

WILL KOSTAKIS
REBEL GODS

LOTHIAN

ONE

Sally Rodgers has a face full of stars. The first thing you notice about her is the smattering of freckles she hides behind. She could be standing right beside you, but she's a galaxy away. That's the second thing you notice about her. The distance. She's working on that.

After falling off my radar last week, she's shown up on my doorstep with the promise of an adventure.

'A small one,' she clarifies, a glint in her eye. 'Couple of hours, tops.'

The neighbours have been complaining about doe-eyed religious men with pressed shirts and pamphlets showing up at all hours, so when the doorbell rang during dinner, Mum called dibs on not answering it. She poured herself a glass of wine to make crystal clear the fact that she had no intention of leaving the dining table. I dragged myself through the house, braced for an aggressive pitch about sins and saviours, and instead . . . Sally in jeans and a grey T-shirt.

She's never come over before. She's a meet-at-a-neutral-location kind of friend.

There's a traffic jam between my brain and my mouth. I want to ask her how she is, where she's been, what adventure she's roping me into, but no question gives another the right of way, so I just stare at her, mouth agape.

Her eyebrows almost hit her hairline. 'Hi?'

I find words. Finally. 'Hi. *Hi.*'

'Adventure?'

'I . . . We're in the middle of dinner,' I say. 'Can you come back later?'

'This is the potential end of the world, Connor. Time is of the essence.'

Understanding the mess we've gotten ourselves into requires a cursory knowledge of the secret history of creation. Five gods, the Monuments, made our world. To borrow somebody else's metaphor, if the world were a mound of clay, Nuo bound it together, Darroch gave it shape, Aiden and Finn tempered it with fire and ice, and Jivanta gave it life. Since life requires nurturing, Jivanta also created new gods from pieces of herself. These three sisters were responsible for guiding all living beings. And they did that . . . until they rebelled. They set out to rule, commanding armies and plunging the world into war. One rebel god died, and the Monuments lured the other two into a parallel realm and sealed it off, weakening themselves in the process. If anything were to happen to them, the seal would diminish, so the Monuments were hidden away, eventually interred in sanctuaries beneath Sydney.

I found one of those sanctuaries under my high school. I was avoiding class by following a hidden passageway to its end – as you do. That's where I met Sally, who, grieving the

loss of her parents, sought out Jivanta to resurrect them. When we found her, Jivanta wasn't too wild on that idea. Sally was distraught and tried to kill her, because killing the Monument would make Sally her heir. Sally would inherit the power of life and bring her parents back herself. That didn't happen. It became clear that it was impossible to resurrect her parents. By that point, we were entangled in the Monuments' story. Sally was the heir to Aiden and Finn, and I was the heir to Darroch. I had his godly strength.

The story went awry. The last surviving Monument, Nuo, was mortally wounded. She warned us that the rebel gods would return. We would have to fight them, and we would have to win. The best the Monuments had done was lock them away, we had to do one better and defeat them. She died without telling us how. Sally became her heir. The night was sliced by shimmering cracks. The seal was broken. I saw into the parallel realm and stared straight into the wide, blank, unblinking eyes of a rebel god.

We thought the end of the world was imminent, but nothing happened. There's been no sign of the rebel gods since, no hint of them influencing the actions of humans and animals, commanding armies and plunging the world into war. But that doesn't put us at ease. The rebel gods are a thrum in the backs of our minds. They might be anywhere, doing anything . . . only we just aren't aware of it yet. Considering we're the ones who are supposed to defeat them, that's less than ideal.

And now Sally's on my doorstep talking about the potential end of the world.

My chest tightens. ‘Did you find them?’ I ask breathlessly. Sally stammers. She’s overplayed her hand. ‘Not exactly.’ ‘Oh.’

‘But I’ve found *something*,’ she stresses, ‘and you said—’

‘No solo shenanigans.’ She’s fiercely independent. If it were up to her, she would try to bring down the rebel gods herself, but we’re in this together.

‘Exactly. I need you to come with me so that I’m not partaking in shenanigans alone.’

‘It’s a school night,’ I remind her. She might be fiercely independent, but I’m only as independent as I can get away with being. As far as Mum’s concerned, I’m an ordinary teenager. ‘I can’t just head out without notice.’

‘I texted to let you know I was coming over.’

