



BOOKS IN THE
WINGHEART TRILOGY

- I. *Wingheart: Luminous Rock*
- II. *Wingheart: Spirit's Gate*
- III. *Wingheart: Sword of Caligus*
(Planned release Fall 2018)



Wingheart
LUMINOUS ROCK

BOOK ONE IN THE WINGHEART TRILOGY

BENJAMIN GABBAY



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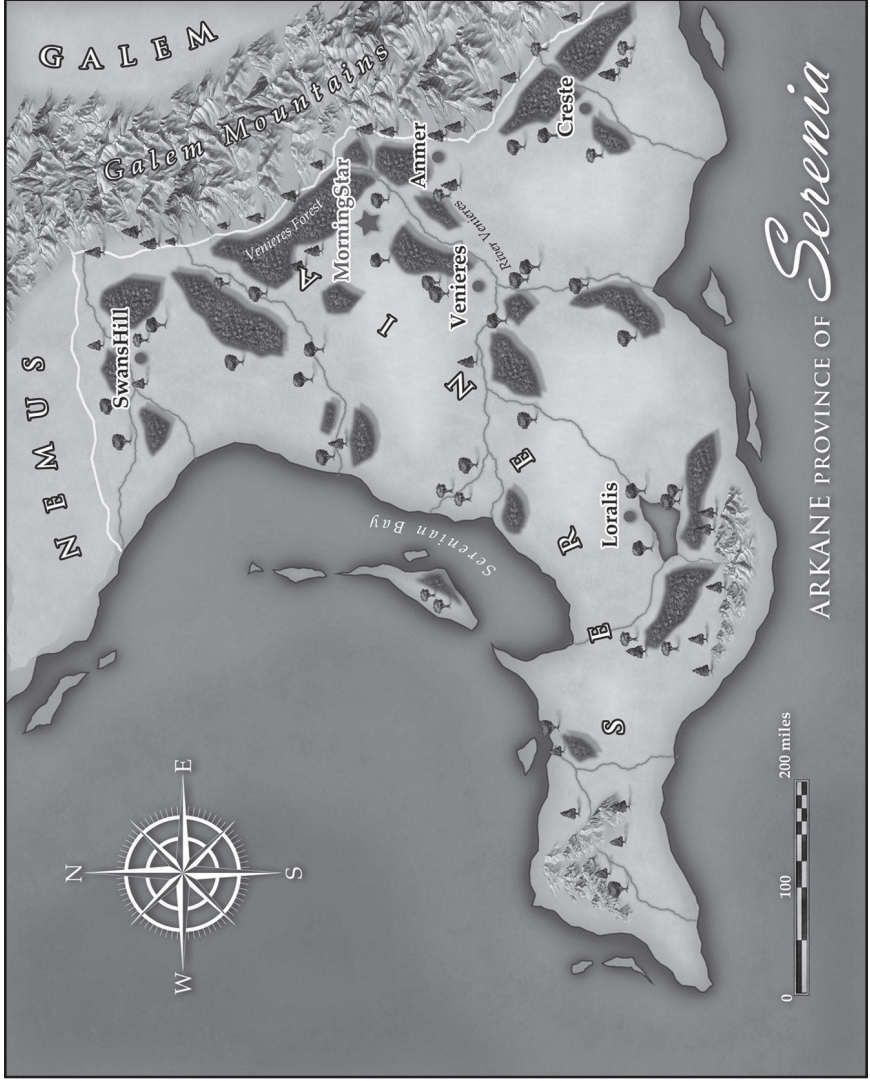




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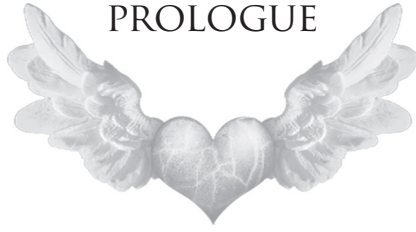
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PROLOGUE



The Burial



THE COLD, UNBLINKING EYE of a full moon cast its gaze upon the forest floor. Its pallid light gave form to the mist that coursed like a river of smoke over the damp earth, breaking against ghostly columns of ancient oak and cedar. The wind, chilling as the touch of a blade, moved with no sound. But the stillness was broken by a rustle of footsteps, signaling the arrival of two men as they approached a glade within the heart of the forest.

The men were draped in identical dark cloaks, faces swaddled in the shadows of their hoods. They slowed as they entered the clearing. Before them stood an empty grave—freshly dug, marked by a monolithic granite headstone.

“Here it is.” One of the men drew toward the headstone. He shook his sleeve off his gauntlet to palm the stone’s surface. “Lay the coffin next to it.”

Another four men clad in the same sinister garments emerged from the darkness of the trees. Together, they bore the weight of an august wooden coffin, elaborately carved as if it carried a king. One of them lugged a burly rope with which to lower the coffin into the grave. When the men reached the clearing, they set the coffin down next to the headstone.

“The rest of the troop will arrive shortly,” said one of the two who had first entered the glade. Then the six men kneeled around the coffin, hands on their laps. The face of the casket shimmered in the moonlight like quicksilver.

“Our master is dead,” the first man proclaimed sorrowfully. “The greatest power ever known to this world has departed . . . and our invincible empire falls to rubble.”

A silence passed before the next man spoke, burying his face in his palms. “I do not understand . . .” he muttered. “He was a lich. You cannot kill the immortal!”

All eyes sank toward the coffin, as if in a unanimous resignation. “There were powers afoot within that temple that we cannot begin to comprehend,” said another man. “Our master was dabbling in forces beyond even his control. Too often did we witness their danger; it must have been no less than those forces that cost him his life.”

Before long, another wave of footsteps descended on the glade. An even larger gathering of cloaked men began making their way through the veils of tangled branches, stalwartly filing into the clearing where their master’s coffin rested. They were trailed by the last three of the men—bearers of tall, murky-gold candles that were etched with skeins of glyphs labyrinthine as the ridges of a fingerprint.

The candles were set on the ground—one at the casket’s head and one at each side of its base. As the men came to kneel around the coffin, one raised his hand and, as if by magic, with nary a touch to the wicks, the candles burst alight.

The assembly bowed low to the coffin, hoods wilting over their faces. They imbibed the fateful silence and, with folded hands, commenced their grim requiem.

“Master,” one of the men began to speak, “we are eternally indebted to you for ushering us into a new era of power and glory. Under your indomitable rule, our empire rose to conquer the mightiest kingdoms and dethrone the insolent monarchies that plague this world. You brought death and terror to our enemies; you rendered us powerful and feared by all. You always remained loyal to us, just as we remained loyal to you. You embodied the very essence of the Treus Aetherae, which you once conquered and wielded as your almighty weapon, but which ultimately turned against you in their untameable ways. Now, as we lay you down into this sacred earthen bed, we ask you, if you wish to show us—speak to us—one last time before you sleep. For even to the grave, we will always remain loyal to you, our Lord, Master, and one true leader.”

With shut eyes and fallen heads, the men awaited their master’s response. When the wind picked up and stirred the dead air, the assembly held their breath to listen, as if they were trying to divine words out of the rustling. The airstream coiled around them, cold like snakeskin; then it convulsed and burst into a squall. As the assembly opened their eyes, smiles spread across their faces.

With that sudden boast of wind, the topmost candle was knocked onto the edge of the casket. Its flame began to lick along the coffin, scoring its way up to the lid, where it lingered, burning the wood in a single place. The men gazed into the fluttering ember in anticipation, as if they expected a phantom to burst forth from the smoke, or the casket lid to lift by the hand of the corpse within. Instead, the flame moved. It drifted across the coffin, etching a faltering string of symbols into the wood. After it came still again, ashes settled in the black groove of its trail; and indeed, the symbols were letters, forming words:

I am not dead

The men leapt, quailed, and gasped. It was some time before anyone felt brave enough to end the silence. “I do not believe it . . .” murmured a wide-eyed man. “He truly is a lich!”

The next man laid a trembling hand on the lid of the coffin. “Master,” he quavered, “we ask you, what fate has befallen you, if you say you are not dead?”

The flame was mute at first; it appeared as if the force that had driven it were waning, unable to deliver its response. Then it moved again, creeping across the wood to produce a shivering inscription:

***I am alive
But my soul is trapped***

“Trapped!” one man exclaimed. “How is that possible?”

“That is not important!” interjected another, raising a hand for silence, then lowering it onto the coffin lid. “You say, Master, that you are not dead, and that your soul is trapped. What can we do to free you? Will you ever live among us again?”

The flame spiked fiercely, spewing sparks. This time without delay, it scrawled a promising answer:

When I regain my power

The assembly fell silent for lack of a reply. Still, the flame burned staunchly, as if in expectation. “How?” one man finally asked.

The flame moved slower this time; twice, it threatened to gutter out early. But it persevered long enough to engrave, as if in a whisper, a last response:

***My future followers
will lend their power to me***

The fire unraveled to fingers of smoke that reached for the night sky and dissipated. The followers were awestruck, bound still to their places on the forest floor. Said one of the men in a hoarse murmur, a grin flaring over his face:

“Our master, Drakathel, is alive.”



Morning Star



UNSET BURNED AWAY THE sky like flames set to a canvas of blue silk. The autumn air was crisp and still, disturbed only by the occasional drone of a passing vehicle or the fleeting whip of the wind. One young man, Magnus Wingheart, trod along the empty sidewalk with his hands in his pockets and a beaten messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

Inattentively, he surveyed the familiar, tranquil setting. The roadside was lined with a variety of quaint storefronts, most of which were base to an upper level of apartments. As if swathed in translucent gold silk, the rooftops caught the glow of the sun in the final minutes of its descent below the horizon.

Magnus turned a corner and made his way down a crescent road. He didn't need to travel far from the mouth of the street before arriving beneath the forest-green awning

of his brother's bookshop. After a clumsy struggle with his bag, he fished his keys out of his jeans pocket and unlocked the door, rattling the entrance bell. He lobbed the empty bag onto the floor as he stepped in, locking the shop door behind him.

Magnus scanned the soundless bookstore for his brother. Row upon row of wooden shelves filled his view, brimming with antique tomes. With no sign of his brother, Magnus presumed him to be out, or upstairs in their apartment. He noticed a scrap of paper taped to the cash register on the front desk and tore it off to read it—a note left for him by his brother. Bored disappointment trickled over his face.

I've gone out to run a few errands. Please check the notebook in the top right drawer for another list of book orders.

*Thanks,
Drake*

Magnus forced a dry smirk. While he was always willing to assist his brother, he often tired of the repetitious chores. One of the tasks he commonly assumed was sending out deliveries through a shipping depot a few blocks down the road—from where he had just returned after completing what he had hoped to be his last errand of the day. The shop frequently received orders, mainly for the rarity of the books that it sold; many dated back more than a century.

He wrenched the drawer open and extracted his brother's notebook. Glancing at the scrawled column of book titles, he dragged an empty cardboard box out from underneath the desk and hauled it to the nearest aisle of shelves.

Tackling the task with little enthusiasm, Magnus found himself placing more attention on the haunting orange glow that loomed over the street outside the shop window than on locating the books that his brother had marked for him. He idled as he became gripped by his musings, his mind cast adrift as clouds carried by wind.

Magnus had been helping his brother in the shop for some five years now, since he was eleven. Drake had started the business when he was nineteen, with the support of their then-guardian, Cecil Handel. Having raised the brothers for nearly a decade, Cecil was the closest that Magnus ever had to a father—his true parents, Brendan and Myra, had drowned in a sinking tour boat shortly after Magnus' birth. At least that was what Cecil and Drake had always told him. For Magnus, his parents' past was so vague that they would, at times, seem no less than imaginary. He had never seen as much as a photograph of them, and each time Magnus tried to press his brother for answers about their parents' tragic demise, the issue was brushed aside for the reason that it was too dreadful to discuss.

Magnus was jarred from his daydream by the obnoxious roar of a motorbike streaking past the bookshop. His lackluster stare trailed the bike down the road and into the fading sunset before falling back on the crate beside him, reminding him of his task.

Since Magnus was intimately familiar with the stock of the shop, it didn't take him long to gather up the books on Drake's list and pile them neatly inside the box. Seeing his work complete, Magnus scraped his brown locks out of his face and easily heaved the heavy crate up to his chest. He lumbered toward the back of the store, to the open doorway of the shop basement, where his brother stowed the books for delivery. Steadying his balance with the load in his arms, he began his descent down the basement's steep flight of stairs.

The air here was dank and musty, like that of a long-abandoned cellar. The basement was the one part of the bookshop that was rarely ever cleaned. Magnus had many times offered to do the task, but his brother was firm to refuse, insisting that he'd take care of it eventually. It was apparent, however, that Drake's workload prevented him from doing a thorough job. In hopeless disarray, books and crates were stacked about the basement floor, matted with dust. A beige rug mottled with inerasable filth was sprawled over the floor. There was no light aside from the few pale rays that managed to penetrate the grimy slits of the windows high up on the wall, and after sundown, it quickly grew dark here.

With the unwieldy crate obstructing his view, Magnus placed his step too far over a stair and stumbled. His heart lurched as he toppled forward and saw the hardwood floor tilt up to meet him. He lost his grip of the crate, which hurtled to the ground, casting its books in twenty directions.

Magnus groaned from the pain of his impact. He pulled

himself to his knees and began to collect the books that lay scattered from the foot of the stairs all the way to the farthest ends of the room. After gathering the lot, he took count; he was one book short. Magnus recounted, feeling certain he had scoured the entire basement. Of course, he could have easily overlooked something in such dim light. He had always disagreed with his brother over his refusal to install a lamp in the room. Drake had insisted that because the basement was rarely used, it wasn't worth spending the money—although a desk lamp or two would hardly cost a fortune.

The missing book was nowhere to be found. Magnus snatched a flashlight from one of the decrepit wooden shelves, flicked on its switch, and continued his search. He was close to giving up when the flashlight's beam caught a mysterious bulk underneath one of the shelving units. He lowered his head to the floorboards and aimed his light beneath the unit—there, the book lay.

Magnus set aside the flashlight and blindly reached for the book. To his surprise, his fingertips made contact with ice-cold metal. He flinched, leading his hand to collide with another, duller object—the book, which he quickly retrieved and returned to the box with the others. He reached for the flashlight again.

He flooded the light under the unit to examine the cold metal. On closer inspection, this nook was surprisingly clean for an area of a room that saw so little attention. A thin metal rod winked at him from the base of the wall; it looked as if it had been tossed there quite like the book.

Magnus tried to drag the rod out from under the shelves, but was only able to extract it halfway, as if it were snagged. With greater force, he managed to tug it free. It was, in fact, a short, blunt steel rod; stranger yet, it was welded to a length of heavy chain that appeared to run under the shelving and along into the floor. When Magnus attempted to haul out the entire length of the chain, something chittered beneath the basement rug—a sound like that of a key being turned in a lock.

Magnus lowered the rod and watched it mysteriously retract to its original position under the shelf with a steely clicking noise. Intrigued, he peeled back the rim of the rug to bare the hardwood slats beneath. Magnus' heart thudded into the back of his chest; a trapdoor had opened in the floor where the carpet once was, its fallen wood panel suspended from a hinge on its lip. A ladder was nailed to the rim of the opening, ushering the way into a pitch-dark shaft.

Magnus fell into a shocked stupor. This was the stuff of fiction—a trapdoor concealed so inconspicuously in the basement of his own brother's bookshop. Though he knew he ought to wait for Drake to return before exploring the chamber beyond, he could not resist the lure of his curiosity.

