

Prologue

Specks of 800 year old dust rose from folds of vellum as the gloved hands spread them apart. Drifting upward, they found a resting place deep inside the man's nose. Taking a step back, he raised a hand to his face, stifling the growing sneeze.

Should have worn a face mask, he thought to himself. He avoided the cheap paper masks since they caused his glasses to fog up.

It had been six months since his team found the jars, sealed into the wall of the armory at the dig site. For weeks they found bits and pieces - armor and weapons fragments, painted pottery, coins from the old kingdoms. The kind of items that any archaeologist would have expected in the ruins of a Dwarven hold. But these jars, they were something altogether unexpected.

Seventeen in all - each sealed with birch resin. Inside were dozens of folded manuscripts, unmolested by time and the elements. His team had been prepared that cataloging would take

months, if not years. The manuscripts might have seemed mundane, but for the archaeologist and his team they were the find of a lifetime: invoices for supplies, notes on seasonal crop yields, watch schedules for guards at the hold.

This would have been enough to seal his legacy. A detailed look into daily life during the Great Fall. But then, they broke the seal on Jar 12. Unlike the others, Jar 12 contained a single long scroll dominated by a crude drawing. In the center stood an image of the Shard, the last great remnant of Aeyl civilization that still dominated the skyline of Cairn-Galorre and stood only a few miles from the University research center. Surrounding the Shard in a ring were the Aeyl, tall and slender, with skin like faceted crystal preparing their final journey.

He had seen this image a thousand times. The day of the Great Fall. But this version was different. Outside the ring, five knights stood with their swords raised high above their heads. Beneath each, a word written in flowing Aeylian script. His knowledge of the ancient tongue was limited, but even without the benefit of translation he knew who the men were and what the script most likely said. This names of the Scions - the

men whose lust for power had driven magic from the world, leaving behind six hundred years of war, famine and death - and this scroll recorded their names. Names which had been purposefully scrubbed from history.

Once word of what they had found got out, the authorities were brought in. Members of the King's High Council, the Black Coats, even a bishop from the Iron Church were briefed and consulted. For now, the scroll was to be kept secret from the public until a more thorough examination could be completed. And so, the Archaeologist tried to put the thought of Jar 12 out of his mind and continued his work translating Artifact 4-J, a record of training exercises conducted in the Arlian Highlands.

The dust continued to irritate his nose.

Fine, I'll go get a mask.

Leaving the climate-controlled room, he entered the laboratory prep space and opened a cabinet. *Empty*. Some grad student had left an empty box where the face masks were supposed to be. Hopefully there were some still on the top shelf or he

would just have to deal with the dust until facilities could put in a supply order in the morning.

As he reached up to grab a new box from the top shelf he found himself startled. He cocked his head to the side.

He heard the sound of breathing coming from behind his ear, and pressure of the cold blade of a knife buried deep into his neck.

Chapter 1

... Six weeks later.

"It's the 7,242nd day of His Majesty King Serwyn's reign, long may he live. Mikken Resh here, joined as always by the lovely Miss Sonja, and you're listening to Good Morning Cairn-Gallore! on the Royal Radio Network."

As he drove the nearly empty, early morning streets, Detective Inspector Jerroc Marsh turned off the radio. Too

cheerful for this hour. Pressing a button on the dash, he switched over to the dispatch station and lost himself in the hum of static and guard chatter.

His unshaven face harbored deep lines of discontent, only partially because he had forced himself out of bed well before sunrise. Turning the corner onto Old Barrow Road, the city's scenery gradually changed. The roads narrowed and the glass and steel buildings gave way to the rough-hewn masonry of the city's Old Quarter.

Some of these buildings had been here for centuries. Jerroc liked to think that some distant ancestor had frequented the shops that once called these streets home. His family could trace its history with the City Guard for countless generations. He had grown up hearing tales of generations of Marshes who had served in the ranks since the days of the Aeylin Coregency.

These days, however, most of the buildings in the Quarter housed chain restaurants and gift shops where middle class parents could buy commemorative mugs, while their children played with cheaply-made toy swords.

Jerroc drove further into the Quarter, where the narrow streets gave way to the vast Shard Plaza. The grey-brown alleys of the Old Quarter were suddenly replaced by a massive, lush garden park, and in the center, towering nearly a half mile high, the Aeylin Shard. At its base, it took up an area larger than some small towns. The five-sided crystalline tower twisted and turned as it rose into the clouds, shimmering as it climbed. The tallest structure in the world, and once the seat of power for the Aeyl. It remained sealed since their disappearance eight centuries before.

The guard station sat within the large ring of buildings that circled the plaza. Jerroc pulled into the alley beside the old garrison, finding his reserved parking spot in the small gravel-covered lot.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon as Jerroc settled into his office. He removed his blue cloak, hung it over the back of his chair and placed his sidearm on the desk. The night shift had mostly packed up, leaving him some precious alone time to catch up on paperwork. Marsh had finally closed the books on

a ring of con men who were selling counterfeit historical artifacts in front of a few of the Old Quarter's tackiest tourist attractions. Not exactly saving the realm, but considering the neighborhood had become a glorified theme park, it came with the territory.

He was putting the finishing touches on form 723b when his solitude was swiftly broken.

"Morning, Rock!"

The voice came from Bowden Trent, a Junior Inspector, not eight months out of the academy and filled with the type of eagerness that made Jerroc's skin crawl. And somehow, he'd found out about his nickname, one he had spent the better part of a decade trying to shed.

Despite protests from Marsh, Trent had been assigned as his partner.

"Trent, it's Jerroc, or better yet, D.I Marsh. Or best... 'sir' "

"Yes, umm... sir. Anyway, I didn't expect to see you here this early. I wanted to be able to get in a run down at the Shard gardens before my shift starts."

Trent looked the sort. Marsh was never the type of guy who went out of his way to stay fit. A job well done would keep you healthy if you were doing it right. Though busting small time crooks preying on tourists and the requisite paperwork that followed had added a bit of a paunch to Marsh's silhouette in recent years.

"Well, get to it, Trent. I'm just going to be here working. Though, when you're done with your run, make sure to bring this stack of folders to the filing clerk. Then we need to dig into this complaint that came in over the weekend about school kids vandalizing the statues outside Beryon's Hall."

He turned his head back to his work. Trent mumbled something about going for his run and left.

Jerroc remembered being Trent's age. He could almost

remember what it was like to be filled with vigor for the job. All he ever wanted to do was live up to his family name - his grandfather had been the Captain of the Guard under King Hester III. The history of the Guard was littered with Marshes. And, as for his father, Lucan Marsh, he had gained a notoriety all his own. Now, well into his 40s, Jerroc was content to file his paperwork on time, watch his pension grow, and enjoy the view of the Shard from his desk chair.

He reached the end of an evidence registration form and rose to grab a cup of tea. A great cacophony of sound overtook him. The ground shook, papers fell from desks and the windows rattled. Jerroc worried that the earth would open up and swallow him whole. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see sky outside as it turned blood red. He rushed to the window that faced the Shard. Huge plumes of red flame, accompanied by thick black smoke were rising from center of the gardens. The civilian defense sirens whirred to life. Jerroc threw on his cloak, strapped on his gun and dashed towards the flames.

As Jerroc ran into the street, a handful of joggers, Trent among them, came pouring out of the garden gates, coughing from

the heavy smoke. Jerroc ran to him - pulling him by the arm, out of breath but fueled by adrenaline.

"Was anyone trapped in there?"

"I don't think so. I mean, I didn't see anyone but I'm not sure, and it's a big park. Anyway, it all just happened. I heard the explosion, saw the flames and ran." Trent was out of breath. "Gods, do you think we're under attack?"

As Jerroc was about to reply, a great wind barreled down on top of them. The flames withdrew in a gust as if they were sucked down into the ground by some unnatural force. The smoke remained, but even it was dissipating. Both men stood, dumbfounded.

"Come on. Look, the trees aren't burning and the flames have drawn themselves back." Jerroc grabbed Trent. "We should be careful, but I think it's safe. Follow me."

They made their way inside, heading towards the epicenter of the blast. As they went deeper, they both started to feel

that something was wrong. Nothing had been destroyed. Not by fire or force. No ash covered the buildings. Even the flowers growing on the cherry trees retained all of their petals. The only thing that seemed out of sorts was the noxious smell of sulfur that hung in the air. Neither had noted it when the flames seemed like they might consume half of the Old Quarter, but now in the relative calm it stung their noses.

By the time they reached the inner ring that surrounded the Shard, the smoke had faded almost completely. It looked almost peaceful.

"You don't have a radio on you, do you?" asked Marsh

"Nope." Trent pointed to his running shorts.

Marsh pulled a whistle from one of the pockets in his cloak.

"Take this, you go left, I'll go right. We need to check the perimeter for whatever device did this. Whistle if you see anything out of the ordinary."

"Marsh, I don't think that's gonna be necessary...."

Trent's eyes looked past Jerroc. He raised his hand, pointing at the Shard.

On the other side of the fence that separated the Shard from the garden path, not 20 meters from where they stood, a man lay dead on the ground.

They climbed the fence and sprinted to the corpse. An old man, dressed in trousers and a blue tunic. And on top of that a crimson coat. In his left hand, a large knife, his right wrist dripping with blood. Below the cuts, a tattoo - some sort of bird surrounded by strange writing. Surrounding the corpse, piles of bundled leaves.

