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The Bannerlight Sanctuary

Sydney Anderson
sjander@bgsu.edu

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Prologue

Layla Winterbourne, the lady of a High Noble family, is attending a Voskarian coronation ceremony where the two kings of Voskar will decide which of their three sons will ascend the throne after their retirement. She prepares her young son, Sphene, an illegitimate child that has strange, non-human traits (fox ears and a fox tail), for the event. On the way to the event, they meet Roan, Anatase, and Ruby Winterbourne who have been waiting in a carriage for them. Roan is Layla's husband; he has been very distant from her in the years following Sphene's birth, but Layla hopes their youngest daughter, Ruby, will bring their family back together. Anatase is the oldest of their children, and he entertains Sphene on the carriage ride to the castle.

Before the coronation, Layla notices one of the other High Noble families, the Silverways, aren't present amongst the guests. They all wait for a while before the lord of the Silverway house, Deacan, bursts into the chamber wielding strange magic. He demands the king's give the rule of Voskar to him instead of their sons and summons a red dragon to smash through the entrance hall and into the coronation chamber. The kings refuse his demands, and Deacan commands the dragon to kill them before he seemingly loses control of it, and it begins to wreak havoc on the palace. Layla is able to escape with Sphene, though she loses her husband and two other children in the fray.

As she escapes the castle grounds, the dragon moves to attack the city proper. Layla and Sphene run by a horde of armed warriors, all screaming about usurping the throne for the king's youngest son, before Layla runs to the east of the city where she hopes to escape the walls through the sewers. She's cut off by Deacan, who is also in the midst of escape. He's injured and

seems manic, and Layla begs him to let her and her son go, but she fails to negotiate with him. She's able to throw Sphene safely into the river before she's killed.

Chapter 1

Twenty years after the events of the prologue in Carcal City, Atrea to the south, Sif Linsakt is drunk and walking home when he's accosted by a shadowy figure with a face wrapped in bandages. He manages to escape his initial capture, but is caught when he runs home, leading three of the mysterious figures to knock him out cold on the floor of his apartment.

Enrel is visiting the office of the Premier of the Bannerlight Sanctuary, a peacemaking organization that helps Voskarian refugees acclimate to Atrean life. Many Voskarians escaped their homeland, driven south by the civil war that ensued after Deacan Silverway defected and killed the kings before they could announce which son would take over ruling the country. Enrel has been asked to act as a bodyguard to the organization's ambassador, but she wants to decline the offer due to some event in her past that has lowered her confidence in her skills as a protector.

She makes it to the office with her black panther companion, Jox, who is a familiar belonging to her parents. He shares a psychic bond with them and has an extended life, and Enrel has more or less been raised with him as her third parent. Upon entering, Enrel is greeted by the Bannerlight Premier, who offers her tea. While he makes it, they chat about the events surrounding Enrel's potential hire—she saved the Premier from a swarm beast attack four days ago—and she slips that she used to be a member of the militia in her hometown of Alra, to which the Premier gloats about having read her correctly. He then goes on to explain a few aspects of

the job, but just as Enrel is about to decline, they are interrupted by the ambassador, Eola, entering the room.

With the added presence, Enrel feels more pressure to accept, and Eola offers to show Enrel around the upcoming Autumn Equinox Festival, which the Premier explains is a yearly event put on by the city to foster community. Enrel struggles for a moment with herself before finally signing on to the job against her own better judgement.

The perspective switches to Lumiseth as he's entering the city on a caravan train with Adwynn, who's name he hasn't bothered to remember. They see the city from the outside, its huge pyramids within the walls, the massive forest to the west of it, and the catacombs to the north.

They then enter the city, and they get off the caravan to go register themselves as guests at the city's Administration Building. The room they're directed to has a huge machine in it, and the person manning the counter explains that it's keeping track of the city's used resources with magic. Lumiseth receives a key-shaped object to register his own resource consumption to the thing, is given some papers explaining the temporary work he has to do here on behalf of his Church, and is sent to the Inn where he's meant to stay, leaving Adwynn behind as quickly as he can manage.

The perspective switches to Howler. The day is over, and they're breaking into the Administration Building to look into the Citizen Archives. It isn't a difficult task since they're an expert thief. They begin searching for foreigners who arrived in Carcal fifteen to twenty years ago, and when they find their information, they jot it down in a journal of theirs. They reminisce about how they're searching for revenge before leaving the building with their catch.

Chapter 2

Adwynn wakes up the next day and performs a short morning ritual: meditating in the bath and moving on to breakfast before she takes on her task. She's on a quest from the Candlelight Library to hunt down a stolen tome from their archives, something very dangerous. Due to security reasons, Adwynn isn't allowed to know many details about it, and the quest is going to be more difficult without them. Regardless, she's ready to confront the challenge, and decides to begin by asking around about wizards in the area. She's directed to a biomancer by the name of Telin, and on her way to his apartment, decides to take out her arcane energy detector to scan the area for anything weird. She notices that there are traces of necromancy, which scares her; necromancy is a banned division of magic. She walks on, suddenly unsure of the task at hand.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth as he works his first day at one of Carcal's medical halls. He's filled with indignant rage at not immediately being promoted to a healing position; he's a cleric with powerful healing magic, yet he's been delegated to very basic errand work. Lumiseth is also frustrated about why he was sent to Carcal in the first place: to track down and stop some ancient evil that's prophesized to be arising in the area. The Council of Solars, a group of high priests of Lumiseth's religion back home, have sent him here with few instructions beyond what the prophecy said, and he's mad that he doesn't understand the problem any better.

His thoughts are interrupted by an elven woman striding into the building. She rushes off to the intensive injury bay, and Lumiseth becomes enraged that the public is so worried about their loved ones in need of healing, yet he's prohibited from being allowed to help. He takes off after her, determined to heal whoever she's looking for himself.

When he catches up to her, he introduces himself, and discovers that the person she's looking for, Sif Linsakt, isn't in the bay. They go looking for him in the sick ward, but he's not there either. Lumiseth thinks that a strange, missing person could be a clue to his quest, so he offers to look at his apartment to see if he's fallen ill there, and the woman agrees and takes him with her. On the way, Lumiseth devises a plan to trick her into leaving so he can investigate alone, and when they arrive at the apartment, he pretends as if he's left his healing supplies behind and sends her back to get them.

Now alone, Lumiseth unlocks the door to the apartment with holy magic and walks in to find a bloody mess. There was clearly a struggle on the floor, but Lumiseth doesn't yet know what to make of it. He decides to keep it hidden from the woman so he can investigate on his own; if she found out, she could tell the local authorities, and they could bar him from becoming involved, which would be unfortunate for his quest.

When the woman comes back, he tells her that Sif is inside, but very ill with a contagious disease. She asks questions about when he'll be better, but he's able to deflect them well enough to get her to leave the apartment alone, and Lumiseth resolves to solve this mystery quickly.

The perspective shifts back to Adwynn, who is still hunting after Telin. She's able to locate his apartment and joins him and his family for lunch before discussing her quest with him, asking if he knows any suspicious wizards or magically inclined people who might find use for the tome she's searching for. He doesn't know anything, but tells her to search the Administration Building for more information, so she leaves. On her way there, he catches up to her and explains that she'll need a citizen's Resource Key to get in, and that he's willing to sneak her in with his so long as she's quick. They move off to the city center together.

