

# Unbroken

By Richard Kelly

## Author's Note

*This was written on something of a whim. I'd meant it only to be a proof-of-concept for what Oubliette fiction could be like. Instead, it triggered the avalanche of words that became this book.*

*Marratayn's past title, al Andalusi, is a reference to Said al-Andalusi, who was a historian, scientist, mathematician, and astronomer in eleventh century Spain.*

*Marratayn's current name is a reference to the number of times he has, against his better judgement, sacrificed himself for someone else.*



I am lying on my back in the Cistern, staring up at the empty heavens. There is no moon on high and I would know that even if the night were not drenched deep in fog.

Past the billowing vapors, the most I might see would be a glimpse of the Sky Spider. It has been active lately, its impossibly long legs kicking over huts in Spearfield and Cutting and passing perilously close to the Moon Tower—although I think it has learned its lesson from the last time it tried to find purchase on that monolith. The roaring necrotic volleys and cascading bolts of lightning that the mages there had pitched at it had not been enough to hurt it, but understanding had skimmed the surface of its alien eyes and it had reluctantly moved away.

There will always be plenty of other places for it to step. Plenty of other lives to disrupt.

It does not trouble me.

Freezing water laps my back, but the chill hardly touches me. I have long-since stopped caring about the discomforts of the Oubliette. Besides: the Arts Elemental are a fire in the back of my mind. Their heat washes through me, painting me like a target for anything waiting beneath the waters, watching in thermal.

This is what I want.

The Cistern is vast and I am far from where the fishing skiffs ply their trade, drifting like canvas ghosts along the opposite bank. They do not come to my side of the lake. There is too much uncertain water to cross and there are things far below that could snap their hulls and gobble down their crews with scarcely a thought.

Dying would be hard for them to cope with, but the loss of their

boat would be insurmountable.

I do not need a boat to fish.

If I did, I would choose not to be a fisherman.

Nothing good comes from pursuing attachments. That is a lesson I have learned so deeply it might as well be inked into my bones. The Oubliette is like a massive, intricate machine. Try to fiddle with even some small part of it and you are liable to leave your fingers caught in the cogs.

Something splashes in the water beside me and for a moment I perk up. It is not, however, the surfacing head of a Sump Wolf or an Angler Crab.

A woman has thrown a pebble at me from the nearby shore. She is standing in the middle of my solitude, arms crossed, and shivering in her drab-looking skirt and blouse.

I ignore her.

It is like ignoring a drip of molten steel between the eyes.

Did she come to fight me? Did she find my stash of Edipedes? Is she a newcomer?

The last thought makes me shudder, shedding ripples from my body across my tiny portion of the lake. I don't think I can deal with a newcomer right now.

I want to keep pretending that I haven't seen her, but she's seen me and now she knows for certain that I'm not a corpse. Not that corpses don't move down here, but they rarely look embarrassed about it.

"May I have your name?" the woman calls out. Her voice is calm and confident. It has that strange non-accent that people start developing after their first millennium here: a dead spot where nuance should be.

"What if I don't want to give it?" I say. Only my lips move. I have not completely given up on there being predators beneath me.

"I'm afraid the one that I know you by is out of date. I will call you al Andalusi if I must," she begins.

I sigh heavily. "It's Marratayn," I tell her, "but whatever you're here for, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed."

She smiles. "What if it was two handfuls of Edipedes hidden under a rock?" There is a fleck of something midnight-purple on her lips.

"You came here to steal my bugs, Lucette?" By now I know her name. She has changed little since the last time I saw her.

Lucette de Ardes is an enduring constant in the Oubliette: one of many rules of life in purgatory. The Unbroken break. The Dracule-

ans and Shell Kings wage their pointless wars. The Sky Spider cares little for where it treads and Lucette de Ardes looks for newcomers to educate about this pit of nightmares that they have slipped and fallen into.

Five hundred years ago, I admired her determination.

Thinking about it now just makes me feel tired.

When Lucette does not respond, I ask her what it will take for her to leave me be.

"Just hear me out," she says. "Without preconceptions, let me talk to you for a minute."

As she speaks, I feel a faint ripple pass through the cold water to push against my back. It is overpressure; the bow wave that precedes a predator's lunge.

I seize the Arts Elemental, reach into the water behind me, and freeze it solid.

An ice cube the size of a market stall bobs to the surface by my shoulder. Trapped within is the snarling visage of something that could be either an albino lobster or a wide-mouthed shark. It stares back at me, hate vivid in its immobilized stalk-eyes.

Lucette continues to watch placidly.

"Alright," I concede, directing tendrils of lake-water to hand-over-hand the frozen monster to shore. "I'll hear you out, but I hope you've brought enough material to get a fire going. I haven't eaten since yesterday."



