

Only two walls don't have shelves. One is filled with pictures of Nicky playing with famous people, Joss Whedon, Kevin Smith, Judi Dench, Vin Diesel, Felicia Day, Will Wheaton, and Joe Manganiello. The other wall has always intrigued me.

Outside the Moral Order

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I am a monster. No, I'm not your average genocidal maniac. The kind which revels in the indiscriminate killing of racial or political groups for dubious purposes. There are far too many of those already. I'm just your average, every day, ordinary inhuman thing who scares the pants off of people. Not that I planned to become a monster, you understand. I didn't go to school intending to get a degree in it or anything. It simply ended up this way.

I live on the lower east side, York Avenue off of 74th Street. In a little apartment above a deli. You know the type, ancient heavy windows with a room air conditioner sticking out of one. For employment, I work as a claim's adjuster for a local insurance firm. One of the big names, it's not important which one. They are all the same. Basically, my job is to help the company not pay people to whom we contractually owe money. When they are committing fraud, it's easy. I have no problem with writing those scumballs off. It's the regular people who keep me up at night. The owners of the mom and pop grocery store who filed for benefits after being robbed for the 47th time this year. People we genuinely own money. I mean, isn't this why you buy insurance? To protect against loss. Not to be robbed by the insurance company as well. Believe me, if there was any other job I could do, I would do it. Fireman, polesitter, Chinese laundry attendant, anything. But I'm a dreamer. Respectable firms don't like dreamers. This is the one advantage of working for a soulless company. They don't care what you do in your off-hours. As long as your side of the ledger is black, you could pull the legs off live frogs in your spare time. They wouldn't care. In the end, I guess you must have a job, right? So, that's my job, robbing people who do business with us. Who, year in and year out, send us money to protect them from unreasonable loss. I'm supposed to find a loophole, proving the loss was reasonable. In order to make sure our company doesn't lose money.

I'm exceptionally good at it.

Sleeping nights, I'm not so good at. So, most evenings I spend at Sacks. Not the department store over on 5th Avenue. This is a basement of a building down the street, owned by the bowtie wearing, bongo drumming, Nicky Sacks. It's a large open space, originally built as an air raid shelter during World War II. The place is usually filled with long tables and a crowd of people playing games. I specialize in roleplaying games, where players assume the roles of heroic characters in a fictionalized setting. Usually the Middle Earth sort of thing. Occasionally, I'll mix it up with a space adventure. Either way, players take responsibility for roles within a story-based narrative, usually through a process of structured decision-making and character development. It all takes place on paper. Believe me, I'm remarkably good with paper narratives. At Sack's, I'm the reigning rules lawyer.

The place is what you expect from a bomb shelter. Most of the walls are filled, floor to ceiling, with crudely built wooden shelves, intended to stock groceries. The rows of fluorescent light overhead give the place the perfect mystical look. When one of them starts blinking, it resembles an imposing thunderstorm in the distance. Although the damp smell of an underground shelter has never truly gone away, you get used to it. On rainy days Nicky burns incense to cover it up, so the spice smell also hangs around. Sort of like a mix between a fishbowl and a porn shop. In Nicky's case, the underground grocery shelves hold his collection of games. If there was a Metropolitan Museum for games, it would be Sacks. He has a copy of everything, and I mean everything. My personal favorite is the *Grand Grimoire*. It's a game where you play mystical adventures acting out the roles of heroes, righting wrongs and doing good. Sort of the contrary to what I do at work.

I tend to arrive at Sacks early before most of the crowd shows up. This leaves me time to wander around and peruse the shelves. Only two walls don't have shelves. One is filled with pictures of Nicky playing with famous people, Joss Whedon, Kevin Smith, Judi Dench, Vin Diesel, Felicia Day, Will Wheaton, and Joe Manganiello. The other wall has always intrigued me. It's roped off with a velvet line as if it were a museum. The wall is covered with a heavy red velvet curtain as if it was a small stage. It couldn't be a window, we're 50 feet below street level. But guests don't go near this wall. There is even a sign which reads, "Hands off." Every once and a while some new guy will ask about it. Nicky always skirts the question and changes the subject.

"Hey, what games do you like to play? I bet I've got it around here somewhere."