I sigh. Mum’s friend sent her a seven-minute video about phone dependence the other day. It confirmed her worst fears and gave her a few more for good measure. She instated a digital-device ban during family time – that being any time she doesn’t want me checking a screen. Like when we’re grocery shopping or in the car or eating dinner. If I want a plate, I have to relinquish my phone. She drops it in a small wicker basket with hers.

I explain the ban to Sally and she doesn’t seem impressed.

‘That’s not helpful. Why push me to get a phone if you’re just going to ignore me when I use it? I tried your boyfriend, in case you were with him, and he left me on read too.’

‘I need to get back to dinner.’

‘Or – hear me out – you could explain to your mum that you’re a god who doesn’t need food for sustenance.’

'I'm closing the door.'

'Sneak out afterwards.'

I negotiate. 'After Mum goes to sleep.'

'Pretend to be sick, go to your room and climb out your window.'

'If Mum thinks I'm sick, she'll hover over me all night.'

'I'm not asking you to act like you're dying. Present as low-level, I-need-a-nap sick.'

'Okay.' That seems doable. 'Should I . . . bring the sword?'

She shakes her head and retreats to the van that's parked a solid metre from the kerb. 'No. Should be fine.'

'Should be or will be?'

She doesn't elaborate. I close the door, and I have no clue what I've just signed up for.

I return to the dining table. There are gaps in the salad beside my half-eaten steak, like someone picked out all the cherry tomatoes while I was gone.

Mum asks who was at the door.

When you inherit a god's world-shaping strength and you haven't found the right moment to tell your nearest and dearest, you tend to lie a lot. About the chip in the stone countertop or the broken glassware or the door that's come off its hinges. I don't like lying to Mum; I feel the weight of every fib, so I tell vague truths whenever I can. I met Sally at a school thing. We're working on a project together. All vague, all true.

'It was Sally. She was in the area.'

Mum scowls. 'Didn't you invite her in?'

'She's got somewhere to be.'

Vague truths will only get me so far, though. Sally's waiting to whisk me off on an adventure. For a second, I wonder if I've left enough time between Sally's visit and pretending to be low-level sick, and then I commit. I run my hand over my abdomen and summon a pained expression.

'I've decided I'm going to redo the laundry. I don't like the tiles.' Mum scowls at me. 'What are you doing with your face?'

I lie. 'I feel sick.'

Her stare intensifies. 'No, you don't.'

'What?'

'I can tell when you're faking it.'

'No, you can't.'

She raises an eyebrow. 'Are you saying you've faked it before and I haven't noticed?'

A siren blares in my head. 'No,' I blurt out.

She pricks the air between us with the tip of her fork. 'Exactly.'

Right. I guess I'm not getting out of here until she's asleep.

We eat in silence. Before she's done, Mum sets down her cutlery and reaches into the wicker basket in a clear violation of the digital-device ban. My brain goes to the worst-case scenario and my stomach drops. She's suspicious of Sally's brief visit and my attempt to abandon dinner. My message previews will reveal something incriminating. All she has to do is tap the screen.

She plucks out her phone and places it on the table. She enters her passcode incorrectly twice. Third time's the charm.

If she's not going to let me pretend to be sick, I'm not going to let her ignore her own rule.

‘No phones,’ I tell her.

‘For you.’ She bites back a smile and reaches for her reading glasses. ‘You’re addicted.’ She checks a new message. Her lips purse. She’s considering something. ‘You’re not actually sick, are you?’

‘The steak’s just a bit tough.’ Vague and true.

I don’t think she’s actually listening. Without looking away from her phone, she announces that she’s going out for dinner. It feels like she’s being vague on purpose. As a big believer in vague truths, I should respect Mum’s right to use them too. I *should*. But it seems like she’s going on a last-minute date and she doesn’t want to say so. I remind her that we’re already eating dinner.

‘I’m going out for second dinner, then.’

‘You’ve never—’

Mum clears her throat harshly. She removes her glasses and blinks hard.

I’m grinning. ‘Are you going on a date?’

Mum opens her mouth. She’s arranged her face like she’s about to say something pointed, but she reconsiders. She tells me to wash the dishes when I’m done.

The moment Mum leaves the room to get ready, I have my hand in the wicker basket. I unlock my phone and read Sally’s message. All it says is that she’s coming around. I shoot her a quick update. She replies almost instantly. She’ll wait around the corner so Mum doesn’t catch her parked outside in a dodgy-looking van. Good call.

