

# NEVER AGAIN

THE ORIGIN OF GRUKARR



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OF THE MERLIN SAGA

**Never Again**  
*The Origin of Grukarr*

by  
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## **Hello, Readers.**

Many of you have wondered about the origins of Grukarr—the ruthless, brutal, power-hungry priest who tries to destroy Promi and Atlanta (and anyone else he can't control) in my novel ***Atlantis Rising***.

As the magical isle of Atlantis is finally born, both as a place on the map and a legend in the heart, Grukarr's life seems to end. Not at all prettily. But not so fast! There may still be more of his story to come—as you'll see in the coming books of the Atlantis Trilogy.

So for all those who wish to know the secret of Grukarr's origins, here it is. But in this case, alas...be careful what you wish for.

**– T.A.B.**



Even as a baby, he loved blueberries.

He loved them fat and round—thoroughly plump. Which pretty much described him at that age, too. He was so plump, in fact, that his crawling looked more like rolling. And when he finally started to walk, it was really a waddle.

Fortunately, Grukarr's mother (who was rather plump herself) enjoyed taking him along as she gathered herbs, roots, bark, and berries for her healing concoctions. Placing him securely on her hip, she hauled him—along with her sack loaded with ceramic jars, assorted tools, a leaf press, and several sizes of knives—out to gather whatever ingredients she needed.

They didn't have far to go. The simple hut they called home sat at the edge of the Great Forest, nearly a day's walk outside the walls of the City of Great Powers (the not-so-humble name recently chosen by the Divine

Monk for the town dominated by his temple). Since most of Ellegandia's natural magic could be found in that forest, finding the ingredients for herbal remedies wasn't difficult. Knowing which plant or extract or substance was useful for what ailments—that was the tricky part.

Grukarr's earliest memory came from one of those journeys into the forest with his mother. Though he was only three or four years old at the time, that day never faded in his mind.

"Here you go, my Gru." She placed him on the golden grass of a meadow and tousled his curls. "See if you can find some berries while I fetch silver moss from the stream."

His eyes glowed like candles. "Blue ones, Ma?"

"That's right." Her ruddy cheeks creased in a grin, and she tossed him a wooden bowl from her sack. "Just try to save a few for the bowl, my love."

“Well...I’ll try.”

As she knelt beside the stream, trying to keep her apron out of the water, he turned to the trees bordering the meadow. Though he didn’t know any of them by name, he recognized their varied shapes—the tall one with long needles that swished with every breeze, the twisted old one whose branches held round fruit that birds with orange and blue wings loved to eat, the graceful one whose long boughs shaded the stream. Then, lowering his gaze, he spied a familiar patch of blueberry bushes.

Licking his lips, he waddled over. The ripe berries practically fell into his hands as he plucked them. He stuffed them into his mouth, again and again, barely swallowing one handful before taking the next. Soon his lips and tongue were the same deep blue as the berries, and a trickle of blue juice ran down his chin.

He looked over at his mother, bent over the stream. As she tugged on the clump of moss she'd chosen, her ample rump jiggled. The sight made him giggle—with amusement, yes, but even more with affection. He knew that well-padded woman...and loved her dearly.

She was his whole world, really. His father, whom Ma called 'that vagabond', rarely came home. And when he did, he smelled like the drinking flask he always carried on his belt. Whatever it was didn't smell like any of Ma's healing ingredients that filled the shelves and hung from the rafters of their hut. No, it was more like rotting dandelions at the end of summer—a smell both repulsive and strangely alluring.

"There!" cried Ma, sounding elated. With one last tug, she pulled free the silver moss.



Deftly, she set the moss on a flat slab of wood and started chopping it into tiny flakes. “Come see this, Gru. You’ll like what happens next.”

Heeding her call, Grukarr waddled as fast as he could to her side, still holding a few berries in his hand. He arrived just in time to see the freshly chopped flakes start to rise up off the cutting board. Like small silver stars, they lifted into the air, glittering and sparkling.

