

A STORY OF PILEAUS

# THE UNMADE MAN



DANIEL TYLER GOODEN

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UNMADE  
MAN**

**D.T. Gooden**

THE UNMADE MAN: A STORY OF PILEAUS

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*Sometimes, when part of a man is lost, the rest seems in ruin.  
Sometimes, it's the unknown that binds him together*



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- I -

## THE WAITING BOY

**T**he boy felt the man descend from the ridgeline like his own hand held out into a numbing cold and now returning as a stranger to the warmth of his pocket. He was glad. The Fae had searched long for them both, reaching out with eyes and whispers from their home in the Dreaming Lands. Now the boy would journey home, if this new man could bear the weight of the burden he'd come to carry.

The boy listened to his grandfather's last breath as the man and his three riders broke through the jungle's edge. He held his mouth shut and watched them ride into the field. When they were halfway across the thin valley the child inhaled again, no longer fearing that his grandfather's last dead breath would be sucked into his own body. In life the old man would never have done the boy harm; he was a protector. In death, the boy knew, spirits tend to do odd things.

He laid his small hand on the dead man's chest, feeling the heat slip from the corpse. He felt his grandfather's magic fade too. The ties snapped like a broken spider's web. The strands began to sever and would soon wipe clean what life he knew in this hidden glade.

The riders came to a halt before the porch. This is where his life would now go. His grandfather was gone, and he'd taken the protection of the valley with him. The boy thought little of that, noticing only the runes tracing down the arm of the man standing before him. There was much power there. A keen few would see them: those that still knew the smell of old magics, those that heard the hum of coarse power even trapped in script. Why did the man risk laying that secret bare for those watchful few? The boy gazed at the others in the group. There was much strength here, almost as much as there was weakness. He rubbed his palm against his grandfather's chest,

one last goodbye and a measure of what little time they had left for introductions.



Boruin ran his hand through his short gray hair, deciding what to make of the scene. The smell of the dust rising up where his boots stirred the earth was too sharp. His scabbard smacked against his leg louder than it should have. He could feel it all changing. The jungle around them was coarse as rock salt rubbed into a wound; this place was smooth and fine, but it was cracking. The dead man's magic had polished down this deep valley. He had held the land in check, held his valley in a chosen image. Now he was gone, and this place was on its way out.

Boruin could feel Pile's eyes pricing the items on the porch, peering through the open door into the gloom. He didn't have to see the young man's hands to know they were already twitching, ready to take his share. They had all been relic hunters in their own way and time, but it was engrained in Pile, part of the young man's fabric.

Wraethe kept Pile in check with her imposing presence alone. She stayed wrapped in her shadowy cloak, her raven hair and pale skin hidden from the sun. Only her blue eyes appeared under that dark hood as she dreamed of the day and waited for night. She could wake now, if needed, and come forward into the world, but rarely did those eyes rise into the bright sunlight without riding on a wave of rage.

Toaaho showed no sign of eagerness, no pleasure at finding the boy. Perhaps the mask of tattoos laid across his face kept his emotion hidden as well. The broad strokes covering his sun-darkened skin seemed overdone as just decoration, but they kept the Mana'Olai hidden from more than just his emotions.

Boruin stepped forward, and the boy took his hand off the dead man's chest. He did not shy away, did not run and hide from the four strangers. The old man watched the boy's eyes dart across his left arm and it made him nervous. His tattoos were not visible to all—to very few, in fact—and for a child to see them meant something. The boy was not what he expected, much like this whole contract. Every time he swore off that damn Nefazo merchant, the next job was doubly strange.

The boy reached out to touch the black runes, and Boruin almost stepped back. He took the small hand and dropped to his knees before the boy.

"Do you know me?"

The boy shrugged.

"You know why I'm here, or who sent me?"

The boy nodded yes. He stood up and walked to the horse as if he had expected a ride. The stirrup hung shoulder high. Though the steed stamped about him, the boy did not flinch. He placed his small hand on the horse's flank and it quieted.