This always starts a game of "Have you got ..." Nicky never loses.

It was early spring. Fresh air blew down the avenues and the uncollected garbage was still frozen. Only the side streets smelled as if the bums were using it was a urinal. It was the time of year for new beginnings ... and increased quotas at work. One Friday Nicky surprised me. I was there, early as usual. So, it was just the two of us standing around. Nicky was in his usual white shirt, jacket and slightly crooked bowtie. I was wearing my jogging shorts and a gray hoodie made to look like a knight's armor.

"Hey, how about my curtain?" Nicky said.

"What?"

"The red curtain. Don't you want to see what's behind it?"

It was a stupid question. Everybody wanted to know what was behind it. Most of us figured it was a blank wall or something stupid. "Sure, I'm game. Show me what you got."

"Get ready," he said, teasing me with his hand on the curtain. With a quick yank, he pulled it open. It took me a few moments to start breathing again. Floor to ceiling, it appeared to be a window. There was a pastoral scene on the other side. Before me stood majestic trees, slightly discolored grass, rolling countryside with a gentle hill in the background. The sun was shining down on a bleached-white stone castle tower at the hill's peak. I had to be the most realistic painting I had ever seen. It had a real three-dimensional look to it, just like a window. But you couldn't see any glass. I mean it was fantastic. How the bright light didn't peek out at the bottom of the curtain this whole time, I have no clue.

Then the leaves on the trees moved in a slight breeze. I jumped back about ten feet.

"Cool isn't it." Nicky had a smile on his face from ear to ear.

"I'll say. Who made it?"

"Wrong question my friend. The real question is, what is it?" Nicky was practically hopping around with excitement, barely containing himself. He desperately wanted me to ask his suggested question.

"OK, I'll bite. What is it?"

"I glad you asked. It's a game."

"Huh?"

Nicky leaned back and raised one eyebrow. "A game. You've heard of games, right? This one's a doozy. You don't roleplay the characters in this beauty, you become them." He rubbed the velvet curtain as if he was petting a dog.

"Nicky, what are you talking about?"

He flashed me his big blue-gray eyes. "Game playing. Roleplaying. Only in this game you just bring yourself. No paper and pencils required." He toyed with the cord used to open the curtain.

"Have you slipped a gear, Nicky? Are you high? Using any drugs I should tell the paramedics about if you pass out?"

He looked down at the floor. Took in a big breath of air and let it out slowly. "Oh, ye of little faith. You can't begin to fathom what I am offering, can you? This is the ultimate game and I'm proffering you a chance to play a once-in-a-lifetime experience." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small stone. It looked like a quartz crystal, only it was light blue. It hung at the end of a delicate silver chain. "Here, put this on." He put the chain around my neck. "Now you can walk right into it. Whenever you are ready to come back home, wrap your hand around the stone and squeeze it with your fist and you'll be back here in a flash."

"You're bat-shit crazy, dude. What are the rules? Games gotta have rules, Nicky. What if I die in the game? Do I come back here, or do I have to hold the stone with my last dying breath?"

"What's a game without risk?" He answered.

I gave him a noncommittal glance. "Naugh, I have to be at work on Monday. I don't have time to learn a new game."

"You're in luck," Nicky smiled. "Time differential."

"Time what?"

"Time differential between this world and the game world." He explained unclipping a section of the velvet rope. "Seventeen years in the game world is only one day here."

I frowned. "Look, Nicky. I surrender. You're the closest thing to a gaming god in the universe, OK? If you say this is the cat's meow, I believe you. You win. But even if I had the time to learn a new game ... which I don't ... what am I supposed to do? Is there some kind of controller? What? Does your opponent just walk into view? Then what? Is this a giant VR screen or something?"

"It's not a screen." Nicky took another long breath and then let it out slowly.

"Fine. Monitor, Touchpad, whatever you want to call it. I still don't understand. What am I supposed to do?"

"It's a portal," Nicky explained. "You step into it."

I crossed my arms. "Nicky, it's a gorram wall."