The perspective switches to Howler, who is examining a crystal amulet on a rooftop. Their old family of thieves, the Double Edged, stole it as their last job, and now Howler has it and is here to hunt down the person who ordered them to steal it. Howler suspects they're a noble or a merchant from Voskar who was driven south to escape the chaos of the recently ended civil war, because anyone who had the funds to commission their group wouldn't be native Atrean since Atrea is a land without currency. Telin is Voskarian, so he's at the top of Howler's list of suspects, most likely responsible for their family falling apart after the stealing of the amulet. They see Adwynn leave his apartment, and then see him run off after her, and they decide to follow the two of them to wherever they're headed.

Chapter 3

Adwynn has been in the Citizen Archives for a while, digging for wizards who might be the thief she's looking for. She suspects Telin as a possible suspect because he fits her criteria of "skilled wizard," and he also popped up in her search alongside another suspicious character, Rikee. He's an alchemist who lives in the city and has caused trouble with the citizens, but nothing dangerous; he just doesn't abide by their rules. Adwynn decides to investigate both of them.

She then hears chatter outside the door to the archives, and quickly hides herself as it opens and Lumiseth enters the room. He walks in to begin his research, and Adwynn is able to see that he's looking for someone named Sif before he notices her. They get into a brief argument before Adwynn convinces him to tell her why he's here, and she learns that he's looking into a suspicious person he noticed earlier. She then tells him that she's looking for

suspicious people too, and that they might benefit from sharing more information with one another. Lumiseth caves in and agrees to speak with her.

The perspective switches back to Howler, who has been waiting outside the Administration Building for Adwynn. They initially wanted to follow Telin as he left, but decided to stay to see if they could find out what Adwynn was doing in the Archives since that information might give them a better clue about what was going on with Telin. After a moment, they watch Adwynn come out with Lumiseth, and Howler gets close enough to hear what they're saying. They're discussing some strange happenings with necromancy surrounding a person named Sif, and they agree to meet up the next morning at the West Inn Canteen, where Adwynn is staying, for breakfast and research. Howler is intrigued by this—they know about necromancy thanks to a wizard who was in the Double Edged—so they follow Adwynn back to the West Inn Canteen to make note of which room she's staying in for later.

The perspective switches to Enrel, who has been holed up in her apartment since her meeting with the Bannerlight Premier. She's nauseous since her anxiety has been keeping her from eating, and she's been trying to sleep all day to get over it. Now, she's leaning at her window, waiting for Jox to come home from his nightly prowls, overthinking her new position as Eola's bodyguard. She then notices movement in the streets below.

A cloaked figure is darting around in the shadows, following a group of drunk people. Enrel runs to grab her sword to help, but she stops for a moment, worried that her actions might get someone hurt. She concludes that, regardless of her feelings on the matter, there isn't anyone else around to help, so she has no choice but to rush to action, and she grabs a sword and runs off after them without shoes or armor.

After a moment, she's able to catch up to them as they stalk a lone drunk who's broken off from the larger group. The figure turns upon hearing her approach, and after a moment, draws a long knife and attacks her. The scene changes then as a memory weaves into the action, and as she loses the fight against the figure, she recalls her mistake in the militia. A chimera attacked her hometown of Alra. Enrel attempted to save a group of people from being eaten by it, but she made a mistake in getting them out of the corner they were backed into, and one of them died as a result of what she did. When the flashback ends, Enrel is on the ground, about to be killed by the mysterious figure. But, through her own self-hatred, she decides that dying isn't going to keep anyone safe from this thing, and at the last second, she slashes out at the figure and discovers that it's an undead creature.

Enrel has a special relationship with undead. Her parents fought them in Suki G'taa as members of the Billowing Order, and their heroism against them was what inspired Enrel to pursue monster hunting in the first place. Upon discovering that this figure is undead, a new fire lights inside of her, and she becomes determined to kill it and restore her honor and standing with her parents.

Enrel fights back harder now, and gets the better of the thing. Just as she's about to finish it off, though, it slips from her grasp and starts running away. She chases it to the River of Divines in the west district of the city where it jumps into the water and escapes her. Enrel decides that it would be better for her to retire for the night, and she leaves to go find medical attention for the wounds she's sustained in the fight.

Chapter 4

Enrel enters the central medical hall, but hesitates at the idea of seeking out a healer. She knows if she goes to one, they would find out why she was injured, and the militia would take over handling the undead issue, leaving her to return to her new normal life in Carcal City; she wouldn't be able to help them stop it. On one hand, she wants this—she's supposed to be avoiding militia-type work as a self-imposed punishment—but on the other, she wants to help. The opportunity to make her parents proud of her again is still a distinct possibility that could come from solving this mystery. From experience, she figures the militia will probably search out the creature and kill it without looking further into why or how it got here; they operate more defensively than actively going out in search of trouble. Enrel decides to take on the task herself, at least for now.

She ends up stealing a jar of healing salve from the medical hall's storage since she can't get direct help, and she takes it back to her apartment where she finds a worried Jox waiting for her. After calming him down and wrapping her wounds, she's finally struck with a pang of hunger, and she snacks on some loose fruit she has laying around before passing out in bed.

Enrel wakes up and decides to do some research into the undead so she can get a better idea of how to approach the situation. She heads to the Administration Building to find Eola, who she hopes will know something about where to find that sort of information. They meet, and Eola directs Enrel to a family friend of hers, Ty Nioh, who is a bit of an undead aficionado. She treks upstairs to his office, since he works in Carcal as an administrative priest, and finds him there, where she's able to ask some questions.

Ty Nioh suggests that there might be a necromancer somewhere nearby after hearing the details of Enrel's night. Undead are exclusive to Suki G'taa since they come from the Brispawa—the dark forest—but a necromancer could create undead virtually anywhere so long

as they had bodies to work with. He instructs Enrel to keep the undead business a secret so he can research, citing the same assumption about the militia that she had worried about earlier, and asks her to retrieve a biological sample from the one she fought the night prior so he can get more in-depth with his study. Enrel agrees, and leaves to plan at home.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth where he and Adwynn are entering Sif's apartment. He's annoyed by her attitude, and once she concludes that there was necromancy performed in the area, they split up and search the apartment for clues. Adwynn tries to change the subject of their investigation, saying that they should look into Rikee first before spending a ton of time in the apartment looking for things, but Lumiseth shoots her down, and they follow his plan.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn after she's spent some time looking in the apartment. Lumiseth has gone off to check with Sif's neighbors about any loud noises they might've heard, so she's alone for the time being. Adwynn regrets allying with Lumiseth now after his outburst; she's ashamed to have been so persistently friendly towards him when he'd been so obviously disenchanted with her from day one on the caravan.

She takes a break to grab a snack, and her thoughts wander to her magic focus, a collapsible staff she's named "Pegasus" for the decorative wings on its head. It was her father's before he was killed when she was just a baby, and she's had it ever since she picked up magic as a teenager. She uses it to peel a mango, and then reminisces about how she's glad she has her job with the Library so she wouldn't have to go home and confront her old friends.