And on the crystalline wall of the Shard next to him, a crack wide enough for a slender man to pass through.

For the first time in nearly a millennium, the Aeylin Shard was open.

Chapter 2

The City Guard had quickly established a perimeter to keep civilians away from the area surrounding the Shard. They promised a press conference following their initial investigation but said nothing more. The blast had been heard across Cairn-Gallore, waking foppish Lords in the posh townhomes of Hestian Park and rattling stevedores clocking in for the morning shift at the docks that lined the Bay of Tears.

It had certainly managed to shake Releia Senn from her sleep. Not that sleeping on an old couch in the lounge near the conservation lab had left her in a deep slumber. She was still in a bit of a daze after a long night spent cataloging pottery fragments from the Khar-haden site. And besides, even deep sleep hadn't been particularly restful since Perenil's death.

Clearing the sleep from her eyes, she approached the window just in time to see the deep red flames devour themselves and disappear behind the buildings that surrounded the Shard.

She opened up her satchel bag and pulled out a small radio.

She turned it on and found herself in the middle of a breaking news broadcast.

"... from the gardens around the Aeylin Shard. Guard spokesmen tell us that there are no serious injuries, and a preliminary report on any damage should be released shortly."

The broadcast proceeded to play a series of brief interviews with eyewitnesses who were at the scene.

"All I can tell you, was I was taking my dog for a walk when I heard the noise. I thought I was going to die. Gods help me, I thought I was done for. I couldn't tell if it was a bomb or an earthquake. I just knew I needed to run. And then the flames, they sprung up from the trees and the whole place filled with smoke that smelled like rotten eggs."

A series of similar comments from confused and frightened bystanders followed. Each carried similar themes - the red flames, the smoke, the smell. And the fact that nothing besides maybe their mental health seemed to be the worse for it.

The guards were keeping the media away from the scene. That much was clear as the radio broadcast circled back to the reporter who cleverly managed to make the same report he had given just moments earlier sound different enough that it could be mistaken for new information.

The station then cut to an interview with a "guest expert" who offered possible explanations ranging from an attack by Seletic terrorist cells to a turf war between Dwarven crime syndicates.

Releia turned the volume down on the radio.

A blood-red fire. The sound of a massive explosion. Smells of sulfur. And no discernible damage to even the leaves on the trees. It certainly wasn't a turf war; and no guardsman was going to know what caused this. But, in a moment of terrible realization, Releia Senn was sure that she did.

Grabbing her bag, hair tussled and clothes wrinkled from a night spent in the lab, she raced downstairs.

The receptionist who should have been manning the Archaeology department's front desk was nowhere to be found. She was likely not the only one late to work. Undoubtedly the events of that morning had caused panic at worst, a city-wide traffic jam at best.

She reached over the desk and picked up the phone handset.

"TTC Operator speaking. How may I help you?"

"Operator. I.. umm... please put me through to the nearest guard station."

"Ma'am, if this is about the events near the Shard, we've been instructed to route all non-emergency calls for the City Guard to a message service."

"Well it is about that. But it's an emergency. Please, can you put me through?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, unless you're in imminent danger, I'm just going to have to take a message."

Releia gave in. This wasn't going to get her anywhere. And anyone from the City

Guard who could help was likely preoccupied.

"Fine. Take a message - but make sure it gets to someone in the City Guard. And, ok, this message is going to sound odd, but you need to take it verbatim."

She heard the operator rummaging for a pen and paper.

"Go ahead, ma'am."

"Ok." She paused to compose her thoughts. "My name is Releia Senn. I'm an archaeologist at Queen Helenda University. I have information that can explain the events at the Shard. At the center of the explosion, you found a person bleeding from a wound caused by a silver knife, in a circle of dried lilac and wormwood roots. You haven't told this to the media yet. If I'm right about these facts, then you need to contact me."

The operator took the strange message in stride. Granted,

she probably received calls from all sorts, Releia thought. She just had to pray that she would deliver the message intact. She left contact information with the operator and hung up the phone. Her next destination was the library - if and when the investigators contacted her, she needed to be able show them what they were dealing with.

Jerroc hadn't had to call in the body near the Shard. The sound of the blast had been heard by most every guardsman in the city, and the emergency sirens that started shortly afterwards alerted the rest. A crime scene perimeter was established, and guards were posted around the park to keep out prying eyes.

It was now almost two hours since the blast. A team of twenty men had been combing the gardens. Apart from the apparent suicide, nothing was amiss. No sign of a bomb or any incendiary. It didn't make sense. Jerroc didn't know what to make of it. Flames burn. Explosions destroy. And yet, nothing. Except the dead man - and the crack in the wall.

Jerroc had ordered Trent to stand watch and make sure that the Shard remained undisturbed. He stood at attention, still wearing his jogging clothes. Despite this, Jerroc could see that he understood that it wasn't his, nor any other guardsman's job to go poking around inside the structure. Even at the height of the Coregency, men did not just walk into the halls of the Aeylin Shard. Jerroc had grown up hearing the stories of the impossible labyrinths and magical traps designed to take the lives of men who attempted to enter the Shard uninvited. And even if those were mere legends, no one could begin to say what was in there after eight centuries of disuse. Plus, curious eyes meant clumsy feet. And this was still a crime scene after all.

Derron deVarle, Captain of the City Guard had been in the first wave to arrive after Jerroc and Trent made their discovery. A stout man with an impossibly long beard, he could have been mistaken for a Dwarf if he had been but a few inches shorter. Even amid the chaos of this morning's events he wore the traditional uniform of the City Guard - a black doublet beneath a midnight blue guards cloak. On his head, a gold helmet crested with blue and black plumes. The rest of the force only wore it for ceremonial occasions. DeVarle, ever conscious of his

height and his position was never seen without it. Jerroc wondered if he even owned any other clothing.

Now, DeVarle was yelling into his radio.

"Gods damn it! No, tell the reporter from the *Regal* that he can wait until midday for the press conference with the rest of them. No one gets special access, no one gets to view the crime scene. We don't even know what we're fucking dealing with here."

He shoved the radio into the pocket of his cloak and scanned the site until he made eye contact with Jerroc.

"Marsh, get over here."

Jerroc was working with the crime scene photographer to catalog the corpse. He heard his name and made it way over to DeVarle.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Marsh, what the hell is going on here? The press wants

answers and I'm stalling as much as I can. We've promised them a press conference in a few hours. What do we even say? 'Nothing was destroyed, an unidentified man is dead, and oh yeah, the Shard is open?' All that's going to do is cause questions, and questions without answers lead to panic."

"I know, sir. We've got as many men as we can muster searching the area. That said, they don't even know what they're looking for. And I'm looking into the victim - or perp - or whatever he is. We searched him for identification. He had nothing on him. He has that strange tattoo - the bird with some sort of script around it that we can't read. According to the ME, the tattoo looks fresh. That's really the only solid clue we've got. Other than that, we're coming up empty."

"And the opening in the Shard, Marsh?" DeVarle looked annoyed.

"I don't know, sir. What am I supposed to say? It's been shut for eight centuries and I'm supposed to know in a couple of hours why it's suddenly open?" Marsh tried to keep his cool.

"People have thrown bombs at that thing to try to open it and it

hasn't taken a scratch. And now, some sort of explosion, or whatever it was, cracks it open like an egg. Captain, I honestly don't know what any of this means. Besides, the public doesn't know about the opening yet. All they saw was flame and smoke. If we start spouting off about that to the press who knows what type of chaos we might cause. I'll get you answers when I can, but this is going to take time and investigation."

DeVarle's face began to turn red. He needed answers soon. Jerroc was sure he was about to be chewed out. But before any of that could happen, he spotted something over the Captain's shoulder.

Making their way down one of the garden paths was a mass of men in black, belted military coats marching in formation. On their left breasts, silver shields bearing an orange enameled stag-and-stars - these were the King's men.

And at the front of their ranks, Courtnay Brithe, Lord-Commander of the King's Watch. They walked around the crime scene in silence before making their way towards Captain DeVarle.

"Lord Brithe." DeVarle stood at attention. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your appearance?"

"Good morning Derron. I trust your men have things under control here? The crowds outside are getting restless. I almost had to have my men draw their weapons to let us through."

Lord Brithe, exceptionally tall and slender with his jet black hair dripping with pomade towered over the Guard Captain. Even including his plumed hat, DeVarle only came up to Brithe's neckline.

"Yes, my Lord, we're trying to get answers as quickly as possible"

"I trust you will...." Brithe said dismissively. "Anyway, I'm here to relieve you. The Shard is under the auspices of the Royal family. You and your men may continue to patrol the outer gardens, or whatever it is you're doing here, but my men are here to secure the area immediately surrounding the Shard."

Jerroc piped up.

"This is my precinct. This is my crime scene. We're only just beginning to piece together what happened here."

"Who is this?" Blithe looked at DeVarle, and then at Jerroc. He snarled.

"Lord-Commander, may I introduce Detective Inspector Jerroc Marsh. He was the first on the scene."

"Marsh?" Any relation to Lucen Marsh?"

Jerroc nodded.

"Aye. My father."

Blithe looked Jerroc up and down.

"Yes, see it now. Such a pity. Well, I thank you for your service, but my men will take it from here. Standing orders from the King. With the Shard now penetrable, we must do our duty to

protect it. For the sake of the realm. And of the Crown."

"And the suicide? The explosion?" Marsh asked.

