

THE GHOST SEEKERS

DEVON TAYLOR

Swoon READS
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*This one is for my girls,
Rylan and Norrie,
the protectors of my soul.*

THEY ARE CALLED THE
DEAD WHO LIVED THROUGH
THEIR DEATHS . . .

—FRANK STANFORD

— PART —

ONE

—

ONE

His ghost was cold.

It was frozen, down to the last string of whatever incorporeal ooze it was made of. Whatever else changed around it—and it was always changing—the cold was a constant, unwelcome thing.

For most of it, there was a house around him. It was small—just a couple of bedrooms, barely a kitchen, a cozy fireplace that he could never warm up with. The single hallway was long and empty, sometimes swept clean, sometimes cluttered with dust and leaves and bits of trash. He could stand in the living room and blink and it would be different every time he opened his eyes.

Outside the windows, seasons snapped in and out of place like slides in an old projector. In one moment there were long, luscious blades of grass waving at him from the yard. In another there was a blanket of clean white snow, untouched and unbroken. And then it would go back to summer, then to spring, then to winter again, then to fall. In the trees, he could see leaves stuttering in and out of existence, as cardinals dripped through the branches in streaks of bloodred.

He couldn't remember ever having been here, in this house, but he was sure that it was a part of his memories. He felt lucky just to have that one little bit of confidence. There was a lot about his life—and everything that came after it—that he couldn't pin down. It shifted in his mind as sporadically as the seasons outside.

Sometimes he wasn't sure. Sometimes his memory would slip and he would lose it all, and he would slump to the floor, cold as ever. He would sit there with his head in his hands, staring between his feet, trying to ignore the unhinged passing of time.

It was a joke to think that he could ever eat or sleep or do anything that seemed even remotely normal. Normality was so, *so* far gone. He just sat on the floor, against the wall, letting the world flicker around him, watching tiny dunes of dirt and dust build themselves up and break themselves down along the floorboards.

Occasionally the house would unbuild itself, becoming a sturdy wooden skeleton standing in the bright sun atop a freshly laid concrete foundation. Then it would be gone entirely—or never there at all—and he'd be sitting in the empty field. He liked those moments the best. He could see the sky, the clouds rocketing across it. He could see blue fade into black and the stars chasing one another above the atmosphere in swarms of light. Given enough time, he might have been able to will himself to stay there with the wide-open sky above him. Every now and then, he'd even try to do it.

And that was usually when time shifted in the opposite direction.

The house would become a ruin, clothed in darkness, slumping against itself. Broken beams poked down out of the tattered ceiling;

the floorboards rolled and snapped from the damp and the cold. It was empty and lonely and forgotten.

He would see her then, in the deepest shadow of the farthest corner. There was only ever the unfocused outline of her body—her knotted hair, her too-thin arms and legs. And, of course, her eyes. Black with just the tiniest white pinpricks for pupils, staring out at him with something that could have been curiosity or barely withheld rage.

He didn't know or care. What he knew was that even here, in a place that should have been just his, cursed as it was, she had found him. She had *found* him, and clarity would slam into him like an alarming gust of wind, and he'd be afraid. For his friends, for the ship that he abandoned, for the souls that he had been made to protect. What had she done to them?

How had they lost?

"Because you were foolish enough to think that you could not," she said once, somehow hearing the question that he never spoke. Her voice was the same as it had always been, a force of its own, thrumming with a thousand other voices. Only now, here, it was more subdued, somewhere between a rumble and a whisper.

"What do you want from me?" he asked her, forcing himself to meet her gaze.

"All the parts of you that you could never hope to understand," she said. *"The power that you've only just scratched the surface of."*

"So why don't you just take it? Take me?"

Her grimy teeth shone in a horrid grin. *"It is a game, Soul Keeper. And the only way to win is if everyone keeps playing."*

Time cycled forward, and then it cycled back. Furniture appeared and then vanished. The sun came and went in violent flashes of light from the windows. Except for the darkest days of the future, when the demon girl was there watching him, he was alone.

And he had never been more terrified.

When he finally heard the voice, he wouldn't allow himself to believe that it was real. The voice that called to him was one he hadn't heard in so long, and missed so deeply, that if he believed he was really hearing it and it turned out to just be another trick of his awful prison, his mind would snap like a dry twig under a heavy foot.

