

CHAPTER 1

CULMINATION

The First Amagium was fashioned from Athens' ruin by the sublime archmagi, Homer. He was the great architect of the world we know, and the terrible monster who obscured the world that came before it.

We have lost the language for the spell he cast, if that dreaded cataclysm could be contained by letter or rune. Surviving records are inconsistent in their accounts. Most describe a column of light beyond brightness. A few claim that he summoned the wrath of gods, or the last dragons to eradicate the feudal sophists. Others describe it as a subtle thing. They write that he knew the Name of the entire peninsula and scratched it from the ledger of the universe. Some even suppose that the Faed was created in that moment; an entire realm made of ever-shifting ashes.

But the method matters little, as there is no question of the result. To this day, the region remains a maelstrom of caustic energy; a hole in all that is healthy and just. To this day, the devastation has gone unmatched. And to this day, it is a reminder of what we must protect the world from.

It was the final proof in Homer's thesis. He believed our world was given wyrd so that it might know the horrors of godhood; so that we may knowingly choose a path of restraint. He argued the purpose of magic is to govern magic, and he restricted the privilege to those deemed worthy.

His first criterium of worth was abstinence from the games of gods and kings. He divided his forces into three groups. The most skilled magic users were taught to bind wyrd, while the others were bound. The pious third was bound and made messengers to gods. The wise third was bound and made rulers of law.

Homer stated that history began anew in that moment, and we still recognize the destruction of Athens as the first Anno Amagium. There was such hubris in his humility. Such violence in his peace. And his Amagium would fall, as would the Amagium that followed. But we survive only through the necessity of their interventions.

Now that duty rests with us. If the Third Amagium should fall, the world will likely fall with it.

- Excerpt from the preface of *The World's Wyrd: A History of Magic, Fifth Ed.* Jotham Tolkien, Arch Magus & Headmaster of the Arroyo Athenaeum 2321-2355 AA (present time of writing). Published by Argent Press in 2330. London, Avalon of Europa.

-Hace-

Keepers seek not heroism. Keepers seek not power. Keepers hold the laws of magic.

Hace repeated the mantra in sync with the throb of pain. He pressed the tip of his index finger against the nail's tip, harder and harder still, until the point pricked his thumb, sending a shock like a wasp sting up his arm. Its black iron shaft burned white-hot against his hand. He'd kept it in his pocket for the past quarter, palming it regularly to get used to the sensation in preparation for this moment.

"Begin," the proctor said.

He calmly stepped out of the Administratum, fighting the urge to run, and began to search for his target through the early evening fog. Gemini Gloom had arrived early that year, leaving Arroyo chilly and dense with petrichor. He could feel underclassman stealing glances at him through the haze, even though they had been instructed to act naturally and not interfere with the test.

The athenaeum was large; a tiny, dense city unto itself, squeezed between the western bank of the arroyo and Old Town's sprawl of shops and restaurants. Each building on the campus was done in the region's signature Craftsman style, which amused Hace. Originally, the athenaeum was on the opposite side of the arroyo, and it had burnt to the ground in a magical fire a century ago. This new campus' angular, primarily wooden architecture hinted at lessons unlearned, or neglected in favor of tradition.

As he stalked the forest of wood, stone, and stained glass, he thought of his family. Warm memories wrestled with long shadows cast by guilt.

I can finally pay aunt Sera back. I can finally get mom the help she needs.

His parentage had kinked and knotted his life in a variety of ways but it never galled him more than it did in the present moment. Being fatherless stung as a child, but he quickly learned to supplant longing with anger. He also didn't really mind when his peers left threatening notes, or called him 'scatch' and other slurs—the sudden looks of fear from otherwise friendly people were much harder to take.