He seized the flashlight, flicked it on, and tilted its head into the hole. Nothing more could be seen than the dull shine of hardwood about seven feet below. With a clammy grip and a hammering heart, he lowered himself into the shaft and descended the coarse wooden ladder. The room above faded while the gloom below consumed him. As he arrived at the bottom of the shaft, he swept up his light.

An unremarkable table, mounded with at least a dozen books, and a matching chair stood in the room's center. The premises were confined, and made even more so by the hoard of books and wooden crates piled across the walls, spanning from the floor to the low ceiling.

Magnus drifted past the slovenly heaps. He cast the beam of his flashlight onto a particularly hefty volume—*The Markus Eal 3784 Herbology Encyclopaedia*. It looked antique, though it was in astoundingly good condition. Magnus would have been quick to reckon this place no more than a storage chamber left behind by the building's previous owners, but the lived-in appearance of the room suggested otherwise.

He flitted his light onto the face of another, smaller book—*Conjuring the Secondary Elements: The Fundamentals of Advanced Spellcasting*. He spent a moment puzzling over whether the volume was some form of occult book or fantasy novel before turning his attention to the table behind him.

Of the many books stacked here, only one caught Magnus' eye. Enfolded in a jacketless crimson hardcover, it lay at the edge of the table, in front of the chair. Magnus picked it up to examine its title, set in shimmering gold letters: *MorningStar*. But as his eyes drifted further down on the cover, his heart momentarily stopped—the author was Brendan Wingheart, his father.

Magnus had no time to think before he heard the entrance door chimes ring faintly from above him. "Magnus?" he heard Drake call out.

It took the boy several seconds to reply. "I'm downstairs," he hollered back. "In . . . the basement."

Magnus didn't quite know how to describe where he was, or if his brother would understand. But when he looked up through the trapdoor, he got his answer. There Drake stood at the peak of the shaft, a half-lit silhouette against the basement ceiling. His face revealed no surprise; rather, it was heavy with despondence, darkened by the shag of his brown hair.

Magnus tried to speak first, but Drake stopped him: "How did you find this?"

A bitter anger settled inside Magnus. It was obvious from his brother's vacant tone of voice that he had known about this place. The boy set the book back down onto the table and scaled the ladder to face Drake. "I came down into the basement to store the books you told me to gather," answered Magnus frigidly, "when I tripped on the stairs. I fell, and one of the books slid under a shelf . . ." He shone the flashlight back under the unit where he had discovered the steel rod and chain. ". . . where I found this."

Drake didn't even bother to look. Instead, he turned away with a sigh.

"Did you know about that trapdoor?" Magnus pried, almost certain of his brother's reply.

Drake's confession was prompt: "Yes. I did." Then he moved toward the shaft and lowered himself in. "Come."

Magnus descended the ladder without taking his eyes off his brother. The veins of his hands pulsed with ire against the splintered wooden rungs; his head pounded

until he began to feel faint and he questioned whether he might be dreaming. Once both he and Drake had reached the bottom, Magnus used his flashlight to steer his brother's attention to the crimson book on the table.

"This book . . ." Magnus said sternly, ". . . did our father really write this book? What is this place, and how come you never told me about it?" The more questions he asked, the more his fury boiled in him. He couldn't fathom why Drake would have wanted to hide something as important as a book that may have been written by one of their parents.

Remorse twisted Drake's face. He took a seat at the table and grasped the book in ashen hands. "This book *was* written by our father," he croaked with audible guilt. "This place is my study. Sometimes I come here to read when you're out with your friends or running an errand."

"But what's so special about this place that you'd want to hide it from me?" Magnus snapped, shivering. "And these . . ." He picked up one of the books from the table and read its title aloud: "*Chronicles of the Archmagi*. Why in the world would you stash all these . . . bizarre books down here? And what about the one our father wrote?"

Drake did not lift his head from *MorningStar's* cover. His silence seemed clotted with dread. "I hid these books from you for your own good, Magnus."

"What's so good about hiding our own father's past from me?" Magnus erupted. "My whole life I knew practically nothing about our parents! Why didn't you ever tell me about that book?"

Drake finally rose from his seat. He passed Brendan Wingheart's book back to Magnus. "First, read this," he said. "Then, we can talk. Then, you can ask as many questions as you please."

After silently considering the offer, Magnus assented with an icy nod. The smile that his brother returned was bent and feeble. Drake climbed the ladder, leaving Magnus behind in the study with his father's book in his hands.

Magnus was paralyzed by the storm of emotions that flooded him—anger, toward Drake, for having kept from him a part of their father's history; frustration, for not understanding why he did; and fear, in wondering whether there was truth to the suggestion that this study had been concealed for his own good.

He pulled up the chair and sat down at the table. He took note of what appeared to be a lantern perched at the table's edge, but failed to see any obvious way of igniting it. Its construction was more like a birdcage, with a clouded pane of glass obscuring the mechanism inside.

Magnus opened Brendan's book on the table and set down his flashlight to illuminate the pages. His fingertips swept through the yellowed sheets, coming to rest on a page near the end of the book. He skimmed over the text voraciously:

After the war, exceptionally few of Recett's followers were found to remain loyal, or even alive, at last allowing Serenia a much-needed opportunity to recuperate after its gruesome battle.

As for Recett himself, although many claimed to have seen him dead, some even declaring to have been his slayer, no evidence has, of yet, been brought forth to Council that would offer proof of the warlord's death. Though the possibility of his survival must be seriously considered, it is not likely that Recett will ever again pose a threat with his forces in such a crippled state.

Magnus was endlessly perplexed by the mere paragraph he had read. Once he'd finish the book, he wouldn't know where to start questioning his brother. *I'll start*, he decided, *from the beginning*. So, as he reopened the book at its first page, taking his flashlight in a hand aquiver, he began, ardently, to read his father's words.



In Shade and Shadow



IT WAS NEARLY TWO HOURS past midnight when the blackout struck Northvalley Crescent. The sudden collapse of an electrical pole had downed the power to some three dozen stately properties that branched off the narrow main road. Sunken in the depths of an overgrown vale, the unlit street seemed darker than the night sky above it.

The houses here were perched on sprawling grounds of wooded slopes and hillocks. Despite their mansionesque size, none were extravagant in appearance. The area's wealth of streetlamps usually served as an effective deterrent against all forms of unsavory activity, but in tonight's blackout, one home had already drawn a curious figure.

Outside of number twenty-four Northvalley, a man loitered on the sidewalk that hemmed the main road. He was swaddled in a dense overcoat that draped to his feet, his

neck roped in a wool scarf. He stood with a nonchalant slouch, but his eyes were avidly watchful of his surroundings. He took into view another murky character, who made his approach from the far end of the sidewalk.

The second figure was bundled in a similar coat and scarf and crowned with a wide-brimmed fedora; most strikingly, his burly frame towered close to seven feet high. His hands were plunged deep into his pockets and his face was half-buried in his scarf, as if he felt unusually chilled in the mild autumn weather.

The tall man stopped next to his partner. "Looks like the whole street is out," he remarked.

The shorter man nodded with a furtive glance across the empty road. "You did well."

"I toppled the whole pole. Did you hear it from here?"

"A dull thud. Hardly enough to wake anyone."

"Good." The tall man motioned toward the residence. "Let's get moving. We have only as long as it'll take them to restore the power."

Together, the men slipped through the gateway of the wrought-iron fence that encircled the property. They surveyed the driveway ahead of them, which climbed a steep hill to meet the mansion's distant silhouette. As they began their ascent, they veered off the paved path to walk alongside the thickly hedged north end of the grounds. Halfway up the hill, they halted and looked skyward.

Even in the stifling darkness, it was clear to see that the clouds above number twenty-four Northvalley that night did not behave the way of ordinary clouds. Ordinary clouds

do not churn and shift by their own accord, nor do they throb as if they were coursing with life. Ordinary clouds are not black like the heart of an abyss, nor do they glimmer with cadaverous outlines like the surface of the River Styx. However, these were not ordinary clouds.

The shorter man raised his hand, which became lit with sputtering black embers. In response, the rolling mass of clouds above the mansion jolted, like an idle puppet stirred by a tug of its strings. As he lowered his arm, the clouds obeyed him.

Swiftly, the clouds began to descend, disbanding into smaller billows of smoke that wove a veil to engulf the mansion rooftops. They were like specters spawned from the darkness itself, swirling with uncanny coordination, like a flock with a single mind. Their murmuring robbed the wind of its breath until the air seemed to cringe in agony.

Just after the specters had covered the second storey of the building, the two men were jarred by the rattle of an igniting engine. The instant they turned their heads, they saw a pair of high-beam headlights flicker alive in the distance. With the beastly roar of a motor and the howl of rubber on tarmac, a pickup truck burst out of the shadows at the top of the hill and careened down the driveway with manic speed.

The shorter man whipped back his hand, and the specters' descent ceased instantly. The sparks about his fingertips blazed to kindle an orb of flame black as a cinder. He lunged, hurtling the fireball toward the speeding pickup. But the truck thundered on without flinching in its

course. In a blur, the vehicle had passed, and the projectile splattered over the lawn with a vitriolic hiss.

The man shook the smoldering remnants off his hand and scowled ferociously. As the car swerved onto the main road with a stammering screech, it sped away, leaving the drone of its engine clinging to the silence for several seconds afterward.

“How could he have seen us?” the tall man sputtered.

“It was probably the shades that he saw,” replied his partner. “He must have been awake when I called them down.”

“What do you reckon we do now?”

The shorter man turned back toward the mansion and resumed his ascent. “He isn’t all we’re after. We search the house regardless.”

As the men advanced, the specters, too, gathered pace and continued to envelop the house within their writhing funnel. Now scarcely four meters ahead, the smoky specters could be seen with more clarity—they were distinctly skeletal, with empty concaves for eyes and fleshless jaws sealed in unbending grins. Chain-thin arms and claws dangled at their sides, though the rest of their forms were lost in mist like amorphous black gowns. They glided as if by the aimless currents of the wind as they trickled further into the grounds about the residence.

The men hastened over the peak of the hillside until they both arrived at the mansion. Under the specters’ pall, the house appeared like little more than a mirage. Its front entrance was carved into an ivied façade and preceded by

a flight of stone steps. Next to a great bay window was a half-opened garage from where the pickup truck had made its exit.

When the shorter man reached the door, a fleeting tug on the handle confirmed it to be locked, though this did not seem to concern him. As he brought an upturned palm to level with the door lock, a shadowy vapor stole over his hand.

A plume of black mist and splinters erupted from the face of the door with a clamor of snapping steel. When the debris settled, the door lock had been mangled as if by an explosion, rent from its place in the wood, broken and scorched. The man delivered a crushing kick to the foot of the door and broke it ajar, the warped remnants of its lock clattering to the floor.

“Wait,” the tall man barked. “What about the shades?”

“Leave them,” his partner snapped, his boot already leaning over the doorstep. “No one can see them in this darkness anyhow. They will depart along with us.”

The tall man nodded, and the two entered the mansion, which seemed even darker than the grounds outside. From under his coat, the shorter man produced a peculiar utensil—a leather-bound shaft topped with a closed steel funnel, something resembling a disproportionate flashlight. He wrenched the lip of the instrument’s funnel, parting a disc of interlocking metal blades to bare a glass lens beneath; then, without as much as a flick of a switch, a flood of dazzling rays poured forth from the funnel and threw back the shadows. The tall man repeated the ritual with his own flashlight.

Now dappled by the glow of their lamps, the men's features became at least partially visible. The shorter man had a sickly complexion and eyes like sunken shards of jasper, shaded by curtains of flimsy brown hair. His mouth looked as if it had been carved by a knife, like an unpliant slit in a mask. The man's name was Noctell Knever, and his arctic expression alone bespoke his character.

The tall man slackened the coil of his scarf and tipped up the brim of his hat, unveiling his face. His eyes were deep garnet, buried under a thick and stony brow. His nose jutted like an ill-positioned hook that dangled over thin lips, complementary to the shape of his face that was whittled to a dull point at his chin. His most prominent feature, however, was his skin—it was bloodred, blotted with patches of dry, hard scales. When he peeled off his bulging leather gloves, he revealed obsidian-black claws in place of his fingernails. The man's name was Raven Gaunt—though his monstrous appearance made it difficult to call him a man at all.

The two intruders waved their lights across the few wooden fixtures in the room, which appeared to be a foyer. "What are we searching for?" Raven asked matter-of-factly.

"Nothing too specific . . ." Noctell drawled, eyes trailing the ray of his flashlight. "Since the fool escaped before we could pry any answers out of him, we'll have to find answers in his possessions. Naturally, anything of use to us would bear the Winghearts' name—Brendan's or his son's."

Raven cast a bitter glance across the foyer. "The man is a book hoarder, and this place is nothing short of a mansion. Finding anything of use here will take till sunrise."

“We’re not returning empty-handed.” Noctell directed a scowl over his shoulder. “Provided the power isn’t restored sooner, we have four hours until dawn. Search quickly.”

“We’ll split up to cover more rooms,” Raven added.

Noctell waved the beam of his lamp over the two doorways in view. “I’ll go straight,” he motioned ahead. “You take the other door. We’ll meet up later on.”

Raven listlessly obeyed his partner’s command and sauntered out of the foyer. Noctell steadied his light as he walked on, into an expansive living room. Much of the furniture here was antique, Victorian in appearance. Twin settees were arranged at opposite ends of a luscious carpet, accompanied by an assortment of armchairs and a stout wooden table. The stone fireplace, stoked with charred logs, had its mantle cluttered with tarnished bronze and ceramic trinkets. Bookshelves were abundant here also, scattered between glass display cases and vivid oil paintings that left no portion of the walls unadorned.

Noctell turned to the bookcase immediately at his left and skimmed its contents. Many of the books were impressively old, though few appeared to be organized in any particular manner. Shifting his attention impatiently, he found the volumes on an adjacent shelving unit to be arranged just as chaotically. He began tearing out the books at random, striving to uncover something of importance, but he found even the most intriguing volumes to be useless when he leafed them. Hardcover thudded to the floor like shot birds.

He discarded what seemed like the last of nearly a

hundred books and heaved an irritable sigh. Grudgingly, he conducted a final search of the room. His scrutiny wandered from a tidy stack of newspapers to four unopened envelopes and an erratically marked wall calendar. When none offered anything of relevance, he was drawn to a cabinet topped with a quaint red telephone.

Noctell swept open the upper drawer of the cabinet. From a mire of loose papers inside, he withdrew a tattered booklet in black faux leather—an address book. He scanned its entries with a sleuth's eye, but failed to see his target's name listed anywhere. Finding nothing else worthy of his attention, he strolled on through a second doorway, into what appeared to be a library.

This place was nearly double the size of the living room and far more commodious. No part of the walls was visible here, for they were submerged behind a seamless procession of bookcases that towered from the floor to the lofty ceiling. The chain of shelving was interrupted only by a vast window draped with tasseled red damask; a great round table sat nearby.

Noctell's paces resonated on the hardwood as he plodded to the opposite end of the room. He faced a bookshelf and scanned it downward from its unreachable peak. The books here appeared to bear more solid order, but their sheer multitude was devastating. If there were anything of value to be found among the myriad of volumes, it would take well past dawn to find it.