But it persisted. Calling to him. Searching for him.

Mate.

That voice.

Mate, are you there?

He was sitting against the wall, watching the trees outside judder and flail, growing leaves and shedding them over the course of minutes instead of months.

It was the same as it had been every second of every minute of every hour since he arrived here. But when the voice spoke, the sound of it exploded into the room like a firework going off. It shook against the floor and the ceiling, and he swore he saw a sprinkling of plaster come falling down from somewhere.

Mate. Rhett. It's me.

He knew that voice, but it couldn't possibly be real. Yet the sound of his own name was such a sweet thing to hear that he couldn't help but pull himself off the floor, cocking his head to listen. He thought

about a time that felt like centuries ago, when he'd stood on the side of a highway in New York, talking to the owner of that voice.

My name is Rhett, he had said. Rhett Snyder. While nearby, his dead body hung within the wreckage of the car accident that had ultimately landed him here.

The voice spoke again, thunderous within the tiny house.

It's me, mate. It's Basil. Can you hear me?

Rhett opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. He realized he'd barely spoken the entire time he'd been here.

He tried again. Standing in the middle of the room, he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled from the deepest part of his gut.

"I'm here!" he barely croaked. "Basil, I hear you! I'm *here!*"

Beneath him, the floorboards shuddered. The walls groaned deeply, menacingly. As Rhett watched them, tiny cracks began to form, snaking their way across the paint like slow bolts of lightning.

Hang on, mate! We're going to try to bring you to us!

What the hell did *that* mean?

The house rumbled and shook around Rhett. Outside, he could still see the sporadic passing of the seasons. But everything inside the house had given way to chaos.

More cracks formed across the walls. The floorboards bowed upward. Doorframes leaned in haphazard directions. Some of the windows exploded, sprinkling the floor with shards of broken glass.

Okay, Basil said from . . . wherever he was. We're ready to go. Rhett, are you ready?

"Ready for *what?*" Rhett yelled back.

Here we go. One.

The walls buckled.

Two.

Rhett shut his eyes, listening to the destruction as it happened.

Three!

There was a rush of air and a crackle of electricity. The house roared around him briefly—sounds of blowing dirt and snapping wood and collapsing reality.

Then it was quiet.

He could feel a change in the atmosphere. The world was silent . . . but it was also still. That feeling of time flickering around him like a constant, inextinguishable fire was gone, replaced by a smothering ache in his chest and a tingling in his limbs. He could barely breathe. And for the first time in a long time, he could feel it. He struggled to pull air into his lungs and got barely a gasp.

Rhett opened his eyes.

The first thing he noticed was that they burned. Not just in a dry, itchy way, but in a way that made it feel as if someone had thrown acid into his retinas; keeping his eyes open at all was a struggle.

He fought through the pain, waiting for his vision to clear. Once it did, he wasn't disappointed.

He was in the same house, his prison for who knew how long now, but time had finally settled. The place had long been abandoned, leaving a coating of dust across everything like a blanket of dull, gray snow. The paint on the walls was so faded and flaked, it looked like dry skin after an awful sunburn. There were a couple pieces of old furniture—a caked-over mirror on one wall, a fraying wicker chair

in the corner, a lone end table with a vase that still choked on a bouquet of brittle, bonelike flower stems—and it all stayed put. Nothing sputtered in and out of existence. Outside, the trees were naked and the sky was clear. A faint ray of cold sunshine angled in through one of the windows like a spotlight. Rhett stared at it for a moment, waiting for it to start rushing across the room, waiting for time to unstick itself again . . . until he noticed the figure standing just outside that spotlight of sun.

He would have recognized that damn blazer anywhere.

Basil stepped forward, allowing the sunlight to fall over him, and that slanted grin blew away any doubt that Rhett may have had: He was really here. They had come back for him.

“Hello, mate,” Basil said, his gaze darting up and down, staring at Rhett with wide, uncertain eyes. No, not uncertain—unbelieving. It was the same look that Rhett imagined he was giving Basil. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but . . . you look god-awful.”

Rhett couldn’t help but laugh. Except it didn’t sound like much of a laugh at all. It was a horrid, choked sound. He watched the muscles in Basil’s face twitch slightly.

“Listen, mate,” Basil went on. “We’re here to help you, okay?”