And akrasia was undoubtedly the worst of it, disrupting everything from daily lessons to nightly dalliances. *But God? Satan? If you or anybody else is listening and willing to strike a deal, hear this: I will go through a thousand damned akratic episodes if you let me freely tell a lie right now.*

His left hand rested on the pommel of his sheathed longsword, countervailing the weight of the revolver holstered on his opposite hip, and the large book buckled to his belt against the small of his back. The initially-awkward triad of weight had become as natural as the large metal licenses on his forearms, and the swish of his aspirant waist-cape. *Comforting presences, but comfort isn't what I need right now.* He continued to finger the nail with his right hand, almost savoring the painful rash that radiated from its touch.

As he stepped up the broad stairs leading to the campus' Lexiclave, there was a sharp movement across the courtyard. A figure hastily ducking between the Exemptions buildings.

Shit! Was that him?

Before the test started, Hace received a brief with a detailed description of the suspected malefactor, but through the haze of daydreaming, he wasn't sure if the person even resembled his suspect. It could be a distraction. Headmaster Tolkien's warning echoed in his head. *Don't assume a person is guilty just because they avoid you. As an amagia, you will inspire fear both well-founded and irrational.*

So far, the final exam had been as tricky as a fae's bastard and twice as nasty. Fortunately, Hace himself was a tricky fae's bastard and good at playing such games. The final part of the Keepers' practical exam was something of an open secret. A test of loyalty. A matter of following protocol. It followed a script. And when Hace stepped into the alley, he knew he was on the right path.

The shadow was indeed his mark. A tall, thin man with a close-cropped beard. He had waited at the other end of the alley, looking back over his shoulder nervously, and upon seeing Hace again, he broke into a mad, wyrd-assisted run. Since the suspect was now actively using sorcery to evade questioning, Hace had permission to use non-lethal magic to subdue and question him.

He put just a touch of his wyrd's power into his step to help his boots adhere to the fog-slicked stones and ran as fast as he could without further magical assistance. If the suspect reached the edge of campus, Hace would fail the exam. *But I'm not about to let that happen. Hell, if I can end this quick enough, I won't even have to tell my damn lie.*

But the bastard reached the twisting warren of buildings that made up the artifice labs. Giant lens arrays, kilns, distillation vats, and enormous gyves jutted out from buildings at odd angles, making it impossible to line up a binding or stunning spell.

The suspect slid around a corner, and as Hace gave chase, he felt a ripple against his wyrd. Powerful magic created wrinkles in reality, currents of ethereal force that telegraphed strong spells. It gave him a quarter second's warning to avoid the curtain of flame that came tumbling down the alleyway like heavy surf from the shores of hell.

Hace cartwheeled to the side of the fire with the grace of a dancing cat, a manic grin spreading across his face. *That was lethal magic, boys and girls. I am free to terminate.* But when he rounded the next corner, the malefactor had stopped running. He now had a hostage. An attractive young woman, eyes welling with fear. He held a knife to her neck, and was spouting the usual, predictable threats. The fated moment caught up with him.

Keepers seek not heroism. Keepers seek not power. Keepers hold the laws of magic.

And the laws of magic stated, time and again, that malefactors could not be suffered to live. Lethal magic was to be answered in kind, even if an innocent could be caught in the crossfire. His teachers wanted him to roast the girl to get the bad guy. And the terms of the test stated that he was supposed to act precisely as he would in duty.

Trouble was, Hace knew he had the skill to save the girl, and he also knew that in real life, he would not let an innocent die needlessly. Which meant he had to intentionally lie.

Unlike full fae, half-breeds like Hace were capable of deliberate falsehood. But speaking or acting in opposition to fact, or worse yet—breaking promises—hurt. It felt wrong on a deep, instinctual level, like forcing muscles to bend a limb against its joint. The only thing that came close was his agonizing allergy to iron—another delightful hallmark of his mixed heritage.

Drive the nail in. Tell the lie. But he hesitated a quarter second too long. The plan wouldn't work. And if he didn't act *now*, he would fail anyway. So he leaned into instinct and began two separate pieces of contract magic.