He turned to a three-drawer table at the side of the bookcase. Its surface was bare, save for a potted ivy plant

with vines that straggled over the table's edge. Noctell yanked open the middle drawer to find a miscellany of household trinkets mixed in with scrawled-on stationery. As he scooped out the mess, noisily spilling a pair of scissors and a broken pocket knife, the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears. He redirected his light to see Raven emerge into the library through a distant second entrance.

Noctell waited until his partner had come close enough before hollering to him: "Anything?"

"Nothing," Raven replied snappishly. "The house is monstrous. Either we waste an hour skimming the surface or spend a day hollowing out every bookcase and cabinet."

"We're not trying to find a cache of jewels," Noctell retorted. He leafed the papers in his hands mechanically. "Anything with a shadow of significance will suffice. Our chances are best if we limit our search to the library and rummage through any loose papers we see."

Raven allowed his gaze and his light to wander until they fell on an arrangement of furniture in the corner of the room. There was a fanciful, multi-drawer writing desk—an *escritoire*—covered by papers and paired with a high-backed armchair. "Checked that desk yet?" Raven muttered.

Noctell shook his head and followed the hulking shadow of his partner toward the *escritoire*. Raven batted a collection of ballpoint pens off the desk surface and gathered up the remaining papers. These were letters, some unopened, others tucked inside torn envelopes. Noctell paused, as

if in thought, then cast away the pages in his hand and tore open one of the unit's lower drawers. He stole out a generous mound of tattered envelopes and riffled through them voraciously, halting at the sight of a familiar name.

Noctell grinned as if he had struck riches. "Let's go."

"What?" Raven started at Noctell's brusque command. His partner handed him an empty envelope.

"This letter appears to have been sent by Drake Wingheart." Noctell beamed, discarding the rest of the envelopes in a fluttering rain of parchment. "His address is on it. We've found all we need."

Raven's brow twitched as his face came alight. "That'll do nicely." He swiped the envelope and sheathed it into a pocket in his coat lining.

"Looks like we're finally closing in," Noctell added wryly. "It can't be much longer before Handel and Wingheart are both ours."

"It's taken long enough as it is," Raven huffed. "I feel like I've spent half my life searching for a bloody address."

"No matter." Noctell padded away from the *escritoire*, into the sapphirine moonlight streaming through the library window. "It's nearly over with now. Be thankful that all our efforts weren't in vain."

Raven drew beside his partner and gazed out the window from under the brim of his hat. "Where now? Do we hail another cab out of here and find Wingheart's street?"

"The address points to another city," Noctell replied. "And we haven't a clue how far away it is. We're not going to stage a break-in in broad daylight, and we don't have

long until sunrise. We'll transport back to MorningStar, then we can plan our next steps."

Raven nodded, and Noctell reached beneath his coat collar. He extracted an ominous-looking pendant strung by a waxed black cord—a stone skull, made up of a spherical scalp and a notched cylinder for its teeth. Its two slanted eye holes formed a mocking frown that seemed unnaturally expressive for a piece of crude jewellery.

In thin fingers, Noctell wrenched the pendant's cylinder loose, then began to unscrew it. On the final turn, as the skull's teeth popped out like a cork, a flood of smoke-thin black ashes gushed out from the open cavity.

Like a silken hand, the ashes stretched and wound about the bodies of Noctell and Raven, sealing them in a cinereous shroud. The moment the cloud rose overtop Raven's fedora, it collapsed and dispersed to mist, leaving nothing behind. Consumed by the ashes, the men had vanished.



Cecil Handel lowered his binoculars. Far below him, Northvalley Crescent loomed like a canyon of shadows. His feet retained their grip on the thicketed hillside even while both his legs and arms coursed with tremors. The air, which carried scarcely a breeze, felt arctic against his face.

After narrowly escaping the assault on his home, Cecil had fled in his pickup truck to a secluded side street on the summit of the valley's eastern wall. From there, he had managed to keep watch of his house by the glimmer of its

intruders' flashlights behind its windows. When the lights had suddenly disappeared, so had his ability to perceive anything in the blackout.

Cecil turned to survey the dead-end road behind him where he had parked his pickup, still not easing his clasp on his binoculars. Though the houses here were dark, the streetlights were operational. He hoped that, at such an early hour, he would not be seen as a dubious loiterer; but he knew that this was, by far, the least of his concerns.

He knew what were the creatures that had descended on his mansion. He was familiar with them—perhaps too much so. He knew from where they had come; he knew the aims of the man who had sent them, and he feared gravely for the people who would be targeted next.

Cecil darted for his pickup, his shadow cleaving the still rays of the streetlights. *I dreaded this day*, his mind raced. He dove inside the car and slammed the door shut. *Sixteen years haven't made them give up.*

As the roar of his engine broke across the silent road, Cecil spun his pickup around and sped off ahead into the night.



A Turn For the Worse



AGNUS KNEELED to collect the morning paper at the foot of the doorstep. Dawn's glow smarted his eye as he rose. The storefronts lining the opposite side of the street were still daubed in shadow, the sun's rays only beginning to seep over the eastern rooftops.

Magnus turned to grip the chill-bitten handle of the apartment door tucked behind the end of the bookshop window. Striding through, he made his way up the steep flight of stairs to the second floor.

He entered the apartment. The living room was fairly large for a residence so discreetly nestled above a bookshop. Blanketed by the dull shine of a floor lamp, an oval glass table stood before a beaten couch and a pair of matching seats. Though the premises were well kept, they were piled

with dated newspapers and book-filled cardboard boxes that had found their way upstairs from the bookshop's packed storeroom.

Magnus' gaze immediately took hold of the scintillant book on the table—his father's book, *MorningStar*, which stood out like a jewel in an otherwise drab tableau. His heart flinched as he picked up the book. It had been a little under a week since he'd first discovered it; the previous night, he'd finally turned its last page. His brother had promised him an answer to every one of his questions once he'd read the book entirely, and Magnus wouldn't waste a day to hear them.

He turned and headed left, through the doorway of the kitchen. Drake was there, rummaging out a pair of plates from the overhead cabinet. He whipped around and hastily laid the dishes on the dining table, outstretching a hand to his younger brother to accept the morning paper. "Thank you, Magnus."

But as Magnus approached, he dropped the newspaper onto the table and passed *MorningStar* into Drake's open hand instead. "I've finished it," he declared. "Just last night. Now we can talk."

Drake gaped, as if caught off guard. He hardened his grip on the book and stammered when he tried to muster a response. Then he laid the book aside and quickly diverted his attention back to the kitchen counter. "Later. Later this afternoon when the shop is closed. We can't spend time now discussing something so . . . complex."

“The shop doesn’t open for a couple hours,” Magnus protested. “Can’t you at least tell me now why those books were hidden down there in the first place?”

“Please, Magnus, these aren’t questions I can answer in five minutes!” Drake hastened to distribute cutlery over the table, dodging eye contact with his brother.

“You don’t have to,” Magnus countered. “We can talk over breakfast. I don’t expect you to answer all my questions now; I just want to know why you’d hide our own father’s past from me! I’ve waited a week to ask you!”

Drake picked up his head and feebly attempted to reply, but he was cut short by a clamant rapping on the apartment door. The brothers stiffened and spun toward the noise. Seconds later, the knocking repeated. Drake glanced at his wristwatch as he hurried out of the kitchen. “Who in their right mind . . . ?”

Magnus trailed his brother through the living room and down the entrance staircase. Drake strained to peer through the door viewer, then pulled away with wide eyes. He turned the lock and swept open the door. “Cecil!”

A wiry, middle-aged man stood in the entranceway. His face was framed with dark-gray hair that straggled down the length of his neck and brushed the collar of his olive-green trench coat. His sapphirine eyes were bright, but his smile was thin and faltering as he greeted the older Wingheart. “Good morning, Drake.” He tipped his head, hands buried inside his pockets. “I—I’m sorry for disturbing you so dreadfully early.”

“Oh, no disturbance at all! Come right in!” Drake

showed Cecil Handel inside the tight vestibule. “But what on earth brings you here at this hour? Is everything alright?”

Cecil seemed more intent on sealing the door behind him than on answering Drake’s question. He greeted Magnus with a brusque nod. “No, no, everything’s . . .” he choked on his words when he turned to face Drake again. “Perhaps we’d better talk inside.”

Drake gulped; his eyes twitched as he extended a hand. “Let me take your coat.”

Cecil passed his coat to Drake and followed the older brother up the staircase. Magnus lumbered behind with unease. He was disappointed at having been cut short in his questioning about the book, but his former guardian’s solemnity told of far more pressing matters.

It was not a rare occasion that Cecil would travel to meet the brothers in their shop, despite the arduous length of the drive. Whether he would come to donate books from his immeasurable collection, or simply for an afternoon visit, he seemed never to abandon his cheery air—until today.

The three headed into the kitchen, where Drake slung the coat over the back of a chair and nervously ushered Cecil to a seat at the dining table. “Have you . . . have you had breakfast yet?” he stammered.

“No, I haven’t.” Cecil directed a searing stare at the older brother. “I’m afraid I left my house in a bit of a rush this morning.”

Drake nodded uneasily. He swiveled over to the counter and began to trifle with any utensils at his disposal, as if to stall while he devised a response. Magnus pulled up a

chair next to Cecil and tried to think of something worth saying, but the troubling silence weighed his mouth shut. His lungs tightened when he noticed that Cecil's attention had drifted onto the book *MorningStar* on the table, where his brother had left it minutes earlier.

"Magnus came across the book last week," Drake blurted out, then slowed his speech. "He just finished reading it yesterday night."

Cecil's expression morphed from shock to curiosity. "I see." He took the book into his hands and slanted a look at the younger Wingheart. "So?" he asked. "Did you enjoy your father's book, Magnus?"

Irritation hardened Magnus' face. It was apparent that Cecil had known of the book just as Drake had. "An interesting read," he remarked icily. "I didn't know that my father wrote fiction."

"Fiction?" Cecil was impassive. "I assure you this is no work of fiction."

"None of the places mentioned in there ever existed," Magnus objected, "and none of what it says ever happened . . . anywhere. The whole thing reads like some surreal piece of fantasy."

After a despairing pause, Cecil replied. "I wish I could tell you that every word of this book was purely fabricated," he said, "that this is no more than a tale of fantasy. But if that were so, I'm afraid I would not have come to alert you to the danger we face."

Magnus pulled a bewildered frown and turned to Drake in consultation. His brother's face was full of terror. "What

happened?” Drake exclaimed, buckling over to clutch the edge of the table.

“They found us, Drake,” Cecil said at the end of his breath. “Last night, my house was attacked.”

“Attacked!” Magnus nearly sprang upright. “Attacked by whom?”

But Cecil’s attention remained fixed on Drake, who descended, trembling, into the third of the four chairs around the dining table. “By whom, Cecil?” Drake repeated Magnus’ question with more sobriety.

Cecil slumped back into his seat, sighing through gritted teeth. “It was shortly after 2 a.m.,” he began. “I was woken by an alarm, specifically one by my bedside that’s triggered when my home security system is deactivated. The house was pitch-dark and none of the lights worked. By the looks of it, the area’s power had gone out. I couldn’t see much out of my window . . . until I looked up.” He turned away to the floor with a grimace. “I’d recognize those ghastly clouds anywhere. An entire shade horde had gathered above the house.”

“A *what?*” Magnus interjected, but was promptly silenced by his brother: “Please, Magnus,” Drake quavered.

“I grabbed a flashlight, a change of clothes, and my coat, and made for the garage,” Cecil continued. “I managed to get in my car just in time. As I sped out and down the driveway, someone assaulted me from the dark, but I was moving too fast for them to land a hit.

“I escaped unscathed, thank heavens. I was forced to take a cumbersome detour because the road was blocked by

a collapsed electrical pole—clearly the cause of the blackout and the doing of the people who attacked me. I headed for a cul-de-sac that overlooks Northvalley; from there, I was able to survey my house with a pair of binoculars I store in my pickup. There were at least two people inside; their flashlights were visible through the windows. But they vanished after barely an hour. I can only assume that they found what they came for, else they wouldn't have fled so quickly.

“Whatever they found, of course, you'd be their obvious next targets. I stopped for supplies and made it here as fast as I could. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but . . . I suppose we knew this day would come.”

“What is all this?” Magnus asked again in a more demanding volume. “Who attacked you? What were they after? None of what you're saying makes any sense until you explain!”

“I'll explain later, Magnus!” Drake pleaded, but his brother remained unconvinced.

“And why would they want us next?” Magnus persisted. “If we're being hounded by a bunch of book thieves, then we'll just call the police!”

“Book thieves! I wish!” Cecil scoffed grimly. He pinned wide eyes on the boy. “There is nothing the police can do. There is nothing we can do. We must flee from here by sundown or risk being slaughtered in our beds!”

“No!” Magnus snapped. “Not until one of you explains to me what any of this means! It's enough that I've had to wait a week just to ask why my own father's book was kept

hidden from me; now we're blindly running away from something, and I don't even know what!"

"Now is not the time, Magnus!" Cecil gripped Magnus' shoulders with shaking hands. "I promise you, soon all will be explained, but for now we must leave! Leave! We are in danger, and that is all that matters!"

Magnus said nothing in reply. He made his frustration clear by his scowl.

"I'm sorry, Magnus." Cecil sighed, mellowing. "We'll talk as soon as we're out of here and on the road."

"Where will we go?" Drake pulled a bleak frown.

"I believe the shelter outside Markwell would serve us best," Cecil answered the older brother, who gave an understanding nod. "It will, of course, take us most of the day to reach it. Assuming that Recett won't pull off another attack until dusk, we have plenty of time to pack and head out. Still, we'd be wise to leave soon and reach our destination before dark. Night will blind us by the time we reach the countryside if we leave here too late."

Drake propped his forehead in his palm. "Magnus," he muttered without lifting an eye to his brother. "Go and pack any of your things you'll need for at least a week. We may be gone for quite a while."

"Pack a couple of sleeping bags also, if you have them," Cecil added. "In the place we're heading, I don't have much to offer in the way of a bed."

Magnus shook Cecil's grasp off his shoulders as he rose from his seat. With only a wordless scowl to each of his companions, he swiped *MorningStar* off the table and

briskly exited the kitchen. After a despondent pause, Drake turned to his former guardian in an invitation to break the silence.

“Does he know . . . ?” Cecil said, barely above a whisper.

“Nothing more besides what he read,” Drake answered.

“How did he discover the book to begin with?”

“He found it in the storeroom chamber. Somehow he stumbled upon the trapdoor while I was out.”

Cecil’s stare hung over Magnus’ empty chair. “Rather ironic, isn’t it,” he murmured, “how that book came to surface only a week before this whole mess started up again.”

Drake nodded ponderously, lowering his head into his hands. “I was naïve to think I could bury our entire past under the floorboards. It would have been better if he’d found that book long ago. Maybe then we could have done something to prevent this.”

“That isn’t something you can regret,” said Cecil. “We could have done nothing. It seems no matter where we would have fled, we would only have been delaying the inevitable.”

“Does this always have to be about fleeing?” Drake replied irritably. “Of course, nothing will ever change if all we do is run from one hiding place to another!”

“Can we do anything else?” Cecil gave a dismal shrug. “Last night was a vivid reminder of the enemy we face. It is an enemy we are powerless against, and one that will stop at nothing to achieve its goals. We cannot fight it, and that is why we run from it.”

Despair settled over Drake’s face. He hauled himself

up from his seat and plodded past the table, halting in the doorway of the kitchen. “You’re right,” he conceded. “We should start packing. We’ll want to leave here by noon.”