Why was Basil putting his hands out like that, like he was talking to a child or a stray animal about to run away? And who was *we*?

For the first time, Rhett noticed other shapes lurking in the shadows of the house. And until they began coming into the light, each one gave him an unpleasant jolt of fear. Fear that they might be *her*.

Rhett also realized that there were lines crossing in front of his field

of vision, forming a grid. Not just lines—bars. Metal ones. When he focused on them, he could see speckles of rust.

He was in a cage.

“Basil . . .,” he started, but he couldn’t go on. The sound of his own voice was too jarring. It sounded distant. It sounded broken. It sounded . . . haunted.

He put a hand up to try and grab hold of the cage and had to force back a scream.

His hand was barely there, made mostly out of roiling gray smoke, shedding flecks of what could have been ash or skin with every motion. When he balled his fingers into a fist, any indication of his fingers vanished, leaving only a fist-shaped bulb of churning matter. His arm was the same way. And when he looked down at his feet, he realized that he had none. There was only a slowly boiling mass of gray, like a miniature storm cloud clinging to his body, infecting him somehow.

Rhett looked up, panic rising inside him, and found Basil had come closer to the cage. His hands were still outstretched, but his face was relaxed and confident.

“Stay calm,” he said. “You have to be cool, Rhett.”

Rhett put a cloudy hand up again, reaching for the cage, but the bars buzzed with electricity when he got too close. Sparks sprayed out and he felt a strange current roll through him, like slowly dipping into a pool of water.

He didn’t want to speak, didn’t want to hear the unnerving sound of his own voice again.

It still hurt to breathe. It still hurt to see.

What was happening to him?



“Okay, so, here’s the deal,” Basil said, obviously spotting the panic in Rhett’s face. Did he even have a face? He didn’t want to know. He just focused on Basil’s voice. “You’re . . . still a ghost.”

Rhett gave him a look that was meant to say *You think?*

But it had never been like this. How had they pulled him out of the prison of his haunting?

He glanced around the inside of the cage and then looked beyond it. Electrical wires curled and twisted along the splintered floorboards, connecting to what looked like old car batteries and a white, plastic desktop computer from the nineties.

He returned his gaze to Basil, who had finally moved across the room so that he was standing just beyond the cage. There was somebody else beside him: a shorter, lankier guy with a baseball hat that was still just the faintest shade of red twisted up in his hands and a jagged, unkempt head of hair.

Basil motioned to him. “This is Jon,” he said. “He set this up for us. I’ll let him explain all the . . . I’ll just let him explain. Jon?” Basil took a small step back.

The other guy—Jon—took an equally small step forward.

“Uh . . . h-hi,” Jon said.

Rhett just stared at him, trying not to imagine how horrifying he must have looked in that moment—a vaguely human-shaped cloud of smoke and ash floating inside an electrified cage, staring out with a dead face and impatient eyes.

Jon’s eyes widened slightly, but he went on. “S-so, the idea here is that you need energy to . . . to manifest . . . in order for us to be able to see you. The . . . uh . . . cage provides that energy. If we were to shut

the power off, then you'd go back to . . . wherever it is that you came from.”

Rhett listened, feeling the slightest thump of panic at the thought of going back. From the other side of the room, near the front door, he heard what sounded like the squawk of a walkie-talkie. After a moment, one of the other syllektors—a woman with wavy brown hair—stepped up beside Basil and leaned toward him.

“Captain,” she murmured, and then Jon spoke over the rest.

“I understand you have . . . um . . . an ability?” he asked. He stared at Rhett, hopeful.

Rhett knew what he was referring to, but he didn't know if he really had the ability or not. He had only used it once . . . and it had cost them all everything. He gave Jon what he hoped was a shrug.

Jon nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Fair enough. Well, if you do have the . . . ability and you *can* bring yourself . . . back, you're going to need a lot more energy for that.” He gestured at the car batteries, maybe a dozen of them, lined up at his feet. “Right now, we're drawing power from two of these. In order for you to . . . do what you can do, we're going to need all twelve.”

“Jon,” Basil said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We need to hurry this along.”

Jon looked back, and Rhett watched as they communicated silently. Something was wrong.