"Look into them if you must, but your access to the site ends now. Give the public whatever answers will keep the peace. Tell them that the gardens are closed until further notice. Tell them the explosion was caused by kids playing with fireworks, for all I care. Keep order in the city, that's your job. Anyway, I see no damaged buildings, no injuries - well, none apart from your suicide victim. And from where I stand, that looks like a bum who slit his wrists with a kitchen knife. So, as far as I'm concerned, I believe your work is done here."

Brithe turned and faced his men.

"Get to it boys. Secure the site."

The men shifted formation, their ranks spreading out around the Shard. One group moved in a straight line, with Brithe behind them. They marched towards the break in the Shard wall. Jerroc made eye contact with Bowden Trent, still standing guard.

He motioned for him to stand down and let the men of the King's Watch pass.

Stepping over the dead man's corpse, the soldiers squeezed through the narrow crack in the Shard wall, one by one.

The first man to enter the Shard in 800 years was some lieutenant in the service of Lord Courtnay Brithe. If those magical traps do exist, better him than me, thought Jerroc.

Captain DeVarle collected himself, and addressed Jerroc with an audible sigh.

"Let's pack it up Marsh. Get to the bottom of what happened here if you want. But you heard the Lord-Commander, this isn't our territory anymore. I'm going to go try to figure out what to tell the press. Let's try to keep this whole Shard business under wraps for now. Brithe wants it, he can deal with answering the questions about it."

Jerroc Marsh picked up his radio and gave the order for the guards to wrap up their work and make their way out of the

garden.

As he slowly made his way out of the inner ring of the gardens, he realized that Trent had caught up and was walking next to him. Trent broke the silence.

"So, that's it? We just let Lord Hair-gel and the King's Black-coats take over? What about the dead guy? The explosion?"

"Orders from the King. Nothing we can do about that. We got what evidence we could, but look around, what crimes have occurred? Suicide isn't against the law. None of the surrounding area has any permanent damage. What would we even charge someone with? Disturbing the peace?"

"Come on Rock, you know that's bullshit." Trent knew that the nickname would get his boss' attention. "You saw what went down this morning. That wasn't normal. And you know that wasn't just a suicide. What with the way that guy was laid out and all. That was part of a ritual or something."

"Bowden, listen to me. One of the keys to surviving in this

world is knowing when you've been outranked. We've been outranked." Marsh said with resignation "So we go back to the office, we file the requisite papers. We go home tonight and wake up tomorrow morning and forget this ever happened."

"Forget that the damn Shard is open? That people might finally figure out what's inside the damn thing?" Trent shot back.

"That's not our job. Lord Brithe and his men will comb the place. I'm sure they'll bring in scientists or government contractors, or a godsdamn wrecking crew. Maybe they'll get in there and figure out the mysteries of the universe. Maybe it's just an empty husk of a building. Maybe I'll read the book when it comes out."

They reached the outer rim of the garden. Barricades had been set up, and a crowd of reporters had been corralled together. A few of them shouted questions at Jerroc as he passed by. Sooner or later Captain DeVarle was going to have to tell them something.

Jerroc made it across the street and walked the steps into the guardstation. Trent and a handful of other guardsmen followed. Inside the station Mrs. Restonne was sitting behind the reception desk as if it was any other morning. She had manned the front desk of the guard station for as long as anyone could remember. Her husband had been a guard, shot by a thug robbing a corner store. For reasons only known to her, she turned down her husband's death benefit payments, but instead insisted that the department find her a job. And every day since she could be found working behind the precinct's front desk.

"DI Marsh... the TTC service sent over a whole bundle of messages for the precinct about the whatever-that-was over in the park." Mrs. Restonne called out to him as he passed her desk. "They're sitting in a cardboard box over by your desk."

Marsh nodded, not saying anything. Looking over at his desk he saw the box - large and filled to the brim with pink memo slips. He'd skim them later, or get one of the guys to do it. It was department policy to catalog and respond to calls from the public. Not that these would be of any use. Most likely they were filled with a mix of calls from scared old women and

crackpots who had heard the blast.

He removed his coat, draped it over the back of his chair. Sitting down, he placed his gun on the desk and let his head hang back.

Quickly, he found himself dozing off into sleep. He woke up to find Trent sitting in a chair next to his desk, rummaging through the box of memo slips.

"What are you doing?" he said, as he looked at his young colleague, bleary-eyed.

"Oh, hey, sir." Trent continued to look at the box "Well, we have to file these eventually. So I figured I'd get a head start. Nothing else going on. Captain DeVarle was on the radio earlier, talking to the press. Gave them some line about how we have some leads that we're following up on and how we're cooperating with the Black-coats in the investigation. Left out the whole bit about them kicking us out and getting into the Shard. Mentioned there was one dead, but didn't go into details other than to say that we believe he was homeless and he had no

ID."

"Did it do any good?" Marsh asked.

"Meh, probably not the answers they wanted. Though, what was he supposed to tell them?" Trent took one of the memos and put it into a small pile to his side. "These are the ones that just report that they heard a loud noise and saw some smoke. As if the rest of the city didn't notice. But that's what the bulk of them say. I've also got a pile for ones that come from the conspiracy theorists and the nutjobs - I'm dog-earing the ones that are especially entertaining. I figure I'll pin those up in the break room for a laugh."

Jerroc motioned for Trent to hand him some of the memo slips. He grabbed a handful and placed them on the desk.

Trent was right, these were mostly useless, but now and then one would raise an eyebrow. Several of them quoted scripture, one featured a particularly ominous verse about "the return of Trela the Many-Eyed and her legions of draugrs that would swallow the world in flame." Shit like this always brought

out the crazies.

Trent decided to break the silence. He would have asked about the morning's excitement, but he wasn't sure where to start.

"So, sir, I've been meaning to ask you, what's the story with your piece?"

Trent was pointing at Jerroc's gun on his desk. An ornately decorated eight-barrel revolver.

"You want to know about my gun? It's old, and it's mine. That's all you need to know."

"Sorry, sir," Trent said feigning sheepishness, "It's just, I've never seen anything like that, the carvings and all. Where did you get it?"

The grip of the gun was ivory, with inlaid silver. The carvings showed a scene from the early history of the Guard, the knighting of Sir Kelvin of Tomeswood, who had rescued King

Hensal's daughter from kidnapping by Gharisian pirates.

"It's dwarven-made. And before you can ask how I can afford it, I can't. It was given to my father many years ago. He earned it. He trusted it. He died wearing it. Then it was given to me."

It was clear to Trent that Marsh wasn't in the mood for small talk.

They were half way through the box when Trent stood up and tapped Jerroc on the shoulder.

"Uh, hey, boss. You need to read this."

Jerroc took the slip.

A woman named Senn. From the University. She said she was an archaeologist. And how did she know about the dead man with the knife? The bundles of plants around him? All of it. And looking at the time marked on it, the memo was taken less than a half hour after the event.

"Trent, let's go pay Ms. Releia Senn a visit."

Chapter 3

It was just before dinner time, and Releia Senn was sitting at the small card table in her apartment kitchen flipping through the books she had pulled from the campus library. Her left hand held a pen which was buried in a small black notebook. She was muttering things to herself as she read them, reaffirming fears she already held.

She was in the midst of copying a set of Aeylin runes when she heard a knock at the door. Looking through the peephole, she saw two men. Guardsmen by the look of it - both wearing dark blue cloaks with gold epaulettes. Thank gods that the operator had gotten her message through.

She opened the door.

"Ms. Senn, I presume?" the older of the two men said. He

was slightly disheveled, and looked to be carrying a few extra pounds. His dark brown hair was speckled with bits of grey and he had obviously not shaved for at least a few days... Even so, she could tell he had been handsome when he was younger.

"Yes. Yes! I guess you guys got my message? I'm so happy you came. I was worried that the woman at the phone company would think I was a loon."

The younger guard spoke up.

"Ma'am, after a day like today, I'm willing to believe anything." He was close to Releia's age, maybe even younger. Tall, thin and blonde - a stark contrast to his partner.

The older guard pulled an ID card from his cloak. Emblazoned in gold was the emblem of the City Guard - a flaming sword with olive vines wrapped around it.

"D.I. Jerroc Marsh, and this is my colleague Inspector Bowden Trent. Yes, we got your note. May we come in?"

She was younger than he had expected. He assumed they would be meeting some middle aged professor. Instead, here she was, a vision of youth, dressed in a loose sweater and cotton lounge pants, with a pen behind her ear and her red hair pulled up into a bun. Jerroc wondered if she was even out of school.

Jerroc and Trent made their way into her tiny apartment. The couch was covered in laundry and looked like it might double as her bed. Nearly every surface in the place was covered in books and papers. The only art that hung on the walls was a cheap tourist poster of the Great Temple of Heria at Termis.

"I'm sorry I didn't prepare for guests. What I need to show you is on the kitchen table."

"So, your message said you were an archaeologist?" Marsh said, scanning the spines of the books that littered the apartment.

"Well, sort of, I'm an archaeology student. here at the college. Well, that's not quite it either. I'm enrolled in the archaeology school, but my area of study is arcaenology. But

they don't have a department for that here, or anywhere for that matter. It's kind of frowned upon."

"Arcaenology?" Trent looked confused.

"The study of the history of magical civilization." she said matter of factly.

"Not a popular subject, I take it?" said Jerroc.