“We ought to take along any books that require safe-keeping,” Cecil suggested, rising to draw beside the older Wingheart. “Specifically those under the storeroom. I can load them on the back of my truck.”

“Not many—only those of significant use or value.” Drake turned suddenly to his former guardian. “And my father’s satchel as well. The stone and the notebook should still be in it.”

“Of course.” Cecil gave a mindful nod. “We wouldn’t want to leave behind the things we’re being hunted for to begin with.”



Magnus found himself growing less and less attentive of the situation at hand. As he abstractedly fed the contents of his dresser into his travel bag, his thoughts were carried further off along tides of aggravation and confusion. Never in his life had he felt so lonesome—as if he hardly knew his own brother. The discovery of his father’s book had already put into question much of what he’d been told about his past, but Cecil’s bewildering warning seemed to suggest that far more had been kept from him.

Reviewing the lot of his belongings, Magnus shut the dresser vigorously and sealed the full bag. His gaze drifted to the ceiling as he slumped against the side of his bed.

“I wish I could tell you that every word of this book was purely fabricated,” Cecil’s voice throbbed in Magnus’ mind, *“that this is no more than a tale of fantasy. But if that were so, I’m afraid I would not have come to alert you to the danger we face.”*

Magnus turned to retrieve *MorningStar* from where he had earlier left it on his bed. His hands embraced the vintage texture of the book’s fabric binding. *Why should the reality of my father’s stories be tied to Cecil’s attack?* he mused to himself. He sought answers in the pages of the book, which he thumbed through vigilantly.

“... Council of MorningStar ...” fragmented phrases flitted past Magnus’ eyes, *“... armored troops to the Serenian Border ... swayed by councillor Larke’s harangue ...”* The words that had perplexed him over the course of last week were made no clearer after Cecil’s arrival. This was a telling of a history that never took place, yet it was, according to his former guardian, nothing less than fact.

“... that Recett’s forces had reached the outskirts of Nayr.” Magnus was jarred by a single sentence that entered into his vision. Recett—it was as if the name were haunting him. The book was riddled with mentions of this supposedly powerful person; just earlier, even Cecil had uttered the name: *“Assuming that Recett won’t pull off another attack until dusk ...”* he had said.

Eras Recett, Magnus recalled the man’s full name as he had read it in his father’s book. *Who is he?* The book seemed to portray him as a councilman who became a cult leader and warlord—a general whose commanding might resided

in his vast army of devotees and mercenaries. According to Brendan, Eras had seized one of the largest cities within a land known as Serenia, only to suffer a narrow defeat to the Guard of the capital city of MorningStar.

But even the absurdity of that story paled in comparison to the book's offhand references to sword fighting, crossbows, and magical conjuring. Whatever sort of tale this was, it certainly wasn't factual—though Cecil had insisted otherwise. *Then what is it?* Magnus repeated a question that had plagued him from the moment he'd first picked up the book. The back cover offered nothing save for a silvery stamp that read "Elkridge Press." The first pages of the book contained what he assumed to be publishing details, but even these were maddeningly obscure.

"Have you finished packing, Magnus?" Drake's call from the living room jolted the boy from his ruminations.

Magnus hastily stuffed the book into a pocket of his bag and slung the load crosswise over his shoulder. "Coming," he answered barely loud enough for his brother to hear.

He exited his bedroom with a melancholy gait and proceeded down the short hall back into the living room. Drake stood there alone, saddled with a pair of swollen travel bags. He motioned to a third piece of luggage slumped at his feet. "Take your sleeping bag," he said. "We're ready to go."

Magnus hauled the last bag over his free shoulder. "Where's Cecil?"

"Outside, loading the pickup," Drake replied. His attention clung to empty space. "We're taking along some of the

books from . . . that room under the basement.” He slanted an eye at the boy. “Did you take *MorningStar*?”

Magnus nodded, feeling for the bulk of the book along the side of his bag. As the brothers retrieved their jackets off the coat stand by the entranceway, Drake heaved a sigh and trudged on down the staircase. Magnus followed him.

Each step of his descent, Magnus felt as if he were fading further from his life of normality and everything that he had ever known to be true and sound. Even if he were to return here soon, it did not seem likely that anything would be the same as it had been before he discovered his father’s book.

Drake swept open the apartment door, drawing the autumn wind inside the vestibule. Cecil’s pickup was parked across from the bookshop, loaded neatly with cardboard boxes. Enfolded in his trench coat, Cecil stood by the driver’s door of the vehicle like the brothers’ dutiful chauffeur in wait to depart.

As Magnus shut the door behind him, following Drake toward the pickup, he savored the sight of the bookshop’s homely storefront. It was hard not to be gripped by the fear of uncertainty—whether or not he would ever return to see this place again. *You will*, a wary inner voice promised him. *Once this is all over with, you’ll make it back here as if nothing ever happened.* But still, the prospect seemed doubtful.

Magnus turned away mournfully and found himself standing next to his brother. Drake’s gaze was similarly fixed on the shop. He did not appear to hold any more

confidence than Magnus, nor any less fear about their safe return. His eyes shifted to lock with his brother's, but it seemed as if he could not bear to look for long. He shuddered and whipped around, hastening to the vehicle that awaited them.

The Barren Road



DEATHLY SILENCE PREVAILED through the first ten minutes of the drive. It seemed as though neither of the brothers were bold enough to speak first. Cecil handled the wheel in an ironhard grip; Drake sat stiffly, glassy-eyed, scarcely ever turning to his companions on either end of the truck's bench seat.

Magnus hadn't lifted his head once during the drive so far. All his attention rested on the book in his hands—*MorningStar*, whose golden script caught the gleam of the sun flickering in through the pickup window. Though he sat motionless, his mind was restless. The silence was growing difficult to endure, but it felt as if any words he formed on his lips were immediately smothered by the anxiety that was so thick in the air.

They drove on for several more minutes before turning onto the highway that led out of the city. At last, Magnus

gathered the nerve to utter the first words since their departure. "Where are we going?" he asked, not shifting his eyes from the book in his lap.

"Far from here." Cecil's reply was surprisingly prompt. "To a remote hamlet named Markwell. Deep in the countryside and virtually impossible to locate on a map."

"And your shelter is there?" Magnus replied with audible sarcasm.

"In a neighboring forest, yes," said Cecil. "The shelter isn't large, but comfortable. It was made for a situation such as this and should serve us well."

As Magnus fell silent, his brother suddenly joined in the dialogue. "How . . . did they find you?" Drake faltered. "I never got a chance to ask you in the apartment."

"I've been wondering about that myself." Cecil smiled dryly. "In retrospect, I suppose you could say it was a result of my own ignorance. About a month ago, I attended a national antique book fair with the hope of acquiring a few volumes I'd been searching for. While there, I made a couple of connections with some of the vendors . . . as well as one visitor who seemed to take an awful lot of interest in me and my collection.

"He was a well-dressed fellow, not much older than I. He struck up a conversation with me while I was browsing a book cart, offhandedly inquiring about what sorts of books I was looking for. We chatted a while. As it turned out, he lived just a couple of hours away from me. He was keen to see my collection for himself, so I gave him my phone number and invited him to call so that we could arrange

a meeting. I never heard from him since. I'm inclined to believe that the only meeting that resulted from our encounter took place last night. And it wasn't a pleasant one, certainly."

Drake furrowed his face. "You think he was the one who attacked you?"

"Not him, no. The man I spoke with must have been only a scout. Recett would have sent someone of greater caliber to carry out an attack."

"Attacker or not, that doesn't make much sense . . . what would one of Recett's scouts be doing at a book fair?"

"Looking for me, no doubt," Cecil snapped. "They know my trade. What better place to search for a book collector? They must have traced the phone number directly to my address. It's the only way they could have found me."

"But your number is unlisted."

"Makes little difference to them. Any number can be traced, especially for someone as persistent as Recett." Cecil irritably struck his palm against the wheel. "For over a decade, I've taken every measure possible to keep out of sight and prevent something like this from happening. Yet when one of Recett's own men walks up to me, I practically invite him to my home!"

Drake heaved a sigh. "You can't blame yourself. There was no way you could have known."

"After sixteen years of safety, one tends to let down one's guard," Cecil lamented. "The fault is mine. But there's no sense dwelling on it now."

After three seconds of silence had passed, Magnus

turned the subject back to his own questions. “That name,” he said. “That name you keep mentioning. Recett . . . who is he?”

With no more than a glance in Magnus’ way, Drake uneasily replied, “You . . . you read about him in our father’s book, didn’t you?”

“Eras Recett,” Magnus recited the man’s full name. “The book says he was a warlord.”

Drake seemed to find difficulty in wording his response. “Eras . . . is the name he used to go by,” he said with a stammer. “He’s now known as *Daimos* Recett. He’s . . . a powerful man who’s been hunting us for many years.”

“What?” Magnus blurted out. “Why didn’t you ever tell me this? Hunting us for what?”

“For something he thinks we own.” Drake’s voice began to quaver. “Something of our father’s.”

“But what is it?” Magnus’ tone turned more demanding. He flashed up the cover of Brendan’s book. “*MorningStar*?”

“No, no, it’s . . .” Drake tried to answer, but suddenly fell mute.

“It’s a collection of research done by your father,” Cecil interjected. “Recett is after it because he sees it as a threat to his life.”

“And why’s that?” Magnus prodded. “What’s the research about?”

Cecil pursed his lips. “We’ll have to discuss that later. The point of the matter is that we don’t actually have the research. Recett only assumes so because of your being Brendan’s sons.”

Magnus frowned. “Then where is this research?”

“None of us knows. Most likely it’s long destroyed. But Recett isn’t willing to accept that.”

Magnus paused, mesmerized by the light-play on the face of the book. “Why is it again that the police can’t do anything about this? Regardless of what kind of criminal is chasing us, why are you so averse to getting the law involved?”

“Because we are not dealing with *criminals*,” Cecil stressed. “We are not dealing with petty robbers who wield guns and knives. The law enforcers can’t defend us from something they are powerless against.”

“Then what in the world are we running away from?” Magnus barked, endlessly frustrated by the ambiguity of Cecil’s answers.

But once again, Magnus’ inquiry was met with cold silence. It was as if neither Cecil nor Drake had even heard the boy. “Back in the apartment,” Magnus said more slowly, “you said that . . . something had gathered above your house. What was it?”

Drake was clearly unwilling to respond. Cecil seemed pensive, answering only after a great deal of thought. “Imagine them as . . . living clouds,” he said, “formed of some rather unusual beasts.”

“What?” Magnus sputtered and grimaced. “Beasts? Like . . . birds?”

“Not quite,” Cecil replied waveringly. “Perhaps beasts of more . . . ethereal quality.”

“Why does every answer you give have to be a riddle?”

snapped Magnus. "If you know what it was you saw, then tell it to me straight."

Cecil drew a breath. "In that case," he began again in a more resolute tone of voice, "I will tell you that I was attacked by a horde of shades."

Magnus raised an eyebrow dubiously. "And what exactly would that be?"

"Perhaps you've heard of them before," replied Cecil, "from mythology or elsewhere—a shade."

"Yeah . . ." the boy affirmed with hesitation. "A shade is a spirit of the dead, a ghost." He shook his head. "You don't seriously expect me to believe you were attacked by . . . spirits."

"No, Magnus, I don't," said Cecil, coming to an abrupt pause. "Nevertheless, it remains the truth."

Magnus' mouth snapped closed in shock. He glared at his brother, who did not even return the look. Neither of his companions showed any obvious sign of lying, but their sobriety did not sway Magnus from his skepticism. He riffled through the pages of *MorningStar* again in absent-minded frustration. "How could you even tell?" he asked, slamming shut the book. "What does a shade *look* like?"

"This certain kind is unique," said Cecil. "They are formed of black ash, and gather in great hordes. Individually, their appearance is something akin to a legless corpse dressed in rags."

Magnus winced at the unsettling description. "Are you sure you weren't . . . seeing things? How could you have known what that was?"

“How could I not? I’d recognize those ungodly creatures from a mile away.”

“Recognize?” Magnus pried suspiciously. “Did you see them before?”

Cecil stiffened, as if caught unawares by the question. “I did,” he said. “We all did.”

A sudden terror wrung Magnus’ heart, assaulting him with shivers. Cecil’s stories were highly irrational—but Magnus could not seem to dodge the fear that they instilled in him. “I never . . .” he croaked, then cleared his throat. “That can’t be. When? And where?”

Silence returned as Cecil deliberated. “There’s much to be explained,” he finally replied. “There’s much that needs to be told, but a highway isn’t the place to tell it. The only thing you must bear in mind now is that I speak nothing but the truth, and that an answer to every one of your questions will be given in due time. Know that this is our fault and by no means yours. I’m sorry, Magnus.”

Magnus found no words to answer. He had heard enough to make him wary of asking further questions, fearing what horrors he would be told of next. He was possibly even more confused than he had been when he left the shop a half hour ago; and yet again, he would be forced to wait for clarity.

Magnus returned his attention to his father’s book, disregarding all around him. Stranded in unfamiliarity, he could only void his mind and prepare for the long hours ahead.



Cecil and the brothers drove on through the day, stopping occasionally to eat and rest in the desolate villages through which the highway ran. Words were scarce, and conversation scarcer. Any dialogue that did not involve directions was spurred by Magnus' questioning about Cecil's attackers, and was promptly pushed aside with a vague response and another promise of future discussion.

Most of the journey, Magnus gazed out through the pickup window in a trance. He had seen the sun soar at noon and now watched as its blinding flames brushed the horizon on its descent. The day had drifted past like a reverie; Magnus was still unsure whether or not he was dreaming. How, in reality, could he have been so suddenly whisked from his home for the sake of such an elusive danger? It was all a simple nightmare, no doubt—albeit one from which it seemed impossible to wake.

As dusk approached, their drive carried them into increasingly barren territory. Roadside barriers dwindled to be replaced by half-toppled wire fences, exposing acres of unkempt fields and distant forested hillsides. A handful of decrepit barns and farm houses went by, many of them long abandoned or razed by storms.

There were few others traveling this road, and the absence of any signage suggested that it led nowhere in particular. They braked at the first intersection they met, veering left onto a similarly sterile stretch of road. "This is the way to Markwell?" Magnus asked in a monotone.

“Indeed,” answered Cecil. “It won’t be much longer. We’re getting near.”

The road ahead, however, cleaved through miles of empty farmland with no foreseeable end or destination. They drove on for another fifteen minutes before arriving at a second crossroad, at which Cecil made a sharp right turn. A dilapidated signpost caught Magnus’ eye, but much of its text had been effaced with black paint. Only three names on the post had been spared—Evans Rd., Downey Rd., and Markwell.

They were taking Evans Road to Markwell. Magnus dragged his gaze away from the signpost as it shrank into the distance behind them. Not ten minutes had gone by before Cecil suddenly eased on the brake, making another right turn into a narrow avenue hidden by wild grass. After a downhill slope, a timeworn road sign jadedly greeted them: *Welcome to Markwell*.

The first buildings emerged into view almost immediately. With flourishing lawns and immaculate porches, the residences were old, though surprisingly well maintained. Among the houses, a couple of storefront windows caught the blaze of the setting sun, smarting Magnus’ eye as they passed. There were few cars or open stores at this hour, though the occasional pedestrian was seen. Markwell was not the ghost town one would expect for a place so remote.