“Aye, Captain,” Jon said. When he looked back at Rhett, his face was even more unnerved than it had been before. But he got back into his explanation. “Once you start . . . doing your thing,” he said, “these

puppies won't last long. You'll have to use up all the juice and then be quick. Because as soon as the energy level in the cage starts to drop, your window of opportunity will close."

Basil stepped forward again. "We've got one shot at this, mate," he said. Then that devilish grin spread across his face, smooth and sarcastic as ever. "Don't screw it up."

Rhett took little comfort in Basil's humor—which was usually the case when Basil tried to crack a joke in the middle of something serious, so this shouldn't have felt any different. But it did. It felt like the end of the line, like one last wink of hopeful light before Rhett was to be cast back into the hell that he'd been existing in.

He closed his eyes, momentarily thankful for the relief it brought—now all he had to do was focus on the ache in his chest. He let the images flicker around in his head for a moment. Endless days of constantly moving time that gave way to those last moments aboard the *Harbinger*, right before she sank, right before he told Basil and Mak to do this to him, to keep him and his power away from the souls, away from *her*. Urcena.

He saw those piercing, deadly eyes watching from the corner. The power was what she wanted; using it was dangerous. But the souls that she intended to use the power on were at the bottom of the river in the afterlife, still tucked inside the monstrous hull of the *Harbinger*. Rhett's parents were among those souls. He had promised himself that he'd protect *them* if nothing else, because he hadn't been able to do that in life. She had come for them, too.

Urcena had caused *all* of this. He wanted to end her.

Around him, electricity hummed and snapped along the bars of

the cage. He heard Jon's voice, along with what sounded like the clacking of computer keys.

"Okay," Jon said, raising his voice over the sound of the electrified cage. "We're up to full power! It's now or never!"

"Always the optimist, aren't you, Jon?" Basil cried.

The energy rushing through the cage was stronger, louder. Rhett felt it mixing with the tingling sensation in his ghostly limbs. He felt the weight pressing into his chest, crushing his lungs.

He saw the girl from the apartment building, surrounded by flames and sparks of purple lightning. He remembered hearing her heartbeat in time with his own . . . and he could hear it now. It thumped in his ears, just once. At the same time, something beyond the cage popped and sparks fizzled against the vibrating metal.

"Shit," Jon hissed.

"It's okay," Basil said. "I . . . I think it's working . . ."

It was.

Rhett could feel the surge of life coursing through him. Well, not life exactly. But the fibrous extensions of his soul were reconnecting themselves, turning him back into what he'd been on the *Harbinger*.

His heartbeat sounded in his ears again. *Whump-whump*.

And again.

Again.

He opened his eyes.

Veins of purple electricity snaked their way around the cage, weaving in and out of the bars. One of the car batteries was a smoldering husk of melted black plastic, spewing noxious smoke. Another one popped as Rhett watched, launching a wave of glowing sparks into

the air. Everything was charged. Lightbulbs in the house that probably hadn't been lit in years flickered violently.

Whump-whump.

Rhett took a step forward, putting his nose right up against the metal of the cage . . . and then he stepped through it.

Basil and Jon took a few stumbling steps backward, watching Rhett pass through the solid, electrified bars.

Rhett moved through it, feeling the density of the steel. He left the bubbling cloud of smoke and ash behind, let it dissipate along with the energy in the cage. He stepped onto the wooden floor as if breaking through the surface of water, gasping for air.

As he fell forward onto his hands and knees, Basil tried to catch him, and they ended up on the floor together amid the dirt and the dust. But Rhett was there. He was back.

He was a syllektor again.

TWO

“Whoa,” Jon said, staring down at them.

Rhett and Basil knelt on the hard floor together, both of them panting—Rhett from the exertion of un-ghosting himself, and Basil from what must have been fear. They looked at each other side-long . . . and then they both burst out laughing.

Rhett felt a strange warmth, something that he never realized had been there when he was aboard the *Harbinger* the first time. Even though the sensations in his body were numb, there for him to switch on if he needed to, he wasn't cold. He didn't think that there could ever be a cold as punishing as what he felt . . . back there. He had been a ghost; he could admit that much to himself. But the place where his ghost had resided—some kind of sublevel of reality—he had no idea what to call that.

People were still staring at Rhett. Not just Jon, but the handful of other syllektors that were there as well. They watched him as he sat up, examined him like some kind of specimen. He assumed they all knew what he was, that he had the ability to bring people back from the brink of death. And if they didn't before, they definitely did now.

