

FANTASY

Maladorme and the Pan-demon

Daniel Gustafsson

A raw wind ate at Maladorme's ears as he plunged through the fissure between gates. He could not open his eyes, and even then, what would he see? His body descended soundlessly through the icy cold toward the exit. His wish to explore the other side was about to be fulfilled.

Maladorme shot from the elemental egress, hands first onto the soft, damp ground. He slowly opened his eyes. A foul stench raided his nostrils, curling the ends of his moustache and tingling the roots of his shaggy brown hair. Maladorme looked upon the dirty ground peppered with moss and dead leaves. Nightfall cast a shroud of deep blue all around.

He stood, brushing the dark earth from his pale hands. He removed clinging mud from his knees, darker than the cloth. Standing straight, Maladorme adjusted the drape of his brown magician's cloak to hang evenly off his shoulders.

A thick bog several strides ahead was the source of the stench. It bubbled fiercely, as if a fire raged below. Air pockets burst on the surface of olive-green sludge, sending a foul aroma into the air. Oddly, the marsh gave off a faint glow.

The atmosphere around Maladorme was uncomfortably humid, in harsh contrast to the tundra-like temperature of the fissure he had come from. Patchy islands of grass broke up the surface of the bog ahead. At the far end was a forest of tall but crooked trees, overshadowed by ominous clouds. The thick cloudbank stretched across the entire marsh, masking the sky and any stars.

A humid wind tugged at Maladorme's cloak. He turned his back to the bog to examine a clump of trees close to his position. The marsh forged a clearing in the midst of the warm woodland; Maladorme stood at its edge.

"Where am I?" the magician muttered. Nothing looked familiar. No lush greenery, no trickling stream, nothing that smelled of home. It was rumoured that some gates led to other realms, though that could be an exaggeration.

He stepped toward the gateway he had come from, treading upon leaves. Distracted, Maladorme halted to look down at his muddy boots. He picked up a faded green leaf, spade-shaped, edged in brown. After a moment, he turned his attention to the forest ahead and noticed that the trees had no leaves.

Maladorme dropped the leaf to look once again at the gateway. The elemental egress seemed quite out of place, being the only beautiful thing in sight. It was composed of two elegant, pale trees, trained into a circular shape. With bare branches at the top, this egress reminded him of large deer antlers, like the sibling gate Maladorme had initially stepped through.

He scratched his chin, fiddling with his small beard before recoiling from the smell the ground had painted on his hands. His nostrils flared.

"Such a dreadful place," Maladorme said, on the verge of a cough. He looked into the trees, squinting to sharpen his night vision. When that did not help, he summoned his aura, the magic his people collectively possessed. He needed some light.

A bright magenta membrane layered over Maladorme's brown eyes. He raised a hand with purpose, conjuring an orb in his palm. It grew as large as an apple, then stopped. The magenta pulsed within the sphere, purring faintly. Maladorme gripped the ball in one hand and waved the other over it as he muttered a spell. The pink in his eyes faded, leaving the energetic orb to exist independently.

The magician approached one of the trees, intrigued by its irregular bark. It was unlike any tree he had seen before. The entire fleshy surface was wet, as if lathered in sweat. Maladorme stared at it momentarily, then walked to the tree beside it that had a concave knot. The hole made an odd, squishy sound when the orb-light hit it. Cautious but curious, the magician peered closer and saw what appeared to be a human hand stuck in the tree. Without warning, the hand sprang from its hole and grabbed hold of Maladorme. He recoiled in horror as a multi-fingered alien squeezed his wrist, sliming it with a layer of thick mucus.

"Ten thousand tongues!" Maladorme cried. The pink sphere fell to the ground, rolling away from the tree. Maladorme tugged his wrist free of the disturbing trap. Squirming, he snatched up the sphere and hustled back towards the elegant gateway. He watched from safety as the irregular hand slowly slunk back into its knot. It was attached to a lanky arm with several lumpy elbows, which disappeared with an unsettling noise.

Maladorme gazed up at the forest, knowing it was not as it seemed. The limbs of the fleshy, gelatinous trees were alarmingly human-like. His heart rate increased. The twisted branches ended in small, stiff, chubby hands with long nails. Maladorme realized the trunk resembled a torso more than a tree, with the outline of ribs visible beneath the squishy bark. What was this place? What kind of trees grew here, if one could call them trees at all? His curiosity had quickly morphed into discomfort and fear.

A small tingling began to grow in the magician's wrist. Large red-orange boils erupted from his slimed skin, which dried and peeled painfully, and throbbed like a barrage of bee stings. Maladorme was horrified at the transformation that had happened in seconds. He trembled at first, then yelled.

Maladorme slowed his breathing to calm himself, releasing his death-grip on the pink orb. He no longer wished to explore but to return home and leave this pandemonium to its own miserable existence.

Ignoring the hot pulsing below his flesh, Maladorme turned back to the gate, looking for any sign of activation. He'd come through that gate; he'd leave through it. Then he would take an axe to the sibling gate to ensure no one could ever visit this realm again.

Maladorme pondered how the gateway operated in his world. There, it activated when he stood within a foot. He moved closer to this gate, doing his best to ignore the swollen discomfort of his wrist. With his good arm, he held up the magenta orb to the egress and waited. Nothing. Stepping back, his boot crunched a leaf.