"No, it's a portal to the Nethereaches." Nicky shook his head. "You walk through it. Once in the Nethereaches, you become part of it. You'll still remember everything about yourself, but you have new

muscle memories. If your muscles once knew how to cleave a man in two, you'll find cleaving a man as easy as walking. There's nothing to it." He approached me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Fine." I lied to him, trying to look as if I understood every word he just said. The reality was, completely different things were running through my mind, sapping my attention. How can I get my cell phone out without him noticing? Should I call the police first or do I just call up Bellevue Hospital directly? I smiled politely to play along and asked, "But what do I do?"

Nicky grinned. "We could stand here all day and I don't think I could do the experience justice. Let me help you. Just one important thing I should tell you before you start."

"Which is?" I asked.

"Don't lose the stone." He said.

With that, the little petaQ pushed me through the portal to Nethereaches.

All I remember is seeing black. The kind of black you'd see if someone pushed you smack-dab into a solid wall. When I woke up, I was on the ground. In front of me was, I don't know, a limb. It was as big as a tree trunk and covered in white, fish-like scales. I started to get up, so I could beat Nicky to a pulp, and the limb moved. It was then I came to the realization, it was my arm.

Standing up, I took a glance around. I wasn't in any pansy-ass idyllic setting with trees and grass. There was snow everywhere. On the ground, falling from the sky, blowing in the wind. The whole place was one big snowfield. I could tell it was day, but the clouds obscured the position of the sun. Taking a tentative step forward, my muscle memory took over. Two wings flapped in the air. I have wings. I have gorram wings!

So, this was the Nethereaches. I, Alyson Reynolds, was now a giant reptilian creature with wings.

I tentatively flew a few feet. It was easy. I could feel the wind rushing against my face. I tried out a few loops, a dive or two and just glided along for a bit. Then I felt like someone had dropped a tree on me. I could hardly move my new-found wings. I drifted to the ground. My wings felt numb. Moving them caused a shooting pain in my shoulders.

OK, lesson one. Limited flight time. Don't overdo it.

For all my flying around, the scenery hadn't changed one iota. It was still whiteout blizzard. It was then I noticed I wasn't cold at all. It felt like early May in Central Park. But for all I know, the actual outside temperature was -20°F. I started walking. I was standing on a slope, so I picked downhill. Going up was only going to get me higher in the clouds.

I passed the tree line. Stumpy pine trees grew haphazardly between the drifts of snow. They got taller as I went further downslope. I still had not seen a soul in the Nethereaches. When I get back, I was going to have to give Nicky a piece of my mind. Panic came over me like a wave. I reached up with my now clawed hand. I felt for it all over my neck. *Crap*. The stone was gone. My one ticket back home and it was buried in some snowfield far up on a mountain. Well, if Nicky was right, I had exactly 34 years to locate it or I was going to be late for work. I turned around and started to head back up the mountain. I needed to get back up to where I had started before my footprints were buried in the snow.

I buried my nose in the snow. Yea, right, like I had the power to smell quartz. I could have kicked myself.

Right about then, the snow lifted to flurries and I could make out three shapes closing the distance between us. Strange, I was much taller, but I still have my sense of proportion. The dark shapes heading towards me were quite tall, about seven or eight feet. They would have made great power forwards for the Knicks.

They were wearing a lot of furs. The first one who approached had a real Viking-like appearance to him. Long dirty yellow hair and beard and eyes to match. His hands and face were pale blue. He was holding an axe over his head and approaching us quite rapidly. It was only after a moment of thought it occurred to me the axe blade was poised to strike, and he was charging me.

Instinctively, I opened my mouth. My first impression was I was going to spew flames and incinerate this giant Northman's ass. But instead, what flew out of my maw was more akin to an ice storm on steroids. When I was done, he stood there, frozen. Icicles dripped from his beard and axe. He had more the appearance of a clod, blue statue about him than a giant.

Turning my head, I moved to blast the other two. Out sprang a wall of ice, blocking their path. Guess I need to learn how to press the X, Y, A or B buttons correctly. Maybe my freeze breath needed time to recharge. What did I know? I'd only been an Ice Dragon for about an hour. But I was friggin' Frozone. Yea. Either from *Incredibles* one or two ... take your pick.

One of them started climbing over the wall. When he reached the top, I swung my clawed hand at him. I only had three fingers, but I opened three long gashes in his belly ... right straight through the leather armor. Each one was leaking bright red blood and entrails like it was Niagara Falls. He fell back over the other side of the wall.