"Let's just say it's fallen out of fashion." she looked back at him and smiled. "Though with what they were reporting on the news this morning, I have a hunch my services might soon be in demand."

"About that - how did you know about the body?" Marsh sat down at one of the chairs around her kitchen table. The others followed.

"So you did find one?" Her eyes widened. "Oh, sorry, I mean I don't mean to be excited over someone's death. But it means I'm right. I'm used to being told I'm wrong, so this is new."

It's very exciting!"

"Ms. Senn, please stick to the matter at hand." Jerroc tapped his finger on the table.

"Sorry," she resumed. "Anyway, I didn't know you would find a body, but this had all the classic signs. Let's call it a good hunch."

"Classic signs of what?" Trent asked.

"Well, blood magic." Releia's smile grew wider.

The two men raised their eyebrows in unison.

"Here, let me show you." Releia pulled a large, old book from the pile on the table and opened it up to a page she had marked with a torn piece of notebook paper.

On the center of the page was a drawing of a robed figure. He was laying on the ground and blood dripped from his wrists. Around him, a circle of text in a language that neither Marsh or

Trent could recognize. Below the circle, a diagram showing sets of runes and drawings of animals.

"I assume this looks familiar?" Releia asked. "When I saw the the flames suck themselves in and disappear, I remembered this plate." She pointed to the title on top of the illustration..

"Resthiatus un Sithis - Hariventhus Brella da Munus," she translated "Elemental Summons - Sanguine Transference Between Realms"

"Elemental Summons?" Trent asked. "So someone called the fire down from the heavens or something?"

"Close, but not exactly." She straightened up in her seat. Clearly it was time for a lesson. "This image shows a man using his own blood to open up a channel to the Aether - the realm of magic. By doing so, hypothetically, they could draw energy from that realm into ours."

She put a finger below the rune chart. The runes were

arranged around the outline of a bird. Jerroc realized they were looking at the same image that was tattooed on wrist of the body they had found this morning.

"The Phoenix runes. A mage would tattoo this on his body. That was the first seal - his flesh and blood meeting an image of the thing he sought to transfer from one realm to another. He would then build a circle of complementary elements from our world - in this case, lilac and wormwood."

"How do these create fire, again?" Trent interrupted.

"That would require at least two semesters of advanced arithmancy for me to explain, so I'll just say that the math adds up." She continued. "Anyway, once the circle was constructed he would use a specially-made silver knife to cut himself and allow his blood to flow on the area that he intended to bring the Aether energy into."

"So, these guys would kill themselves in order to cast a single spell?" Trent laughed. "Really puts getting a papercut at work into perspective."

"No, no they wouldn't kill themselves." Releia really wished that Trent would just let her continue. "Remember, the last time that human mages were doing this sort of thing was before the Aeyl disappeared. The Aeyl straddled both our realm and the Aether. A trained mage could use their presence in our world like an antenna. As long as there was an Aeyl within a few hundred miles, all it took was a small amount of blood to perform a basic summon. When they were finished, a quick healing spell would settle the rest. Even so, blood magic was relatively rare - most mages didn't bother. There were plenty of more elegant, and much less messy methods of channeling. So, anyway, that brings us to this morning's events. I assume that the body you found had these markings - the tattoo and the lilac and wormwood?"

Both men nodded.

"What we witnessed this morning was one of the simplest of all blood summons. A parlor trick really. The energy is pulled into our world, and well..... boom. But no destruction, no heat. Just a whole lot of noise and light."

She made a motion with her hands mimicking an explosion.

"This exact spell was sometimes used by court mages to intimidate opposing armies, and historical records show that it was employed in some of the Termian Empire's more elaborate mock battles. You see, it's a completely harmless spell, the fire won't burn anything. It can't do any real damage to things from our realm. To put it simply, it's a fire tuned to a different frequency."

"So, this is all well and good, but it still doesn't explain this morning," Jerroc spoke up after letting her lecture sink in. "Every school kid knows that the day the Aeyl disappeared, all the magic in the world went with them. So, unless they're back and no one told us, how did this happen?"

Releia looked at Jerroc and Trent.

"Well, now we get into hypothetical territory," she said. "As I mentioned, blood magic usually isn't fatal. Today it was. With no Aeyl around to serve as a channel, he must have had some

other method. I suspect it was a rather weak connection, requiring time and blood - enough to kill a man. It would also require an intimate knowledge of magic, and that is in very short supply."

"So who *would* have that knowledge?" Jerroc asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm sort of an anomaly at the University. There are maybe a dozen others in the world who continue to study the art of magic, not just its history," Releia said proudly. "There's no way to know without some more investigating. Do you know who the victim was? On the radio, they said he was homeless."

"We don't know to be honest," said Marsh. "Why do you have a theory on that too?"

"Not really," she said. "But does the name Yoen Perenil mean anything to you?"

"The professor who was found murdered last month?" Trent asked. "You knew him didn't you?"

"He was the only one who didn't laugh when I decided to focus my studies on magic," she said. "I was on his research team."

"And you think his death has something to do with this?" Marsh asked.

"I can't say for certain," she said. "But Perenil's a good part of the reason that this blood magic business is so fresh in my mind. He called me in a week before he was killed to talk about it. He wanted me to bone up on Aeylian blood lore. He said it had something to do with a scroll they found, but he couldn't show it to me. Not until "the investigation" was over, whatever that meant?"

"But what does this have to do with the explosion?" Marsh asked.

"Well, the scroll he was talking about went missing the night he was killed. One of the lab assistants who was there when they first opened it up mentioned it to me. Said that some

Black-coats met her at her apartment and told her that they were investigating its disappearance, but not to mention it to the police." She paused. "So she mentioned it to me instead."

Jerroc nodded his head.

"Well, I wouldn't call it a lead, but I'll make a note of it," he said.

"Thanks," she replied. "Oh, one more thing. Do you have the knife that he used to... well, you know?"

Jerroc was about to explain that they had been barred from the crime scene before they could collect the evidence. He then that he realized that Releia had not let on that she had any idea that the Shard was open. His gut told him to trust the girl, but there was no use sharing secrets that did not yet need to be shared.

"The knife was sent off to be processed, so we don't have it at the station." He lied. "But we do have crime scene photographs."

"That will have to do, I guess - but I do need to see them," she said. "I can't tell you who's behind this, but the knife might hold some clues as to who they're working with."

"So, we're really buying into all this?" Trent asked as the two men walked down the steps leading from Releia's apartment. "Blood magic?"

"I'm not sure anymore. If you had asked me yesterday if any of what we just heard made sense, I'd have told you to bugger off. But after this morning, with the shit we saw, who knows." Jerroc sighed as he lit a cigarette. "Ms. Senn back there might be a bit of an odd bird, but she didn't seem crazy. We'll bring her into the station tomorrow morning and show her the crime scene photos. If that's a dead end, well, we got to spend some time with an interesting young woman. If it's something more, maybe we'll get to do some real guard-work for a change."

It was night now, and the streetlights flickers over the

two men as they walked around the block to Jerroc's car.

"How do we know she didn't know all of those details because she was involved in the first place?" Trent said as he entered the passenger side door.

"I can't say that thought didn't cross my mind, Trent." Jerroc answered as he started the car. "But there's one big thing she left out. Maybe the biggest thing. She never mentioned the Shard being open."

Jerroc dropped Trent off at the Market Street Underground stop. He still lived with his parents in an East Bay bungalow, a fact he revealed to the older guard with a tinge of embarrassment. Jerroc thought nothing of it, except to say that he still lived in his father's house, though it had been years since anyone but Jerroc called it home. That thought was on his mind as he exited his car and walked the granite steps to his front door.

The grey stone facade of the house showed its age. The carved faces of the two-headed wyvern that sat above the doorway

had been smoothed by time, leaving their features less fearsome than intended. Jerroc Marsh threw off his cloak and fell into the old arm chair that sat in the center of the living room. Above the fireplace hung a kite shield, dented in the middle. Above it, a sword and a mace. When he was a boy, his grandfather had told him that these were carried by Sir Jerwyn Marsh in the Seige of Terras Kahe. He lost an eye protecting the ram that broke the gates, and when he returned to Cairn Gallore, he found this house deeded to him by a thankful King.

Jerroc picked up a bottle of elderflower gin which sat half empty at on the side table. Apart from the chair and table, the only furniture in the room was a large, carved wooden radio cabinet tuned to a live broadcast. After his father died, Jerroc had sold most of his belongings. At the time he wanted to think that he would one day fill the house with his own treasures; tonight it sat as empty as it had ever been. He looked at Jerwyn's sword and shield. Somehow he felt his ancestor would be able to make more sense of it all than he could.

As the sounds of *Vickus Shirelle and his Electric Lute Orchestra* filled the room, he took measured sips from the bottle

until his eyes began to close.

Chapter 4

"There's a girl here to see you. She's waiting in your office."

Mrs. Restonne spoke up as Jerroc entered the guard station. Of course Releia would be have come in as early as possible. Looking towards his desk, he could see her sitting in the chair across from it. The box of pink memo slips was still on the floor. Trent had already found her and was handing her a cup of tea as Jerroc made his way over.

"Good morning D.I. Marsh!" Releia jumped up from her chair, splashing a bit of tea on the floor.

"Good morning, Ms. Senn." Marsh motioned for her to sit down. The morning light that filtered through his office windows reflected off her pale blue eyes. He hadn't noticed them under the harsh fluorescent light of her apartment. Gone was the loose sweater and lounge pants, replaced by a high-collared linen shirt and dark brown trousers. "It looks like Bowden has been

keeping you company."