"Do you have anything to take, anything you need? You won't be coming back," Boruin said. The boy pointed south, where the jungle closed in to swallow the valley at its needle point. A brown cloud had stirred up—dust, probably. The wind had begun to descend out of the hills. Wind didn't suck the thick grass down into the ground, though.

"Time to leave," Toaaho said in his quiet, ever undisturbed voice.

Pile spat in anger and the wind blew it back on his jungle-stained pants. "What about all this? You promised us some treasure! I didn't hack through the Fae-cursed jungle to leave empty handed." He sidestepped his horse closer to the porch, and Wraethe's black shift rustled in response. His eyes darted toward the shrouded woman. "Come on, Boruin. I'll be quick. Anything will do. It'll just go to waste."

"I see wooden bowls and a dead man, Pile. Search for more if you want," Boruin said, placing the boy on the horse and vaulting up behind him.

"The time is almost past," Toaaho said, turning his horse to the north.

Boruin followed and shouted over his shoulder against the rising rush of the wind. "Half the valley is gone. Take what you can if you wish to join it!" Pile looked back and saw the valley behind him was now a whirlwind of destruction. The air sucked down out of the hills, pulling the soil toward the pocket storm. Pile's mouth snapped shut as a heavy gust made his horse stumble backward toward the swirling mass.

"Have it your way!" the young man shouted as he spurred his horse into a gallop after them.

Pile hurried his mount forward and soon led the galloping riders through the field. The grass lay flat before their horses' hooves. They all leaned close to their mounts, save for Wraethe, who seemed to flow as part of the gale.

The moisture drained from the dirt and great cracks split through the soil. Boruin glanced back and watched as the storm engulfed the small cottage. The old man's body rose into the air, or maybe it was



the ground collapsing beneath. It hung still and then pulled apart as if made of dust.

Boruin drove his horse on harder as they crashed back into the thick jungle. The horses did not slow and their riders did not try to rein them in. They plowed along a shallow stream and stayed low, ducking under the trees. The wind continued to blow down off the ridgeline, whipping the tangled branches and vines across their skin.

“Up! Up!” yelled Boruin as he felt the first tremor. The horses staggered as the earth began to shift, and the riders turned up the slope. Toaaho led them, switching back and forth up the steep walls of the valley.

Pile swung free from his saddle, leaning off the side of his horse as a boulder burst from the underbrush. It passed behind his mount's head and flew down into the valley.

“I'm going to pass you if you don't flog that beast!” Pile yelled at Toaaho. He dug his spurs in and his horse tore forward. Wraethe followed after, and Boruin pushed his steed onward, cursing from the rear.

The horses halted as a great tremor shattered half the valley. The bedrock snapped with a loud groan and the shelf sagged beneath them. A cleft in the hillside, virgin gray of exposed stone, ran upward from their feet. Toaaho did not hesitate to gallop up this strange track. The others followed. Boruin could smell the sharp spice of sparks as iron horseshoes clattered against the tilting rock. The trail canted steeper as they rushed on. The valley was dropping away and soon there would be nothing but air under their feet.

As the gray stone began to crumble, Boruin felt a wet mist blow from beneath them. The top of the ridgeline was right there, and he stopped cursing the gods to offer one quick prayer. Perhaps it did them good; perhaps the crash of water and splinter of stone drowned it out. Regardless, Toaaho reached the top just as the stone began to slide. Boruin saw Wraethe's horse slip, so he rammed it forward with his own. It was enough to drive them both up off the tipping stone and onto the stable ground of the jungle above.

Pile leapt, wide-eyed, from his horse. “Yuin's whores, what a ride!”

Toaaho turned to watch as a great geyser of water shot out from below. The sliding walls of the valley had uncovered a deep river, and the wash now vaulted into space and tumbled into a bottomless cavern. The valley was gone, swallowed by the earth. The dead man could have received no deeper grave.

The horses pranced about, their blood still churning in excitement. Pile dropped to his knees, panting. He searched through all the hidden pockets of his red vest. On finding a charm, idol, or trinket he kissed each in turn as thanks and then tucked it away again. Toaaho soothed his horse, whispering quietly into its flickering ears.