Lumiseth returns to the apartment with news that there was a scuffle heard a few nights ago, but none of Sif's neighbors checked it out any further than that. He suggests they look into Rikee now since they've found nothing in the apartment of much use, and the two head out to the River of Divines, where the Citizen Archives said he lives.

At river-level, they find a door placed into the canal wall, and after a moment of knocking to no response, Adwynn pushes it open and enters a messy shop, where the dwarf Rikee sits behind a counter. They ask him a few questions about the missing tome and the disappearance, to which Rikee is suspicious and hostile, and Adwynn figures that—along with some strange potion ingredients she sees in his stores—is enough to begin interrogating him for information. She doesn't get far into it before Lumiseth stops her, and they have an argument about whether or not Rikee is the criminal. Lumiseth ends up locking her limbs with magic and forcibly dragging her from the store.

Outside, he chides her for her behavior and argues about how she was wrong that Rikee was the suspect, citing that if he really *were* running around kidnapping people for evil experiments, his home would have evidence to suggest that, but when they were in there, there was nothing to indicate violence had happened on the premises. Adwynn loses confidence in herself as he speaks, and charges off once he's done arguing with her, returning to her room at the West Inn Canteen to be alone.

The perspective switches to Howler, who is wandering the city looking for Sif. Since they overheard Adwynn talking about him, they thought it would be best to look into him themselves so they know what she knows, and they find their way to his apartment and crawl in through a window. Upon approaching the blood smears on the floor, Howler's amulet starts growing warm and begins to glow red. They wander around the apartment, testing why that could be, and discover that the closer they are to the blood, the warmer and brighter the amulet gets. This is confusing to them, since such a simple function contrasts the sizable sum of gold their family was paid to retrieve it. They think about this for a moment, but they're interrupted by someone approaching from the outside.

Just before the door opens, Howler is able to escape into the back of the apartment. Whoever has entered is approaching them, having sensed their presence, and Howler makes a noisy escape out a back window. They see that the mystery figure was Lumiseth, and they watch him duck back inside before escaping to the safety of an alleyway.

The whole situation reminds them of a mistake they'd made in their past. They were robbing a home when the homeowner came in, and in a scuffle, Howler accidentally killed him. The group leader had told them to get over it, but Howler's adoptive mother, Ether, was comforting to them, and she helped Howler through the trauma of the event. For a moment, Howler remembers her to calm down, and gathers themselves again, but they know now that Ether is gone, and they're alone, far from home, never to see her again.

Chapter 5

Enrel is out at night, fully armored with Jox, looking for the undead. She's searching the west district, and when she reaches the bridge she'd lost it at the night prior, she sees it again, standing on the other side, like it's been waiting for her. Apprehensive, she and Jox approach, only to be cut off from behind by a second one. They both attack.

She senses something wrong with the new one. It's armed with only a dagger, and Jox, who is fighting it, is completely silent. She wants to investigate further, but is too busy fending off the first undead that she can't. Then, she sees Jox sail over the edge of the bridge, and she quickly jumps in after him. Enrel can't sense his position like her parents can, so she flails about in the water looking for him for a moment before finally catching him and dragging him to the access sidewalk to their right. She helps Jox up out of the water, and then the undead drop down to continue the fight.

Jox battles the undead solo while Enrel gets herself out of the water, and then they team up to take them both down. Enrel ends up having to throw a sword at one of them, so she's left with only one blade again as she tries to get it back. In the mess of their fight, she discovers that the undead with the knife can cast magic, and she's able to cut the arm from the first undead before it uses its powers to escape with its comrade. Enrel is left sitting with Jox, largely unharmed, and with a biological sample she can take back to Ty Nioh. Mission accomplished.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth, who's sitting in his room writing letters home to update his Solar on his progress with the mission so far. He writes a letter that misrepresents his success with the mission and leaves out some of the more unfortunate details and bad luck he's had, seals it, and then writes a second letter. This one is to his husband, Vaen, and he's completely honest about his situation. He places his first letter to his Solar and the letter to Vaen in the same envelope and takes them to be mailed, walking through the city and observing the preparations for the festival.

He stops in at the medical hall for work and is instructed to help the injured militiafolk at the intensive injury bay. The hall is mysteriously short one jar of healing salve and they're busy making more, but in the meantime, they need someone with magic to help. Lumiseth asks if they've looked into who might've stolen it and is deftly ignored, but when he suggests Rikee, the organizer he's talking to seems to take it into consideration. He's left wondering if the disappearance of Sif and the healing salve are connected somehow.

The perspective shifts to Howler as they're breaking into Adwynn's room. It's an easy lock to pick, and they get to digging through all of her books and belongings to find any clues worth their time. One of the books they pick up is a book on elemental spellcasting, and they remember the wizard in the Double Edged trying to teach them spells, once. They open the book

to a shield spell and give it a try, following the instructions for hand movements should a wizard be without their arcane focus. The spell fails, and Howler experiences a brief bout of embarrassment before returning to the task at hand.

They manage to dig up a copy of the missive Adwynn was given that explains her mission, and also accentuates the world-ending danger that the tome she's after could cause. Howler sits down to put the information they've gathered together. Adwynn is hunting a dangerous old tome, which is somehow connected to necromancy and Sif, who is also connected to their amulet because of how it reacted at his apartment when they'd broken in. Howler isn't sure what it all means, but they figure that following Adwynn will lead them to some answers about the amulet, so they elect to do just that.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn, who is investigating Sif's apartment after a long day of walking around looking for clues on her own. She checked out the catacombs to the north of the city for necromancy, but found it empty, so she came back to square one to look around some more. For a moment, she starts panicking about being wrong about Rikee, and then tries to calm herself down. She thinks back to an old friend, Tsare, who used to make her feel similarly: threatened at the idea of being wrong.

After regaining her composure, she pulls out her arcane energy detector and tries to follow it to where the most necromancy could be detected in the city. It leads her to the west wall, where the huge Carcal Forest sits behind the gates, and she finds someone to tell her what's going on with it. They say the forest is cursed or haunted, and that anyone who tries to go in is just spat back out by some sort of strange magic. Adwynn resolves that she's going to get past that magic somehow.

The perspective switches to Enrel as she's delivering the arm to Ty Nioh. From the sample, he's able to determine that the creatures they're after are wights. This is bad news, because it means the necromancer is skilled enough to fully bind a soul to a dead body, which would make them a very powerful opponent. He tells her he's going to do some tests and spells to locate where the wights are hiding, and in the meantime, she should lay low since they seem to be hunting her. Enrel is wary about this because if she's not out at night, the wights will have free reign of the city, but Ty Nioh says it'll probably be too busy with the festival for them to feel safe doing their hunting, and that it should be fine. She also asks why the wights haven't killed her yet, since they've had plenty of opportunity, and Ty Nioh suggests that they're being controlled by the necromancer, though that would be unfortunate because overwhelming a wight's natural desire to kill would make them even more powerful than they'd previously thought. Enrel leaves, nervous.

On her way out, she runs into Eola, who invites her to her family's celebration feast. Enrel accepts, and leaves the Administration Building more apprehensive than before.