He tried to ignore the stares and glanced up at the cage: a tall, hastily constructed cylinder. It still smoldered along with the car batteries and the computer, which had a blank screen now.

Rhett cleared his throat before speaking, even though he was sure that his voice would work just fine.

“This is . . . different,” he said, gesturing toward the equipment. And he was right—his voice did sound fine. Slowly, he allowed himself to relax.

“Yeah, well, we had to go a bit analog since . . . well, you know,” Basil said, pulling himself up off the floor. He reached down to help Rhett up, and there was a strange look on his face. He was choking back more laughter. “I’m sure it’s a side effect of what just went down, but Anderson Cooper called, mate. He wants his hair back.”

Rhett didn’t understand. He let Basil pull him off the floor, and then stepped across the room to the grimy mirror. He smeared away some of the muck with the sleeve of his shirt.

As he stared at his reflection, his mouth dropped open. He wasn’t focused on the fact that the skin on his face was more sunken and deathly looking than ever, or the fact that his clothes from the *Harbinger* had somehow gotten darker. What he stared at was his hair, which had been a standard shade of brown before but was now a shocking, perfect white.

“Jesus . . .” Rhett murmured, running a hand through what could have been a stranger’s hair.

“Yeah,” Basil said from behind him. “I feel you. But I’m more confused about something else.”

Rhett turned to face him, giving him a questioning look.

“Why aren’t you . . . alive?” Basil said. “Like, *alive* alive.”

“I . . . don’t know,” Rhett replied. He thought about it. “Maybe it doesn’t work like that. Especially not on myself. I’d probably need a corpse for that.”

Basil looked horrified.

“*Blegh!*” he said. “No offense, mate, but I’d rather not see you as a zombie.”

Rhett opened his mouth to try and explain what he *thought* the logic was, but someone else cut him off. It was the woman from before, who had whispered in Basil’s ear.

“Captain Winthrop,” she said. When Basil glanced in her direction, she simply tapped her wrist with her index finger. *Tick-tock.*

“Yes,” Basil responded. He gave his head a shake and seemed to bring himself back into the moment, standing up straight. Rhett realized that Basil looked different, too. Not older, because syllektors could never look older than they were when they died, just more severe. Exhausted, maybe. “Thank you, Liz. Everybody back to the truck. We have to be gone before they show up.”

Rhett didn’t have to ask, but he did anyway. “Psychons?”

Basil nodded. “Psychons.”

Rhett looked around. “Where’s Mak? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” Basil replied, glancing down at his boots. “She’s working on something else at the moment.” The look on his face told Rhett not to question the issue further. As long as Mak was all right, he didn’t care where she was or what she was doing.

“What about all this?” Rhett asked, pointing at the hulk of the cage and the equipment.

“Leave it,” Jon said before Basil could reply. “It’s toast.”

Rhett glanced at Jon, then extended his hand toward him.

“Thank you,” he said. “I owe you my . . . *after*life, I guess.”

Jon smirked, taking Rhett’s hand and shaking it. “Don’t mention it. You’re the Twice-Born Son. If you’re going to save us, someone had to save you first, right?” And then he secured his baseball hat on his head and walked out into the cold day with the others, leaving Rhett and Basil alone in the house.

Rhett shot an accusing look at Basil, who cringed.

“I’ll explain later,” he said.

“You better.” Rhett took a look around the house one last time, still seeing it as it had been to him.

“Your parents . . . ,” Basil started.

“I know,” Rhett said. “They lived here when I was a baby. Probably right after I was born. After my dad lost his license for saving me.”

Basil nodded, his face suddenly solemn. “It seems like they were trying to lie low. Lots of nosy press people and all that.”

Rhett took a deep breath as Basil slipped into an overcoat that hung down to his knees.

“So,” he said, grinning. “Captain Winthrop, huh?”

“Oh, shut up,” Basil said, but he was smiling, too. “I’d much rather talk about your Danny Phantom hair.”

“Ugh.”

They moved together toward the door, leaving the ruined equipment behind, stepping out into the crisp winter air. They stopped when they nearly ran into the other syllektors, all of them grouped against the steps that led up to the front door.