Contracted spells were harder than sorcery—they were never a sure thing, because they demanded the cooperation of anima—semi-sentient 'knots' of ambient magic energy, which had to agree to specific criteria. Appeasing a spirit and intelligently listing the conditions of a spell in a combat situation was not trivial. Doing two at once was damn difficult indeed.

He could trip over a syllable or knot his fingers mid-gesture, offending the animus and causing a spectacular backfire. Either one of the opposing elements could take offense at being afforded half his attention and simply refuse to work with him. The mystic aspect of the spells could go off without a hitch but they could physically interfere with each other as they manifested. He could simply phrase the contract poorly and the anima might screw him.

But he didn't. It all worked perfectly.

Hace willed his *wyrd* to free the anima from the stones in his license cuffs—water on his right wrist, fire on his left—and carefully described the effect he wanted in his mind. At the same time, he spoke two letters of elder tongue to court the water animus, and used a string of legerdemain gestures to appease the fire animus.

The completed water spell gathered the moisture from the air into a current of murky liquid that yanked the girl downward, pulling her beneath the malefactor's knife and safely forward. Simultaneously, Hace raised his hand and fired a jet of flame at the malefactor's head. It struck him square on, knocking him flat. If the anima weren't specifically tied to 'mute' harmful magic for the test, the man would have been immolated. And all of the examiners watching from their scrying spells would know it.

The malefactor, enthusiastically portrayed by Instructor Dumas, croaked a laugh even though he was supposed to die. He had taught Hace's cohort elemental magic for five years.

"Defiant to the end ay, Matthews?" he said, remaining on his back.

Hace said nothing. He sucked in a shuddering breath and fought a sick chill as the borrowed power of the anima faded from his *wyrd*. The confused underclassman who pretended to be the hostage gaped at him in shock. She was supposed to die. She knew she was supposed to die. She had probably died a dozen times over the past couple days.

Great job, hero. You stopped the bad guy. You saved the girl. You failed the test. He ground his teeth, dug his hand into his pocket, and clenched his fist around the nail, wanting to drive it in out of spite. *No. Not yet. I may not be able to talk my way out of this one, but damned if I won't try.*

He followed protocol from there on out, binding the 'dead' malefactor's body with plastic inhibitor cuffs, shouldered the limp body, and asked the soaked girl to follow him back to the campus' Administratum, where the charade would end, one way or another.

No. It will end my way and no other. I've been through too much to fail now.

From the moment he arrived at the athenium, at the tender age of seven years old, the Amagium tested him. They put him in a dimly lit room and told him to do as much sorcery as he could; simply lifting weights with his *wyrd*. He kept going until his ears rang. Until he saw spots, and reached the edge of *exus*, that state where you risked losing yourself to magic entirely.

He kept expecting the proctors to tell him to stop, and when they didn't, that became his goal. A game of chicken fueled by a grim question: *Will they really let me kill myself?* The proctors were the first to blink, but not before his nose was streaming blood.

Training began with heuristic and mnemonic drills, to ensure learning was quick and firm. They had him spar, sprint, and stretch, lecturing on law, history, and philosophy all the while. In between classes on language and science, they taught him sorcery and contract magic. The trials and principles were always hard enough to make him hurt with wyrd and head, but they also stoked the fires of an insatiable, lifelong addiction.

And when he turned fifteen and officially declared his discipline; the intention to become a Keeper, they revealed that they had been going soft on him all along.

That was when the teachers literally started beating erudensis into him—the sorcerous martial art cultivated to subdue malefactors and literal monsters. The remaining six years would expand his education in pain to account for fire, frost, shock, sensory overload, and poison. But Hace didn't mind all that so much. The bureaucracy was the true torture. Legal codes and technicalities dictating what he could and could not do.

And if he failed now, they would kick him out. Most aspirants had the option of retaking a term. Most aspirants had money. But he was there on his Akrasiac's scholarship, which would expire. If he couldn't secure a student loan—a dubious enterprise for a half-fae—the Athenaeum would dismiss him with a civilian magic license. His life to date would be a waste, and whatever followed would be pointless.