The leaves. The sibling gate needed greenery to activate. They whirled around in the middle of the circle, forming a portal that sucked him here through the cold fissure. He looked on the ground for moss and leaves—the only natural-looking things in this twisted world. He gathered all he could find to pile them before the exit. This was his way out!

A sinister noise behind Maladorme, like a boar being impaled by a pitchfork, interrupted his excitement. Then, a hot, uncomfortable breeze scattered the greenery he had carefully gathered. Something else drew near.

Sweating, heart galloping, Maladorme gripped the magenta sphere tighter. Through the fleshy trees, a large creature approached. It lumbered toward the orb-light, laboriously huffing with every

squishy footstep. Quickly, Maladorme threw the glowing sphere far into the trees, distracting the monster. It followed the arc of the pink light, ignoring the magician. Maladorme resummoned his aura, crafting several more apple-sized balls. He threw them all toward the creature, who devoured them. He fashioned a final orb to throw, but his aim was off. The orb hit a fleshy tree and deflected near him. Maladorme hastily kicked the ball into the bog, where it floated on the marsh's oily surface. The magician held his breath, dimming the magenta from his eyes. Waiting, freezing, in the dark, he feared what was about to come.

The laborious huffing and wheezing were getting closer, along with multiple thudding footsteps. Maladorme stood unmoving as he watched the monster emerge from the treeline.

The hideous creature bore countless red-orange boils like the ones on Maladorme's wrist. It had sixteen limbs, or more, lanky human legs ending in chubby children's feet. Its appendages led the way, protruding unevenly before the creature's disturbingly humanoid head. Its limbs stretched out over the bog, unable to reach the pink orb resting on the foul surface. The monster grumbled as if cursing under its breath. The bog bubbled below, pushing the orb closer.

Maladorme gingerly turned around to gather the scattered greenery. He carefully returned it below the egress, checking over his shoulder to monitor the multi-legged lifeform.

He remade his pile, and stood before the gateway awaiting activation, but again nothing happened. Holding his breath, he waited a moment more, sweat dripping down the back of his neck. Still nothing.

Breathing heavily, the creature grabbed the orb and consumed it in one sharp, toothy gulp. The pink orb-light disappeared, replaced by the blue of night.

Maladorme remained a statue. His night vision had not yet adjusted, but his hearing was hyperaware. The exit remained inactive. Maladorme listened as the beast slowly stepped away from the shore, making its way back into the disturbing forest. This unnatural place—nothing but a pandemonium of darkness—was clearly not of the earth.

After the lumbering creature faded from earshot, Maladorme could breathe normally. He let his nerves settle while he looked upon the dormant egress. The magician huffed and muttered in frustration. He knew the leaves and moss were key, but they were not working. Unless...

Maladorme swallowed a gob of spit and quickly summoned a ball of light. With it in hand, he darted around the antler-like gateway looking for anything green he had missed. Behind him in the forest, the creature screamed, once more attracted to the magenta. Maladorme ignored it, continuing his search. Finally, he located the last handful of moss. He scooped it up and raced back to the egress. The harsh breathing and multi-footsteps of the monster approached. Its many eyes reflected the pink light it sought. Maladorme quickly piled the greenery, watching as the beast stumbled towards him on its chubby, clumsy feet.

He chucked the orb into the bog, but the monster did not stray from its path. Maladorme held his ground as the gateway slowly stirred. Magenta glowed from his elbows, wreathing his forearms in a crisscross pattern that intensified as it quickly extended to his hands. Maladorme's palms surged with energy in a synchronized explosion, burning with pink fire that left the magician unharmed. Magenta rings erupted from the fire's centre, orbiting Maladorme's hands to signify the pinnacle of a full-strength aura. The magic purred deeply, filling Maladorme with confidence as he assumed a firm stance, arms at the ready.

“I’ve had enough of this place,” he said. Breaking past the treeline, the creature continued toward the light source. In the egress behind Maladorme, the small pile of greenery began to levitate. “The Pandemonium is no place for me!” The leaves whirled, nearly ready. The monster drew nearer, choking at the sight of all the light. “And I will not be struck down by a pan-demon!”

The pan-demon raised its mandibles, its multiple eyes like magenta mirrors. Maladorme instinctively raised his arms to shield himself from the creature’s strike, emitting an array of pink sparks. The pan-demon jolted back just as the leaves reached peak activation. With a scream, the monster brandished his multi-rowed teeth as the gateway carried Maladorme out of the Pandemonium with a swift whoosh.

All became quiet. The freezing temperature quickly cooled the sweat on Maladorme’s skin. His eyes once again felt welded shut. A moment later, the magician sailed through the other side of the elemental egress which then closed behind him. He landed on the ground, cushioned by a familiar texture. Maladorme opened his eyes and stared down at a mattress of lush green moss. Though the boils on his arm remained, the magician knew he was safe. He let his aura dissipate.

Maladorme slowly got to his feet amidst a moss-bedded forest. The straight white trees stood proudly with him, their leaves chattering in a cool passing breeze. The sun had nearly reached midday, casting its golden rays through the high, leafy canopy. Maladorme stood with his eyes closed, listening to the wind, birds, and a small nearby river.

The magician inhaled a deep, chilly breath, then headed off to find an axe.