Boruin wiped the sweat from his neck as he watched Wraethe's horse back into the shadows of the nearest tree.

In the full light of the sun Wraethe seemed weak, and to an extent she was. She sat still in her shadows, never seeming to move in the light. Still all of them feared her, even in day. Boruin would deny that, but in day and certainly at Diuntyne, he was as wary as any. Wraethe was like the trained war cat; fierce, loyal, and just wild enough to never take your eyes off of completely. Her nature was more cruel than kind. And at Syan, at full night... she could be pure nightmare.

The boy alone turned his back on the valley. He sniffed at the air, his tongue licking out as if he were catching a scent the way a northern boy would catch a snowflake. When he had smelled enough, he turned to catch Pile's attention.

"Father of Yuin!" Pile yelled when the boy placed his hand on the back of the man's neck. "Don't sneak up on me like that, boy! I'm a trained killer and I almost did you in!" The boy did not flinch at the barrage, but held out a strand of beads and tied rocks. "What's this for?" The child shook it, as if enticing a baby.

"Treasure," Toaaho answered, his face motionless.

"Kind of worthless."

"Only kind you'll get today," Toaaho replied, his eyes sparkling.

Boruin pulled himself to his feet, laughing. "He's right, Trained Killer. Better hold on to your share."

He left Pile to grumble at their teasing and stepped to the edge of the valley wall. The rock had shorn clean off, and a new granite cliff followed the waterfall down into the deep gloom. Boruin wondered if he could have seen the bottom even with the sun directly overhead. He looked up, checking its position, but it was lost above the thick jungle canopy.

Boruin turned his gaze to Wraethe. Only her eyes were visible behind the veil of shadow. They watched him back, dark as Diuntyne's setting. They would brighten nearer sunset when she would come forward. She was mostly asleep and that meant it was still afternoon. Wraethe would follow and she would flee, but she would remember little of the day except as fading dream. This was

her slumbering hour, her weakest hour when he watched out for her. At night she returned the favor.

"It may not be wise to linger here longer," Toaaho said, stepping beside Boruin.

The older man nodded. "There is more magic to that man than the valley. I felt it, too."

"I would guess more protection," Toaaho replied. "Something ranging that let us pass before."

"Why did it drop? Why so much magic here? Do you think he was Fae?" Boruin asked. Toaaho shrugged and did not answer. "Well, Belok better have more of an idea than you. I knew I should have sent him to peddle his contract elsewhere when he offered so much gold."

There was nothing but brush in the deep jungle, but Pile found some way to lead them on. Smart-mouthed, selfish, shallow, and short, Pile was more annoyance than good companionship, but he had his uses. Boruin kept him around mostly because he could swallow a joke. They tried at least once a day to get him riled, but Pile could take it as well as he could dish it out.

Pile could also find a trail, even if there wasn't one, and he could see far. Despite the brush, despite the sun hidden behind the thick leaves, Pile could see what was coming.

So, when the dead man's guardian found them, Pile had long seen it on its way, and they were as ready as they could be for a twelve-foot construct of mud, rock, and wood—the life of the jungle—twisted into new form by strange magic, sentient and seeking them out.

Boruin was not worried about Wraethe. She would wake if she felt the need, but the boy was going to be a complication. They hunkered down, waiting while the monster sniffed them out. The boy stepped lightly around Boruin, looking up at the trees, waving at colorful birds. The old man took his hand and hid him behind a thick tree root. Soon the child was back on his feet, undisturbed, unafraid, and unaware of the rising tension.

Toaaho disappeared into the brush, his movements slow and perfect. Years in slavery had not dissolved his training, and he'd had plenty of time to develop his skill since Boruin had purchased his writ. Pile watched the creature come and tapped his fingers across his axe blade. It echoed out a light ring, a tinny reverberation that sounded eager to be put to work.

Boruin licked the fingertips of his right hand and considered a small prayer. Maybe his last had delivered them out of the valley, but he decided against another. No reason to make a habit of it.