"No," he growled to himself.

I have talked my way out of hundreds of blatant infractions, wooed the better half of my class, went on to win Pensey Hayes' heart, and argued every instructor I've ever had to a draw or better, all without the benefit of lying. I can do this. I have to do this. He started weaving a speech as if it were a complicated contract, one word at a time, and by the time he reached the imposing wood and stone building, he had a plan.

Five assessors waited in front of the entrance. Headmaster Tolkien stood in the middle with the humor of a headstone. Ozra Wilde, Hace's mentor, was at his right. The wry smile that defined her had vanished; a mask of ashen concern in its place. *Shit. Did they already decide to fail me?*

"Leave us," Tolkien snapped at the girl and Dumas in blunted speech, words unaccompanied by wyrd or gesture. When they were out of earshot, he turned to Hace and continued in mixed speech. His tone was hard. His wyrd emanated dismay and severity. Each gesture was clipped and deliberate. "This test was supposed to demonstrate the culmination of your studies, Aspirant Matthews, and you saw fit to play it like a game."

"I was not playing, Your Wisdom," Hace stood at attention, and spoke as respectfully as possible using full gestures and backing each syllable with wyrd emanations. "As promised, I performed as I would in duty, to ensure that I fulfilled my mission."

"Keepers seek not heroism, Mr. Matthews," Tolkien stated.

"Not if it would lead us astray from purpose, Your Wisdom," Hace agreed. "I knew that in duty I would endeavor to save the hostage, and misrepresenting my decision on the test would be dishonest. The lie would cause me to miscast my spell."

"If you cannot obey protocol, I cannot afford to put you in the field."

“Saving the hostage was in the Amagium’s best interest, Your Wisdom.”

Tolkien gestured sharply for him to explain why.

“Reputation, for one. My kind are inherently distrusted. Killing humans will deepen that distrust, impairing my ability to do my duty in the future. The Arroyo Amagium can’t afford it, either. Anticordance sentiments are at an all-time high. After Captain Harker’s excessive force debacle in Aquarius, we are one incident away from seeing riots.”

Hace felt a sharpness in his ears and pain behind his eyes, a gag gathering in the back of his throat. What he said was true, but he was drifting from the real truth. Tolkien made a dismissive gesture, still keeping his *wyrd* muted.

“Politics are concerns for the regional archons. A Keeper must see to his duty.”

“A Keeper must also exercise subjective discretion in their duty, Your Wisdom. Under different circumstances, where I knew with certainty that killing a person was necessary to save untold others, I would act without hesitation.” The words came without pain—they were the honest truth. “But I knew that I could save her and still kill him. So I did.”

Tolkien was still unconvinced, and opened his mouth to rebuke him.

“Finally,” Hace continued, “We are amagia before we are Keepers, Your Wisdom. You yourself told my cohort that when I declared my discipline. And the day I arrived on this campus, you told my cohort that amagia must strive to be worthy of our position. In my opinion, we cannot be worthy if we kill needlessly. We cannot be worthy if we settle for mediocrity. And while I seek the title of Keeper, Your Wisdom, I also aspire to be an exemplary member of the Amagium.”

Ozra’s wry smile returned.

The headmaster paused and turned, lips pursed in consideration.

Hace knew he cut a dashing figure in his blue aspirant uniform. He was tall and lean, yet distinctly muscular. His face symmetrical and wickedly charming. As a sign of respect for the occasion, he wore no glamour, leaving his bloody hair and summer-sky eyes in their natural colors. For once, the self-assessment wasn’t vanity. The Amagium needed a handsome face right now. Somebody who could be a symbol for the good it did, in both deed and appearance.