"Yes, quite well," she chirped. "I barely slept all night, I've been so worked up about all of this. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I arrived before dawn this morning. It looks like they're still cleaning up in the gardens around the Shard, they were finishing putting up the fence when I got here."

Jerroc had noticed it on his drive in. A large chain-link fence had been set up along the perimeter of the gardens. Signs reading "Closed for Repair" with the Royal Crest were hung at regular intervals.

"Cleaning up is one way to put it." Trent snarked. "Anyway, I was able to run by the lab this morning, they developed the photos that our guys took yesterday."

He produced a folder from underneath his arm. Opening it up on the desk, he fanned out the photos. Seeing them now, Jerroc was struck by just how closely the scene echoed the illustration in Releia's book. She was now pouring over the photos closely, mumbling to herself. She picked up one and brought it close to

her face.

"Here... this one." she pointed at the corner of one of the black-and-white prints. "Do we have a closer photo of the knife from this angle?"

Trent searched the pile of photographs. Pulling one out he handed it to Releia.

"This good enough?" he asked.

"I think so," she said, running her finger across the knife in the photo. "Do you see this here?"

At first glance, nothing stood out about the knife. Jerroc and Trent had both looked at it yesterday, it looked like a knife you could buy in any camping store from Torrennshold to the Gharisian Valley. But, as Releia's slender finger traced a shape on the blade, they both began to see it - some sort of iridescent material was woven into the steel.

"Ahh, good you see it. Arellicite," she said, eyes wide.

"It means I'm right, this knife was made specifically for use in blood magic."

"What does it do?" asked Trent.

"It vibrates at the only frequency that resonates in both our realm and the Aether. The blood is the binding agent, but the arellicite is the catalyst." She spoke with an authority that belied her age.

"And I assume this is hard to come by?" Jerroc added.

"Very. It's rare, it's expensive, and there are probably only a handful of craftsmen left who could weave it like this. There are a handful of substances that could be used as a catalyst - Arrellicite is powerful, but difficult to work" she said. "If we want to find out who this dead blood mage is, you should probably start by talking to people who can work arellicite."

"And, who would that be?" Trent asked.

"Dwarves, most likely" Releia answered.

"Trent, get your stuff," Jerroc said. "I think I know who we need to talk to."

"Where are we going?" Releia asked excitedly.

"We aren't going anywhere," Jerroc said as he studied the photo of the knife. "Thank you for your assistance, Ms. Senn, but this is still official guard business. I'm afraid this is where your story ends."

"But... but... you wouldn't have anything to go on if it wasn't for me!" Releia protested.

"And it is much appreciated," Jerroc put his arm around the small of her back and pushed her towards the door. "I promise, if your theories pan out, we'll let you know, but where we're going is no place for a young woman."

The three made their way through the lobby. Releia soon realized that protesting was getting her nowhere and when they

parted ways, Jerroc thought he noticed a hint of disappointment in Trent's face as she made her way out of the door.

When Releia was out of sight, the two men made their way towards Jerroc's car.

So, where exactly are we going boss?" Trent asked. Jerroc looked back at him and pointed at the ground.

"Down-under" he said. "And I don't want to hear a word about it."

Chapter 5

Jerroc parked the car in an alleyway behind a tire store. The entranceways to the Down Under were scattered throughout the city and while most were well-hidden Jerroc had learned the location of several of them from his father.

"Leave your cloak." he said to Trent as they were getting out of the car. "They don't take kindly to law enforcement and we need to keep a low profile."

He walked towards the chest-high wall at the back of the alley and began to climb over it. He motioned for Trent to follow suit. On the other side of the wall they found a ten foot drop into a concrete drainage tunnel. Jerroc remembered this being easier once upon a time. Luckily, a stack of old mattresses was strategically placed beneath them - the entrance was most likely still in use.

They dropped down, one after the other. The mattresses broke most of their fall. Trying to ignore the ache in his back, Jerroc rolled off the damp pile.

"Through there" he said, pointing at an open pipe sticking out of the concrete wall. He tossed a hand-lamp to Trent.

"Seriously?" Trent looked at the opening. It was barely tall enough to fit him if he crawled.

"It'll be a tight fit, but yeah, through there." Jerroc walked over to the pipe and getting on his hands and knees, made his way inside. Trent was relieved as he realized the pipe

widened past the initial entrance.

"It's a false sewer pipe," Jerroc said, standing up. "Keeps prying eyes away."

The passageway sloped gradually downward. A faint light in the distance grew brighter as they neared it. Trent had been told about this place but always in warnings. In the Academy they warned against exploring the Down-under. This was the Dwarves' refuge inside the city of men, and their own laws held sway.

Soon, they no longer needed the hand lamp and the passage opened into a vast cavern. Huge pillars of stone reached up into vaulted ceilings and the whole area was bathed in neon light. Rows of stone buildings lined the streets, some many stories tall.

"The city-beneath-the-city," Jerroc said.

"So, where to?" he asked.

Jerroc pointed at a neon sign hanging from one of the support pillars: *Professor Fezzik's : Your Pleasure is Our Pleasure.*

"There," he said. "To see someone I've not seen in a very long time."

Trent looked around. He had never seen this many Dwarves in one place. Now and then they would see another human, most of them homeless, many of them lost in a haze of Nightgum. They made their way deep into the maze of streets, past beggars and black market merchants. They pushed through a crowd gathered around a makeshift stage. Standing on it were two plump Dwarf women and one human, from the Selet Islands from the look of her. They were dressed in cheap lace gowns and their faces projected a profound indifference to their situation. A dwarf in a purple suit with his beard dyed green collected bids from the audience.

"Gods, we allow this shit down here?" Trent whispered.

"We don't *allow* anything. You know the arrangement. The

Dwarves get to do what they please in the Down-under." Jerroc said. "In return we get access to the resources they mine."

"But that's a human woman up there. She's being sold like cattle," Trent muttered.

"You'd best keep your opinions to yourself around here. I like it about as much as you do, but as long as we see no signs of it in the city proper, we can't touch them." Jerroc gritted his teeth. "Now come on and stay quiet. We're not far."

Trent kept his eyes on the stage as they continued down the street. A man in the crowd threw a fistfull of crowns and a gold watch onto the stage. The purple-suited auctioneer chortled loudly as one of the Dwarf women was lowered into the crowd. The man pulled her by the chain and led her into a side alley.

Eventually they turned down one of the wider paths. At the end, a white stone building, lit by pink and blue spotlights.. An illustrated Dwarf surrounded by a bevy of buxom women peered out from a large lit sign on the roof; below, written in pink neon lights: *Professor Fezzik's*.

"Follow me," Jerroc looked at Trent. "And say nothing."

A fat Dwarf sat on a stool in front of the club. Trent stood back as Jerroc exchanged words, and a fistfull of crowns, with the doorman. He motioned for Trent to follow him inside.

Lingering scents of milkweed smoke and sweat filled the air inside Professor Fezzik's. In the Down-under, it was easy to forget that it was only midday. The relative emptiness of the club served as a subtle reminder. Trent looked around the central bar. A set of plush couches sat against the blue velvet-lined walls. Across from her, a small group of Dwarves sat at the chrome-rimmed bar, arguing over some sort of dice game. In the far corner, a scantily dressed waitress sat on the lap of an obese man while she took his order. Behind them, a woman dressed in a long red hooded coat entered and sauntered towards the bar. Trent was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. Jerroc was directing him to a small hallway leading behind the empty stage.

Down the hall, a door was guarded by a pair of fat Dwarves.

Since they had entered the Down-under, Trent had observed Jerroc's remarkable calm; he knew this place somehow. As they neared the door, something about him changed. Jerroc's posture lowered and his pace grew uneven.

"Your man outside told me he was in." Jerroc stated to the Dwarves. "My friend and I need to see him."

"And who are you to Fezzik?" asked the larger of the two Dwarves.

"Jerroc Marsh." He paused for a second. "He was an associate of my father."

The bigger Dwarf cracked the door and motioned for the smaller to relay the message. Several minutes passed. The Dwarf stared at the two men in silence. Finally, the door opened, the smaller Dwarf emerged and nodded. They were free to enter.

Fezzik's office could not have been more different than the club that housed it. Carved wooden bookshelves lined the walls, packed with leather-bound volumes. A large oil painting

stretched floor to ceiling showing an early steam-powered drill at work in the Khazog mines. Vellum scrolls sat in stacks on top of an ornately sculpted iron desk. Perhaps the "Professor" was actually a professor, thought Trent.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Jerroc Marsh and friend?" said the voice in a thick Dwarven accent. "It has indeed been a very long time."

The question came from the shortest, oldest Dwarf that Trent had ever seen. The Dwarf entered the room from a side-chamber, wearing a black double-breasted suit with crimson pinstripes. In his long, white beard, he wore a massive diamond.

"Not since my father's funeral." Marsh replied. "Your presence did not go... unnoticed."

"Ahh yes." The Dwarf took a seat in a leather armchair. "I hope my presence did not go unappreciated. You know your father meant a great deal to me. I would also hope you do not blame me for the circumstances of his passing."

"He made his choices." Marsh said dryly. "However, I didn't bring my partner here to reminisce about my father's mistakes."

"Ahh, I did not assume so." He twisted his beard around a finger. "Then what does bring you to see Professor Fezzik?"