Cecil navigated the homely streets with a confident sense of direction. They turned twice, meandering into a shop-clustered plaza. While Magnus took in their

surroundings with languid curiosity, Drake surveyed the darkened storefronts wistfully.

“Been a while, hasn’t it?” Cecil remarked, rousing the older brother’s attention.

“Hmm,” Drake concurred. “Too long.”

“Perhaps too long . . .” Cecil nodded dismally. “. . . perhaps not long enough.”

They headed down a side street that branched off from the plaza, where Cecil steered the pickup into a parking space along the side of the road. “Before we go any further, I ought to pay a visit to an old friend of mine,” said Cecil, tugging the hand brake. “A herbalist. He owns the apothecary over there.” He motioned toward a building across the street. “Markwell Apothecary” read the painted sign above the shop’s display window.

“His help would be invaluable at a time like this.” Cecil proceeded to rummage through the overfilled glove compartment, extracting a battered notepad and pen. “He travels to Serenia often as part of his work. He would know as much as anyone could about the province and its current state.”

“Serenia,” Magnus repeated inquisitively. “That was in my father’s book as well. Where is it?”

Cecil pulled a dour frown. “Unfortunately no less complex a question than anything else you’ve asked. Once again, all will be answered soon!” He unbuckled himself from his seat and exited the vehicle with haste. “If he isn’t there, I’ll leave him a letter. He’ll be sure to see it when he comes in the next morning.”

Slamming the car door behind him, Cecil hurried across the road against the boisterous current of the wind and up to the apothecary's front window. Inside, a store counter speckled with medicinal wares stretched from the entrance to the murky rear of the shop; ceiling-high shelves teeming with bottles, flasks, and vials lined the walls. No lights were on inside. The shop was closed, and its owner didn't appear to be in.

Cecil rapped twice on the door and waited, but received no response. He raised his notepad against the windowpane and attempted to write, only for his pen's ink to fade repeatedly. After a great deal of dry scrawling to restart the ink's flow, he spent minutes to cover both sides of the page in a constrained script—a terse letter outlining the assault on his home and extending a plea for help. He tore the page off the notepad and passed it under the crack of the door, tapping its edge to send it on through.

Cecil flitted back across the street and into his pickup. Drake turned to him as soon as the door was shut. "I remember him," he said. "Anubis, wasn't it?"

"Anubis Araiya, yes," Cecil affirmed, securing his seat belt. "You have a good memory. He once worked in MorningStar, if you recall."

"That's an odd name," Magnus remarked. "Anubis, I mean. It's the name of an Egyptian god, isn't it?"

"Ancient Egyptian," Cecil corrected. "And no, not a very common name around . . . here."

"Does he live in Markwell?" Drake asked before his brother could question Cecil further.

“Yes, why?”

“You could see if he’s home. The sooner we can get help, the better.”

Cecil pulled the truck off the roadside and drove on down the street. “I’m not certain of his address exactly. The letter says that I’ll be at the apothecary to meet him before noon tomorrow, so we’re in good time for now.”

Not long after they left the plaza and the area around it, the storefronts dwindled back into scattered rows of houses. Minutes later, Magnus found that they had traveled back out into the same barren farmland from where they had entered. They didn’t continue for long, however—Cecil steered into a side street that took them far off the main road and, eventually, under the fluttering shadows of trees.

Magnus watched their environment darken as they slipped inside the grove. A canopy of bronzing leaves drowned out what little light of the day was left, upheld by great columns of oak that began to encroach on the road. Just as the thicket threatened to close in on them, it suddenly receded.

They emerged from the grove and entered a derelict parking lot surrounded by forest. There wasn’t a single vehicle here; the lot’s twenty-some spaces were occupied only by shattered tree limbs in puddles of dried leaves.

“This forest was once home to the Markwell Campgrounds,” Cecil described, cruising past the empty lot, “which, as you can see, are long abandoned. The dirt roads are all that remain. They’ll take us deep enough into the forest to reach the shelter by car.”

“If there are any dirt roads left, they’ll be buried in debris,” Magnus noted. “That parking lot looks like it hasn’t been driven on in ten years. We won’t get far driving in a place that’s been abandoned for so long.”

“Abandoned, perhaps, but not untrodden,” replied Cecil. They drove through a second opening in the trees at the opposite end of the lot, reentering the umbrage of the forest.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Even if people don’t camp here any longer, the forest is still used as a passageway for travelers.”

Magnus gave a saturnine look. “Travelers heading where?”

Cecil paused impassively. “You will know soon enough.” His tone denoted that he would offer no more in the way of an explanation.

Before long, the asphalt road had faded to gravel and, eventually, to a compacted bed of leaves and dirt. Soaring trees hemmed the path like the walls of a canyon, their leaves eclipsing the roseate sunset sky. Even though the way ahead was sharply illuminated by Cecil’s high-beam headlights, every turn in the vague, meandering road seemed to come without warning.

They passed a campsite clearing—a field of bare earth where the carcass of a deserted motor home had been left to rust. It was peculiar how, despite the dilapidated surroundings, the path remained unobstructed. After a turn at a crossroads, however, the terrain suddenly grew rugged. As the pickup slowed to a dead crawl, it became

apparent to Magnus that they were no longer driving on any kind of road.

“We’ve gone off the path,” Magnus alerted, peering out the car window.

“We have,” Cecil confirmed rather nonchalantly. “The shelter isn’t far from here, but we’ll have to travel off the road to reach it.”

“Then just park here and we’ll walk the rest of the distance,” Magnus suggested. The front end of the pickup took a harsh plunge as they drove over a furrow in the earth, rattling the vehicle’s passengers.

Cecil readjusted himself in his seat. “We can’t leave the pickup out in the open or we risk giving away our location.”

“We’re already as close as we can get to being in the middle of nowhere. What are the odds that anyone would think us to be out here?”

Cecil laughed quietly. “You’d be surprised.”

The forest was growing denser. Maneuvering was becoming a challenge, though Cecil seemed adept at finding just enough clearance between the trees to snake through. They eventually came to a stop at the peak of a hillside jagged with serpentine roots and tilting trees. There appeared to be a clearing at the bottom, but it was too covered to see clearly.

“Cecil, where—” Magnus could only begin his sentence before Cecil lurched the car off the hilltop and into the start of a precarious descent.

“Almost there. The shelter’s straight below,” Cecil assured, easing on the brake pedal to inch further down

the slope. With acrobatic precision, Cecil slalomed through the closely knit trees and coursed into the open glade. The car halted, unscathed.

Magnus pulled himself upright in his seat and absorbed the eerily tranquil scene. This was a secluded area of the wood, enclosed by walls of forest mounted atop lofty hills. Autumn leaves carpeted the ground, brilliant hues muddied in the twilight.

Cecil drove a little further, into a shaded corner of the glade. "Leave everything in the back for now, and I'll show you inside," he said, shifting the vehicle into park.

"There's nothing here," Drake observed.

"Not to unsuspecting eyes," Cecil made his way out of the pickup, beckoning Drake and Magnus to follow him. "Come."

Cecil escorted the brothers to the foot of the steepest hillside, which was smothered in snarls of undergrowth. He crouched to clear it away; much of the debris was loose, as if it had been laid there deliberately. When the final branch was discarded, Cecil dusted off his hands on his clothes and stepped aside.

There was a door built into the slope. It was stout and wooden, free of rot or wear, fixed into a frame in a slant against the hillside. "Well concealed," Drake remarked with a nod.

"In a location as predictable as here, it needs to be." Cecil dug his keys out from his pocket and selected one from the set. He unlocked the door and heaved it open by its handle, revealing a short flight of stairs descending

into shadow. "Watch your step," he cautioned as he ducked inside.

Drake followed Cecil warily. Magnus stood a moment in admiration of the unlikely doorway before proceeding after his brother. As dusk's ghostly aura dwindled behind him, the stillness broke to the anguished moan of the wooden stairs. Darkness came over his vision like a veil. He could only make out the contours of Cecil walking ahead and Drake standing nearby.

Cecil approached a table in the center of the room and took up a peculiar bulk from its surface, something similar to a large tin can in shape. A rattling of metal sounded as he separated the object in his hands and laid part of it aside on the table. Without much warning afterward, the room was lit in an explosion of light.

Magnus flinched, blinking to regain focus. Cecil appeared to clutch a hunk of cut crystal that glowed with tremendous radiance, even brighter than an ordinary light bulb. He set the crystal back inside from where he had taken it—a low pedestal on a thick steel base. From the table, he retrieved the second half of the object, a slatted metal-and-glass covering that resembled a miniature birdcage, and fitted it overtop the base to form a lantern of sorts. He seized the instrument by the ring on its cap and swung it about to illuminate the room.

"And here we are." Cecil shrugged. "Welcome to my shelter."

The wide room was enclosed by wood-paneled walls, crammed bookshelves, and stacks of unmarked boxes.

The center table and its accompanying twin chairs were strikingly similar, if not identical, to some of the opulent furniture in Cecil's home. An ill-matching beige couch sat at end of the table, near a rudimentary stone fireplace.

Cecil ushered everyone's eyes across the three doors leading out of the room, two at the back wall and one on the left. "Our bedroom, bathroom, study," he listed, then swerved the rays of the lantern over to a final entranceway in the far left corner, "and the kitchen's through there. No windows, only a couple of vents to let in some outside air. Not a very large abode, but it will keep us in safety and comfort for the time being."

"Incredible, Cecil!" Drake exclaimed, admiring the sturdy lodge. "Did you build all this yourself?"

"Heavens, no. I had the help of a few friends who did a great deal of the work."

Drake nodded, no less impressed. "I remember. You told me about this place when I was younger."

"Shame that it's only now you've gotten the opportunity to see it." Cecil raised his lantern to the shelf rows as he moved past. "Even this, unfortunately, is not a permanent solution. We should be able to stay here a few days, only until we've gathered our bearings and worked out what steps to take next."

Magnus wandered toward the kitchen, peering inquisitively inside the dark room. It was confined, with barely enough space to contain anything more than it did—an austere counter, cabinet, icebox, and a plain wash basin without any form of faucet.

“How will we get any water here?” Magnus asked. “This place doesn’t have running water, does it?”

Cecil dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. “We have other sources, not to worry. Why don’t you go help your brother with the things in the pickup, and I’ll get us some water to drink and wash. After that, we’d best get some sleep. We have a lot of work ahead of us in the morning.”

Magnus tried to protest retiring to bed so early, far too many questions still remaining. But he succumbed to his growing fatigue. He had heard enough for one day; he had heard enough to haunt him through many restless nights to come.

Cecil regarded the weary disappointment in Magnus’ eyes with a sigh and a grimace. “Tomorrow,” he said steadfastly. “Tomorrow, we will talk. I promise you, Magnus—you will soon know everything.”



City of Ashes



HE SUN NEVER SHONE here anymore. It was veiled by the thickest and darkest of clouds, the same ones that had first eclipsed it over a decade ago. The earth was barren, as arid as a desert, with trees as black and contorted as the withered roots beneath them. Nothing flourished here, or grew at all. Serenia was a dead land, stricken by a plague of ruin and desolation that had spread from its capital city.

Noctell Knever and Raven Gaunt ambled briskly down a cobblestone Broadway, approaching the gatehouse of a heavily fortified citadel. At every step, fingers of black ash curled off the ground like smoke. The surrounding storefronts and residences, once lordly brick and half-timbered structures, now stood abandoned, stained with soot and painted an infernal red by the flames of iron torches.

Still, the true horror of this place resided in the sky above it, in the clouds that masked the sun. They were the shades, the scourge of Serenia, a filthy black tangle of groping limbs and half-formed skulls that writhed ceaselessly in the heavens. The clouds' spawn, the abominations individualized, soared over the rooftops with dead gazes and dangling claws, like avian corpses carried by unseen strings.

This was the city of MorningStar—the former pride of Serenia, now a lightless, ashen hell.

The two men advanced through the grandiose archway of the open gatehouse and into the citadel. Buildings were more densely constructed here and possibly in even worse condition than those outside the fortress. There were other people as well, the idle guards of the city, ghost-pale men with languid postures and gaunt, bloodshot eyes that should have belonged to no one but the dead. They wore liveries of hard leather shadowed under jet-black cloaks; shortswords and miniature crossbows dangled from holsters at their belts.

Guards though they were, they had little to be vigilant of. The men who spent their days loitering in the derelict city could hardly be considered sentries of any kind. This place saw almost no passage from anyone other than the guards themselves, and any outsiders who dared enter risked a torturous death at the hand of the city's ruler.

As Noctell and Raven traveled through, they were regarded by the cloaked men with tentative nods of welcome. They were respected in MorningStar, even feared,

as elite members among the guards. Noctell, especially, surveyed the forlorn city contentedly. Here, he was revered for his power. He was a necromancer, a puppeteer and conjurer of the undead, with skills that surpassed those of every other soldier in his master's forces. Spectral beasts such as the shades would bend to his will like unquestioning servants, and those who worked beneath him were wise to do the same. He wielded his influence callously, as if dominance were his only creed and sustenance.

Raven was one of the exceptionally few nonhuman members of the city guard. He was a crimson-scaled giant with little in the way of a name to describe his species. Many knew him as a demon, a rare and accursed creature of uncertain provenance. Anyone foolish enough to press him for answers about his ghastly appearance was likely to face the demon's infernal temper.

The main road of the citadel ended far ahead, at the most dour edifice in sight—a small castle, comprising a two-storey base and a spiring tower like the neck of a serpentine colossus that scowled upon the world from beyond the clouds. A podium of stone steps led up to its enormous double door, flanked by withered brambles rowed along ivied walls.

Noctell and Raven drifted into the open courtyard that encircled the castle. The torches' firelit stalks pinned wolfish glares on them. The eyes of another person, emerald-green and gleaming, turned toward them from the castle doorway. They belonged to a female figure, her lank silhouette bronzed by the irascible glow of the torchlight.

Like Raven's, the woman's appearance was only partly human. Her skin was dull-gray, the color of stone, contrasting sharply with the veil of her jet-black hair and suit of dark, hard leather. But what distinguished her the most were the wings that branched off the back of her shoulders—featherless, like those of a bat, but nearly five feet in height, folded close against her frame. She was a harpie, a winged human of origins unknown to all who encountered her.

“So our triumphant heroes return,” the harpie greeted sardonically.

“Indeed they do!” Noctell resounded. “But what manner of welcoming party is this, Medeva? Wouldn't you have gathered 'round all the men in celebration of our victory?”

“That depends on what manner of victory.” Medeva walked off the steps to face the necromancer. Her inquisitive stare was fierced by scorn.

“We raided Handel's house and found this.” Raven came forward and withdrew the brown envelope from inside his coat pocket to pass to the harpie. “It's the address of Drake Wingheart, Brendan's son.”

Medeva ignored the envelope. “And what of Handel himself?”

“He escaped,” Noctell declared bluntly. “But it's no matter. Drake will be of even more use to us.”

“For your own sakes, hope that Recett will think the same,” Medeva stepped aside, gesturing Noctell and the demon forward. “Go on. He's expecting you.”

Noctell climbed the entrance stairs with Raven and the harpie at his back. As the three entered the castle, the

doors fell shut behind them with a roar like the sound of a crumbling monolith.

The air here was clogged with smoke and the stench of blood and putrid flesh. Beneath a vaulted ceiling, the walls were rowed with thickset iron torches that lit a macabre display—withered corpses, suspended by manacles and swathed in threadbare black gowns. Like the stuffed head of a buck flaunted by its hunter, these were the trophies of the castle's owner, the carcasses of long-forgotten enemies.