“You know your unique heritage makes you *potentially* more valuable to the Amagium than other candidates, and that has earned you leniency in the past despite its liabilities. So. Tell me this, Aspirant. Think carefully. Respond honestly. Can you commit yourself to our laws over pride, desire, and conscience?”

“Yes.”

Tolkien studied Hace’s face and sighed deeply.

“You pass,” he said at last. “Pending the results of your written examinations, that is. If all goes well, you shall graduate on the last day of Taurus and assume the rank and duties of Keeper. But you had better prepare another speech for your disciplinary hearing. From what Bronte has told me, you’ve had a busy quarter.”

Hace exhaled, smiled, and bowed low.

“Thank you, Your Wisdom.”

The Headmaster nodded and went back into the building. Ozra winked at him as she turned to leave with the other teachers.

Alone on the steps, Hace pried the nail from the heel of his right palm, growling to cover a scream. The pain provided him with a way to disassociate himself from the greater pain of falsehood. It was the third lie he had told in his life, and the most convincing yet.

An inflamed, dark green corona had appeared around his wound, and snaked into the adjacent veins. It was receding now though, and the relief was so intense that he nearly passed out. The sound of a voice just over his shoulder hit his heart like a needle jabbing a balloon.

“That looks fucking horrible,” Ozra surmised brightly.

“Just a nick,” Hace smiled weakly. “Besides, it worked.”

Using the pain of the nail to distract him from the lie had been her idea.

“All according to plan?” he added.

She pointedly said nothing but gestured for him to give her his wounded hand. He complied, and she started to wrap it with salve cloth.

Ozra was in her early fifties now, but still exuded surety, power, and an almost ostentatious grace. Her shock white hair was cut short in a series of messy spikes that looked both tomboyish and flirtatious. Absurd on anyone else her age, but she owned it.

“Look, I meant to roast the bitch. I really did. But in the heat of the moment, I just...”

“Decided to wing it?”

“Not sure I’d call it a decision, but yeah.”

“Well, those were very some pretty words. Since the old man gave you the all clear, you’re one of us now. Provided you didn’t cock the cactus on the written.”

“I think I did alright,” Hace chuckled. “Any final lessons? Last words of wisdom?”

“If you still need teaching, we’re both in serious trouble. Though I do have a question for you. Remember what you asked me the day we met?”

Hace groaned as he was vaulted back in time.

After completing his assessments, he was given a map of the campus with a building circled and an office number next to it. The specified location was actually a small, cottage-like room on the roof of the building. There, a lithe woman lounged on the broad guard rail. He eyed her with curiosity, but didn’t address her, opting to knock on the door and wait silently. After five minutes, the woman languidly asked:

“What’s your deal, kid?”

“I’m waiting for Professor Wilde,” he said cautiously.

She sat up at that point, stretching like a cat bored with napping.

“You found her. And she wants to know what your deal is.”

He was caught off-guard for only a second.

“I’m a new aspirant who was assigned to you. My name is Hace Matthews. I’m a half-fae with akrasia, and... uh, I want you to teach me the true nature of magic.”

Just like that, he’d won her over. She busted up at the scope of the statement, its pure-hearted audacity and sincerity. But once she caught her breath, she had to chew on the demand for a long moment before responding.

“Well, Red, I think it comes down to three things. First, magic abhors coincidence. It catches your life in its own wind and guides you by its whim. The more you use it, the stronger that wind blows. Things start to happen for unlikely reasons.

“The next thing is, magic is circular. Ironic. It makes sages out of morons and shows wisemen for the fools they are. It turns hate to love, love to hate, and shows both crueler fates.

“But those are all side effects, really. The last thing is the most important. Magic is the will of change itself. It makes something of nothing, defies observable laws, and human logic. Those transgressions are what keep the wheels turning. And, therefore, Hace Matthews, I think the true nature of magic is violence.”

Then it was Hace’s turn to chew.

“Isn’t violence evil?” he asked.

Again, she had to carefully weigh her response.