"A weapon."

"Yes, I noticed you have taken to carrying her?" Fezzik's eyes went to the gun strapped to Marsh's hip.

Jerroc shook his head.

"No, not that one. A knife." He pulled the photo out of his pocket. "What do you know about arellicite?"

The Dwarf took the photo and studied it carefully.

"Ahh. It has been making quite the resurgence these days, has it not?" He thumbed the diamond in his beard. "Yes, I can tell you much and more about arellicite."

"A resurgence?" Marsh inquired. "Someone else has come to

see you?"

"Yes. I believe you know him." The Dwarf sat forward.

"Tall man. Smells of pomade. Fond of black coats."

"Lord Brithe," Trent spoke up "What was he doing here?"

"Ahh, friend of Mr. Jerroc Marsh. You make your presence known at last." Fezzik smiled. "Your Lord Brithe, as you call him, visited me several weeks ago. He knew, as Mr. Marsh does, that Fezzik's can service all sorts of uncommon needs. In his case, he needed a small supply of arellicite, and a smith familiar the old ways of the Dwarven forge. And with the purse of coin he carried, I was more than happy to oblige."

"Wait, Brithe had the knife made?" Trent asked, turning his head towards Jerroc. "Gods, no wonder he was so insistent that his men take over."

He looked back at Fezzik.

"And you made it for him?"

"No, no. I have not crafted for a very long time." Fezzik extended his left hand. It was badly mangled and covered in burn scars. "No, I spend my time now reading, and teaching, and making sure things go smoothly around here. But, I had a pupil, a very gifted young man. I was able to... facilitate a contract between myself and Lord Brithe. My student would craft the knife and I could supply the arellicite - at quite a high premium I must add."

"Did you know what Brithe's plans were?" Jerroc asked.

"Ahh, you mean the explosion in the Old Quarter? Good for business. Fear of the unknown causes men to drink and whore." Fezzik stood up. He walked toward the door to the side chamber from which he had entered. "Of course, Lord Brithe's ultimate goals remain unknown to me. But, I am afraid that I have already said too much to Mr. Jerroc Marsh and friend. Fezzik is a Dwarf of his word, and Lord Brithe's coin purse came with some stipulations. But as I said, Lucan Marsh meant quite a lot to me, so I shall give his son a fighting chance. I apologize for this, sincerely. I hope you will not hold it against me."

He pushed a button on a wooden wall-panel. The two Dwarves who had stood guard outside the room entered, guns drawn.

"Try not to make too much of a mess." Fezzik said, as he slipped behind the door.

Jerroc grabbed Trent. A bullet flew past their heads as they dove behind Fezzik's iron desk. Their hearts racing, both guardsmen reached for their guns. More shots fired. A bullet ricocheted off of the desk. Jerroc lifted his gun, firing two rounds blindly. Trent felt sweat on his palms. His mind raced.

You've trained for this. This is what the academy was for. Keep your head down and wait for an opportunity.

Jerroc fired again.

"Gaargh." One of Jerroc's bullets grazed the larger Dwarf's ear. Blood trickled down the side of his face. Trent peaked over the edge of the desk.

Ok, he's distracted. One shot to center mass. Just like they taught you, Trent.

He aimed his pistol at the Dwarf who was cupping his ragged ear. A bullet flew through the air.

Trent felt his shoulder light up in pain as his gun fell to the floor. He had waited too long. He had given the smaller Dwarf a chance to get a shot in. It felt as if a blade of hot iron had been thrust through his shoulder. He slumped towards the ground. Jerroc fired again. Two misses. The Dwarves moved towards the desk, closing in. A new voice yelled from the doorway.

"Mah-jahrai excatuum"

Jerroc and Trent looked over the desk as the two Dwarves turned their heads to the woman standing in the door. She clutched a silver pendant that hung from her neck. The Dwarves pulled their triggers.

Click. Click.

Rust crawled up the barrels of their now-jammed guns.

"Run!" the woman yelled. Trent clutched his arm as he and Jerroc sprinted past the confused Dwarves and down the hall. The woman took off with them. As they ran through the bar, she turned around and shouted.

"Maehrieun Silvatus!"

One by one the bottles of liquor that lined the bar ignited, catching the pursuing Dwarves in a wall of fire. The three ran out of the club, darting into an alley. Collapsing against a wall, Jerroc tried to catch his breath.

"We need to get him to a doctor!" Jerroc looked at Trent's bleeding arm. His face was turning pale.

Before he could say anything more, the strange woman placed a hand on the pendant. Jerroc could now see it in more detail, a silver disc with a flower inlaid in some sort of gemstone. Strange words flowed from her mouth as Jerroc and Trent fell

quickly into a warm, deep sleep.

Chapter 6

Releia Senn laid her head on the satchel bag that served as a makeshift pillow. She had been trying to do work in the university library since leaving the two detectives that morning.

They would be nowhere without me. She thought as she closed her eyes. Attempting to write an essay on the creation myths of pre-Drecaian civilization was a poor substitute for the adventure she supposed they were having.

"Ma'am, excuse me." A tap on her shoulder stirred her from her near sleep.

Releia looked up, pushing a strand of hair from her face. It was a young man, presumably another student. He was thin, with high cheekbones and shaggy black hair. He sported thick rimmed glasses and a red corduroy jacket that was frayed along the cuffs and lapel- she couldn't tell if it was for fashion or for

want of a new coat.

"Oh, yes, sorry. I guess I was asleep," She straightened her blouse and sat straight. "Can... can I help you?"

"Hi. Molochai Rizaldi." He held out his hand. "But you can call me Mol."

"Umm... hello." She stared at him blankly.

"Right. I just... I've seen you around campus. You're the one studying arcaenology, right?" There was nervousness in his voice. "Well, anyway, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Ok. What is it?" Releia was confused. What was he playing at?

"Well, it involves something I found. It's in the stacks though. You'll have to come with me."

Whoever Mol was, Releia didn't sense he was dangerous. Even

so, her good sense told her that following a strange man into the stacks in a near-empty library was inadvisable.

"Please. I don't bite." He looked her straight in the eye.
"I just need to show you something."

He placed a hand in his pocket and mumbled something under his breath. Releia felt something change - the air grew colder, the skin on her arms grew goose pimples and a calm, quiet voice inside her head began to speak.

Go with him. He is safe. This is a new friend.

"OK. Lead the way." Her mind was trapped in a gauzy haze as she stood and strapped her bag around her.

Mol took her by the hand, leading her up the staircase that fed into the archive stacks. The wooden shelves created a labyrinth so thick even the librarians often found themselves lost. As they wound their way through the narrow aisles, Mol dragged a finger along the spines of the books. His eyes were scanning their titles.

"No, no. Not this one," he mumbled. Releia could already feel the cloud in her head slowly clearing. Why was she following this stranger?

Finally, he stopped in front of a section that suited his purposes. Releia glanced at the volumes that occupied the shelf in her line of sight: *Crop Yield Ratios - Cabbage Varieties: 615 ACR - 625 ACR*.

"Umm... you wanted to talk about agriculture?" she asked.

"No, no. I wanted to find a place where we would not be disturbed," he said. Releia found his strangely reassuring. He pulled a book from the shelf and thumbed through its pages. "Unless someone comes looking for, let's see, historical trends in highland soil conditions, I believe this should do just fine."

Replacing the book, he took a step closer to her.

"As I said, I'm interested in your expertise. Let me run

something by you. Are you familiar with this phrase."

He reached into his coat pocket and produced a scrap of paper. Scrawled on it were two words. Releia recognized them immediately.

"*Maehrieun Prolatii*," she said. "It was a simple fire conjuration. It's very common in introductory magic books published during the Coregency."

Mol stared at her and smiled.

"Yes, exactly," he said. "And is there any way to get that spell working now?"

She thought about the phoenix fire at the Shard. Blood magic was a great deal more complicated than this. If that was possible, perhaps this was too; but, this man was still a complete stranger. She decided to be cautious.

"Of course not," she answered matter of factly "When the Aeyl disappeared, any power they may have went with them."

"Yes. I imagine you're right about that," Mol said with resignation. "But, humor me for a moment, if you will."

He pulled a book from the shelf. To Releia's horror, he began ripping pages from it. He formed them into a tight wad and placed them on the ground. He crouched down, motioning for Releia to join him. When she had, he reached back into his pocket and pulled out a small necklace. Making a fist around it, he spoke.

"Maehrieun Prolatii."

The ball of torn pages began to smoke. Within seconds, a small flame surrounded the pages. Releia watched as they sunk into a pile of ashes. Mol stared into her eyes, grinning as the flame burnt itself out.

"You... you... you could have set this whole place on fire," she said in an excited whisper. "We're surrounded by books! Highly flammable books!"

"Really? I perform magic in front of you and all you can worry about is lighting some old books on fire?" Mol shook his head. "Though, I suppose you saw a much more impressive display yesterday. Perhaps it's become mundane to you already?"

"No. No. Sorry, I just. What in the realm is that?" She looked at the silver pendant in his hand.

He opened his palm. In the center of the necklace sat a rose carved from an irridescent crystal. When she realized what she was looking at, she shrunk back.

"Oh gods. It's... you're.... oh my gods," she scrambled to find her words.

"Yes, I am. But the Order is not quite what you think it is," Mol took her by the hand. "Releia Senn, we have much to teach you."

Mol allowed her to collect her thoughts before continuing.