His mouth fell open. He dropped the blueberries, which fell on the cutting board. “Ma...that’s *magical*.”

“Indeed it is, my love.” She pulled a large bowl from her sack and, holding it upsidedown over the rising flakes, managed to catch all but a few of them. The ones she missed kept floating skyward, sparkling as they climbed toward the clouds.

Meanwhile, Ma carefully set the bowl face down on the grass. It trembled from the power of all those flakes that wanted to fly. As they watched the trembling bowl,

she placed her hand on her son's chubby neck and stroked his curls. "'Tis the same lovely magic as fills this whole forest," she explained. "Never you forget that."

"I won't, Ma."

Just then, the bowl shook violently—and started rising off the ground!

"More magical!" he cried, thoroughly entranced.

"Yes, indeed!" She clamped both hands on the bowl and forced it back down to the ground. For good measure, she sat herself right on top of it. For a long moment, she and Grukarr waited in silence, unsure whether she, too, would be carried upward by the moss' powerful magic. But her weight was enough to hold it down.

Finally, she flashed her son a smile. "This is a powerful lot, indeed! It'll make a strong batch of my special potion to spur lovers' desire." Chortling to

herself, she whispered, “Maybe I’ll slip a little into that handsome woodcutter’s ale next time he stops by.”

Suddenly her smile vanished. “Blubbering bladders! With all the excitement, I almost forgot the prayer.” She shook her head. “But for that I need to kneel—and I don’t dare get off this bowl.”

“I’ll do it, Ma! Let me help.”

She hesitated, then said, “All right, my dearest. The voice of an innocent child should mean just as much—or more—to the spirits. Just kneel down on the grass and say what I say.”

He flopped down on the meadow—so eagerly that one of his feet smashed the berries on the board. Trying his best to get low to the ground, he stretched out his hands as far as they could. “Ready, Ma,” he called, his voice muffled by the grass.

She closed her eyes, concentrating her thoughts. “Thank you, great immortal spirits.”

In his small child's voice, made even smaller by the grass, he repeated those words.

“For all the blessings you bring to this forest, your home and ours...”

Obediently, he repeated.

“We are grateful with all our life and all our love.”

Grukarr did his best to recite. But one mischevious blade of grass tickled his nose, making it very hard to concentrate. As soon as he said the word ‘love’, he sneezed.

He raised his head. “Sorry, Ma! My nose was just too ticklyish.”

She burst out laughing. “It’s all right, my love.”

“Are you sure I didn’t spoil the prayer?”

“I’m sure. Why, the spirits themselves have to sneeze sometimes.”

He, too, started laughing. She opened her arms wide and he ran to her, burying his blueberry-smeared face in her apron. She hugged him warmly.

“You’re a good prayer giver, my son. There’s nothing you need to worry about. Nothing at all.”

She stroked his curls—then suddenly stopped with a gasp. He pulled free to see what was wrong. Following her gaze, he saw that the smashed berries on the cutting board made the unmistakable shape of a bird. Yes—a dark bird in flight.

“Tis a sign,” Ma said quietly. “For good or ill, I cannot tell. But it is most certainly a sign.”

\* \* \*

The years passed, each one much like the last. Grukarr grew taller and stronger. By the age of nine, he could venture into the forest alone to find ingredients for his mother. While he still enjoyed gathering his

favorite berries, he now preferred hunting for game with his oaken spear and clever traps.

Sometimes, on his hunts, he forgot to say the required prayer of thanks. But nothing bad happened...so he figured it really wasn't necessary after all. He simply stopped doing prayers.

Ever devoted to Ma, he never left her for long. And whenever he returned to the hut, she always gave him a warm welcome (along with a steaming mug of hot apple cider or mushroom soup). The seasons turned, and very little disturbed their daily rhythms.

Apart from his father's sporadic visits to the hut, and the few tradesmen and forest dwellers who came by for help now and then, Grukarr and his mother lived undisturbed. Which was just how he liked it. Sure, he watched with keen interest as she bandaged someone's broken arm, made a fresh poultice for a deep gash, or concocted a potion to banish nightmares. But he

always nodded gladly when the door closed behind their visitor. For he had Ma all to himself again.