“It certainly can be. And that’s why we have to try to be better than magic.”

Hace chewed on the statement.

“As amagia?”

Ozra smiled. “As people.”

Hace recounted the exchange to Ozra in surprising detail as the two of them wandered toward the park at the heart of the campus.

“I’m not sure whether I should be touched or creeped out. You remembered that all these years?”

“It left an impression.”

“Well. Did I manage it? Do you know the true nature of magic, Hace Matthews?”

“Not a chance. But I know enough to understand why you laughed at the question.”

Ozra chuckled.

“I guess we’ll have to call that good enough.”

-Alinore-

Keepers seek not secrets. Keepers pry not at locks. Keepers hold the Amagium’s wisdom.

Lin’s fingers flew across the keyboard, addressing the next essay question. She knew they would keep appearing on the incanter’s screen until the time ran out. But if the cadence of those working around her was any indication, she had answered at least half again as many questions as the second fastest typist. She hadn’t looked, of course—it was grounds for immediate dismissal. And why bother? She was the best of her cohort. *I have to be.*

When she completed the essay, the test gave her another multiple-choice question:

When was the first magic exemption system established?

- A) Mesopotamia – ~2000 BA**
- B) Zhong – ~1100 AA**
- C) Europa – ~1600 AA**
- D) Global – ~2270 AA**

Lin rolled her eyes. It was another apparent trick question. Something designed to prey upon those just smart enough to second guess seemingly obvious answers. The goal was to pick the answer that was the least wrong.

Pre-Ancient Magi undoubtedly had various magical restriction devices, but there wasn't enough physical evidence from that era to discern whether there was an actual system of governance in place, or they were just vehicles for slavery. It also didn't fit the Amagium's preferred historical narrative. Similarly, Zhong established a system of magical limiters to help reinforce its caste system long before it came under Amagium rule, but it was more feudal than legal in structure. Pedantic smartasses argued that any sort of magic licensure created 'exempt' classes, and therefore, exemptions began with the founding of the Second Amagium.

Lin clicked "D".

When people referred to "the exemption system" in common parlance, they invariably meant the one that governed the modern world, instituted by the Third Amagium. Every subject of the amagia had their wyrd bound at birth, and received their 'speaking' license at age three. At seven, they were either enrolled in the Amagium or declared Asfalium, and received the corresponding license on their ninth birthday. The basic asfalis license allowed the use of a single animus stone in each cuff. On their twenty-first birthday, asfalis subjects could apply for a 'full license,' which everyone did—provided they could afford it—allowing for two stone. Asfalis professionals such as doctors, police, and scientists who required access to more advanced magic could earn exemptions for licenses that could access more varied and specific types of anima. But the overwhelming majority of magic, including all combative and militarized magic, was restricted to Amagia.

The next question appeared, frowning Lin's brow.

Describe the curing process for a standard Gygax Vessel.

It wasn't a hard question per se. Foundational knowledge for an aspiring animathurge but somewhat harder for an aspiring Keeper who received the pertinent lectures in their seventh year. Gygax Vessels, or Gyves, were the backbone of modern civilization. An incredibly flexible form of animate energy with few fluctuations in function and a long shelf-life. The vessels ranged in size and strength so they could power almost any piece of artifice, from flashlights to automobiles. Lin flew through her explanation of curing the energy, going so far as to include a diagram of the lens array involved.

There was a long pause after she submitted her answer, and then the testing program closed itself. *No!* Lin's heart stunned itself against her ribs and her wyrd seemed to implode.

Did it glitch? Do I have to retake that entire last block? The exam wasn't as challenging as she feared, but she was only five minutes away from finishing and the prospect of starting over made her skull crumple. Before she could look for a proctor, a message flashed on the incanter's chat client.

ADMIN: You're done, Lin.

What? Do they think I cheated?! She shot back a reply.

A. VALMONT: I don't understand. There are five minutes left.

ADMIN: Yes, but you completed every question from every variation of the Keeper exam yesterday. Under the safe assumption you got two thirds of them right, you've passed twice over.