"I hope I've not given you too much of a fright," he said.

"We've had an eye on you for awhile. Long before yesterday's events, though, that has sped up our timetable considerably. Either way, you show considerable potential."

"Wait, what?" she asked "Potential for what? Magic? I thought the Order was supposed to be hereditary. Everything I've ever heard said that you were born with-"

"Bullshit," he stopped her short. "The whole Aeyl-blooded humans thing? Just the product of some power-hungry nobles and conspiracy theorists. Though you are right, my father was in the Order, and his father before him. Either way, I'm not here to recruit you exactly. Your role is... unique- though I fear I have said too much on that matter already."

"Anyhow," he continued. "You demonstrate a natural understanding of magic - especially for someone who has not been trained in it. You were quite right in identifying the form of blood magic used at the Shard. Though, you were not entirely correct in laying the blame on the Order. And, before you can ask, yes we did monitor your conversation with the two detectives. One of my colleague has been tailing them since they

left your apartment. We fear they might be in a bit over their heads."

Gods, what dark path had she sent Jerroc and Trent down, she thought.

"Are... are they ok?" she asked.

"They're in good hands," he answered. "I wouldn't worry. Now then, we need to get you started. Please, come with me."

Releia's head was swirling with a mix of shock and curiosity as Mol led out of the library. If this was the Order, and Mol was telling the truth, who was responsible for the the Shard explosion? And what did the Order want with her?

"Hop in," Mol said, as they approached a beat-up red hatchback parked outside the library. Releia opened the door and settled into the faux-leather seats. She was about to ask where they were going as she felt herself drifting quickly into a deep sleep.

Releia awoke to find herself in a cinder block basement, laying on an old, torn couch. She sat up, trying to shake the haze from her mind. The slit windows on one side of the room let in a sliver of orange light.

Evening, she thought to herself, trying to figure out how long she had been unconscious.

Apart from the couch, the only notable feature in the room was a large stack of cardboard boxes. She recognized some of the faded logos printed on their sides: *Rooster's Crow Summer Ale*, *Bay City Mead*, *Arellia Hills Plum Wine*.

Her arms and legs felt as if they were covered in pins and needles. She tried to stand, but couldn't quite find her balance. She remembered getting into the car with Mol.

Why did I do that? Gods, you're dumb. she thought to herself. A string of possible fates rushed through her mind, each more terrifying than the last.

As she began to settle into a mild panic, the door at the far side of the room creaked open. It was Mol. He was carrying a plate of sandwiches and a glass of water.

"Oh good, you're awake." he said calmly, placing the glass and sandwiches at her feet. "I'm sorry about this, truly. I hope we haven't given you a fright. It's just, the Order has its secrets. Not that I don't trust you, but we can't be too careful. Here, eat something and drink plenty of water, it will help with the numbness. "

Releia tried to calm her nerves. She took a sandwich, inspecting it carefully before taking a bite. Whitefish salad, not her favorite, but as she ate it she realized just how empty her stomach felt.

"Where... where am I?" she asked between bites. As in the library, Mol's presence made her feel strangely at ease.

"You're inside the Order's home. I know, it's not much to look at," he said. "Your strength will come back in a moment. It's an unfortunate side effect of the..... technique... I

used."

"Right, the Order...." she trailed off. "Are you really?"

"I take it you've heard of the Order of the Crystal Rose before?" he said.

"Of course," she said. "Who hasn't? But no one believe they're real. An ancient order, secretly performing magic. Pulling the strings of government and the media. It's that kind of conspiracy theorist talk that gets my research laughed out of the room most of the time."

"Well I'm not sure about the 'pulling the strings'. If we were really that powerful, you'd think I could afford some nicer digs," he motioned his hand around the sparse, concrete room. "But we do in fact practice magic, as you have seen."

He held out his hand. In his palm was the small silver necklace.

"Here, do you know what this is?" he asked.

"From what I gather, it lets you do magic," she answered.

"Someting like that," he said in a tone that sounded older than he looked. "I'm sure you don't need a history lesson, but humor me if you will. As you know, the domain of the Aeylin Coregency stretched from the Attican Ocean, across the plains of Drecaia, to the very border of the Dwarven kingdoms in the foothills of the Sheckov Mountains."

Releia nodded. Mol continued.

"From the Shard, Aeyl trained select humans in the arcane art. They were trained in medicine, alchemy, and simple charms. The knowledge the Aeyl shared brought our people up from mere savages and formed the backbone of our world. And, as you are well aware, mankind woke one morning to discover all traces of the Aeyl gone - all but the Shard."

"Right, right, but any primary school student could tell you that." Releia interjected.

"I'm sorry, it's just important that a story begin at the beginning," he said. "Anyhow, what you know is not entirely correct. You see, while the Shard remained, so too did fifteen pendants, three for each of the great cities of man - Gharisia, Byylog, Agrophos, Cairn-Gallore, and Torrenshold. Shortly before they disappeared, these tokens were given by the Aeyl to a handful of their most skilled and trustworthy acolytes- the first members of the Order of the Crystal Rose."

"Right, and they let you do magic," like I said. "I've spent years studying magic, I'd like to think I know it when I see it."

"It's more accurate to say that they let us mimic real magic," he said. "Did you ever wonder why they left the Shard behind?"

Before she had time to answer, he continued.

"It's an antenna," he said, smiling. "And these pendants, these are the transmitters. We're not really sure how it works, it just does. It's not perfect. The magic we perform is severely

limited and it can't hold a candle to the real artifact. But allows us to continue to practice basic magic. As I said, there were three mages posted to each great city. They were tasked with protecting the the art of magic through the generations," he said. "And so we have. Until yesterday."

They were interrupted by a woman's voice yelling in the hallway.

"Mol! Heyden! Anyone! I need help out here." The woman shouted. "One of them was shot."

Mol shot up off the couch and into the hallway. Releia stood up slowly, finally able to regain her balance. The hallway was made of the same cinderblock and was lined with shelves filled with glass bottles and canned goods. As she stumbled into it, Releia saw the woman whose voice she had heard. Wearing a dark red coat with the hood pulled down to reveal straight, raven-black hair, Releia watched her as she carried a man's limp body into a side room. His shoulder was wrapped in a linen cloth, spotted with blood. Releia instantly recognized Bowden Trent.

Adrenaline overtook her as she ran down the hall. Mol and the woman were laying him on a cot as she entered the room. When he was down, Mol ran back outside.

"Trent! What in gods' names happened?" she asked, looking at the woman in red.

"He'll be ok. I was able to stop the blood loss. The bullet is still in there though, we'll need to remove it." The woman said.

"We... I don't know how to..." Releia was panicking.

"You can," the woman replied. "You just don't know it yet."

Mol returned with another older man. They were carrying Jerroc with them. They slumped him into a ratty overstuffed armchair in the corner.

"Over here," the woman said, grabbing Releia by the shoulder and pointing her towards Trent. She then kneeled down

and removed the linen bandage. The wound was open, but covered in an iridescent gauze. Releia could see blood welling up against it. The woman grabbed her necklace and waved a hand over the wound. The gauze dissolved into nothing and blood began to flow.

"Quickly," she shouted at Releia. "Concentrate and try to see the forces that surround the bullet."

"What?" Releia asked. "I don't know what you mean. Do something, he's bleeding out."

"*Teharani Prehenset*," she said calmly. "Do you know those words?"

Releia nodded.

Aeylian words. *Lead* and *Force*.

"Repeat them. Focus yourself on them," the woman said softly. "Make the words your own."

Releia fell into quick, shallow breaths.

"*Teharani Prehenset, Teharani Prehenset, Teharani Prehenset,*" she said the words. Over and over. As she repeated them, they began to lose their meaning as each syllable stood on its own. What was this doing? Why didn't they just take him to a hospital?

"I... I can't," she said, exasperated. "I'm sorry but I just can't. I don't know what you want me to do!"

"Stop it!" the old man yelled from behind them. "Attia, help the poor boy already."

The woman sighed. She knelt down and put a hand on Trent's arm and grasped the pendant around her neck.

"*Teharani Prehenset,*" she said calmly as the bullet slid out. She whispered another spell as she waved a hand over his shoulder. Pale, white skin began to stretch and cover the wound.

The man put a hand on Releia's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about that," he said in a voice that was gravelly but kind. "Attia was trying to prove a point. The boy will be ok. He just needs to sleep it off."

"I'm... I'm sorry. I don't know what I was supposed to do. Mol showed me your talismans, the transmitters. I know how they work. I don't have one. What did she expect me to do?"

"Calm," he said. "I'll explain everything in good time." "The important thing is your friends here are more or less unscathed. What in the realm happened to them, Attia?"

"Dwarves happened," she said. "They were investigating something in the Down-under. Stopped by Professor Fezzik's. It seems the meeting didn't go very well," she said.

"Gods damned Dwarves," he shook his head. "Should've known they'd have their beards in this somehow. We can figure out our next steps once these two wake up. In the meantime, we should show our guest here some hospitality. Attia, go rest up for a bit, and get Mol to put on a pot of tea."

He turned to Releia

"Apologies for not introducing myself more formally," he said, extending a hand. "You can call me Heyden. Allow me to show you around."

Heyden led her from the room and gave her a brief tour. The basement ran under two buildings, not far from the Opal Palace. They housed a used book shop and a pub called the Wheezing Boar. Attia ran the former, while Heyden tended bar at the latter. Mol did odd jobs for both. The two storefronts provided the Order with a cover, plenty of opportunities to eavesdrop, and a private place to practice magic.