Sometimes, after a day's outing, Grukarr brought home magical creatures—not to eat but to keep. He captured a pair of color-shifting pigeons, amazed by their constantly changing feathers. Plus a weasel whose claws could freeze water so it could walk across streams even in summer. And a three-tongued toad who could imitate human voices well enough to speak in full sentences.

Alas, Ma never let him keep those creatures for long. And not just because the toad kept talking back to her.

Rather, she knew they belonged in the Great Forest, the source of their wondrous magic. And she knew, as well, that the immortal spirits who lived in the forest and guarded its residents wouldn't take kindly to

such behavior. So she commanded her son to set them free.

Grukarr protested loudly. After all, the birds were fun to watch, the weasel's talent was useful for making cold drinks, and the toad scared away overly talkative visitors. Sure, he'd seen some equally magical beings when he and Ma made their annual trip to the City for supplies—creatures caught in the forest and brought to the market for sale. But these creatures he'd collected were different—most of all because they were *his*.

In the end, though, he obeyed his mother's wishes and set them free. But he still couldn't resist capturing more creatures. To avoid Ma's disapproval, he would sometimes hide them in a secret cage in the forest he'd built for just this purpose. There was something about controlling those beasts—something immensely appealing—that he just couldn't resist.



Strangely, after he built the cage, he started to notice a subtle difference in the forest. It could have been just his imagination, but it seemed that sometimes tree branches creaked when he passed beneath them, even when he couldn't feel any wind. Or, as he walked, twigs on the ground seemed to snap a bit more loudly than before. More than once, these mishaps startled his prey in time to avoid capture.

Still, Grukarr hardly noticed. After all, random things happened all the time in the forest. Nor did any of this deter him from hunting creatures. If anything, such challenges made the task more enjoyable—and success more sweet.

Then one day he made a new discovery. The most wondrous one he'd ever found.

It was a chilly day near winter's end, with snow still visible among the roots of the trees. Grukarr felt glad for the warm coat and scarf Ma had made for him.

All that morning, he'd been pursuing a hare. It was just the right size for Ma's biggest cooking pot...and would be just the right taste after several weeks of eating only dried vegetables and roots.

But the canny little beast had eluded him. Bounding speedily through groves of spruce, elm, and acacia, the hare led him on a climb up a steep, rocky hillside. Finally, the creature darted into a cave.

"Good," muttered Grukarr as he stood outside the entrance. He hefted his spear in one hand and his net made from woven rushes in the other. "No escape for you now, master hare."

Cautiously, he entered the cave. He paused after a few steps to allow his eyes to adjust. Yet this cave, somehow, didn't seem all that dark. More like the dim, shadowy time just after sunset.

Just then he noticed a faint yellow glimmer farther down the tunnel. What could it be? A shaft of sunlight

through a hole in the rocks? Some sort of creature who had made its home here?

Deeper into the tunnel he walked, spear at the ready. With each step, his boots crunched on pebbles and scattered debris, echoing inside the walls. At last, he rounded a bend—and discovered the source of light.

A crystal embedded in the rock! It glowed with magical fire.

*Whoosh.* Something raced past his feet, bounding out of the cave. The hare!

But now Grukarr didn't care. He was totally entranced by the glowing yellow crystal.

Slowly, he stepped closer. He stood before the luminous object, captivated by its lustrous beauty. With the butt of his spear, he struck the rock at the crystal's base, hoping to dislodge it. To his surprise, the crystal broke free easily and tumbled to the cave floor.

Retrieving it, he held it carefully in his hands. Every facet glowed with mysterious fire. Yellow rays flooded his palms, shooting beams between his fingers.

“It’s almost...” he said in amazement, “like holding the sun.”

With great care, he wrapped it in his scarf. This would be something Ma would be delighted to see! And something she’d surely allow him to keep.