I clear the table and begin washing up. On her way out, Mum tells me she’s going to be late. I can’t resist a parting

shot: I ask her what my new dad's name is. She laughs until the door closes behind her. I wait a couple of minutes, in case she needs to come back for something she's forgotten, then I slip on my sneakers and climb out my window. I could have waltzed out the door, but that wouldn't have felt the same.

There's a little pit beneath my window, where me dropping with the force of a fledgling god has compressed the ground.

TWO

If vans were sentient, they would show photos of Sally's to younger ones to scare them into a life of respecting speed limits and indicating before turning. Any part that can dent is dented, and any surface that can scratch is scratched. Sally once tried to feed me the line that each of the van's scars told a story. Yeah, the same story: Sally's not a particularly competent driver. But something about her makes you climb into her reanimated zombie van anyway.

She has cleared everything off the front passenger seat. The back is littered with clothes, essential reads and a plastic potted plant that gives it a homely feel. Her house was deemed structurally unsound after I punched a hole through a load-bearing wall, so she's been living in the van while the insurance company assesses her claim.

I've invited her to crash at mine. As heavy as the fib I'd need to tell Mum would be, it's a weight I'm willing to bear. But she's too proud. She says it's all right. It's not. People can look in from the street. She's adamant she has all the privacy she needs. She doesn't. Like, if I . . .

I pop open the glove compartment, revealing a stack of pages bound by a rubber band. Sally leans over to guide it shut. The van swerves and she overcorrects.

‘You’re going to keep doing that until I tell you where we’re going, aren’t you?’ she asks.

My hand hovers over the glove compartment. ‘Pretty much.’ She sighs. ‘You’re the little brother I didn’t ask for.’

‘Well, *technically* I’m twenty-two, so I’m the big brother you didn’t ask for.’

‘But you exude little-brother energy.’

I can’t argue with that. I turned sixteen in January, then I was flung six years into the past during a confrontation with a fiery god. Every January since, I’ve *technically* celebrated a birthday, so I’m *technically* twenty-two . . . I do feel different to the guys I go to school with, but I’m not certain that’s maturity and not just a side effect of spending six years in near isolation. Gods don’t age on the outside. Every time I look in the mirror, I see a sixteen-year-old. Maybe gods don’t age on the inside either. Maybe in those six years, I turned sixteen another six times. Maybe I’ll be sixteen forever and Sally will always be that little bit older than me.

‘Does that mean you think of me as a brother?’ I ask.

‘No.’

‘You care, don’t you?’

Sally takes the next corner too sharply, as if to remind me there are no seatbelts. I knock against the side of the van.

‘You did that on purpose.’

‘What? No. Never.’

I pop open the glove compartment in defiance. She clicks it shut. The van swerves. She overcorrects more aggressively this time, and we come dangerously close to colliding with oncoming traffic. It's not the sort of thing either of us needs to address directly, so when we're safely back in our lane, and we've taken as many calming breaths as we need, Sally does the mature thing and changes the subject.

'Shenanigans,' she announces.

'Yeah, where are we going exactly?'

While I've been busy cosplaying my old life, trying to pass for an ordinary teenager, Sally's been retracing our steps and returning to sanctuaries, searching for information about the rebel gods. She didn't believe the Monuments would leave us so ill-equipped, but time and again, her searches came up empty. Last week, she turned to the Guardians for help.

Back when they freely roamed the earth, the gods kept two understudies each. These enhanced humans could sense gods, and they passed that ability on to their first-born, who then took on the role, and so it continued generation after generation. The idea was that if a Monument ever required an heir, they could tap an understudy on the shoulder. Enter the rebel gods, who corrupted five of the understudies and made them crave power. They hunted the Monuments and came to be known as Hounds. Those understudies who protected the Monuments became the Guardians.

Larissa Pung is their de facto leader. I discovered her through the support group she founded. It was initially created to ease the burden of guarding gods, but now it exists to help them manage their shared grief at the gods having perished

on their watch. Well, Larissa's grieving. Bevan Tyrell too; he was Darroch's Guardian. He's in the year above me at school. Intense guy. The other living Guardian, Natasha Elliott, who was charged with protecting Aiden, has taken having fewer responsibilities in her stride. She's now a relatively successful Mummy Blogger despite not having a child and nobody really reading blogs anymore.