In front of them, stretched across the long field of dead grass, were at least a dozen psychons. They stood tall and gruesome in the bright light, their tattered cloaks swaying slightly in the frigid breeze, their hot breath puffing in front of their constant grins. They kicked at the dirt with their bony feet, watching the syllektors with their hungry skeleton eyes, like a pack of wild dogs.

Between the psychons and the syllektors, Urcena stood waiting.

She stood in a patch of dead weeds that had gone from brown to an ashen gray under her bare feet. She sneered at Rhett, locking eyes with him over the tops of the other syllektors' heads. He wanted to look away, wanted to avoid that gaze. Her black eyes were emptier than ever, the tiny white pinpricks of her pupils reduced to barely a speck.

She was here for Rhett, and he could just as easily have given himself up. But before that idea could even take root, madness erupted around him.

The psychons sprang forward, thundering around Urcena's narrow shape and across the field, kicking up dirt and the few remaining patches of snow.

The syllektors, who had still been grouped at the bottom of the front steps, fanned out, unsheathing weapons. The woman with the wavy hair—Liz—yanked a hatchet out from under her leather coat, and in one fluid motion she let it loose, flinging it toward the nearest psychon. Rhett could hear a low whistle as the hatchet spun through the air, followed by a nasty, wet crunch as it collided with the psychon's head. The creature dropped at once and didn't move again.

The other syllektors followed suit. They revealed their own weapons, blades mostly, and didn't wait around for the psychons to come to them.

Jon planted his feet, flipped his red hat around so it sat backward on his head, and pulled a short metal stick from the inside of one of his sleeves. The stick didn't seem that intimidating to Rhett at first, but when Jon twisted it a certain way, the stick extended from both ends and turned into a staff that was almost as tall as Jon himself. He spun the staff around his body, impossibly fast. And when it came to a stop, locked firmly in both of Jon's hands, Rhett saw it come to life with tangles of white electricity dancing along the metal.

Of course the genius inventor guy would have an electrified staff, Rhett thought.

Even before he moved to join them, Rhett could see how outnumbered the syllektors were. There were only seven of them, including himself and Basil. There were almost twice as many psychons, and they were blocking the way to a pickup truck that had seen better days, what Rhett assumed was the getaway car.

He stepped down onto the hard, frozen earth, with Basil at his side, and put a hand out.

"Give me one of your scythes," he said to Basil. Nearby, Jon swung his staff into a psychon's ribs. It fell to the ground, spasming from the jolt of electricity.

When there was still nothing in his hand, Rhett looked over and found Basil cringing back at him.

"They're in the truck, aren't they?" Rhett said.

Basil lifted his shoulders to his ears and cringed even more.

“You’re the worst.”

Across the field, metal clanged with bone, and one psychon let out a screaming roar that rolled away into the trees, sending birds fluttering in terror. A few feet away, one of the syllektors—a short, stocky guy who *looked* like he was in his thirties (but of course had probably been around a lot longer than that)—had lost hold of his katana. It fell backward, the open sky flashing across its gleaming metal face, and stuck into the ground. The psychon that the guy was fighting wasted no time. It planted both of its massive claws into his chest and ripped them away from each other. The syllektor tore apart, breaking down into a cloud of ash that swirled across the field, carried by the wind.

Rhett saw his chance and took it. Basil followed his lead.

They sprinted through tufts of dead grass and patches of frozen weeds. Rhett got there first and yanked the ghosted syllektor’s katana out of the ground. He dropped to a knee and spun. The blade cut through the air with a metallic *schinnng* . . . and then it sliced through the psychon. Shards of bone and threads of gristle broke off under the force of the katana. The top half of the psychon tumbled off the bottom half, and both pieces thumped to the ground.

Basil darted past Rhett and the downed psychon, running for the truck. There was another psychon there to meet him, lunging forward with its horrid skull face, which dripped with the white sludge that was its saliva. Basil leaned back and kicked it in the teeth with the hard sole of his boot. The thing stumbled backward, emitting a whining growl and clutching its face with one bony claw. Rhett was there with his borrowed sword. This time he swung it downward, cutting through

the ragged hood of the psychon's cloak and burying the blade in its stooped head. The skull cracked like an egg, splitting open to reveal black, steaming ooze. The psychon slumped to its side and lay still.