He practically pranced home. Every once in a while, he’d stop just to unwrap the crystal and gaze into its fiery facets. Even in full daylight, the yellow beams burst out, wavering across his face.

When he reached the hut, he stowed his spear and net then hung his coat on the peg. Ma was sitting by the fire, roasting some nuts that she used in a remedy for coughs. Seeing him, she brightened instantly and stood to give him a hug.

“My love!” she exclaimed and opened her arms wide. “You’re home.”

“Yes, Ma. And I’ve brought you something.”

A shadow crossed her face. “Not another creature?”

“No, no. Something better.”

Eagerly, he unwrapped the crystal and threw the scarf aside. Yellow light poured out of the facets, filling the hut. Grukarr beamed with pride.

Ma gasped—not in astonishment, but in fright. She backed away toward her cabinet of healing ingredients.

“But Ma! It’s just a crystal.”

“Throw it outside!” she screamed. “It’s a—”

Suddenly the crystal sprouted jagged black wings and flew out of his hands—straight at his face. Grukarr shrieked and batted the air wildly. His hand struck the winged beast and knocked it away. Right into Ma’s eye!

She fell backward into the cabinet, toppling the shelves and smashing containers. Jars, bowls, and bags full of powders and oils exploded everywhere.

Frozen with shock, Grukarr couldn't move. Yet he saw, with utter clarity, as the beast—which now looked like some sort of poisonous beetle with a dozen crooked legs—started to crawl up his mother's neck.

“No!” he cried, lunging at it.

Too late! The beast climbed up her jaw, onto her chin—then plunged right into her mouth.

Ma gagged, trying to scream. Almost instantly, the color drained from her face. Grukarr rushed to her side and reached inside her mouth, grasping at the evil being. All he got for his efforts was a sharp sting on his fingertip—painful, but not nearly as painful as watching his mother writhe in agony.

Helplessly, he glared at the bulge that now formed in her throat...then slithered down into her chest. She

moaned with fear, rage, and absolute anguish—a sound he could never, through all his years, forget.

“Ma,” he cried, cradling her head. “Ma, I’m sorry! So sorry!”

She peered up at him. Despite everything, she still looked at him lovingly. “My son...” she said hoarsely, “you didn’t know.”

A wave of pain crashed through her, making her shriek and arch her back. “’Tis a skretzno—a crystal shape shifter. Deadly, always deadly...unless...”

She grew suddenly paler. Flailing, she wrapped her arms around her chest and wailed.

“*Unless what?*” Fighting back tears, he pressed his gaze into hers. “Ma, tell me! Is there some way to kill this thing? To save you?”

She swallowed painfully. “Y-yes. Tincture of...arsenic. Bu-but my son...I don’t have it here. Too rare! Maybe—”

Arching her back again, she moaned piteously. The sound hung in the rafters as well as Grukarr's mind. She closed her eyes.

“Maybe what, Ma?” He shook her hard. “Tell me!” Her eyes fluttered open. “In the City...apothecary.” She writhed again, gasped, then fell still.

Grukarr set her head down gently, then dashed out the door. He didn't think to grab his coat or even his mother's purse of coins. With all his strength, he raced to the City of Great Powers.

\* \* \*

Six hours later, Grukarr stumbled toward the City gates. Panting hoarsely, his tunic torn by branches and thorns, he looked more like an ancient vagabond than a young man.

The day's last golden light shone on the copper bell tower of the Divine Monk's great temple; a young herder urged his rambunctious goats toward the



market square. But Grukarr saw none of that. All he could see was the memory of his mother's agony—agony that he himself had caused.

*She gave me life, he silently scolded himself. She fed me, bathed me, clothed me, held me, taught me...*

He ground his teeth. *And what did I give her in thanks?*

Staggering up to the gate keeper, an old fellow with a ragged gray beard and a weather-beaten wool cap, Grukarr managed to say a single word:

“Apothecary.”

“Go away,” grumbled the old fellow. “We’ve enough beggars here already.”