His fingers grazed the tattoos on his left forearm. He tried to forget about the creature, forget about the boy prancing in circles around him. The old man flicked his fingers over the dark runes, spinning them like a street shark's gambling wheel. He felt the pull on his flesh as the line began to move.

The runes curled over his shoulder and down his bicep. They turned under his arm and over his wrist, climbing back up his forearm. The line crossed his shoulders and dropped down his back. They twisted around his chest and down across his hips, a long line of black characters that made no sense to him at all—at least very rarely. Boruin dragged his fingers across a choice few as they spun across his wrist, pulling them out of line and into his palm where they settled like fallen leaves. He had created spells before, finding the right arrangement, or right match, or right sub-category, something right—but it was rare. Working combinations came to him in odd moments of inspiration, and he was hoping for one now.

The guardian was bigger than he had first figured. The hard rock spikes shoved into its shoulder blades and forearms did not mark it as a peaceful creature. Its body was clay, with part of the forest shoved into the wet mass to give it more strength. Heavy limbs jutted out of its thighs and vines bound its chest into a dense and solid torso. Briars wound about its lower legs, placed there on purpose or mindlessly collected as it roamed about the forest.

Boruin had selected four runes when the boy sat down beside him. The child watched the symbols flip by and examined the ones on the skin of his hand. The old man was sliding the fifth into his palm when the boy stopped him, motioning that it should be returned and the search should continue. Boruin would have ignored anyone else, but that the boy could even see them was odd. He slid the rune back onto his wrist and moved the line along. The boy's pointed finger followed a sharp-cornered rune down from Boruin's shoulder, snaking around his arm, to his wrist. Boruin pulled it onto his palm, though he did not recognize it, and the boy clapped silently.

The old man stood behind Pile and tightened his left hand under a growing burn. He felt the runes heating up in his hand; he felt their combination mixing. He wasn't sure how effective it would be, but he knew it would create something. There was a feeling about a rune combination, a power that radiated when they matched. At times they matched too well and Boruin let them run back up his arm for fear of their strength. This time they felt just right. As the creature stepped

out of the brush and turned to look at him, Boruin flung the runes out of his hand.

The magic sliced through the air and hit the clay monster with a wet smack. The flesh of its body rippled back as the spell hit, forming a crater on its upper thigh. Blood red flowers erupted from the hole. They sprouted out of the clay and ran across the beast's dark, muddy skin. The monster froze, watching the old man with his arm still outstretched. The matched gaze held until the flowers opened and all burst at once, gold pollen showering out from the wide blooms. They shone like stars where they crossed the thin shafts of sunlight piercing the canopy.

"The rutting Mother!" Boruin cursed. The boy clapped out loud and squealed in glee. Pile laughed through the horrified look on his face. Toaaho dropped out of the trees and drove his dagger into the creature's back.

The monster roared and twisted, flinging the Mana'Olai off its hump. It tore at the flowers, dragging them out by their roots. It did not clear them all before dashing forward at Boruin. Pile met it halfway, swinging his axe up into its kneecap. The blade hit with a dull thud, and Pile dragged it out covered in mud. The creature came on, undeterred by the blow.

Boruin pulled his sword from the scabbard on his back. "Go!" he shouted at the boy. The child dashed off behind a tree, peeking around the other side as if in play. The guardian swung, the rock barbs severing the branches and scoring tree bark as its heavy fists came down.

Dancing aside, Boruin flicked the tip of his sword up under the beast's arm and into its armpit, through where its vital organs should have been. The blade came back out of the monster's body with nothing but clay streaking the well-oiled metal.

Toaaho drove his blade into its back again, trying to sever the beast's spine, if it had one. The dagger opened a great gash, but no blood welled out.

The three fought fast, circling, turning the beast like a bull on festival day. They fought and tired and the creature raged on.

Pile stumbled back, trying to catch his breath. "Köpeka's bloody sons, Boruin! You got more than flowers for us?"

"Now would be the time," Toaaho agreed, dropping below a thundering punch that felled the tree behind him.