Chapter 6

Enrel is helping prepare dinner at Eola and the Premier's house, and she's chatting with Eola about things. They talk about Enrel's parents and the civil war in Voskar, and Eola brings up how she was adopted by the Premier in Suki G'taa. Things get awkward on occasion, but they rebound quickly. The Premier returns home with some bread in the middle of their conversation, and they finish the cooking after that. Ty Nioh shows up since he's a friend of the family, and the rest of the dinner guests follow after him.

Enrel isn't able to grab a seat by Eola like she'd wanted, so she's left to entertain some strangers with her story of saving the Premier from the swarm beast attack earlier. Eventually, she catches Ty Nioh's attention and asks him about the spells he's working on to find the wights' base, and he tells her they should be finished by the end of the festival.

Once the dinner is over, Eola takes Enrel out to explore the festivities. She asks after Jox, who's been left in Enrel's apartment since he doesn't like the noise, and they head out to the west pyramid plaza to watch one of the performances. After it finishes, they head to a market square where Eola shows Enrel her favorite pie stand, and they get a few to munch on while they explore the rest of the festival. Eola runs off to get drinks, and while she's gone, Enrel sees a man get snatched off into an alley by a hooded figure, and she darts off after him.

The perspective switches to Adwynn, who is also wandering around the festival, though she's looking for suspicious people instead of enjoying the festivities. Telin finds her among the mess, and she's immediately wary of him and what he might be up to since he's still very much a suspect. They walk around for a while, and Adwynn sees Lumiseth in the crowd. She's able to break from Telin to go talk to him, and she brings a pie as a peace offering. Lumiseth is unenthused with her presence, but when she tells him about Telin, he reluctantly agrees to help her out of the situation. Before he's able to do anything, though, he sees Telin get snatched away, and then the two start chasing after him.

Adwynn sees Enrel charge in front of her and they all run off down the alleyway Telin disappeared down. On the other side, she sees he's been captured by some hooded figure and that he's been silenced with magic. While he's being carried away, he knocks his captors knife from their hand, which Enrel picks up, but is unable to free himself. The group chases them through the city until they get to the west wall, where the figure jumps down to river level and starts

running on one of the access sidewalks to a hole in the river grate where the river flows in from the forest. Adwynn casts a slow-fall spell on the group so they can continue the chase, and then Howler joins the group, jumping from the city level and breaking their fall with Lumiseth. The four, now, follow the hooded figure and Telin all the way out into the woods, but then a strange blue mist envelops them, and they all black out.

The perspective shifts to Howler, hours later, as they wake up just outside the forest. They search themselves for their belongings, discover they're all there, and then decide to interrogate Adwynn. After writing down a few precursory questions in their notebook, they wake her up with a dagger to her throat and demand to have the situation explained to them. Adwynn doesn't know what's going on, Howler becomes frustrated, and then Lumiseth wakes up from all the noise they're making.

He points his glove at Howler and demands an explanation, to which Howler shows him their questions. Lumiseth has no more answers than Adwynn, and Howler releases her, dejected. Enrel wakes up then, and Lumiseth starts questioning her about her involvement in everything. Before he's able to get information from Enrel, he turns back to Howler and demands to know what they were doing here, and Howler lies about being a bounty hunter who was after Telin for being connected to their target. Lumiseth realizes Howler was also in Sif's apartment, and Howler lies again, saying Sif was *also* connected to their target. The two get into an argument about the privacy surrounding Howler's contract, and Howler ends up improvising more about how their target is a thief who stole an amulet, and that the two missing people are connected to it being stolen. After arguing with Lumiseth and Adwynn a bit more, they offer to come with so that they might see the mystery through to the end.

Lumiseth gives them an ultimatum, to tell him how exactly the two missing people are involved in their bounty, and Howler struggles to find a suitable lie to fulfill it. They fill time with another lie about how their family in Voskar needs the money, but Lumiseth doesn't care. He decides to leave Howler out, and even though they beg for another chance to explain themselves, he's unwilling to listen. Adwynn speaks up though, and demands Lumiseth hear them out. She's not comfortable with stepping between Howler and the money they need to save their home, and she earns them one last shot at explaining themselves. Howler tells them that Sif was their target, and that they saw Telin leaving his apartment, which connected him to the blood smears on the floor. They then decided to track him, and that was how they got to where they were at the festival.

Enrel steps in and says that Howler should come with. Lumiseth snaps at her, but she explains that she's been researching the undead, that a wight took Telin, and that she suspects the amulet Howler is "after" is what's allowing the necromancer to control the wights. Adwynn agrees with her theory, and Lumiseth begrudgingly allows Howler to join them.

Lumiseth then asks Adwynn what the magic was that stopped them from entering the forest. She determines that it's a ward of some kind, though it's not like any ward she's seen before. In order to get past it, they need to find some way to bypass the spell's effects, which can be done with things like potions and enchanted items. In order to make those, though, they need to know what the ward is protecting, so they head back into the city to find out.

Chapter 7

Enrel is leading everyone back through the city to her apartment so she can pick up Jox; he's been all alone this whole time and is surely worried about her. As she walks, she examines

her current situation and decides that she's very much overwhelmed with everything going on. There are too many moving parts, and she wants out.

Once they make it to the apartment, Lumiseth notices the knife Enrel picked up from the wight. He says that it feels oddly familiar, but also unfamiliar, and Adwynn determines that it's imbued with holy magic. Lumiseth is upset by this since it's not something he recognizes, and Howler suggests that it's linked to a god of death considering the necromancy involved. The group decides to investigate that as a possible solution to their forest problems.

Enrel speaks up, then. She wants to tell the militia about all this, since now it's even *worse* with a potential cleric thrown into the mess. Adwynn agrees, but Howler and Lumiseth both refuse; Howler needs to keep the militia out of it for their contract, and Lumiseth doesn't want anyone else butting in on his quest. They argue for a moment before Adwynn lets it go. That frightens Enrel a good deal, but on the way out, Adwynn grabs her and tells her that the two of them are going to find some way to get the militia involved. Enrel is thankful that she'll be able to get out of the danger she's found herself in.

The perspective switches to Lumiseth as he's walking with Enrel. She's told him of a friend she has who knows a lot about local pantheons, and that she could probably help them find the god they're looking for. Lumiseth is unsure how much he trusts Enrel, but supposes he doesn't have much of a choice but to do so anyway. He decides to ask her about herself, and she gives him very short answers to his questions about her job and her moving to the city.

Eventually, he stops interrogating her.

After a while, though, she asks him about his quest that he mentioned in her apartment, and he explains that he was chosen at sixteen by his god to fulfill some unspecified duty in his future, which has ended up being this: stopping the ancient evil rising in Carcal City. She asks

him how he deals with the stress of it all, and he replies that he's simply been trained to deal with heavy things since he was young. His training was hard, and he recalls when he was first learning to channel his holy magic, how his Solar had locked him away in a storage closet for three days with no food until he could produce a simple light spell. Lumiseth is very proud at having overcome that, and similar challenges, to become the powerful cleric he is today. Enrel is impressed with his bravery, says that she doesn't have the ability to handle anything like his quest. Lumiseth tells her that he thinks she has the makings for it, and they both continue on silently until they arrive.