Grukarr grabbed him by the collar and thrust him up against the City’s massive oaken gate. “Where,” he demanded, “is the apothecary?”

With a gulp, the gate keeper saw the unmistakable desperation in this stranger's eyes. "Er, well...down that street. Past the market."

Before the gate keeper even finished, Grukarr hurried off.

He ran down the street, boots clomping on the cobblestones, dodging people constantly. Into the wide market square he burst—and almost crashed into a cart loaded with persimmon fruit. He kept running, swerving past the stalls of wood carvers, rugmakers, incense suppliers, tool makers, food merchants, and artisans displaying their handmade jewelry, paintings, and pottery.

Even at day's end, the market thrummed with activity...as well as noise. The chimes of the great temple bell were nearly drowned out by hammering blacksmiths, squabbling people, bleating goats, belching camels, and crying babies. Some women,

arranged in a circle, were playing bone flutes and seven-stringed harps. And, like everywhere else in the City, monks chanted and beat on their blessing drums.

Oblivious to all this, Grukarr pressed on. When a large wagon loaded with crates of pink flamingos blocked his way, he rolled under it and kept running. And when an old monk offered him a wreath of leaves painted with prayers, he just shoved the man aside.

Finally, he reached the far side of the square. He dashed down the widest street, desperately looking at every storefront. He saw a jeweler, a metal worker, and a maker of paper in sheets and scrolls. But no apothecary.

Stumbling from exhaustion, he rounded a bend in the street. Suddenly, on a small, handpainted sign above one door, he saw what he'd been searching for:

*BINGLA'S APOTHECARY*

*Cures for Every Ailment*

Throwing open the latch, he slammed his shoulder into the door. It opened onto a steep staircase leading up to the second floor. From somewhere above, he heard a voice humming.

Though his legs ached, he ran up the stairs as fast as he could. At the top, he found himself facing hundreds of shelves crammed with bottles and jars of every size and color, loose bundles of herbs, and numerous bags—all carefully marked with paper labels. Amidst the shelves stood a thin man with a face as sharp as an axe blade. On his head he wore a light blue turban, the mark of an apothecary.

Ceasing his humming, the apothecary turned around. He peered at this visitor—a wild-eyed boy dressed in rags. “You need help, that’s clear.”

“Not me,” answered Grukarr, panting heavily. “My mother.”

“What is it? Infected wound? Fever? The blood sickness?”

Grukarr shook his head. “No. She was attacked.”

“By what?”

“By...a *skretzno*.”

Hearing the word, the apothecary winced. He leaned closer, putting his sharp nose near the boy’s.

“Are you sure?”

Grukarr nodded.

“How long ago?”

“Hours—half a day.”

Somberly, the thin man shook his head. “Then she’s gone. Or soon will be.”

Grukarr groaned and stepped backward.

“Even if I gave you the cure...” The apothecary’s eyes darted up to a high shelf near the glass skylight that served as his only window. “Even if I did, she’d be dead by the time you got back to her.”

“But—” protested Grukarr. “I must try! Whatever it takes!”

The apothecary shrugged his thin shoulders. “If you insist, boy. But this medicine is very hard to come by—and very expensive.”

Grukarr caught his breath, realizing he had no money. “I can pay you back in time. That I promise!”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “You mean you came here with no money? You expect me to give you *anything* without payment?”

“But I told you,” pleaded Grukarr, nearly tripping over a pile of bound roots as he moved closer, “I will pay you.”

Scowling, the apothecary waved his hand. “You’re wasting my time, boy.”

“But I told you! She’s *dying*.”

“Get out of here. Now!”

“I won’t go without the cure.”

“Go away, I said!”

Grukarr lunged at him. But the apothecary spun out of reach and drew a curved blade from his tunic. It flashed ominously, like the smile of Death itself.

Glaring at Grukarr, the man said, “Go. Or your mother won’t be the only one to die today.”