Boruin glanced back down at his runes. The growing gloom left little to see. The thing was big but not slow. They were tiring, and in the dark there would be little chance of blindly outrunning it.

The light was still low and tinged orange with sunset, but Boruin knew that day was gone and Diuntyne was upon them as a flash of black swept out of the jungle.

With shadows trailing behind her, Wraethe vaulted up the creature's body, climbing the protruding rocks and shattered branches. Thick clay fingers dropped severed to the jungle floor as the creature's hand tried to close about her. She rose fast and graceful up its body to perch on the golem's crown, like a crow on a gargoyle. The creature groaned as Boruin saw her white hand wipe the creased clay smooth across its brow.

The monster's knees shook and buckled. Pile dove out of the way as the mountain of clay came down. Wraethe stepped free from the softening creature. Her body shivered and her hands clenched. She leaned her head back, lungs sucking in the moist air as if she were drinking in the night to wash down the taste of battle. Boruin and the others held still until her breathing steadied. They knew better than to rush her out of a fury. Fighting always gave rise to her blood, and it was unwise to approach her even after the heat of it had passed.

In the darkness her face glowed like the great moon, her skin pale. She drew back her black hood, swinging the cloak over her shoulders, and seemed to step fully out of shadow. Wraethe tugged a red bloom from the dead clay and rubbed the mud from her hands with the petals.

Her eyes flashed like sisters of the moons and she turned to Boruin. "Your work?"

"Mine and the boy's," he said.

"The boy helped?" she asked. "When almost no one can see them, the boy helped?" Wraethe frowned. "I've warned you about fooling with what you don't understand."

"Yes. You have."

"But we did find him, then," she said, turning to the child. "I dreamt we had." The boy stepped out from behind his tree and came forward. He bent to grab a fallen red petal and took her hand in his. The red leaf wiped the last smear of mud off her wrist, leaving her skin as pale cream.

Wraethe smiled and smoothed back his wild hair. "You are a good boy, aren't you?" The boy nodded. "Learn no lessons from these three

and we will get along brilliantly," she continued. The boy widened his grin until it outshone her pale shimmer.

"How did you beat it?" Pile ventured to ask.

Toaaho answered for her. "The sigil. She saw the sign on its head that bound the material animate."

Wraethe nodded. "Some details stand out in my day dreams better than others. The sigil on the beam of the porch shone like a dying star."

Pile shook his head in exasperation at Toaaho. "Why didn't you do that if you saw it?"

"Didn't see what it was," Toaaho said calmly.

"What's done is done," said Boruin. "Now we know what to watch for. If there are others, hopefully they will be the same."

"Are they ever?" Wraethe asked.

"Never," he replied.

## UNDER THE SHADE OF A TRAVELING TREE

**B**oruin tossed the bones of his dinner into the fire and looked in disbelief at his companion. "An Aiemer flow?"  
"That's right," answered Wraethe.

"You're saying that the man, after he was dead, somehow drew upon a fable to destroy his valley?" Boruin said.

"No. That is impossible," said Wraethe.

Boruin raised his hands in exasperation. "Exactly!" He opened his mouth to continue, then stopped, confused. "Then what are you saying?"

Pile pulled a stick from the fire and held it above their cooking stone. "She's saying the valley was torn apart by the Aiemer after the old fellow died." He dashed the ember against the rocks and let the rising sparks of the dead coal serve as example.

"When you know more about any subject than I do, I'll ask your opinion," Boruin said, giving Pile a sidelong sneer.

Pile saw an opening, and his teeth shone in the firelight. "Like who your mother is?"

"Or where you were born?" Wraethe added. Her rare smile matched Pile's in its eagerness.

"Like why every time we drink, you slip into some northern sailor's accent?" asked Pile.

"And why, for as long as you and I have traveled together, neither of us remember where we started or anything before," said Wraethe, her right eyebrow cocked.

Boruin knew that look. He didn't remember any more of his past than she of hers, and now was not the time to get back into that saga. They had the best of him, and it was either time to storm off or to give in. Boruin leaned back against the high tree root and sighed.