Rhett glanced up and found Urcena staring back at him. She was as terrifying as ever—her ratty hospital gown swayed around her too-thin legs, her body coated in grayish skin and blue veins that twisted across her limbs. Her hair was a knotted black mass that hung off her head like a dead animal, and as always, she was sopping wet, dripping fat globs of water that quickly turned to ice in the cold air, creating icicles that hung from her fingers and nose and ears and the bottom of her pointed chin. The she-thing stepped toward Rhett, the white dots in the blacks of her eyes all but burning a hole into him.

“*You should have stayed in your prison, Soul Keeper!*” Urcena spoke, and the crash of a thousand voices exploded inside Rhett's head. It left him unsteady. “*You were safer while you were there!*”

Her voice ripped through his mind—and the minds of all the other syllektors, it seemed, who were wincing and putting their hands over their ears, even in the midst of their fights. One psychon took advantage of the distraction and dove its claw right into Liz's chest. For a single second, she was a statue of ash, and then she was a cloud of it, and then she was nothing.

Rhett looked back to Urcena, who was still striding toward him.

“So were you,” he said. He bent his arm over his shoulder and then threw the katana with as much force as he could. He had a brief mental image of Basil doing the same thing with one of his scythes back in the engine room on the *Harbinger*, the moment when he'd

inadvertently ghosted Treeny. Rhett pushed the image away and focused on the sword as it flipped through the air, end over end, aimed right at the place where Urcena's heart should have been, if she had a heart at all.

Urcena smirked, her lips twisting into something not even close to humor. The air around her rippled and then she blipped out of existence, leaving only a few icicles behind that fell to the ground where she had been.

The katana flew through the vacancy where Urcena had been standing and landed harmlessly on the ground a couple of feet beyond that.

Rhett straightened and peered around the field. Urcena couldn't have shown herself on her own. When she'd first appeared to Rhett on the Golden Gate Bridge what seemed like eons ago, she'd used Treeny as a conduit, although he hadn't known it at the time. She had to be using one of the syllektors in their group . . .

But then he saw something else at the very edge of the field, in the uneven shadows of the bare trees. A tallish man who couldn't have been much older than Rhett, maybe late twenties. He had jet-black hair and a nose that was canted at an awkward angle. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of a black coat, and even from this distance, Rhett could see his eyes—black with little pinpricks of white. The stranger grinned at Rhett, then stepped backward into the brush and the cover of the trees.

"Rhett, look out!" That was Jon's voice.

Rhett tore his eyes away from the trees just in time to see the gnarly mass of a psychon bearing down on him. It leaped, claws extended,

and Rhett ducked. He rolled beneath the psychon as it lunged over him. It hit the ground and skidded through the dirt, more pissed off than ever.

“Everybody get in!” Basil yelled. He’d made it to the truck. He was leaning out the open driver’s-side door as he turned the key. The truck may have looked like a pile of junk, but the engine roared to life. The sound was extra loud in the emptiness of the field.

Rhett and Jon broke for the truck at the same time, psychons racing after them. Jon swung his staff behind him, nearly catching one of the monsters across the face. The metal sung as it swept through open air, buzzing with its electric charge.

The last two syllektors were still fending off two psychons each. One of them was a girl with straight, short black hair that gleamed hints of purple in the wintry daylight. Her weapon was a sword that appeared to be made mostly of glass. It caught the faint light of the sun and splattered it across the grass in speckles of pearlescent colors. The girl swung her blade in a wide arc, keeping both of the psychons circling her at a distance. She spun one way, then stopped and twisted quickly in the opposite direction. Her sword left her hand, shooting perfectly straight, like an arrow made of light, and sank to the hilt in the gut of one of the psychons. The beast fell, clutching at its midsection as it gushed hot black slime.

The other syllektor was a middle-aged man with dashes of gray in his hair and his short beard. He was caught between the two psychons he was trying to fight, lashing at them with a long dagger in each hand. As he ran for the truck, Rhett could see the panic in the syllektor’s eyes. The man tried to break away, but one of the psychons

caught his heel and dragged him back across the dirt. He yelled once before the psychons fell on him and turned him to dust.

Basil already had the truck in gear as Jon pulled himself into the bed and Rhett climbed into the passenger side. The remaining psychons were closing in.