Defeated, Grukarr slowly turned away. He slunk down the stairs, his shoulders hunched, feeling so much rage and guilt he was about to explode. He was totally powerless to get the medicine Ma so badly needed!

When he reached the bottom step and turned back for a last glance—he saw the fading light of the end of day, glowing through the skylight at the top of the stairs. And that gave him an idea.

He closed the door behind him, then crossed the street. Not far away he spotted an alley between two

mudbrick buildings that faced the apothecary shop.  
Slipping into the alley, he was swallowed by shadows.

For over an hour he waited...though it felt more like a century. How long, he fretted, can Ma hold on? The sky grew darker, and the temple bell chimed several more times. Sounds from the market square diminished, until he heard only the occasional bleat of a goat or squeak of cartwheels.

All the while, he didn't move. When a fly landed on his nose, he didn't brush it off, fearing he might be seen. Even the strange ache he felt in his right hand didn't cause him to stir.

Finally, the shop door opened. The apothecary stepped out, his sharp face peering up and down the street for any sign of that troublesome boy.

Seeing none, he locked the door, adjusted his blue turban, and hurried away down the cobblestones.



Grukarr waited until he felt sure the man had gone. Then he darted across the street, straight to a spindly drainpipe that climbed up the side of the building. Grasping it with both hands, he hoisted himself up and started to climb.

As he neared the roof of the building, the drainpipe suddenly buckled. It was starting to pull away from the wall! Quickly, he worked his way higher, knowing that if he fell, he'd smash into the cobblestones below—and even if he survived the fall, he'd have no other way to get up to the roof.

Just as he reached the top, the drainpipe broke away completely. Grukarr leaped onto the building wall, grasping the edge of the roof with one hand. Below him, the drainpipe slammed into the cobblestones. For an endless moment, he hung there, dangling high above the darkened street.

Desperately, he swung his other hand onto the edge. His fingers barely caught hold. Using all his strength, he pulled himself upward, wriggling higher, until...

There! He clambered onto the roof.

Lying on his back on the flat slabs of slate, his lungs heaving, Grukarr knew he had nearly died. But he hadn't—and now he had more work to do. Turning over, he crawled to the skylight.

One kick of his boot shattered the glass, which rained down on the apothecary's shelves. Careful to avoid the jagged pieces around the skylight's rim, he slid himself into the hole feet first. He stretched his legs down to a wooden table. Planting one boot on the table's corner, he lowered himself until the table supported his weight.

*Craaash!*

The table gave way. Grukarr fell into a wall of shelves, breaking dozens of bottles and covering himself with powders and liquids. Much worse, though, was his right knee. Twisted badly in the fall, it started to ache painfully. He forced himself to stand, but the knee seemed to scream whenever he put weight on it.

Only then did he notice his right hand. It was swollen—badly swollen. And it throbbed like it had been struck with a hammer. Had he hurt it in the fall?

Forcing himself to walk over to the row of shelves where the apothecary had glanced, he peered up at the bottles and jars. Squinting in the dim light, he tried to read the labels. Barely, he discerned the letters “Ars” on one bottle atop the highest shelf. The medicine!

He grabbed a broom that was leaning against the wall. Reaching as high as he could, he tapped the

bottle. It tilted, wavering, then began to fall—not toward him, but backward on the shelf.

Grukarr watched helplessly as the bottle slowly tipped over backward. He roared in frustration, sure that now he'd never be able to get it down.

Just then the bottle's cork top struck something behind it. That slight contact made the bottle bounce forward. It teetered on the edge of the shelf...and dropped over. Stretching out his good hand, Grukarr caught the bottle before it hit the floor.

Eagerly, he read the label. *Tincture of Arsenic.*

Despite his injured knee and swollen hand, he felt a surge of hope. *I can still save you, Ma*, he called in his mind. *I'm coming!*

He stuffed the bottle into his pocket. Then he took a step toward the stairs. But his knee exploded with pain!

All at once, he realized the truth. He had another long journey ahead—and only one leg that could hold his weight. Grim reality demolished that moment of hope, leaving him aching in body and soul.