Lin's eyes bugged. A single Keeper exam was designed to be completed over the course of three days. And this was the third day of testing. *So what the hell have I been doing?*

ADMIN: I had to run today's test manually, pulling questions from exams for other titles. It's an Arroyo Athenaeum record, of course. Probably an Amagium record as well. But this has gone from impressive to indecent. Keeping up with you is tedious. I'm unlocking your incanter so you can browse the arcanet for the final five minutes. I take it you've already completed your practical?

Giddy euphoria crept in from the corners of Lin's mind, dulling the impossible, razor-sharp focus that had possessed her for the last week. Her hands shook as she typed her reply.

A. VALMONT: Yes.

ADMIN: Congratulations. You're a Keeper.

She whooped, throwing a fist in the air that carried her to her feet. The frantic typing stopped dead. Her beleaguered cohort stared at her from all sides with shock, each aspirant assuming the test had finally cracked them. It was an honest mistake. Valmonts rarely smiled. Valmonts did not joke. And Valmonts certainly did not whoop, least of all Alinore Valmont. She was reasonably certain she inspired the phrase "resting bitch face." Her skin, usually a peach shade of porcelain, turned so red, so quickly it seemed like her head would pop. At the front of the room, the proctor she had been chatting with stared in open-mouthed horror. When she sat back down, a final message appeared on her incanter.

ADMIN: Indecent.

She smiled sheepishly at herself. But as the euphoria faded, the unnatural quickness in her blood lingered. Synapses still coursed through her nerves like lightning, currents of power swirling in her wyrd like a tempest, senses sharp enough to slice ink from a page.

All thanks to the glowing green flask of Focaline tucked into her satchel.

Picturing it was like a bullet between the eyes. A knife in the heart. A tear in her wyrd. *Amagium record, huh? Too bad you had to cheat to set it.*

-Sevardin-

Keepers dwell not in the past. Keepers fret not with the future. Keepers hold the present.

Sevardin swirled the mantra around his head like scotch in his glass until Hodd cleared his throat. Reverie broken, he looked up at the ruddy bartender.

"I'm shooting a hole in my boat here, but I'll tell you a secret. At a certain volume of consumption, it's more economic to buy booze by the bottle and drink it at home."

Sevardin smirked at the scarred reflection in his scotch, the pale ghosts of a dozen nicks and gashes shining against his dark skin. He finished the glass and slid it back to Hodd.

"I'd be lost without your warm companionship and sage advice."

Hodd snickered, filled the glass for the seventh time, and slid it back.

"Forgive the observation, but you don't seem particularly 'found' at the moment."

Sevardin just smiled. *Oh, I know exactly where I am. I am shipwrecked on the shores of despair. I am pouring gas on the fires of perdition. I'm sitting in your shitty little dive bar, Hodd, trying to drink a hole in my head so I can fall asleep tonight without dreaming, wishing I didn't have to wake up to another soulless tomorrow.*

Even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't fair.

The Drowned Book was a far cry from Arroyo's nicest bar, but definitely wasn't shitty. There were plenty of watering holes that welcomed thirsty Keepers, but the Book was Sev's favorite. He even treated fellow regulars with a little extra respect on account of them having good taste. *The name's a Dowland reference. What surer sign of class could there be?*

When he lost Yuel and Jecia he had stayed away—couldn't bear the memories—but he came back when he returned to active duty. After the subsequent suspension, he slid from 'regular' to semi-permanent fixture. *Behold the Arroyo's champion, now reduced to human furniture. And to think he showed such promise.*

The bar was built like an iceberg. Its back-alley entrance opened to a cramped ground floor with a short bar, and a smaller second floor that had just enough room for two stools and a counter. But the basement was like an old-world beer hall, big enough for eight tables and two dozen booths with room leftover for darts and billiards. The scent of old smoke always hung in the air, along with the strains of classic songs unspooled from a vinyl record player. Today it was Picasso's original rendition of "Hey Jude."