They're greeted by the Premier, who introduces himself to Lumiseth and leaves to retrieve Eola. Lumiseth and Enrel move into the sitting room, and Eola comes rushing in, asking Enrel what happened to her the night prior. After swearing her to secrecy, Enrel leads into discussing the problem at hand, and Eola agrees to help since they'll be preventing people from being hurt. Lumiseth lies, then, and implies that no one has been hurt yet, even though that's untrue, and Eola goes and gets a large book of her own making that documents the different pantheons in the city. Both Lumiseth and Enrel are incredibly impressed with the amount of work she's put into it, and Eola is embarrassed for a moment before diving into her research. She's unable to find anything about the symbol on the dagger: a tear-shaped hole cut into the blade.

Lumiseth suggests that the dagger may have been blessed directly by the god himself if there's no direct symbol on it to connect it to a pantheon. The room falls silent, considering that such a thing couldn't have been done with benevolent intent if the blade was now in the hands of a wight. They switch topics to the Carcal Forest, and Lumiseth asks Eola what she knows about it. When she hears that Adwynn thinks it's warded, she explains that wards are just supposed to

be solid walls you can't pass, very much unlike what the group experienced when they tried to enter. Lumiseth resolves to ask Adwynn about it later, and they both leave to return to Enrel's apartment.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn as she's walking with Howler to the Administration Building. She's nervous about them and wonders if they're going to try to kill her or threaten her again, but they do nothing as the two wander onward. Them being a bounty hunter unnerves her. Around the time she was leaving for school, Voskar implemented a call for bounty hunters, offering money for the heads of thieves and bandits in an effort to curb the crime that had risen in the crown's absence. She'd passed more than a few people with bloody sacks of heads on her way to the east coast, so knowing Howler holds that profession scares her, even if the beheading practice is long over with. On top of that, something about them is just *weird*. They almost seem to be radiating some kind of evil, but she figures that's just residual fear from being threatened earlier.

They make it to the Administration Building, and Adwynn asks for information about the forest. The receptionist at the front desk rejects her request; she's not allowed to research the forest since it's a protected religious site. She leaves, frustrated, but then Howler asks her to use magic to put the receptionist to sleep so they can sneak into the Citizen Archives. Someone might have researched the forest at one point, and the Archives could know who. Adwynn agrees, and they knock the receptionist out to sneak past him.

The information they find in the Archives turns up nothing until Adwynn notices Rikee's citizen scroll amongst them again. He's apparently been seen going in and out of the forest, and Adwynn suggests to Howler that they look into him. They agree, compliment her on her find, and they start to pack up.

Adwynn is surprised at her own joy at being complimented and is briefly remorseful at having suspected Howler of wrongdoing, especially with their family on the line. She knows her own house back in Voskar is under threat from the local noble family, the Winterbournes, after her mother begged them to loan her the money to buy it before the war could make remaining in the city difficult. They're in the process of paying back that loan now, so Adwynn sympathizes with Howler's cause.

On the way out, Howler thanks her for what she did back outside the forest, when she gave them another chance to convince Lumiseth they were ok, and they apologize for threatening her. Adwynn feels more confident in her choice to trust them, and tells them of her own home-based predicament, and they both return to Enrel's apartment together.

The perspective switches to Enrel as she and the rest of the group stand outside of Rikee's door at the waterline. Adwynn remains outside as the lot of them enter the messy place, and Lumiseth talks to Rikee. Rikee is upset to see him again, but Lumiseth launches into how they all need his help, and the alchemist settles down to listen. Lumiseth first promises him that he's disposed of Adwynn from his investigation and then asks if he knows a way to get into the Carcal Forest. Rikee does, and he picks a potion book to flip through before noticing the shadow of a pair of boots in the sliver of sunlight peeking out from the bottom of his door. He opens it to discover Adwynn.

Rikee is immediately infuriated and demands they all leave, pulling a sword on them and escorting them out. Lumiseth protests, but Enrel convinces him to go; she doesn't want to fight. Outside, Lumiseth starts yelling at Adwynn, and in the commotion, Enrel almost doesn't realize that Howler is missing. Just as she brings it up, Howler reappears, Rikee's potion book in hand. Adwynn says that she can make the potion to get them all into the forest, and after deflecting

some protests from Lumiseth, they head off to her inn room where her potion-making supplies are at.

Enrel tries to speak to Lumiseth, but he's too angry to be very conversational. His anger is something Enrel recognizes from her time in the militia. When uppity individuals would join, they would usually fight for dominance and control, and that behavior would clash with the team dynamic. It always ended in death. Enrel is more motivated than ever to find a way to escape the situation before things get too dangerous.

Chapter 8

Adwynn is in her room at the inn, flipping through the potion book Howler got from Rikee's. It's filled with an impressive amount of original mixtures, and she eventually finds the one for getting into the forest. There are two trouble components: mage's oil, and night toad sludge.

Mage's oil is tricky to make. It's magic in liquid form, and Adwynn is unsure if she can generate enough power to create it. No one knows what a night toad is, but Enrel remembers seeing a toad in a cage while they were in Rikee's shop. She offers to collect some of the normal material components from the markets, and Howler offers to get the toad from Rikee's. Lumiseth decides to get some of the other components from the alchemy chamber at the medical hall he works at, and Adwynn elects to attempt to make mage's oil. Howler and Enrel leave to go find their assigned ingredients, but Lumiseth stays. He has some letters to write. Adwynn loans him some paper and a quill, and then gets down to her own task.

She knows that casting normally works as a form of muscle memory, translating your strongest desires into reality, but she has another workaround for casting powerful spells.

Whenever she needs to channel something *really* strong, she thinks about a close friend she had at Candlelight who betrayed her, and she lets her rage form that pathway for her. Casting powerful spells becomes simple as she draws back on that old betrayal. She gets up to prepare for the potion, anger at hand.

The perspective switches to Enrel, who's wandering around the nearest market square, looking for the ingredients she's been sent for. Finding them is easy, and she wants to be done as quickly as possible so she can talk to the militia about what's going on. On her way back, she runs into Ty Nioh. He heard about what she's been up to from Eola and has come to tell her that the spells he's been working on have finally garnered results, and he's going to help her get into the forest. Enrel declines, informs him of the potion, and he offers to help her get supplies from the medical hall, to which she agrees.

As they walk, Ty Nioh gives her tips for fighting wights that she might use going into the forest. It takes her a while to work up the courage to tell him she won't be going in, and that she's going to ask the militia for help in her stead. He seems a little off-put by it, but leads her on nonetheless, gets the supplies, and sends her on her way. Before she leaves, he tells her where the wights are hiding in the forest, and she heads off, hoping not to disappoint her teammates.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth, who's finishing up his letters. In the same fashion as before, he's written one to his Solar and one to Vaen, and he spends a bit of time recalling the days before he left, comforting Vaen about how he'd need to be gone, hopefully not for long. Once he finishes them up, he asks Adwynn for some envelopes to send them in. After cramming them inside, he watches Adwynn produce the mage's oil, a little perturbed by her angry expression as he does so.

Once she's finished, Lumiseth asks about the ward, bringing up Eola's point about the barrier not working as it should. Adwynn explains that wards give off a certain feeling, one that tells the intruder that they shouldn't be there, and that she felt that feeling when they were trying to get in the night prior. This ward is certainly different from any she's seen before, but it still has that one defining feature, so it still definitely counts as one, even with its oddities. Lumiseth accepts her reasoning for now, though he still doesn't trust her.