Wincing, he made himself move. He hobbled down the stairs, staggered into the street, and limped off. Seconds later, he disappeared into the darkness.

\* \* \*

As the first rosy rays of dawn touched the top of the hut, Grukarr crawled slowly toward the doorstep.

All through the night he had limped, stumbled, and finally dragged his broken body through the forest. Sometimes he'd seen golden eyes peering at him through the gloom. More often, though, he'd seen his mother's face, twisted in anguish—and that vision drove him onward.

It took all his strength just to push the door open. His injured knee could hardly bend—and only

with extreme pain. The swelling in his right hand had spread into his wrist and then up his arm. The whole arm now dangled useless at his side, like a dead branch still clinging to the tree.

On top of all that, he'd started to tremble with fever. His head throbbed as if a hoarde of drummers were beating on his brain; his whole body dripped with sweat. And he ached all over—a bone-deep ache that he'd never felt before.

This miserable fever puzzled him. Had he simply stressed his body so much that he'd fallen ill? Did he accidently swallow something poisonous when he crashed into the apothecary's shelves? Or...

In a flash, it hit him. *The skretzno*. When it stung his fingertip, it must have given him some of its venom. The same venom that was destroying Ma!

He forced himself to crawl into the hut. Every movement sent waves of pain coursing through his

body, and the fever made his mind spin. Yet he struggled onward, bit by bit.

From the doorway, he could see that she lay just where he'd left her, flat on her back, surrounded by the wreckage of her ingredients. But he wasn't close enough yet to tell whether she was still breathing.

"Ma!" he called weakly as he drew nearer.

"Ma...I'm here."

She didn't respond. Even before he reached her side, he could see that she'd lost almost all the color of her skin. Her cheeks, normally so ruddy, looked as pale as parchment. Worse yet, her whole face was contorted, warped with suffering.

*Suffering I caused*, he told himself, feeling a pain deeper than anything else.

Finally, he reached her. Placing his ear over her mouth, he listened.

No breath.

“Ma!” He raised himself on his elbow and shook her. “Ma, don’t go...”

Still no breath.

He checked for her heartbeat, for any sign of life. But he found none.

*Dead.*

Grukarr collapsed beside her, his head on her shoulder. And he wept. Tears of loss, guilt, and failure dampened the lifeless form that had once been his mother.

In time, he raised his head. Bitterly, he decided, *Since she has died, so will I.* He rolled over on his back beside the corpse, ready for his own life to end, no matter how long he had to wait. It might take days—but he’d never stir from this spot.

His brow furrowed. That really wasn’t the right punishment for what he’d done. No, that was far too easy!



“I want to *suffer*,” he told himself. “Just as I deserve! To live in torment for the rest of my days.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the bottle he’d stolen from the apothecary. Nothing on its label told him whether to swallow it or pour it on his hand where he’d been stung. So he chose to do both. With his teeth, he pulled out the cork, then took a swallow.

The liquid scalded his tongue, burning his mouth and throat. Suddenly a new, sharp pain blazed through his entire body. His head started pounding more than ever. His vision darkened; everything spun.

No, he realized, regretting his choice. *I did this wrong...like everything else!*

With his last remaining strength, he forced his wobbly hand to pour what remained in the bottle over the hand that had been stung. Then he fell back, slamming his head against the floor. All went dark.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Grukarr awoke. At first he wasn't sure where he was—but as soon as he opened his eyes and saw his mother's lifeless body, with so much agony written on her face, the terrible truth came crashing back.

Ma was dead—thanks to his colossal stupidity.

*Thirsty*, he realized, rubbing his throat. Only then did he notice that he was using his injured hand. The swelling had receded so much that he could use his fingers, while his arm's mobility had returned. And his fever had vanished!

Astonished, he sat up. Though his knee still throbbed and the rest of his body felt beaten and sore, he was clearly alive. Clumsily, he stood up and staggered over to Ma's barrel of fresh water. He drank greedily.