The second one had more smarts. He walked around the edge of the ice wall, using it for cover. He burst out from behind his protection and almost took me from behind. Sensing him, I spun around and opened my chops again. Out spewed a chilling fog. He didn't freeze solid, but it slowed him down to a crawl. His skin was now frost-white. Without thinking, I swung my tail. It didn't occur to me I had a tail. Yes, I know dragons have tails, but when you don't grow up with one, you don't think about using it.

In any case, the Frost Giant split into a thousand pieces when I hit him. It reminded me of a rose being crushed after a dip in liquid nitrogen. It went strangely quiet after that. I guess I hadn't noticed their fight cries before in all the excitement.

Without even thinking about it. I ate the first one. The frozen one. Yea, I know it sounds weird, but I was hungry, OK? I might have been sick if I stopped to think about it, but damn, he tasted good. Sort of like an A5 Kobe Strip Steak flecked with black oil-cured olives and mushrooms then finished with picada. Trust me, it's the Rolls Royce of beef. Back home, it sells for \$350 an ounce. I hadn't eaten this well since my dreadful date with Eric Newman.

After I finished, I sat down. A light-headed feeling came over me. I considered taking a nap. As I was putting my head down, I heard the crunching of boots in the snow. Lots of them. Spinning around, I saw a whole group of Frost Giants approaching. These guys were serious. Spears, shield wall, the works. I was going to have a rough day. This was going to blow my diet. I couldn't even think of the cholesterol. I guess it was a good thing I started up here. If I'd been, say, plopped down in the middle of a crowded

city ... no doubt I would have been in a heap of trouble. This way I could start getting used to my abilities at a more leisurely pace.

Right about now though, things were about to get more intense. We eyed each other for a moment. An opening in the shield wall appeared and out stepped a big red-headed fellow.

"I am Uhtred son of Morgil, Prince of the Breketh Clan." He announced.

"Alyson Reynolds, daughter of ... well, this peak I guess. Alyson's Peak," I said proudly. "I own this friggin' mountain. So why don't you take a hike before I turn you into frozen dinners."

He cocked his head. "My lady, Alyson Reynolds. What would you take in exchange for your land rights? Silver? Gold? I'm sure we can make you a handsome offer. There is no need for further bloodshed. Perhaps another peak would be more to your liking?"

"I'm fine right where I am, Uhtred, son of whoever."

"I sure we can find something you want in exchange. This too had been our home for generations and we are loath to give it up. But if it is treasure you seek, trinkets, I'm sure we can make you a fine offer. Perhaps we can share the land? If not, we are all prepared to die here. You are surely likely to defeat us, but why take the risk? Tell us then, what do you desire?"

Snorting, I craned my neck. I thought about it for a second. If I was going to find my stone, and get back to New York, I was going to need minions. Lots of minions. After all, I had a whole mountain to search. "Power," I replied.

His face became downcast, his eyes dimmed, "We have no magic to give you."

"No, not magic ... power ... control ... authority."

"Ah, you wish us to bend the knee, to swear fealty?"

"Yea, that," I said.

Uhtred went down on one knee. "I Uhtred son of Morgil, Prince of the Breketh Clan swear loyalty to Alyson Reynolds of Alyson's Peak. By all the gods she is my rightful overlord and ruler. My people are at your disposal." He bowed his head down toward the snow and waited for my reply.

I tried to pull myself together. "Prince Uhtred, I accept your fealty and promise to protect your people and this mountain."

Uhtred rose to his feet. "Come, my lady, we should have a feast to celebrate."

We walked for a bit around the mountain. As the snow halted, an enormous wooden castle hove into view. Its walls and towers were massive. It seemed to me to be the ultimate combination of an erector set and Lincoln Logs. The doors opened as we approached. I was now the mistress of a castle. A bit of a step up from 74th street.

So, as you can see. I'm a monster. For most of my adult life, people have been calling me using this word. Only now, I really am a monster ... in the traditional sense of the word. I could go home and

continue to be called a monster or I could stay here and remain one. Maybe I stick around for a bit. In any case, I have 34 years to decide.