Noctell, Raven, and the harpie strolled down the sultry corridor. From above, the corpses watched disapprovingly, eyes hollow like inkwells and lips parched like notches carved in clay. At the end of the corridor was a vast chamber, stark as a raided tomb—this was the castle's heart, the throne room.

Encircled by wall-mounted torches, a gruesome ebony throne loomed in the distance. A meshwork of tendrils enwrapped its base, straggling up into a spread of gargantuan talons that formed its backrest. Its feet were sculpted like a stallion's hooves, and from its armrests sprouted the heads of open-mawed dragons. The seat itself, however, was vacant.

Noctell and the others walked out into the chamber. Their soles clicked on a floor of faded stone tiles—an ill-arranged mosaic sprawled from the mouth of the entrance hall to the foot of the throne. It bore the crude depiction of a skull: a set of sagging black ovals for its eyes and nose, enclosed by a bone-white circle head with a barred rectangle for teeth. The very same image could

be recognized not only in Noctell's stone neckpiece, but also as the unmistakable emblem that branded every weapon and cloak of the city guards. It was a mark that was abhorred by many, and known by all as the insignia of MorningStar's usurper.

Footsteps resonated from afar. Noctell and Raven halted as they spotted the darkened figure of a man emerge from one of the room's many doorways, hastening toward them in a half-crippled gait.

"Ah, sirs!" the guard eagerly addressed his superiors. "Pleased to see you've returned safely." He hurried up to the necromancer, scrawny hands clasped. He was an older man, blanched, bent, and wrinkled.

Noctell flicked up his chin in the direction of the throne. "Where is he?"

"In the dungeons, I believe," said the guard with a wry smile, "having a chat with his prisoners . . . another four herbmongers we caught in the forest earlier tonight." He cleared his throat as if it were clogged with soot. "Anything else I can assist you with, sirs?"

"You may take our things up to our chambers." Noctell and Raven slung off their overcoats and passed them to the guard, revealing waistcoats and prim white shirts. As Raven handed over his fedora, his unctuous black hair caught the torchlight like an oil slick. Cradling the load, the guard dipped his head in esteem and departed through another doorway by the left of the throne.

Noctell and Raven marched up to the stone archway at the opposite end of the room. Beyond, a dimly lit spiral

of stairs plunged far beneath the castle. Bickering voices could be heard from below—one spitting and viperish, and the other fervid and snarling. The men trampled down the steps, into the castle dungeons.

They drew to a standstill as they reached the bottom. A yawning corridor greeted them, hemmed with metal bars fixed under a sunken ceiling. The asphyxiating stench of old gore wafted from the farthestmost cells. Many of the enclosures here were the size of pillories, barely wide enough to contain two persons. Of the few that were larger, one was occupied by a knot of four men. Outside the cell, a wiry figure shawled in a black cloak and hood paced about feverishly.

“Oh, nothing? Nothing, you claim?” the figure continued the dispute. His voice was raucous, as if his throat were made of brass. “Trespassing! Thievery! Resisting arrest! What is your defense to that, knave?” It was difficult to tell by his tone whether he was furious or simply mocking.

“I wander about a dead forest outside my own city and you reckon me a trespasser? What kind of madman are you?” One of the four prisoners, a brazen-eyed, thin man with tousled hair, appeared to be at the head of the argument.

“*Your* city?” the figure scoffed. “Since when is this *your* city? MorningStar is my empire, the home of my army and all who serve me!”

“It is the land of corpses, ash, and ruin!” roared the man. “And you cursed it so! This will never be your empire, no matter how much blood you spill on it!”

The figure straightened its posture haughtily. “Your audacity tries your life, herbmonger. Perhaps I’d be more inclined to spare you if you’d be more reverent toward your jailer.”

“I’d rather die twice,” the man said through his teeth, “than hold any reverence to an undead beast-of-a-man who could only compare to the devil himself.”

“Then I’m sorry to disappoint you . . .” A skeletal hand lunged out and seized the man’s throat like a shackle. “. . . but I can only kill you once.”

A dark aura stole over the figure’s hand. The prisoner floundered, tearing at his jailer’s grasp in vain. As the hand was withdrawn, it unfurled a noose of electric smoke that wrung the man’s neck tighter still. The other three prisoners recoiled against the back of the cell and averted their eyes; with each aching second, they heard their companion’s desperate shrieks shrivel into guttural choking. The man fell mute abruptly. A blunt thud on stone cut the silence.

The remaining prisoners glanced back loathly to see the man’s body sprawled across the floor of the cell. Their faces were twisted with horror as though their souls had been burned. They said nothing, nor did they look to their jailer, in fear of meeting the same fate.

The figure turned to face the elite guards who waited duteously by the dungeon entrance. As it approached them, it lifted back its hood with knotted fingers to reveal the face beneath. It was a man, but one whose appearance was nothing short of cadaverous. He had no hair or eyebrows and was almost entirely without flesh—only a mask of

sallow skin stretched over bone, with his nose and ears withered to caved-in stubs and eyes like blood-soaked pearls embedded in craterous sockets. Above the serpentine stalk of his neck, his mouth was a gash with lips so thin that even the contours of his misshapen teeth bulged through. He was the sheer image of the living dead—he was the indomitable warlord by whose rule MorningStar and all of Serenia had fallen.

“Lord Daimos.” Noctell bowed his head, restraining an eager grin.

“You’ve returned quickly,” Daimos remarked in a way that suggested disapproval. He glanced behind his men as if he expected to see them hauling the fruits of their victory. “I assume you’ve successfully apprehended Handel?”

Anxiety fractured Noctell’s smile. “No,” he answered. “I’m afraid he escaped in his vehicle as we were approaching the residence. He must have been awake; we can’t be sure why.” Seeing his master’s face darken, he hurried on to their notable accomplishment: “But we found all we need. Look.”

Raven produced Cecil’s envelope; Daimos stole it and scanned it impetuously.

“The address of Drake Wingheart,” Noctell proclaimed boastfully. “It was on a desk in Handel’s mansion. We returned here as soon as we’d found it.”

“Did you?” Daimos replied with biting sarcasm. He set his glare back on the men. “And I assume you have taken into consideration the first place Handel will head to after your assault.”

Noctell's pride was quelled by seeing no change in the warlord's surliness. "Yes, of course, but—"

"Brendan's son!" Daimos burst into a rage. "He and Handel will be halfway to God-knows-where by dawn! How could you not have seen that?"

"We considered it, milord, but it was only hours before sunrise," Raven interjected in a voice more steadfast than his partner's. "The address was in another city and likely distant. If we had started searching for Wingheart, we would have been forced to attack in broad daylight."

"Wingheart has been our sole target for the past sixteen years!" Daimos roared, baring his coal-black mouth. "You will attack at all costs! It makes no difference what the bloody time was!"

"Of course it does. We could have been seen!"

"Then seen you will be! In that world, you are more powerful than any force of law—than nearly every living soul! Yet you cower from them all and dodge between the shadows like dastards!"

Raven abstained from argument, unwilling to anger his master further. In turn, Daimos directed his violent wrath back to the necromancer. "Go! Leave my sight!" he waved a bony claw in Noctell's face as if restraining the urge to strangle him. "Find the address and bring me that man alive! If he and Handel are already gone, search the house and find anything that could tell us where they're heading." He twisted his membranous face into his darkest scowl. "Go!"

Noctell and Raven nodded brokenly, retrieved the envelope, and hurried back for the entrance. They lurched

when they nearly collided with Medeva, whom they were startled to find loitering behind them. The harpie stepped aside, allowing the men to pass and scurry up the dungeon stairs.

Medeva's granite frown bored into Daimos. "They're right, of course," she said. "The consequences of drawing that much attention on Earth far outweigh your impatience."

"Consequences!" Daimos scoffed. "No consequences outweigh sixteen years of fruitless irritation and our one chance at seizing our prize!"

"If Handel had escaped his house at the time of the attack, he would have reached Wingheart long before Noctell and Raven could have," she noted. "It would have made little difference whether they had returned here to report or not."

"It's still their own ignorance that let Handel escape to begin with," Daimos retorted. "Why should you care at all? You have no part in this."

"I will have a part in anything I please," Medeva answered immediately. "You have spent over a decade and a half scouring both worlds for an elusive piece of research that may be useless altogether. You are wasting your own time, as well as mine."

"You're one to talk," snapped the warlord, extending a withered finger. "It was you who told me of that parcel you saw Brendan give to Handel. Why should the research be any more elusive now than it was then?"

"Because if that research were of any significance," replied Medeva, "you would have been dead long ago."

At the least, you would have seen an attempt on your life. So many years have passed in silence that it's as if Brendan himself never lived."

"Silence means nothing." Daimos glowered. "Simply because no actions have been taken, I should not disregard any imminent risks."

"Your irrational fear of an old parcel has conjured up risks where there are none."

"I fear nothing!" Daimos' rage was spurred again. "This concerns not only me, but you and the shade army as a whole! Your life is at stake just as is mine. You ought to be thankful for my vigilance."

"I believe you are mistaking vigilance for cowardice," quipped Medeva, "and for that, I will not thank you. Good night, Recett." Her tone was too cold to seem indignant. She turned her wings to the warlord and made her way up the dungeon stairs.

"You would be wise to watch your tongue, harpie!" Daimos bellowed, but unsurprisingly, he received no answer. When her footsteps faded, he returned to the cell containing his terrified prisoners.

"Well, then," Daimos hissed to an audience of gaping eyes and quivering lips. "Do either of you have anything else clever to say? Or shall I simply rush over to the part where I slaughter the lot of you?"

"I-I'm . . ." A timorous stammer answered the warlord's threat.

Daimos turned to a prisoner cowering in the filthy nook of the cell. "Yes? Speak, fool."

“I may be a-able to assist you,” the man continued, “with some information . . . regarding these p-people whom you seek.”

“Oh?” Daimos turned, throwing his shadow onto the man. “Then you will tell me all you know.” He evocatively eyed the corpse inside the cell, “if you value your life.”



Myth and Magic



HE MORNING AFTER CECIL had brought the brothers to Markwell, Magnus awoke, wishing he were back in his brother's bookshop, safe and at peace. He wished to no end that the story of the shades and the shop's closing were nothing but a ghastly dream. But when he blinked open his eyes, he found himself lying under the cover of a sleeping bag, still beneath the wooden beams of Cecil's shelter. He poured out all his hopes in a sigh.

As Magnus passed through the door of his bedroom into the living room later that morning, he set eyes on Cecil reclined in one of the chairs by the center table, browsing languidly through a slim red notebook. The book *MorningStar* was laid on the table before him, next to a beaten leather satchel. Magnus pulled a limp smile as he approached.

Cecil looked up from the notebook to return the smile. “Good morning, Magnus.”

“Morning, Cecil.” Magnus scanned the premises. “Where’s Drake?”

“He’s walked down to Markwell to get us some breakfast,” Cecil replied, gesturing the boy to a seat on the second of the stately chairs. “Come. Sit down for a minute.”

Magnus nodded affably and sat by his former guardian. The place certainly appeared a lot brighter than yesterday. When Magnus looked to the lantern dangling overhead, he noticed that it was the same one Cecil had used when they first arrived. The crystal within it glowed blindingly.

“Like it?” Cecil called the boy’s attention away from the lantern.

“What is it?” Magnus asked in reply. “I mean, what kind of stone is that inside it?”

“A special kind.” Cecil smiled thinly. “One I quite doubt you’ve ever seen before. I’ll tell you about it later.” He seemed to scrutinize Magnus’ weary expression. “Did you sleep well last night?”

“Not really,” Magnus answered haltingly. “When I woke up, for a minute I thought all this had just been a dream. Running away from the bookshop . . .” he lifted his dismal stare to Cecil. “. . . the story of the shades . . .”

“Well, I suppose I still owe you a solid explanation for why we’re here in the first place.” Cecil returned the boy’s look with sympathy. “My frantic warnings were hardly enough to justify bringing you here on a whim.”

A flicker of hope lit Magnus' face. "I suppose."

But Cecil cut in before the boy could even pose his first question: "Then you must bear in mind that I have absolutely no reason to lie to you," he said, as if already anticipating Magnus' incredulity. "A lot of this may seem hard to believe, but you have to understand, I take no joy in messing with your mind."

Magnus gave a wary nod. Cecil scratched his chin in deliberation. "Where do I start?" he muttered.

"The beginning," Magnus answered. "My past, my parents . . . after everything I've just been told, I'm not even sure about where I was born."

"Fair enough." Cecil nudged Brendan's book toward Magnus. "You were born in MorningStar."

Magnus stared blankly at the book. "Then where is it? Where exactly is MorningStar?"

After a moment of contemplating the floorboards, Cecil rose from his seat to study the bookcases behind the table. From the topmost shelf, he withdrew a hefty, furled chart and brushed it free of a thick layer of dust. He opened it out on the table, flattening it over with his palms.

It was a map. It depicted a sea in which two islands were nested; the first, to the east, was the largest, paired with a western island about three-quarters its size. At both the north and south borders of the map were the jutting crowns of two other land masses that faded off the edge of the chart. Though the map showed traces of vibrant color, time had paled it all to a lackluster sepia hue.

Cecil's eyes arrowed across the chart. He placed a finger near the bottom of the eastern land mass. "Somewhere . . . here."

"On this island?" asked Magnus. "MorningStar is on this island?"

"Island?" Cecil gave an ironic smile. "These aren't islands, Magnus. These are far, far larger than islands."

Magnus frowned harder and peered closer at the antiquated chart. The map bore a great many names in a finely inked script, each one spanning inches of land. Depictions of plains, forests, lakes, and deserts alike suggested a vast array of climates.

"But they can't be that large," Magnus insisted, despite the seemingly gargantuan scale of the map. "I've never heard of MorningStar all my life. And I've . . ." He paused in an attempt to decipher some of the unusual names. "I've never heard of any of these places, either. If this place is so huge, then show me, on a globe or atlas, where these . . . islands are."

"Well," Cecil replied, "this is quite where they are. You could search every last globe on Earth, and I assure you that you won't find any of these places."

"So what are you trying to tell me?" Magnus asked with rising frustration. "That this is another planet?"

"It's the exact same planet," Cecil answered haltingly. "Just a different . . . version."

Magnus bounced a frown off the map and back over to the impassive Cecil. He felt an uncanny shiver—whether of

excitement or terror, he couldn't tell. "Version? A different version? Where is this place?"

"Not *where* . . ." Cecil eased back into his seat. "*What*. This place is called Arkane."

"You're still not making any sense," Magnus barked. "I've never heard of any place called Arkane."

"No, I suppose you haven't." Cecil returned a grin to his face. Then his expression fell flat and he gaped dumbly, as if he were angling for the right words to say. "You see," he finally continued, "Arkane . . . is one of Earth's counterpart worlds."

Magnus didn't know if he had gotten the response he wanted or not. Cecil's answers were growing stranger with every question.

"Or, as many refer to them, *parallel dimensions*," added Cecil.

"That doesn't mean anything," Magnus persisted. He sensed a light-headedness overcome him. "How could I've been born in another dimension?"