Finally, he took a last swallow and sat on the floor, leaning back against the barrel. Looking grimly

at his mother's body, he knew that the first thing he needed to do was to bury her.

Suddenly he caught his breath. That evil beast, the skretzno, might still be inside her! Even now, it could be feeding on her organs. He couldn't let that happen!

Right away, he knew what he needed to do. *Cremation.* Stepping outside the hut, he quickly gathered a pile of broken branches and a few fallen trunks that he could drag over. After carefully placing Ma's body atop the pile, he gave her one last kiss on the cheek.

Then, using her well-worn flint, he started a fire. The wood caught right away and burned avidly, swelling into an inferno. Soon Ma's corpse was engulfed by flames.

Hard though it was, Grukarr made himself watch, absorbing every wrenching detail. Never, never

would he forget this! He would always be haunted by the rancid smell of her burning flesh, the sight of her hair catching fire, the sound of her sinews and bones crackling as they oozed blood and marrow.

At last, as the fire faded, he whispered a single sentence. “Goodbye, Ma.”

When the heat had died down enough that he could inspect her remains, he used an iron rod from the hut to search for any sign of the skretzno. To his relief, he found nothing—no yellow crystal, no winged beast. He sighed, knowing the deadly shape shifter had left his mother for good.

What he didn’t notice was one jagged black coal that had tumbled to the base of the inferno. Slowly, without any sound, it started crawling out of the funeral pyre back into the forest.

Meanwhile, Grukarr dug a pit and buried what was left of the body. After replacing the soil, he covered

everything with a mound of rocks—except for one place right at the top, which he left open. In that spot, he planted something he'd taken from a nearby meadow.

A blueberry bush.

For the rest of that day, he knelt beside the grave. Ignoring his throbbing knee, he spent those hours composing the chant that he would recite every single day for the rest of his life.

*Never again will I know her touch, her voice,  
her love.*

*Never again will I be powerless.*

*Never again will I be at the mercy of others.*

*Never again will I care about someone else.*

*Never again will I lack control.*

*Never again will I know her touch, her voice,  
her love.*

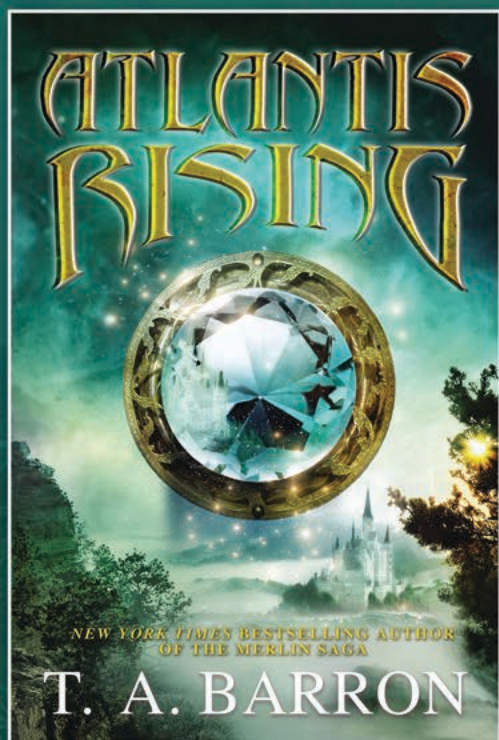
As the sun finally set, casting a golden glow on the bush atop the grave, a scholarly monk named Bonlo came out of the forest. He'd seen a tower of smoke rising from this spot and had come to investigate.

The battered, morose boy he found kneeling beside this newly-made grave didn't even turn to acknowledge Bonlo. Instead, the boy just continued to stare into the distance, chanting something under his breath.

Always kind-hearted, the monk decided immediately to help this lad. To get him food, clothes, and a splint for that swollen knee. And maybe someday to welcome him into the community of monks. Grukarr accepted the help, but not with any gladness.

For while he knew that he would live...he also knew that life itself would be his punishment.

# The adventure continues...



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