The campfire crackles. Pelagic horror roasts in its own shell, legs and claws cracking in the heat. Vivid green tomalley oozes out to drop onto the coals. It hisses where it strikes and the smell of cooked meat fills the night air.

I tear off another mouthful of rubbery flesh, barely caring that it burns me. Steam hisses out of the leg-segment as I juggle it between my hands, the flesh on both palms reddening slightly from the contact. Each time I chew, another plume of steam rolls out of my mouth.

I feel like a dragon, but the very human kind. The one that doesn't live in in Spearfield, taking handouts from vampires.

"I'm listening," I say.

Lucette's lips quirk in a smile. She has stripped her haunch of lobstershark with an illusory blade and now arcane sigils are snapping intermittently into being around her while she levitates it in the air, letting it cool off between her hands. "You don't look like

you're done," she says.

I tear free another piece of meat and bolt it down. It feels like a lump of fire slithering down my throat. "I offered only to listen," I tell her. "I didn't say I'd give you my full attention."

She nods as if this somehow weren't offensive and says "it's about Absolution."

Unconsciously, I straighten.

"The girl?" I ask, checking to make sure we're talking about the concrete Absolution, not the abstract kind.

"The girl," Lucette confirms. She does not seem to have noticed the change in my posture. "She's been found again. Her last few deaths were all over the Bounding. Some people were starting to speculate that she might have even gone over to the Void."

"No such luck for her?" I ask.

Lucette looks at me critically. "The Guild found her in Stonewald. They are taking her to market in Grandhall. The Draculeans will bid, as will anyone else who wants a taste, and the cycle will begin anew." I wince and it's an unfair twist of the blade when Lucette says "you can stop this, Marratayn."

She must have caught me somewhere vital, nicked an artery, because I find myself agreeing.



Absolution is one of the most sought-after commodities in the Oubliette.

That's Absolution with a capital A, by the way. Apart from the Thorns, not many people are out looking for the other kind.

Absolution is a girl, always seventeen years old, straw-blonde and built like a wisp. She doesn't look like she should be but, according to the vampires and therianthropes, her flesh is the most delicious meal in the Oubliette. It's gotten to the point where this is so widely known that market stalls out in Skull Keep are naming lunch specials after her. Every time she dies and reincarnates, there's thousands of souls waiting to snap her up and sell her off to the highest bidder.

Usually that's the Draculeans.

I haven't cared for Vlad's little tin-pot dictatorship since he last threaded me onto one of his disciplinary skewers, but I suspect he's put that behind him. He's not the kind to concern himself with the continuing lives of the people he executes.

I breathe in and out, letting the hot Grandhall air roll in and out of my lungs. It is midday and I am in a sweltering disguise, courtesy

of Lucette's stupid plan. I am wearing the heavily brocaded robes of a merchant and I have come to one of the auction blocks in the central plaza intending to buy the girl.

I can see her up on the stand, flanked by a pair of mercenaries. One is human. She is keeping a very focused stare going at some invisible point in the middle distance, not looking anywhere near her charge. The other is a Preen with truly grandiose tailfeathers, leaning haphazardly against the stock of his halberd. Every so often his bill creases open, just a sliver, although he says nothing.

If he were human, he would be salivating.

There are Draculeans in the crowd, dressed in heavy black plate with red lacquer and thick midnight veils over their visors. They stand in a single unified contingent, watching the stand through their visor-slits.

I wonder if they are roasting in that getup, but maybe vampires experience temperature differently.

Next to the Draculeans are a handful of giants. I can pick out a few trolls, an ogre, and other smaller fae. Only one of the trolls seems like she believes she has any real chance of winning. The others are here for the same reason that some people play the lottery: winning just once makes up for centuries spent losing.

There are spectators here too. They form a buffer-zone between the giants and the Coquille Roi.

The Shell Kings, daunting in their own brightly painted plate, are only a half-dozen strong. They are looking at each other nervously, sizing up the Draculeans.

The Draculeans are ignoring them.

I have chosen to mingle with the bystanders, although this does not exempt me from bidding. Eventually, the auctioneer climbs up on the platform and cups a megaphone to his lips. He is a wizened goblin with gigantic backswept ears and a huge copper piercing in his lower lip. "Ravenous gentlemen," he barks, his voice high and sharp, "and famished ladies, welcome one and all to the Grand-hall market. If you are a devotee of gastric pleasures, if you are a connoisseur of earthly meats, if you have been to Skull Keep in the last six months, you will know who stands on the stage before you. Please give a warm round of applause for this maiden of sirloin, this frauline of flank: Absolution."

There is scattered clapping from the crowd, but neither the Draculeans nor the Shell Kings move their hands. The Troll woman is clapping thunderously.

My throat tightens.