The perspective shifts to Howler as they're breaking into Rikee's home. They approach carefully, but eventually discover that Rikee is gone. It's not hard to get in and snatch the toad, then. While they're inside, they notice a strange mechanism they hadn't seen before fitted into an alcove behind the counter, invisible to anyone standing in the shop. There's a crystal ball and a multicolored dial, and brass tubes line the walls, all interconnecting and branching from the crystal ball's pedestal on the floor. Howler doesn't know what to make of this contraption, so they simply leave it, their cargo in hand.

On the way back, their amulet starts to warm again. They step into an alleyway to investigate it further, and they discover the light inside the crystal glowing bright. It looks like there's a cloud of screaming faces inside of the gem, and Howler is unsettled as they bubble away. They store the amulet in a pocket so its glow remains hidden, and they make their way back to the inn.

The perspective switches to Enrel. Everyone is back, all sitting around as Adwynn finishes the potion. Enrel thinks about her fears regarding the mission, and how guilty she feels for abandoning it. She doesn't want to, but the responsibility is just too much for her right now. Then, she worries that her whole life spent training in the militia has really been wasted now that

she's giving up so easily, and she wonders if she'll ever find something that she can really feel fulfilled doing again.

Lumiseth speaks up. He informs everyone of his mission, and how the consequences of what is about to happen tonight concern the entire world. The rest of the room seems okay with what's about to go down, but Enrel isn't. Lumiseth's speech does nothing but terrify her. Just as everyone starts to leave to get food at the Canteen downstairs, Enrel mentions that she needs to grab her weapons from home, and she departs for the militia.

Upon entering the militia office, Enrel encounters two people who are in the middle of a discussion. She sits down with them and explains her situation, and then begs for their help, to which they don't really react at all. Enrel is confused, and they mention that they've also been hearing of strange happenings around the city recently, namely from Rikee, who's been threatened and robbed. They initially wanted to discount his claim, considering that it was *him* who filed it, but a corroborating source said he was to be trusted, so they took his word. Enrel is fully nervous now, unsure of who would back Rikee up on his claim. Then, they mention that Rikee brought descriptions of his assailants, and they describe Enrel and her group, and say that it's odd that she would come into the building with stories of undead in Carcal Forest considering Rikee's claims.

Enrel confesses that they took Rikee's book, but only to find a way into the forest to save Telin. The militia people mention the stolen healing salve, then, which Enrel also confesses to, but she's not able to explain why she didn't just seek help from the night healer, which only worsens her situation. She's unable to convince them to believe her, and they decide to keep her locked in the office room while they start up an investigation on the matter. Enrel protests this,

but she's shut down swiftly, left stuck behind a door guard and unable to tell the team of the changing circumstances.

She sinks into her thoughts again, figures out what this meant for the group. They were all innocent, relatively, so an investigation done well would prove that. But Telin would die. Enrel would be at fault, too, for having gone to the militia and causing all this in the first place, and she's not ready to let that happen.

So, she manages to fight her way past the guard and escapes the building, and she runs back to her apartment to grab her weapons for real. She tries to tell Jox to stay, but he refuses; he's not going to let her run off alone into danger again. Enrel tearfully leaves the apartment, Jox at her side, barely prepared for whatever comes next.

Chapter 9

Lumiseth is worried at Enrel's absence. They've all finished eating long ago and are waiting for the potion to finish, but Enrel and Jox are still missing. He voices his anxieties to the group, but Adwynn assures him everything will be fine. She pours the now finished potion out into five vials and passes them out to the group. As she's cleaning up afterwards, someone throws a rock into their room.

It's Enrel. She's outside, unarmored, save for a helmet and her swords. Lumiseth yells down at her, and she grimaces and tries to silence them. They all try their best to communicate with her, and she's able to get across that something is wrong: the group is being tracked. And then there's a knock at the door. Howler grabs the extra vials and instructs everyone to jump out the window. They make quick work of it themselves, scaling down the wall in an impressive display of dexterity, and Adwynn lowers herself and Lumiseth to ground level. Enrel fills them

in, and then they see a face peeking out at them from the window they just jumped out of. Everyone runs.

On the way, Lumiseth tries to break down their situation. He concludes that whoever backed up Rikee must've been the necromancer, and they'd been watching the group this whole time, probably by following Enrel since she was a target of the wights. The group continues onward until they're cornered by the bridge they jumped yesterday, a horde of militia waiting for their arrival.

Lumiseth tries to talk their way out of it, but the militia won't hear it. They start closing in, and Lumiseth focuses. He knows the only way out is through a powerful spell granted to him by his god, but he needs absolute focus. In the moments before they're caught, he harkens back to the exact time he was chosen, while he was cleaning in the temple in his hometown. The Silver Sun had manifested itself then, right in front of him, and called out to him. He'd reached forward to touch that glowing, silver light, and he felt nothing but pure pain and calm. Something there was filled with *love*, too. For the first time in his life, Lumiseth felt truly loved and mentally strong. Calling back that memory to the present, surrounded by militia, he casts a spell to freeze time.

Everything stops around them. Lumiseth is weakened, and he stumbles. His vision goes black. They need to make it outside fast, before the spell wears off. There isn't much time. He's able to see again by the time they make it outside the forest, and they all down their potions and move onwards into the trees.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn, minutes later, as they're taking a break from running. She's exhausted, and she's shocked by Lumiseth's display of holy power. After a moment, Howler asks how they were found out so quickly, and Enrel confesses to having gone to the

militia in the first place. Howler asks her why she came anyway, then, since the whole point of her telling the militia was to get out of the responsibility of dealing with everything. Enrel doesn't know, really, she just wants to help. Howler decides to leave it at that. For a moment, Adwynn ponders speaking up in Enrel's defense since she was also in on the militia plan, but she doesn't. The situation reminds her too much of her past with Tsare, watching him tear into others; she'd always just been glad it wasn't *her* at the chopping block, and even now, she was still scared to be at fault. She keeps silent.

Minutes later, Lumiseth forces himself up, and the group trudges on, following Enrel's directions. Lumiseth offers up his theory about the necromancer backing up Rikee after a while, and Adwynn agrees it seems plausible. There's still a lot of ugly tension between the other three, though, so she mostly stays quiet. They continue walking, and the forest gets stranger. Noises echo all around them but there are no animals to be seen. The group is on edge.

Then, there's rustling in the trees. The group only gets a minute to prepare before a mud-covered human man stumbles into their path, screams, and falls backwards in surprise. Jox jumps onto him, but is pulled off by Enrel, and they're able to begin asking questions. The man, however, is unable to answer them. He doesn't understand what they're saying, and speaks a language none of the group recognizes either. After some arguing with Lumiseth over whether or not the man is safe, the group resolves to take him since he seems too pathetic to be involved in the necromancy.

The rest of their walk is quiet. Adwynn studies the man, who's dressed in strange, shoddy clothes, as far as she can tell through the mud, and he looks around nervously as if something were about to jump out at him through the trees. After passing a bog, the sounds of the forest disappear entirely. Lumiseth takes this as a sign they're getting close. The group presses on.

