. It would probably be bolted shut from the other side, maybe even trapped. She double-checked that her red ovals were handy and tried the door softly from the side with her staff. It didn't budge.

Sasha took a white oval, charmed it into a thin stick, and probed the small crack on the side of the door. Moving the stick up and down, she could feel the bolt, but it wouldn't move an inch before the stick started to give. Perhaps it was of a sliding type, too heavy for the instrument, or otherwise locked down.

If everything remained quiet for a while longer, this was a mere inconvenience. Sasha placed the stick on top of the bolt, sent more Dust from another oval to flow through the crack to the other side, and cast the Burrowing charm. Then she settled to wait with a red oval and the staff at the ready.

Soon she tried the door again, and it slowly pushed open. There was a faint light on the inside. She couldn't see the source, but the shadows fluttered like from a candle's flame. There were some bags by the wall, a small hole in the roof—likely a hidden ventilation shaft—and yes, shadowy forms lying on the floor. She'd gone unnoticed so far, she thought. Then the door, still slowly opening, gave out a loud creak. The forms on the floor stirred, and a sleepy voice from further in muttered something unintelligible. *No time to lose.* She tossed the red oval in and spun to the side.

The reaction was milder than she'd hoped, but the bang did indicate some damage. It had been a while since she'd used Red Dust. The voice, quite awake now, shouted clearly: "Attack, minions! Protect your master!"

Leaving her light near the door to illuminate her targets better, Sasha ran into the graveyard corridor which would give her more room to operate in. Slightly banged up human forms emerged shambling from the room. The discoloration was more pronounced in this group. Sasha shot a couple of bolts towards the first zombies. Neither target fell or even appreciably slowed down their steady walk. *Damn.* Sasha would have to make the shots count. The staff

should have had ten bolts in it to start with. Another volley took the first ones down. What, six bolts left, only a bit more Dust in her belt, and she might need that for something else.

More enemies were incoming. She shot at them both, this time aiming a bit higher. The head was a smaller target, but her magic would help guide the bolts. One took a good hit to the throat and fell. The other was hit on the side of the head. It looked bad, but the minion was still shambling toward her, as did others. Sasha glanced at her Red Dust ovals but it was too dangerous to use them now. *Shit*. She should have opened with a larger volley of them, but Master Aaron's teachings had made her overly conservative in her dealings with the red stuff.

Sasha kept thinning the herd until there were only two left. She'd hit both of them, but the shots hadn't been lethal. *Not immediately ...* She quickly pointed her wand at the zombies and made a gesture. The first one's gait grew slightly more awkward. Sasha scrambled to feed her staff from the ovals left on her belt. Just as the Dust was flowing into the staff, her opponent bellowed from the shadows: "Lunge at her, you fools! Grab and disarm her!"

The thralls did as they were told, taking Sasha by surprise. Fast zombies were unprecedented in the lore. They were supposed to be strong and resilient, but shambling and slow in their movement.

Desperately, Sasha went for an oval of Red Dust, but the zombies seized her arms and forced her hands open, making her drop her weapons. There was a thud as the oval fell onto the ground. Sasha grimaced, bracing herself, but there was no explosion. The safety had worked.

Sasha struggled to pull herself out of the zombies' grasp, but the lore was right about their strength. As the stench of death surrounded her, she had to concede that she was well and truly stuck. The necromancer stepped out of the shadows and through the door, dusting off his black robes smugly. He was a little taller than Sasha and had perhaps ten or twenty years on her.

"So. They sent a little girl after me. A Heroborn, surely? Too few explosions for a fire mage," he mused, stroking his beard. He was calm and collected now, holding the upper hand.

"I'll have you know I'm here because all the big boys were too scared," Sasha said with a snarl.

“The common folk do scare easily when confronted with arcana. That’s why these places make such good bases, for a while at least,” the necromancer said, furrowing his eyebrows in thought. “I guess I should be taking my leave now that you’ve discovered the mausoleum entrance.”

Sasha felt the hold over her left arm weaken. She might still have a chance if she could stall the man for a moment. “How did you make them move so fast?” she asked.

The necromancer chuckled. “They’re shambling when left on their own but seem perfectly capable of moving quickly when explicitly told to do so.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Sasha said, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“No, I suppose not,” he said with a scoff. “My colleagues don’t tend to be very creative. But you, you seem different. I think I’ll take you with me, keep you around for a while. You can teach me your kind of magic. If you’ll prove yourself useful, I might show a measure of mercy.”

Sasha’s eyes widened in surprise. This wasn’t how necromancers usually operated. She wasn’t about to complain about the opportunity to stall further, however.

“You must know that your kind cannot use Heroborn magic,” Sasha reminded him. The hold on her right arm weakened as well. She smiled inwardly. Soon she could make her move.

“As with the case of the shambling zombies, I suspect it’s less about ability and more about being stuck in their ways. I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Order your thralls to let me go and I’ll consider it,” Sasha tried.

The necromancer shook his head, smiling deviously. “I’m afraid that’s not a part of the deal. However, if you can be made to see the merits of my way of thinking, in time, who knows?”

Sasha drew a long breath, nodding slightly, as if considering the necromancer’s proposal. Then the zombie on her left let go and fell onto the ground. The bolt that had failed to kill the thrall was still made of her Dust, and while its power was mostly depleted on firing, there was some left for the sake of magical guidance. The power would not have been fully drained during the bolt’s brief flight. That’s what she had called upon, casting the Burrowing charm to churn away at the body’s soft tissues.

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Sasha yanked herself free of the other zombie and dove to grab her staff and the red oval, which she threw at the necromancer. He deftly jumped back through the door and to the side while Sasha lay flat on the ground, fingers in her ears, hoping that the bodies strewn on the floor would shield her.