The Guardians each kept identical leather-bound journals that were passed down through the generations. Sally hoped we might learn more about the rebel gods from one of those journals. She already had Bevan's; his ancestors had left it mostly blank. She took Larissa out for coffee and asked to borrow hers.

'She scowled at me the whole time,' Sally explains. 'Apparently, she holds me personally responsible for everything that happened.'

'You did start it.'

I can tell she's contemplating taking another sharp corner. 'It was a team effort. She's not blameless. Anyway, I gave up trying to win her over and visited Tash. She couldn't give me her journal fast enough. Weird she's pretending to have a kid for clout, though.'

Sally pored over Tash's journal. Like Bevan's, both sides of the back page were covered, margin-to-margin, in a passage written in Wren, the language of the Guardians. The text was identical. She flicked through the rest of the journal. The brown-spotted pages were blank, except for random squiggly lines drawn on a few pages near the middle. At first, she dismissed them, but on closer inspection she noticed that

one of the random lines crossed over the faint whisper of the random line on the next page – like an X marking a spot. She tore the middle pages out of the journal and held them up to the light. The lines connected to form a map of a bending river and a bay. By its shore, X marked a spot. She zoomed in and out of rivers using her phone's Maps app until she found a match. The X fell on Northwood Performing Arts College.

'I paid a girl who goes there thirty bucks to borrow her uniform after school.'

Classic Sally.

'I snuck past security, went to where X marked the spot and found steps leading underground.'

'Out in the open?' I ask.

'I had to move a tombstone.'

'You moved a tombstone?'

'It was clearly fake.' She glances at me. She knows how unconvincing she sounds. 'Besides, there were steps leading underground so it *was* fake.'

'What was down there?'

'No solo shenanigans,' she reminds me.

'And there were no shenanigans up to that point?'

She ignores the question. 'In addition to scowling at me, Larissa let slip that the Monuments were initially kept in an underground vault while their sanctuaries were built. I think I've found the entrance to that vault and I think the Monuments left something down there for us. That's why it was in the journal.'

She tosses me a smile. She's hopeful. The vault might be empty when we get there, but after a month of nothing, this

is the closest we've come to an arrow pointing us in the right direction.

We're at the set of lights before Redfern Park when she asks if we're heading to the front door.

'Here will do,' I tell her.

'You boys are weird.'

'It's cute.'

'It's weird,' she insists, pulling over beside the park. I hop out and she adds, 'If either of you get any dirt in this van . . .'

I blink at her. 'Seriously?'

Sally cracks up. 'No.'

I shut the door and she gets to work clearing some room in the back.

There's always a steady stream of people cutting through Redfern Park of an evening, either on their way home from the train station or on their way to a bar on the main strip. Even in the dead of night, I don't think I've ever had the park all to myself. In retrospect, that probably makes it a bad place for the entrance to a secret tunnel, but what's done is done. I do a quick three-sixty, make sure there's no one too close, crouch down and thread my fingers through the holes of a drainage grate. I shift it to the side and ease myself into the hole, then replace the grate and follow the narrow tunnel's gentle slope. I light my way with my phone.

Gods don't need to sleep. We can, but it feels like wasted time, especially when that time could be spent canoodling under the stars. Sure, the guy I like canoodling with doesn't like me calling it that, but it's an objectively wonderful word. *Canoodling*. Love it.

He's a god too, but even though he doesn't need to sleep, his parents do. He was concerned that he'd accidentally slam a door at one o'clock in the morning and wake them, so I dug the tunnel as a little two-week anniversary present. It might seem excessive, but as a god who specialises in shifting the earth, it really wasn't that difficult. I touch the ground and it parts for me. It *listens* to me. Plus, taking into account the time travel, it was actually a three-hundred-and-fourteen-week anniversary present. But saying that puts too much pressure on us.

The looming threat of the potential end of the world is enough.

In short, I built a tunnel for a guy so he wouldn't wake his parents when he left to canoodle. It's *cute*.

The tunnel zigs and zags until I arrive at a wall of hardwood timber – the back of a bookcase. I hear voices on the other side. He has company. I probably should have texted. I knock twice. The voices go quiet immediately.

Timber scrapes against tiles as someone pushes the bookcase to one side, making way for light . . . and the interior of a teenager's basement bedroom.

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