Eventually, they reach a massive sinkhole in the earth. A trench is dug down through the rock to its base, and when they get there, they discover a dilapidated pyramid temple. Everything feels wrong and weird, so they figure this is the place. They circle up and decide on a plan: if the necromancer is there, they take out their arcane focus first to weaken them, then killing them won't be a problem. Lumiseth gets to work blessing everyone's weapons, and they all decide that he'll lead the group in, followed by Enrel and Jox, and then Adwynn and Howler. Enrel leaves to try to tell their new companion about this as best as possible, leaving Adwynn alone with Lumiseth.

It doesn't take long for them to start fighting. Lumiseth takes a sideways jab at Adwynn's spellcasting ability, and she snaps, yelling at him about his behavior so far. He has no reason to be so rude to her about everything, even if she *does* mess up sometimes. Operations like this can never be under someone's total control, and only a foolish person would think that could be possible. She's able to break him by calling him out on his inexperience, and she wanders off while he finishes the work. He returns Enrel's arrows to her, and the group prepares to go in, but then they notice that Howler is missing. Without waiting for anyone else, Lumiseth rushes in. Adwynn sighs and charges off after him.

Chapter 10

Howler is deep within the temple. None of Lumiseth's plan sat right with them; it was too fast, no room for preparation or scouting. They'd gone on ahead, then, to see what they could do better prepare the group for whatever disaster they were about to face down. Being underground again reminds them of home. They used to live beneath a city with the Double Edged in a ramshackle series of tunnels dug into the sewer walls, eking out the life they could steal for

commission. As they sink deeper and deeper beneath the temple, the amulet in their pocket begins to glow and warm again; they're getting closer to their answers, closer to finding who destroyed their family.

Howler recalls those years before the shattering of the Double Edged, when they first got the commission, the buzz over the money, and then the subsequent planning. Howler was too inexperienced to help, so they had to watch from the outside as everyone raved at a chance for freedom, to finally leave the business behind to live a more peaceful life. They worked hard for two years, tracking down leads on the target, an amulet that belonged to a noble family, and then organizing a plot to steal it. But when the heist finally went off, Ether didn't come back.

The leader told Howler that she'd been captured, but she did it to save the rest of them. Howler was devastated, but suspicious; whenever they brought her up around the others, they'd get quiet. They wanted to investigate. At night, they went to the prison she was being held in, snuck in, and found her. Ether was overjoyed to see them. Howler asked her what happened, and she told them that the leader betrayed her to save the amulet. She didn't have a choice like he'd said. Howler was furious, tried to break her from her cell, but Ether stopped them. She wasn't going to get out, and she just held them for as long as she could before having to let them go for the last time.

In their rage, Howler decided to sabotage their own family. They tipped off the Voskarian Guard to their location, returned home, stole the amulet and whatever gold they could carry, and left. On their way out, they heard the echoes of screams and weaponry through the tunnels.

The Double Edged wasted no time turning Howler in as soon as they realized the amulet was gone from their hideout, though, and Howler was chased south to Voskar's border with Atrea. They took a few days to mourn their lost family, but soon redoubled on their revenge;

whoever commissioned them for the amulet was truly at fault here. They were going to find that person and kill them.

Now, it's finally happening. They're underground, approaching the target, and they hear noises from a room ahead. Three people walking around, and a fourth, screaming and shouting for help. And then suddenly, behind them, Lumiseth's voice. They'd been given away. Howler bolted back up the stairs, leaving the room behind, for now.

The perspective switches to Lumiseth as the remaining four enter the room. Something is wrong about this place, but he doesn't know what. It's messing with his mind; he's not thinking clearly. There's a magic circle in the center of the room, drawn around a stone table with a man on it. A wight stands in front of the table with a wicked sword. Lumiseth knows the sword is hungry. Between him and the sword are two more wights with big shields. He fires a beam of light at them, but their shields block it.

Lumiseth spirals a bit more and then decides to charge them, believing that if he gets close, he can take them down. He's taken out without consequence, knocked on his back, and then stabbed in the shoulder by one of their swords.

The perspective switches to Enrel as she watches Lumiseth fall, and then watches Adwynn vaporize his assailant's upper half. She tells Jox to go get Howler, but instead, he rushes the remaining wight. Enrel runs in after him, unwilling to let him be hurt too. They all clash for a bit, battling the wight in between magic assaults by Adwynn, and then Jox is struck with the wight's sword. Enrel goes ballistic, attacking the wight with no concern for her own safety, and just as she beats it, something explodes at the center of the room, knocking her vertical and unconscious.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn, who's the only person left standing in the aftermath of the explosion. That magic circle went off, and she's staring down some monstrosity the likes of which she's never seen before. It's hideous, an amalgamation of beasts and legs and eyes and mouths, and it's crawling from a hole in the ground that hadn't been there before. Adwynn knows what she has to do.

Somehow, the magic in this room was already making her furious. She dips into that anger, now, and attacks the beast, shooting bolts of fire into it. It's not enough. The beast fights back, sending boiling spears of flesh her way, and Adwynn digs up a memory she'd been saving for a time like this: the exact moment of her friend, Rei's, betrayal. Reliving that moment and the feelings preceding it, Adwynn is unable to unleash a huge wall of fire into the beast, pushing it back further and further into the ground. She's lost to her own rage.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth on the floor as he wakes and watches Adwynn attack the beast with fire. He's delirious, but behind her he sees that last wight, the one with the sword, approaching her. Before he can do anything, Howler bursts from the entrance to the room and tackles it, driving knife after blessed knife into the thing. That problem solved, Lumiseth turns his attention back to the monster at hand, notices that magic circle on the ground still active at the edges of the pit, and casts one spell with the last of his strength, breaking the circle with a bolt of light.

The perspective shifts to Enrel. She's with Jox, making sure he's okay. He's still alive. Enrel knows he'll do his best to pull through this mess, and she decides that she will too.

Suddenly, the beast in the center of the room collapses to the floor, and then it starts pulling itself forward, its upper body severed by the hole closing through it. It's crawling towards Adwynn, whose huge spell just fizzled out. Enrel grabs her bow, picks up an arrow that

had been dropped to the ground, and shoots it at the beast before it could get a chance to jump at her. It's a weak shot, but the arrow is blessed. The beast all but explodes, leaving the room finally still, finally quiet.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth, who is no longer delirious in the effects of the spell. He forces himself up and tends to Enrel and Jox's wounds, pushing himself further than he should. His arm gives out completely, and Enrel makes him stop before he injures himself any further. She bandages his arm, and they all get up to survey the damaged room. Enrel finds Telin naked and covered in strange tattoos. The group elects to take him back out for further examination later. Enrel then ventures into a side room, leaving Adwynn with Lumiseth in the main one.

They end up investigating the monster and the magic circle. The circle is written in strange writing that Adwynn says looks Voskarian, but doesn't make sense. The beast is hard to make sense of; it's anatomically impossible, yet it's right there in front of them. Neither he nor Adwynn know what it is.