"I'm not explaining this very well, am I?" Cecil sighed. "Why don't I start from the top of things?" He shifted himself in his seat to face Magnus again. "Any universe can divide itself into a potentially infinite number of copies at the point of its creation," he said. "Each of these copies exists on its own plane in the universal spectrum, and as they evolve, they also diverge, growing increasingly farther apart from one another. Some evolve so drastically that they become separate universes altogether; others

tend to stay relatively in alignment with each other to form what we know as parallel dimensions, or parallel universes.

“Thus, a universe parallel to ours is not far unlike our own universe. Its cosmic structure is virtually identical to ours, meaning that there would exist in it a solar system with a planet Earth similar to the one on which we live. This particular version of planet Earth I now refer to is known not as Earth . . .” He splayed his hand over the open map. “. . . but rather, as Arkane.”

“And this theory is . . . accepted by modern science?” Magnus asked with obvious sarcasm.

“Perhaps not *Earth’s* modern science,” replied Cecil. “Earth has its own theories, not to say that any of them are wrong. The origins of parallel dimensions have been forever disputed, even on Arkane, where science has a much better grasp on the subject. What I’ve just described to you is Arkane’s most widely accepted theory—put in very simple terms, of course.”

Cecil’s talk of alternate universes did nothing but build on Magnus’ frustration. The boy didn’t believe much of any of this. But he bore in mind Cecil’s candid insistence on having no reason to lie. “So I, Drake, our parents . . .” said Magnus, forcing away his skepticism, “we were all born in this parallel dimension?”

“Of course,” answered Cecil. “I was also born in MorningStar, along with your father. Your mother was born in a nearby town in the same province, and I believe the same for your brother.”

“Then how exactly would we have gotten here?”

“We have our ways,” Cecil said firmly. “If I were to elaborate now, I fear I’d only be confusing you further and drawing away from the subject.”

Magnus cocked an eyebrow. “In that case . . .” he sighed gruffly, “why would we have left?”

Cecil’s expression crumbled. He folded his arms and heaved out a strangled breath. “For the same reason I left my house, and for the same reason I sit here with you now.”

Magnus met Cecil’s eyes. “Shades?”

Cecil nodded silently.

Magnus was still not sure whether he believed the story of the shades. But just as with everything else he had been told, he decided he hadn’t much of a choice other than to trust his former guardian for now. It took all his willpower to force the question past his rational mind: “So then the shades came from Arkane?”

“Well, yes,” said Cecil. “But no one knows exactly from where they originated. Some presume they escaped from another dimension, while others believe they were intentionally summoned.”

“Summoned?” Magnus repeated, drumming his nails on an armrest. “By whom?”

“Almost undoubtedly the same man who now controls them,” Cecil replied dourly. “Daimos Recett.”

Magnus felt his heart lurch upon hearing the name, though he knew hardly anything about their supposedly terrifying pursuer. “Drake told me about him yesterday,” he recalled. “My father wrote about him in his book.”

“You ought to know more about him than just that. I believe that this book may have been written before its final chapters could unfold.” Cecil picked up *MorningStar* and rubbed its gilded letters wistfully. “Decades ago, Daimos, or, more correctly, Eras Recett, was a councilman in the Serenian city of Anmer. He wasn’t a person who attracted much attention . . . until he was linked to an uprising of the notorious New Order cult within the city. In the months that followed, Anmer suffered a violent revolt that led to the collapse of the city council. Eras assumed control of Anmer as a warlord.

“While the rest of the province scrambled to take action, Eras launched a second attack on Serenia’s capital city of MorningStar. Thankfully, his army, which consisted mostly of mercenaries and New Order followers, was small and poorly constructed. He was struck down by the MorningStar Guard and fled into hiding. Your father, who was part of MorningStar’s council, made an enormous contribution during the battle and the restoration of the city. It was because of his immense support that, months later, he was elected as head of the city’s council.”

“I already read all that in my father’s book,” Magnus interrupted. “What did you mean about its final chapters?”

“I didn’t say this was the end of the story,” Cecil replied. “It was about three years later that something strange began to occur. Every night, a small band of shades would soar down from the skies and attack the city’s guards. They were nothing like anyone had ever seen before. As a rule, such spectral creatures tend to remain in a single

location, guarding their place of death or something of importance to them. These particular shades attacked with a vengeance. They were no more than small assemblies at first and were easily driven away . . . but the threat grew worse. The shades' numbers would multiply, night after night, until two weeks had passed and the guards could barely maintain their defense."

"On the fifteenth day, the worst yet of the dangers they had faced arrived at the gates of MorningStar." Cecil paused, laying *MorningStar* back onto the table. Though his vision was fixed on the book, it seemed as though his mind's eye saw something much darker. "I remember it distinctly . . . the city was awoken in the dead of the night to an approaching army of few men but thousands of shades. Leading them was a man who appeared more like a walking corpse than a powerful general or summoner. He had no flesh, only bones and gray skin.

"He ordered that MorningStar surrender, else be attacked. Most incredible of all was his claim that he was, in fact, Eras Recett—and many of his old allies were gathered around him to prove it. He declared that he had been bestowed with a new, immortal form, and that his name was now Daimos, a word meaning 'terror' in an old Arkane language.

"When MorningStar refused to surrender, Recett unleashed his shade army on the city. The battle raged on for hours; I shudder to recall how many guardsmen and civilians were killed. Attacking in hordes, the shades were close to unstoppable. Recett's men were formidable, but at

least they were mortal—Recett himself was left unscathed by all manner of attacks. Aside from being tremendously powerful, he even took the shot of a crossbow bolt to his heart without flinching. It became apparent that he was, indeed, the undead corpse he appeared to be.”

“Undead?” Magnus cut in. “As in . . . reanimated from the dead?”

“Well, yes, but the exact definition can vary,” said Cecil. “One who is undead is not always reanimated. Your father believed Recett to be possessed by some form of dark spirit, possibly something alike the shades themselves. A powerful possessor can leech away the life of its vessel, replacing it with its own ethereal life and rendering the body useless. This would explain why any form of physical assault was futile against Recett.”

Magnus had long abandoned his cynicism for the sake of the conversation and now found himself rapt in the tale. “So then how did you defeat him?”

Cecil’s expression again turned dreary. “We didn’t. The MorningStar Guard, aided by the Serenian army, managed to fend off the shades for long enough that Recett and his men retreated. But it didn’t end. The nightly shade attacks continued relentlessly. Brendan and the rest of the MorningStar council knew that if Recett were to strike a second time, the city wouldn’t have the strength left to defend. They needed something powerful enough to fight back.

“The council concurred that the shades’ summoner, Recett, would have to die if the shades were to be stopped.

Since Recett was impervious to death by any normal means, it seemed that he would need to be exorcised of his possessor beforehand. Now, an exorcism is ordinarily quite possible if the spirit's vessel is unwilling of the bond, or if the spirit is particularly weak. The spirit in question was neither weak nor did it have an unwilling vessel, considering what Recett had become. He would have to be exorcised by force, and with a possessor powerful enough to immortalize him, that was no simple feat.

“Brendan recognized that any spirit of such strength has an elemental affinity—usually of either light or darkness. Since Recett, in his new form, appeared to detest light almost as much as his shades did, it was obviously the latter. Something of tremendous radiance would be needed to drive out the spirit within him.

“Brendan spent many days compiling research in pursuit of something capable of eradicating Recett's immortality. From what I remember, he happened upon a centuries-old record of some bandits living in the Galem mountains. Allegedly, they had discovered a prodigious boulder of crystal in a crater, probably the relic of a meteorite. The boulder was described as being bright as the sun, and it was said that a man had been permanently blinded by a light burst that was released when he tried to break off a piece. Along with the name that the boulder was given by the bandits, Luminous Rock, this is practically the only record that remains of it.”

“That sounds like that stone in your lantern,” Magnus remarked, eyeing the effulgent artifact hung overhead.

“I guess you could say that.” Cecil glanced over the lantern. “The mineral inside is a common Arkane gemstone known as *lucidus*. It’s a type of crystal that captures and exudes light, often used in lamps and lanterns such as mine. The Luminous Rock is simply one of the most, if not *the* most, concentrated forms of *lucidus* ever found.

“Brendan hoped that the light released from even a single shard from the Rock would deliver a strong-enough blow to weaken Daimos’ shade army, and most of all, exorcise Daimos himself. Later that week, Brendan set out for Galem to find the Rock and confirm its existence. Astoundingly, he returned some days later to say that he had found it, and he had a shard of the Rock to prove it!”

“Without having been blinded?”

“Oh, it was a simple matter of protecting the eyes. The bandit was blinded only because he wasn’t aware of what would happen. A couple of days after obtaining the shard, Brendan concluded his research and made plans to return to the Rock to gather more crystal.”

“Then how come Daimos isn’t dead yet?” Magnus cut in again.

Cecil slumped deeper into his seat. “It did not go unannounced that Brendan had found a way to conquer Serenia’s greatest enemy. It wasn’t surprising that news of his plan reached Recett. Not long after Brendan finished his research, Recett returned to rampage the city with the full force of his army. It was clear this time that he had aims other than just the capture of MorningStar—he wanted to find whatever it was that posed such a threat to

his life. As could be expected after the unrelenting attacks of the shades, the MorningStar Guard, wounded and weary, didn't stand a chance in the fight. The city was evacuated, sending thousands of people scurrying to this world, while others were captured or killed."

"What about my parents?" The question came out as a hoarse murmur. Magnus didn't know what to believe about his parents' fate. He had hardly believed the story of their drowning, and he wasn't sure if he believed much of Cecil's story, either.

"During the attack," said Cecil, "I gathered my friends—three ex-captains of the guard and a former councilman—and ran to your father's house. He asked me and the others to take you, Drake, and your mother, and get the three of you someplace safe. We tried to convince your father to come as well, but he insisted on staying to help defend the city. It was, sadly, because of his determination that he met his ultimate demise. I later heard it confirmed by other survivors that they saw Brendan swarmed and killed by Recett's men in the MorningStar citadel."

Magnus clenched his eyes shut and dropped his face into shivering palms. "And my mother?"

Cecil's voice sounded strangled when he replied: "As we made it out of the city, something was following us. It soared in the air, soundlessly, like a bat, watching us. But after we thought it was gone, I saw it, skulking in the shadows. Before I had a chance to stop it, it fired an arrow at your mother, killing her instantly. My friends rushed to fight the creature; they managed to chase it away, but

not before one of them suffered the same fate as your mother. After that, we escaped to this world, where we have remained to this day.”

A stifling silence followed. Magnus almost wished he hadn't heard any of this, whether or not it was true. His chest cringed in sympathy, as though he felt the fatal blow that had claimed his mother. “I don't know what to believe anymore.” Magnus' voice was bent by the restraint of his tears. “If everything that you and Drake ever told me about my past was a lie, then why should this be any more real? And if all this *is* real, then why would you lie?”

“The reasons are not all black and white, Magnus.” Cecil laid a steadying hand on the boy's lap. He swept up the leather satchel that lay beside *MorningStar* and produced forward the notebook he had been reading before the start of their conversation. “When your father asked me to take you and your brother someplace safe, he gave me this satchel, and told me that it held this notebook containing all the research he had ever done about the Luminous Rock and Daimos.”

Cecil reached inside the satchel to produce a fist-sized fragment of rock; he set it down on the open map. “Along with the notebook, your father oddly included this stone in the satchel. None of us really knows why, or what it has to do with anything.”

Magnus picked up the stone and studied it intently. It was quite unremarkable—a coarse shard of rock, such as one might find lodged in the dirt. “Could this have anything

to do with the Luminous Rock?" he asked. "Didn't you say he managed to break off a piece?"

"Yes," Cecil answered with hesitation. "But that piece was unfortunately stored in a holster on his belt when he was killed. I'd offered to take the shard in the satchel, but he said he'd keep it with him should he have a chance to face Recett himself. He never did, and the shard was almost certainly found and destroyed."

Putting aside the stone, Magnus reached for the notebook and breezed through its discolored pages. A gamut of incomprehensibly scrawled formulas filled his vision.

"Through my years of studying that notebook, alas, I've found it to hold no reference whatsoever to Daimos or the Luminous Rock," Cecil lamented. "Thankfully, I can almost guarantee you that Daimos never actually found the Luminous Rock, else we wouldn't be in the situation we're in now."

Cecil accepted the notebook back from Magnus. "It was for your own safety that we didn't tell you about any of this. Recett must have feared the shard at first sight; that's why he's been searching for us. He thinks we're the only ones who know what Brendan was researching."

"Are we?" Magnus inserted a doubt.

"Just about," said Cecil. "There were others in the council who were partly aware of his plans, but not to the extent of knowing where the shard had come from. There were six others who journeyed with him to Galem, but they were sworn to secrecy, and Recett has no way of tracking them

down. Even I don't know their identities, let alone if they're still alive. The three of us are the perfect targets, since we're probably believed to be harboring the original research containing everything about the Rock—from its exact location to how Brendan planned to use it." Despair burned deeper into his frown. "Of course, the notebook we received from Brendan contains nothing of the sort. Neither Drake nor I know where the actual research is. For all we know, your father could have given us the wrong book. Drake never spoke a word of this to you because he didn't want anyone else to have to bear the burden we do."

"That wouldn't have stopped us from being hunted," Magnus retorted.

Cecil nodded drearily. "Alas. We kept the irrational hope that Recett's legion would eventually be quashed by some other province. Years later, that has yet to happen."

Magnus lowered his head in somber reflection. Another question arose in his mind when he looked back upon the map: "If MorningStar was evacuated, then why did its people come here? Why didn't they just move to another part of Arkane?"

"Some did, if they were able," replied Cecil, "but many did not, believing that Recett's ruin would follow them. Relocating to another continent was unthinkable, seeing that Arkane's eastern continent is the only one solidly inhabited by humans. Making way to a separate continent would have meant starting a new civilization. Earth seemed like a perfect refuge to most, given the options."

Even long after Cecil fell silent, Magnus did not shift his eyes from the open chart; these tangled lines on parchment were the most tangible thing he had to grasp of the world in which his past supposedly resided. “All that you told me . . .” he said, “. . . sounded a lot like you were reading me a story straight out of a fantasy novel.”

“True that it does, though it’s nonetheless fact,” replied Cecil. A smile lightened his face. “I hope you can still believe me.”

“Well, I . . .” Magnus stammered, but realized he had no reply.

“Tell you what,” Cecil said brightly. “After breakfast, meet me outside in the clearing. And I’ll show you just how real ‘fantasy’ can be.”



Fire, Wind, and Water



AGNUS STEPPED OUT FROM the shelter doorway and into the forest clearing. Nothing here had changed since yesterday. The pickup slumbered in its spot on the earthy plane, glazed in the rays of the freshly risen sun that trickled in through the overstory.

Drake was sitting on the ground at the clearing's edge, inattentively toying with a withered twig. He seemed disquieted, immersed in his thoughts. Magnus' approaching footsteps called him to his senses. He looked up at his brother with a halfhearted smile.

Magnus found a seat next to Drake between the serpentine roots of an old oak and bared a narrow grin in sympathy. "You've been quiet all morning," he said.

"I . . ." Drake pulled a grimace and rubbed his tired eyes. "I just didn't sleep well last night. I couldn't take my

mind off what happened yesterday.” He dropped the twig with a bleak sigh. “I hope you’re not still mad at me. I’m sorry I never told you any of this . . . I just—”

“Please, Drake,” Magnus cut short his brother’s apology. “I’m the one who should be sorry. After what Cecil told me this morning, I understand now . . . why you kept all this from me.”