"So what do you do around here?" she asked.

"Mostly, we wait," he replied. "It's not usually this action-packed. We're scholars, mostly. Like you."

They entered a small room lined with bookcases. A pair of folding chairs were set against a wall. Heyden invited Releia to

sit with him.

"Why did you choose to study arcaenology?" he asked. Magic was dead as far as you knew,"

She thought for a second.

"Because, I enjoyed it. It's part of our history and shouldn't be forgotten," she said. "Because, ever since I was a child I was fascinated with it. Because, it makes sense to me."

He pulled an old book from one of the shelves. A paper scrap had been used to mark a place. He opened it to a page and handed it to her.

"What do you see here?"

She studied it.

"Well, umm... the runes written at the top of the page are Qu'en and Rel. Sleep and Knowledge. So I'd think this is some sort of recipe for a memory enchantment," her eyes drifted down

the page. "Though, wait, this table here lists a series of binding agents. I don't recognize all of them, but these three here - ghost grass, mercanium, and treilis extract - they're not usually used in this sort of spell. In fact, the only time I've ever seen them combined in these ratios is in a copy of one of Tamerlin One-eye's journals."

Heyden nodded, telling her to continue.

"Well, if I remember correctly, Tamerlin was tasked with designing an enchantment that would dispel lightning strikes from a Lord's hunting grounds. Wait, maybe that makes sense. Brain activity is just electrical impulses, right? Synapses and what not?" her voice pitched higher as she began speaking faster. "Yes, yes. That would do it, wouldn't it? Absolutely ingenious. It's a memory-removal spell disguised as a memory enchantment!"

"Bravo, Ms. Senn," Heyden clapped his hands. "Do you realize that it took me forty years to make sense of that? Even at the height of the age of magic, you would be hard pressed to find a court mage who could do what you just did, on the spot."

Releia didn't know what to say.

"No, of course you wouldn't know. Why would you? You've never met a real mage in your life," he said. "Well, let me cut to the chase. We've been admirers of your skills for quite some time. We send Mol out from time to time to audit classes at the University, looking for potential candidates. I believe about three years ago you got in a heated debate with one of your professors during a lecture. Something about an Agrophorian ossuary inscription. He told the class that it included a life-draining curse."

"And I pointed out that it wasn't a curse at all. It was merely an enchantment meant to keep moisture out of the box," she interjected. "I knew I was right."

"Yes, you were. And since then, you have continued to impress. Which is part of why you're here tonight," he said. "We also have - had, actually - a bit of a source inside the University. Professor Perenil was a close friend, one of the few who knew about us. He pointed us in your direction in the first

place. Such a shame."

Releia was silent for a moment. Her mentor had known about all of this? At the very least it explained why he had been so receptive to her interest in magic.

"You called me a candidate, but Mol said you didn't recruit," She said "That this was passed down through families."

"He's right. There have never been more than three members of the Order in each of the five cities, each the son or daughter of a previous member" he replied. "but our watch will soon come to a close. You see, the Shard has been breached, and so our power will begin to dwindle."

"Breached?" Releia thought for a second. "Was that what the explosion was all about? But, if the Order didn't do it, who did?"

"We're not sure. Maybe your guard friends have uncovered something," he said. "But, it's unsettling, to say the least. Whoever it was, we can't imagine they've done more than breach

the outer ring; believe me, we would know if they had. But either way, it's set certain things in motion."

"You still haven't told me why I'm here," Releia said sharply.

"To be honest, we're not sure. I suspect we each have our theories; Attia does, as you unfortunately saw earlier," he continued. "All we have is an order we were given 800 years ago - to keep any eye out for those few who have a preternatural understanding of magic. And , when the Shard was open once again, to help them find their path. And so, here you are."

"Now, Mol should have made that tea by now," he said standing up. "And I think we have some crumpets and fresh blackberry jam. Feel free to join us in the kitchen, or look around our book collection. I'm sure you'll find more than enough to pique your interest in these shelves."

"So that's it?" she asked. "Just look around? No 'there was an ancient prophecy, you're the chosen one' type thing? Isn't that what this is all about."

"I've told you all I know. The Shard is open and our orders were to find the best student of magic we could and to bring them here," he said. "And so we have. Perhaps that's fulfilling a prophecy. Maybe it's just dumb luck. Either way, you're here, and from what I've seen, you'll figure out what you need to do."

He stoop up to leave the room before pausing. He remembered one more thing and began rummaging through a cardboard box sitting on a table in the corner of the makeshift library.

"I nearly forgot," he said, carrying a stack of notebooks towards Releia. "Remember, I said I was friends with your Professor Perenil? Well, I'm not sure if he suspected his life was in danger, but when the King's men started locking down his research, he dropped these off at the bar. I have a feeling they'll be of more use to you than me."

Chapter 7

The woman in red. Gun shots. A pendant. Fezzick. The fucking Dwarf. Jerroc heard footsteps as he drifted into

consciousness. It was a young man, kneeling next to a cot in a shabby storeroom. He was changing a bandage on Trent. Damn it, Trent. Jerroc remembered he'd been shot. How did they get here?

"Uhhgh... who... are... you?" he tried to speak but his dry throat made it difficult. "Where.... where am I?"

"Oh, good, you're awake!" the man turned around, still kneeling. "Here, here. Drink this."

He passed Jerroc a metal canteen. He drank, water dribbling through the stubble on his chin.

"Thank you," he said, trying to sit up.

"Here, let me help you. I'm Mol," he said, helping Jerroc sit up and placing pillows behind his back. "You'll be stiff for a bit. You've been out for more than a day and a half."

"Gods," Jerroc wondered what progress Fezzik and Brithe and whoever else was behind... whatever this was... had made in that time. "Well, thank you. For me, and him."

He motioned towards Trent.

"Don't thank me. Attia is to thank for your safety. You met her already I assume," Mol said. "Your friend will be fine. We've patched him up as best we can. The shoulder will sting for a bit, and he might feel some numbness, but he'll be alright."

"Who are you?" Jerroc coughed as he asked Mol.

"They're friends," a familiar voice answered.

"Releia? What are? Did you..." Jerroc's eyes widened as she entered the room. "Did you send that woman to follow us?"

"No, no," she replied. "They brought me here. Same as you. Well not exactly the same, I hadn't been in a firefight with some Dwarf gangster."

"But, why?" he asked.

"I'm not completely sure to be honest," she said.
"Something about waiting for me, or someone like me, or

something. They call themselves the Order of the Crystal Rose and they know about magic, and the Shard is open, and, well, I don't know. But apparently I'm supposed to be here."

"The Shard?" he asked. "You know it's been cracked?"

"You knew already?" she asked back. "And you didn't mention that to me?"

"Listen, we have to play some things close to the chest," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it would get this... crazy."

He tried to stand up, stumbling as he left the cot.

"Anyway, it looks like you've been busy. Have your new friends shed any light on what we're dealing with?" he asked.

"We're just as in the dark as you are," Mol interjected. "We know what you know - dead man at the Shard. Blood magic. Big boom. And now the Shard is open. We've done our job finding Releia here, but she's supposed to figure out what to do next. Or at least, that's what we were taught."

"And damned if I do," Releia said. "Apparently I'm supposed to be some sort of magic savant or something. If anything, I'm more confused than ever. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to look for, or if I even have to? Gods, what am I supposed to do?"

Her face turned red as her insecurity grew.

"Listen, I'm not sure about this magic and secret order stuff, but there's definitely something going on. And it's a damn good thing that your friends were following me or our story would have ended in the Down Under. Anyway, I think I might have a lead. Turns out that arrellicite knife was ordered by one Lord Courtnay Brithe, Lord-Commander of the King's Watch."

"So... the King is behind this?" Releia asked.

"I wouldn't jump to conclusions," Heyden joined the conversation as he entered the room. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've been listening from the hall. I'm glad to see you're up Detective. Anyway, I don't claim to be familiar with palace politics but I'd imagine that a great deal can happen without

the King's consent."

"Indeed," Jerroc said. "Even our dear King has limits. I've got a few guard contacts who moved on to do security inside the Opal Palace. I'll start trying to get a read on the situation over there and see if that opens any new leads.."

"OK, so let's leave His Majesty out of it. What does the head of the King's security have to gain by cracking open the Shard?" Releia asked.

"Riches. Glory. The secrets of the universe?" Heyden said. "Honestly, we have no idea what's in the Shard. Seems to me that might be what you're here to figure out. Now, Detective, it sounds like you have some detecting to do over at the palace. Meanwhile, Releia and my team will crack some books and see if we can figure out just what Brithe is aiming for. As for your partner, he'll need a few more days of rest. You can trust that he is in good hands."

"Thank you," Marsh replied. "Keep him safe and when he wakes up, call my guard station as soon as possible. Our

investigation isn't exactly on the up-and-up as far as the higher-ups are concerned. Tell the receptionist that I have a package ready to be picked up and I'll swing by and get him."

He paused for a second.

"Speaking of.... where am I? I left my car in an alleyway off the Northside. And what time is it?"

"You're just south of Palace Hill. And I regret to say it's about 2 am - you were out for quite awhile," Heyden said.

"Luckily, I run the bar upstairs - I'm used to putting guys in cabs at this time of night."

It was nearly sunrise by the time Jerroc found his way into bed.