Enrel returns with a bag full of supplies: strange inks, needles, and a stack of papers. They mostly have diagrams for the tattoo patterns on them, but there are pages with writing, too. Adwynn reads them and discovers they're for a demon summoning ritual. Adwynn asks after a tome, but Enrel says she only found this bag. Lumiseth asks Adwynn what the tome was for, and she tells him she wasn't allowed to know, and he realizes that the tome wasn't necromantic like they had been thinking this whole time, rather, it was probably demonic.

Howler approaches them then, with a long something wrapped in their cloak. It's the sword, covered so it can be carried, as it hurts to touch. Lumiseth makes Howler hand the sword

over to Adwynn, which they do reluctantly. They help Enrel grab Telin's body, and the group marches up and out to the surface, to Carcal.

The perspective shifts to Howler as they reminisce about the amulet they'd been carrying for the past year. It had burned all the way through the fight underground, blazed a hole through the pouch they'd stored it in and sizzled on the dirt floor up until Enrel finally killed the demon with her well-placed arrow. And now Howler was out of leads.

Or so they thought.

They found that wicked sword next. On its blade, by the hilt, were three gemstones, but one was missing. It was the exact same size and shape as the one on the amulet. There was still a trail left for Howler to follow.

Chapter 11

Enrel is helping the mysterious mudman carry Telin's body out of the forest. Upon reentering the city, they're accosted by the militia, and the Premier is there with Eola and Ty Nioh. Enrel's heart drops; she's definitely in trouble now.

The mudman falls into hysterics, looking around the city, and the Premier approaches and demands the group see medical attention before being interrogated, as clearly damaged as they all are. The militia captain agrees, and the group is hastened to the central medical hall. Once they reach the hall, Enrel passes out.

When she wakes, Jox is with her, safe and sound. Eola is there too, and she tells Enrel that the Premier wants to speak with all of them. She says he wants to be told the full story first so he can get them out of trouble, which Enrel morally objects to, but submits herself to nonetheless. After everyone else wakes up, they head to the Premier's office together.

Everyone gets introduced and they begin recounting what happened the night prior. They discuss the return of demons to their world and the notes they discovered in the temple, and then the Premier offers to hire them all to work with the Bannerlight Sanctuary. He wants to help solve this problem of demons, which surely isn't over yet given the notes and the wights, who couldn't have been operating on their own, and since he suspects the group will already be interested in helping, he wants them on his team. Lumiseth is suspicious, as usual, but Adwynn and Howler are pretty quickly on board; he has no real other choice but to say yes, unless he wants to go it alone. The Premier hands them all Bannerlight badges and instructs them to lie about what they found. Their story about necromancy would still track, they just have to tell the militiafolk that they found a necromancer in the forest instead of a demon, and it would all smooth itself over. The mysterious man they found is brought up as well, though no one really knows anything about him, so they just elect to study and help him adjust to his apparently unfamiliar life. The Premier sends them off then, to return to their beds or the final day of the festival if they so choose. Enrel stays behind.

She offers her anxieties to the Premier about lying to the militia; as an Atrean, the idea of doing so is deeply wrong to her, and she wonders why they're doing so in the first place. The Premier explains to her that being truthful would only cause mass panic, and he simply wants to avoid making people worry and potentially causing more harm. Additionally, if word got out that the demon summoners were out there, they may take drastic action that the world is unprepared for; secrecy is simply the best plan for now. Enrel agrees to keep the secret just for now, and she leaves the room with Eola.

When they reach the ground floor and step outside, Eola stops Enrel. She asks to not be lied to in the future about things, like what happened with Lumiseth back at her house when he

told her no one had been hurt—she wants to be kept in the loop. Enrel feels bad for having lied to her and promises to be completely honest with her about things from now on, and the two return to the medical hall together.

The perspective shifts to Adwynn. It's a number of days after she's had all of her own wounds properly healed at the medical hall, and Lumiseth wants Howler and her to return the toad and potion book to Rikee. She reluctantly gets up to find Howler, who's been in their inn room since they weren't injured in the fight, and they go to collect the stolen goods from Adwynn's room. They only find the book there, though; Howler figures the militia must've given Rikee his toad back themselves. The two return to the door at water level with the book in hand, but discover that it's missing. They're definitely in the right place, the door just isn't there. Defeated, they agree to not tell Lumiseth they couldn't find it, and they go their separate ways for the moment.

The perspective shifts to Lumiseth as he sits in the medical hall, brooding over his shoulder injury. He's upset to have been locked up for so long; he's not normally the *patient* in hospitals like this. Eventually, he decides to ask Enrel for help writing a letter home so he can inform the Solar and Vaen of his progress. She agrees to help, and he ends up telling her about the two other times he's been a patient in a hospital: once of a transition procedure, and the other for his first arm injury. He removes his glove and shows her his right arm, which is warped and scarred from when the Silver Sun chose him all those years ago. It's like one big burn mark, with all of the scales torn off of it, and Enrel stares for a moment as he shows it off. They have a brief conversation about it, and Enrel asks why the Silver Sun would hurt him if he were to be chosen. Lumiseth doesn't have an answer, and they go back to the letter.

Enrel finishes writing, and then the conversation drifts to her own anxieties about everything. She doesn't feel as if her contribution was adequate enough, and that she'll only cause more trouble on the mission if she continues down this path with the rest of them. Lumiseth reassures her that her contribution *did* matter; she was the reason they all got home safe. No one can expect to leave a battle without a few scars, anyway. Enrel thanks him and leaves, and he hears her sniffing her way back to her room.

Epilogue

Ruby Winterbourne is stowing away in the depths of a ship heading east to Etrijan. She's in a disguise, and she's listening to the crew above deck load boxes onboard for the trip. Ruby is running away from home, escaping from a cycle of suitors her father is trying to foist upon her, but she's impatient and perturbed by having to sleep beneath the deck in such awful quarters. Eventually, she decides she's had enough of such poor treatment, especially for a high noble like herself, and she storms off upstairs to complain to the captain: her older brother, Sphene.

She bursts into his office and demands to sleep somewhere nicer, but he refuses her on the grounds that she's a stowaway, therefore she should be treated as one. They have more siblings' banter for a while before things get physical, and Sphene knocks her to the floor with a map tube. He helps her up afterwards, telling her she wouldn't last a second if they got in trouble, and then he tells her what he's really going to Etrijan for. He's hunting down Deacan Silverway, commissioned by Voskar itself. Ruby doesn't believe him and threatens to tell their father about her stowing away to get him in trouble, and he dares her to do just that.

She storms out and pauses for a moment. Sphene's claims seemed preposterous, but perhaps there's some truth to them. She turns around to interrogate him more. He's able to

answer all her questions lightning quick and with enough believability for her to conclude that he's not lying. Deacan Silverway really *is* still out there. Sphene also lets on that he plans to kill Deacan if he finds him, despite being asked to bring him in alive. Ruby figures that he's after revenge for their mother, who was killed in their escape from Eagle's Gate twenty years ago.

She asks him what he gains from telling her, and he says she simply has a right to know. Stowing away will get her out of her suitor problem, but it's not without its dangers. Ruby decides she *will* go, and as she turns to leave, the first mate enters the captain's cabin to inform Sphene that they're ready to go. They all step outside and push out from the harbor into the open waters, and Ruby watches the shore of her homeland drift into the distance until she can see it no longer.