The boom left Sasha reeling, but she picked up her wand and got onto her feet as quickly as she could. The other zombie had fallen in the commotion and was twitching on the ground. Sasha slammed the end of her staff against its head and it quieted down.

Then she pointed her wand at the oval of Dust giving off light near the door and turned it up a notch. The light revealed the necromancer, not much worse for wear, pointing a light crossbow in her general direction.

Sasha immediately traced a groove on her staff, and dozens of tendrils of Dust burst forth from its surface in all directions, coalescing into a shell as round as the corridor would allow. Several sturdier strands of Dust remained, keeping the shell attached to the staff.

The necromancer stared at the semi-transparent barrier, his mouth agape, then let loose his bolt. Sasha heard three sounds in rapid succession: soft ones in front of her and at her back, and finally a metallic clank as the bolt struck the obelisk. The shield wasn't sturdy enough to stop anything, but it could deflect bolts and arrows away from the staff's wielder. It would take a powerful and well-aimed shot to even graze her.

The necromancer bolted out the door and towards the side entrance. Bad move, but he couldn't have known that the shield was powerless against touch. Sasha wasn't sure how much of her Dust she'd managed to get into the staff when the zombies had grabbed her, if she still had anything to shoot with. He might've still had a chance if he'd rushed her.

Sasha quickly loaded one of the remaining three ovals on her belt into the staff and approached the bend. The strands holding the shield moved in tune with her, sometimes snapping away only to be replaced with new ones. She heard some banging and cursing from the other end. The necromancer had found her block. Her eyes darted between the room and the side corridor. Satisfied that there was nobody coming for her from either direction, she stepped to confront her opponent.

The flurry of attackers gone and her quarry being an actual person, Sasha grew more hesitant again. She pointed the staff squarely at him. "That's far enough," she said, in a not at all satisfyingly Heroic voice.

The necromancer froze, raised his hands slowly and turned to look at her, dark determination in his eyes. "Impressive. Now you've really caught my interest. Don't think the commoners aren't afraid of you as well, even as they use you to do what they dare not."

Sasha startled. The necromancer had struck home, though not in the way he'd meant it. Those who knew her to be Heroborn were wary enough of her already, but if they knew what else she carried in her blood, they'd hang her in a heartbeat.

The necromancer took advantage of her reaction and continued: "We're better than any of them. I'll do you one better than my last offer: let us work together, share our secrets. I know the Heroborn are just itching to get their hands on necromantic magic."

Sasha didn't have aspirations toward necromancy, but the complex magic that made thralls out of neople would be extremely valuable all the same. In the past, necromancers had kept their secrets just as well as the druids had, even under torture.

But no. She could trust the man about as far as she could throw him. Besides, she strove to follow in the footsteps of the ancient Heroes. Taking the deal would betray all they'd stood for. "Drop the dagger and the wand on your belt slowly. In fact, drop the belt," Sasha commanded.

He complied, but not silently. "Is that a no, then? I'd much rather have done this the easy way."

Sasha tossed her final ovals at his feet. "Hard way it is. Pick those up, slowly. Good. Stay still." The man flinched but stayed still as the Dust crawled up to his wrists, forming solid restraints.

"You may want to know that if you try to run or attack me, you forfeit your hands," she said coldly. It was no idle threat.

The man nodded with a grimace. He seemed to take her seriously enough after all the neople blood spilled. The thought made her slightly faint for a second, but she focused on the man instead of the battleground and regained her composure. *Just a little while longer ...*

She backtracked towards the cemetery exit with the man following her at a respectful distance. At the hole, she stopped him far enough to quickly dart up herself without having to worry too

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much about him grabbing at her feet. After being reminded of the nature of his shackles, the man grudgingly followed.

The aftermath got a bit blurred in Sasha's mind. She took the man to the church first, since they were conveniently on its grounds already. With news of this magnitude, she managed to get the attention of the head priest easily enough even amidst the sacrificial preparations. The City Guard were sent for. Descriptions and locations of the secret passage and room were given. The Church would of course take care of the cleanup, she was assured. It occurred to her that she could still retrieve some of her Dust from the corpses for re-empowerment, but quickly pushed that idea aside. *Let the Church handle it.*

Once the Guard arrived, money, praise, and the prisoner were exchanged. The restraints were swapped for mundane ones, and the prisoner hauled off to rot somewhere until they could decide what to do with him. She cared little, but was glad she'd managed to capture him alive, at least. No people blood on her hands today.

She was asked to stay for the day's sacrificial service as an honored guest. She excused herself as needing to rest after the trials of the day, barely managing not to vomit right there. Everybody understood, of course. She got the impression they were even relieved. It would probably have just seemed ungrateful not to offer.

A vacant stare in her eyes, Sasha returned to her inn on the outskirts of the city. She lay on the bed, reminding herself she'd done a Hero's deed today.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mikko Rauhala is a bilingual Finnish speculative fiction author. Informed by his master's degree in intelligent systems, he's most at home in hard science fiction settings, though he's not exclusive and likes to cross genres. Whether the subject is steam-powered gnomes or universal quantum suicide, Rauhala enjoys taking an eccentric premise and bringing it to its logical conclusion. As befits a Finn, his plot-driven narrative is often seasoned with a touch of dark, dry humor.

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Mikko Rauhala is a bilingual Finnish science fiction author. Informed by both his master's degree in intelligent systems and a transhumanist background, he's most at home in hard science fiction settings, where he enjoys taking an eccentric premise and bringing it to its logical conclusion. As befits a Finn, his plot-driven narrative is often seasoned with a touch of dark, dry humor. Rauhala's credits include co-authoring *Infinite Metropolis* (Aurelia Leo, 2020) and "Rekindled" in Best Vegan SFF of 2020 (Metaphorosis, 2021).