Sevardin hummed along with the chorus, tapping his finger on the bar, staring intently without actually seeing anything. Hobb watched with concern. He was by no means timid, and not a man to mince words, but it took him a full minute to find the words to address Sev.

"Listen, Harker. You know me. I like telling people their business even less than I like them telling me mine, but I think you should go somewhere. Do something. Talk to somebody who can talk back worth half a damn."

Sevardin looked up as the song died. Meeting his eyes was like standing on a precipice, and Hodd quickly looked away. But Sevardin relaxed and did the same.

"I don't know where to go," he admitted.

"There are counselors, aren't there?" Hodd asked.

"Whatever you say in those 'confidential sessions' has a funny way of coming out."

"No, not your people. I meant private practices. The same ones vets go to see."

"I don't feel like paying a stranger to ask me questions I already ask myself."

Sevardin stood from the stool and placed a fifty-dollar bill on the counter. Hodd slid it back. The Keeper eyed him dangerously again, but this time the barman held his ground.

"That's not charity," Hodd insisted. "It's an investment. I'm buying the rest of your week. Go to the beach. Take a hike. Spend it on a shrink you wouldn't want to pay for yourself."

Do anything other than.... this. If it's all horseshit, come back next Lunday and I'll start taking your money again."

Sevardin nodded, now unable to meet Hodd's gaze. The kindness undid him.

He stuffed the bill into his pocket and walked up the steps to the ground floor. Dusk had fallen, and the energy of the early evening stoked Old Town—the lively sprawl that grew out of Calle Puente, Arroyo's major artery. It meant Bridge Street in Spanish, which Sevardin always found funny, seeing as it ran over only one bridge in a city filled with bridges. But that particular bridge reified the city's soul. The Ancient's Bridge, or the Suicide Bridge, if you had kinked humor, was famous. A piece of the old world, built by the Amagium when they first established their presence in the southland.

Bluebies seemed to be everywhere, and then he remembered graduation was just a few nights a way. Another reason Sev appreciated the Book was that Hodd and his bartenders would serve aspirants nothing but water until they wore the black.

He watched a pair of young pups recounting their Keeper exam in anguish, blindly praying to God that their freedom would end. So fresh-faced and bright-eyed. So eager to get out there and save the world. *You poor fools. Go into any other branch, or better yet, become asfalis. Make do with two stones of humble magic, like every other sane person on the planet.*

After about twenty minutes of walking to clear his head, Sevardin returned to his bike and stoked it to life with his key.

It was completely mechanical. Not a trace of animate energy or spelled artifice. It wasn't unheard of, but still decidedly eccentric, requiring a special state license, since it relied on completely manual control. Even though components occasionally needed to be replaced or tuned, a motorcycle would never develop the quirks that a piece of artifice gradually accumulated. Gas cost as much as ambient batteries, but you could go further on one tank. Well worth it in the long run. It demanded capability in exchange for reliability. Sevardin respected that arrangement deeply.

Besides, tinkering was his opus. The little task that restored his wyrd's stamina. Gearwork gave him a small charge. Motors were better. But engines.... After a long day of magic, working on engines was the only thing that truly scratched his itch.

As he darted through traffic, he imagined Jecia pressed against his back, her arms wrapped around him, one hand on his chest and another on the top of his thigh, teasing what waited at home. But she had disappeared and taken home with her.

She's not gone though. They couldn't find a body, and the stories taught him there was always hope until you found the body. *She's too strong to die. Just lost in the Faed, waiting for me to find her.* He chuckled at himself. *No. She would never wait. She's fighting her way back to me, struggling to give me a sign so I can do the same.* He could still feel her touch in his wyrd. He knew it in his bones. But he also knew 'story' was another word for 'lie,' bones could be mistaken, and magic was a door to madness.