Drake was silent for some time. He finally said, “It’s one thing to witness so many innocent people die. It’s another to see your mother murdered right before your eyes.”

Magnus’ lungs clenched as his veins turned to ice. “You saw it,” he replied grimly. “You saw our mother get killed.”

Drake bit his lip; he didn’t turn to face his brother. “We were almost out of the city,” he began to recall. “I was running beside Cecil, who was carrying you; you were only an infant. Our mother was falling behind. Cecil said we were being followed and told us to pick up pace, but our mother wasn’t fast enough. As we turned a corner, she was shot in the back by an arrow. I heard her scream—I saw her fall dead. That was it.”

Magnus couldn’t bear to hear any more. He lifted his tearing eyes to the oak’s thinning canopy, as if to escape his own thoughts. He wished he could still believe that their parents had merely drowned, as Drake had used to tell him.

“I never wanted anyone else to feel the way I felt that night,” Drake continued. “I never wanted anyone else to have to live with those memories. That’s why I never told you any of this.”

“But if I hadn’t found our father’s book,” said Magnus, “would you ever have told me about MorningStar?”

Drake seemed cautious in responding. “I can’t count how many times I had the opportunity to,” he said. “But I couldn’t. I could never work up the nerve to admit I’d lied to you and to tell of a real past that would make me sound like I’d gone insane. When you were younger, Cecil and I both convinced ourselves that it would be best to wait until you grew up before you could handle the truth. As you got older, we feared how you’d react if you were told the truth. It was for the best that you discovered that book when you did.” His last words were stolen away by a frail gust of wind that died into silence.

“What about other family?” Magnus asked. “You and Cecil always told me that we had none . . .”

“A few, I think.” Drake shrugged. “Distant relatives. None that Cecil or I remember well. Perhaps we’d have had a chance of finding them if I hadn’t stayed so secretive.”

“You did all you could,” Magnus commiserated. “You were only trying to protect me. It seems like this was bound to happen one way or another.”

Drake gripped his brother’s shoulder and attempted a smile. “Put your mind off things for now.” He nodded to the opposite end of the clearing. “Cecil is waiting for you. He has something he wants to show you that might help lift your spirits.”

Magnus said goodbye to his brother on a lighter note and made his way to the clearing’s edge. Here, a dirt slope coursed down into a much smaller glade veiled by the

trees around it. Cecil could barely be spotted at the base of the slope, seated on a fallen tree. He turned and raised a hand in greeting at the sight of the boy standing high above him.

Magnus returned the gesture and skidded down the slope into the glade, shouldering branches out of his path. It was considerably darker here than in the shelter clearing. The forest domed around this place so densely that light was scarce to filter through. But in patches where trees had already cast off their leaves or where their branches parted in windows to the sky, the sun's rays cascaded down in resplendent, celestial shafts.

"Hello, Magnus," Cecil welcomed cheerily. His back was half turned to the boy. "Glad you could join me." He was toiling at a stocky branch in his lap, whittling its end to a spear-sharp tip with the blade of a small pocketknife.

"What are you doing there?" Magnus pried, coming around the fallen tree to face his former guardian.

"Just setting ourselves up." Cecil snapped shut the knife and sheathed it in his pocket. With the sharpened branch in hand, he trod into the center of the glade, where an identical branch had already been impaled upright in the earth. He speared the second branch into the ground a few feet away from the first, then returned to the fallen tree.

"To begin with," said Cecil, crouching to retrieve a gnarled staff from the ground beside the tree trunk, "why don't you tell me what you think this is?"

Magnus accepted the staff as it was handed to him. It was near five feet in height, carved of a profusely knotted

wooden stalk and embellished with an impressive array of fine gems. On the head of the stalk, four finger-thin branches sprouted from the wood to enwrap a flame-red hunk of crystal, gripping it fast in place.

“Honestly,” Magnus dragged his speech, reluctant to admit the undeniably fantastical appearance of the staff, “it looks a lot like something a sorcerer would use.”

Cecil’s dry smile broadened. “What if I told you that your guess wasn’t far from the truth?”

“I probably wouldn’t believe you,” Magnus said candidly, “but after yesterday, I don’t seem to have a very accurate idea of what I should or shouldn’t believe in.”

“That’s quite understandable.” Cecil gave a sharp nod. “You’ll find that much of what you may have once considered fiction no longer seems so implausible. You must simply open your mind . . .” He reacquired the staff from Magnus and portentously extended its crystal headpiece. “. . . or allow me to open it.”

When the crystal suddenly gleamed, Magnus thought it no more than the light of a sunray caught in its prism. Then a flame flickered to life on the surface of the gem and devoured the headpiece. As Cecil lanced out the burning crystal like an iron spear still lit by the fires of its forge, a ribbon of flames leapt from the staff, attacking the first of the branches impaled in the center of the glade. Torched, the branch shuddered and collapsed into the dirt. The blaze evaporated as abruptly as it had materialized, without a smolder left behind.

Magnus was rattled and silenced by disbelief. He

couldn't even begin to fathom how Cecil could have propelled fire out of a crystal. "What—" he stammered. He raised a shivering hand toward the staff. "What exactly was that?"

"Would you believe me if I told you?" Cecil asked sternly.

Magnus took a long breath. "I've seen and heard enough to know that I can't stay a skeptic," he said eventually. "Tell me anything."

"In that case," Cecil replied, returning to his seat on the fallen tree, "what you have just seen is what one might refer to . . . as a magic spell."

Magnus bit his lip with painful reluctance, but quickly shrugged off the feeling. "Fine." He gestured to the staff's crystal headpiece. "Then how? How did that thing catch fire?"

"That's a simple question with a less-than-simple answer," Cecil began, admiring the crystal against the flittering sunrays. "Magic, spellcasting, call it what you wish. It's an ancient art that has existed on Arkane for millennia, and even once found users in this dimension. Through the ages, countless people, nations, tribes, and races have attempted to harness the fickle forces of nature and bend them to their will. One of the few that succeeded, as a world, was Arkane, where magic is practiced even by common folk with the use of enchanted gemstones—the basis of almost all Arkane spellcasting."

"What do you mean, 'enchanted'?" Magnus didn't hide the mockery in his tone. He dropped to a seat beside his former guardian. "How are they enchanted?"

“That, even I cannot say.” Cecil smiled and shrugged. “The enchantment of gems is a different science altogether. From the little I know, it involves the use of a runic language that predates Arkane civilization. Now, the enchantment process specifies what elements of nature a gemstone can conjure. However, each variety of gem tends to have an elemental affinity that makes it apt for conjuring a specific element over another. For instance . . .” He rapped the bloodred crystal headpiece. “This is a ruby. It is enchanted to conjure fire, which is its natural affinity.”

“This,” Magnus exclaimed with widening eyes, “is a ruby? This . . . that staff must be worth a fortune!”

“On Earth, yes, perhaps,” Cecil laughed nonchalantly. “But not on Arkane. The gems we consider rare in this world are far more abundant on Arkane.”

“And these . . .” Magnus scrutinized the smaller gems that adorned the staff’s trunk. Some were a brilliant blue; others were colorless and translucent, stirred with a rainbow spectrum as light shone through.

“Sapphires and quartz crystals,” Cecil confirmed. “Water and air, respectively. The fourth and last of the basic elements, earth, is best conducted by emeralds.”

“Why only those four kinds of gems? What’s so unique about them?”

“Oh, other gemstones can be enchanted just as easily,” said Cecil. “But they’re often considerably less effective in conducting the elements as opposed to the four I just mentioned.”

Magnus was caught off guard when his former guardian passed him the staff. “That’s enough of my talk,” Cecil declared, beaming. “Now it’s time for you to try it.”

“Try . . . ?” Magnus blankly took hold of the staff.

“Of course.” Cecil nodded. “Did you think spellcasting was an art reserved for only the well-trained and powerful? Get up, stand ahead of that branch, and hold the staff close to yourself.”

Dazed by Cecil’s abrupt instructions, Magnus staggered to his feet. He faced the remaining branch skewered upright in the dirt and took a two-handed grip on the staff. His nerves prickled with enthusiasm, in war with an obstinate part of him that would not quit condemning him for his naïvety.

“Start with something simple,” said Cecil. “A gust of wind. Anything strong enough to knock back the branch.”

Magnus wavered for a second before realizing that he was clueless as to how he could work the so-called enchanted gems in any way. “How?” was all he could think to ask.

“You must feel what you aim to conjure,” Cecil directed. “Begin by closing your eyes. Notice the most subtle breeze even when it seems there is none.”

Magnus gave a nod and shut his eyes. Without vision, he allowed the forest’s splendor to reveal itself through his other senses. The fickle serenade of birdsong was joined by a chorus of rustling leaves; the wind, previously imperceptible, now fell over the glade like nature’s own whispering breath.

“Clear your mind of disbelief,” Cecil continued. “Pay no attention to what you are actually trying to do, but rather, concentrate on what I tell you to do. Seek out the wind. Grasp it. Concentrate on it until you feel that it is in your control.”

Magnus did as he was told. At the moment that the finest blade of wind licked his skin, he seized it, arresting it to his staff like the taut string of a marionette. It was a peculiar sensation—how every movement of the staff seemed to draw the wind along with it.

“When the wind is within your grasp,” said Cecil, “expel it. Open your eyes and lunge with all your strength!”

Magnus constricted his fists, relishing the eerie force that boiled inside them. He strode forward, blinked open his eyes, and thrust out his staff with his focus pinned on the upstanding branch. The wind was spurred into a rage; as it shattered against Magnus’ back, it tore the branch out from the dirt and cast it flat over the earth.

The gale subsided quickly. Magnus retracted the staff as if he were, all of a sudden, wielding a dangerous instrument. He found it difficult to believe that he had actually manipulated the wind, but it could hardly have been coincidence.

“Well done,” Cecil ended the uncertain silence. His lip twitched to a smile at Magnus’ childlike amazement.

“This . . .” Magnus muttered, “. . . is unreal. How is this even possible? How can any of this . . . work?”

“Such things cannot always be explained through Earth’s feeble spectacles of science,” Cecil cryptically remarked. “The gems are enchanted. That may sound

hopelessly absurd to anyone in this world, but what is often considered fictitious on Earth is the norm on Arkane.”

“But why?” Magnus persisted. “How can it be that all the mythology we ever dreamt up in *this* world exists as reality someplace else?”

Cecil’s smile widened. “That is because much of the mythology of this world isn’t exactly dreamt up. A multitude of parallel dimensions once coexisted, trading their secrets and sharing the tales of their lands. There was once a time when spellcasting was accepted on Earth, but there also came a time when the practice was abused by those who harnessed its power for darker means. Shortly after the Middle Ages, magic was forbidden and shunned as an evil practice. As the worlds slowly diverged, their inhabitants drifted apart with them, and the reality of one world was left as the mythology of another.”

“Then why did it stay that way? I mean, why doesn’t anyone on Earth know about magic?”

“Because of the chaos that would result if they did.” Cecil’s tone saddened. “It’s inconceivable, Magnus. Can you imagine what would happen if spellcasting were revealed to Earth in this day and age? Science would collapse, weapons would become obsolete, anarchy would erupt if an ordinary man were suddenly capable of wielding untold power. It became clear long ago that this world could not handle Arkane’s technology—why, it can barely handle its own. Arkane has fought for centuries to protect Earth from discovering its magic and the consequences that would follow. We are lucky that they have succeeded so far.”

Magnus' attention strayed onto the toppled branch in a reverie; he returned to his senses when he saw Cecil draw beside him. "Now I want you to try an element you can see, not just feel," said Cecil, tapping the staff's bulbous ruby. He walked over to the branch that had been felled by Magnus' wind spell and restored it to an upright position. "The element of fire. Scorch the branch to a cinder!"

Magnus flinched at the command. "What am I supposed to do this time?"

"Seek the element you wish to conjure," answered Cecil, stepping back from the branch. "Embrace it, empower it, and expel it. Such is the method for all elemental spellcasting."

"But there isn't any fire around here," Magnus argued. "Or heat, for that matter."

"Then find it," Cecil replied. "The elements are ever around us. Heat can be found in the deepest cold, even if it is from within your own clenched fists. Feel the singe of flame on your palms, and the staff will guide you through the rest."

With a nod, Magnus shut his eyes a second time. He sifted through the autumn air to locate the element he desired—the sting of flame, the torrid weight of the midday sun. A warmth seemed to soak into his fists; before long, he believed he could feel the same heat emanating from the head of the staff. Opening his eyes to the sight of the ruby headpiece caught aflame, he thrust away the staff in fear of being burned by the gem's now-searing temperature. The fires bickered at his jostling, nearly dying, but endured long enough for Magnus to regain his focus and salvage the spell.

Bracing himself, he thrust out the staff again and shed a broken wisp of flame toward the branch.

Unlike Cecil's earlier demonstration of the same spell, Magnus' frail blaze skimmed the branch and instantly set it alight. It was only a second later that the boy realized he was gaping at a burning wooden stake—which, of all places, stood in the middle of a forest.

"Quickly now," Cecil urged. "Put it out before it spreads. What douses fire?"

"Water, but . . ."

"All elements are conjured in the same manner," Cecil reminded. "The mere water vapor in the air is enough to summon a flood, if you are skilled."

Closing his eyes and renewing his focus, Magnus filled his lungs and searched out the ghost of morning dew that still laded the air of the glade. An invigorating chill washed through his veins as he exhaled. His palms around the staff grew clammy. Once he had fastened his grip on the element, he opened his eyes and lunged, unleashing a surge of icy water onto the flaming branch. With the fire extinguished, the charred stake wearily slumped aside.

Magnus lowered the staff in a stunned stupor. Cecil broke the silence with a leisurely applause. "Impressive." He smiled again. "Especially for a skeptic like you."

Magnus gave a sheepish grin. "Even though I know everything you've showed me is real," he said, "it's still no easier to believe it."

"Indeed," Cecil concurred. "Your perception of reality has been inverted in a matter of hours, but you've shown

yourself to be willing. Accepting the very notion of magic is no easy task.”

Cecil dipped into his trouser pocket and retrieved a miniscule, gleaming artifact. Gesturing the boy to reach out, he deposited the item in Magnus’ open palm. It was a golden ring, inlaid with a jewel as clear as glass. “I want you to have this,” said Cecil. “It is an enchanted diamond ring. While the gems I’ve just showed you can only conduct a single element, a diamond is one of the few precious stones whose unique properties allow it to conduct all four basic elements: fire, air, water, and earth.”

Magnus stared awestruck at his scintillant treasure. Every tilt of the jewel spun the sunlight into opalescent spears as fine as spider silk. “Cecil, I don’t know what to say but . . . thank you!”

“Though a diamond’s power, by far, does not equate to that of, say, a ruby or emerald,” said Cecil, “it’s nevertheless an excellent tool for a beginner in the practice, or for one who simply wishes to use magic for everyday tasks, rather than for combat.”

“Combat?” Magnus frowned at the word. “You mean, you use magic to fight with?”

“Surely you didn’t think that magic’s only purpose is to ignite wooden pickets,” Cecil replied with dry laughter. “Spellcasting is an art that knows no bounds, nor limit of power. Taking magic as what you’ve seen today is as if you were to judge the sharpness of a sword by the pommel of its hilt. Some of the art’s most powerful and magnificent

capabilities lie in combat, a practice you might well need to learn soon.” He sighed. “Where our situation stands, you never know when your skills may be called upon against the dangers that we face.”