“Damn!” Basil yelled, slamming his hand on the steering wheel. “Damn, damn, damn! I thought we’d have more time!” He pushed the pedal to the floor. The engine revved and the tires spun before catching traction. The truck lurched forward.

Basil pointed the truck at the girl with the purplish hair, who now had a third psychon pouncing on her. She had retrieved her sword from the stomach of the first. The blade sliced through the air in a long arch, taking off the left arm of the second psychon and just missing the third, who galloped past the point of the girl’s weapon and turned to come back around, charging at her yet again.

“Hang on, Jon!” Basil called through the open cab window.

Just before he was about to plow into the girl and all three psychons, Basil hit the brakes and spun the wheel. The truck drifted, kicking sprays of dirt up behind it, and the back end slammed into the charging psychon with a metallic crunch. The thing vanished beneath the truck.

In the rearview mirror, Rhett watched Jon try to pull the girl up over the tailgate, jabbing at the other two injured psychons’ upturned grins with his staff. But before she could climb all the way in, the gnarled arm of the psychon they’d just run over exploded up through the bed of the truck. There was a sound of shearing metal as the limb scrambled around, looking for anything it could hold on to. It found

the one leg that the girl had managed to get over the tailgate. The deadly claws of the psychon's bony hand wrapped around the girl's leg and pulled. She screamed and lost hold of her sword. It tumbled out of the truck bed and disappeared.

Jon turned around and saw what was happening just in time for the psychon to shred the girl's leg. She held tight to the tailgate even as the muscles and bones of her leg were split apart. If she hadn't, Rhett was sure that he'd be watching yet another syllektor be reduced to a pile of ash. The girl gritted her teeth—not from the pain, Rhett knew, because she wouldn't feel any of that if she didn't want to, but from the struggle of fighting off the psychon and watching it take her leg.

The charged end of Jon's staff came down on the psychon's arm, and there was rage in Jon's eyes as he held it against the creature's flimsy muscles. The limb spasmed, smacking against the metal truck bed. It released the girl's ruined leg, and Jon was able to push the arm back down through the hole it had created.

"Go, go!" Jon yelled as soon as the claw was gone.

Basil threw the gearshift down into drive and hit the gas again. The truck launched forward and bucked over the top of something that could only have been the psychon that had tried to take a souvenir. Ahead of them and behind them, more psychons were heading toward the truck. Their cloaks billowed around them like bat wings, and the little bit of sinew that stretched across their skeletal bodies strained and flexed. They looked more like wild, rabid dogs than ever with their hungry, grinning skulls.

The truck gained speed, headed for a narrow opening between the trees.

Rhett glanced over at Basil, who only stared straight ahead, the steering wheel tight in his hands. In the mirror he could see Jon's red hat and the girl's purple-black hair; both of them desperately hung on to the sides of the truck.

There was only one psychon that seemed brave enough to take the truck head-on; the others had skirted away, forming groups on both sides. The lone psychon gained speed, its head low and its jagged shoulders working like pistons beneath the thin veil of its cloak.

Basil locked his arms against the steering wheel and a low yell bubbled out of him. The yell grew louder and louder . . .

The psychon slammed into the front of the truck, buckling the metal and crushing one of the headlights, and then it flew into the air. It didn't even connect with the top of the truck. It disappeared for a moment and then plummeted back down behind them, its cloak making a sound like frantic wings. It slammed into the earth and stayed there.

Jon and the girl cheered in spite of her severed limb, which lay in the truck bed, slowly oozing blood instead of gushing it, as only a syllektor injury could. Basil grinned slightly as Rhett slapped him on the shoulder.

But they weren't safe yet.

The truck dipped onto a narrow dirt road that was mostly two rivets with a bunch of weeds growing down the middle, regaining speed, making its way toward what looked like an interstate a mile or so away.

And the psychons followed.

The truck tore down the dirt road, and the four syllektors inside it lurched and bobbed, trying their best to hang on. Scrawny Jon was nearly thrown out completely.

Behind them, there were still seven or eight psychons hurrying to catch up. They dug in with all four limbs, galloping like a drove of horses. To Rhett, they seemed even more awful in the bright daytime light, nightmares normally reserved for the shadows that had come out into the sun anyway.

The truck's tires spewed a cloud of yellow dirt behind them. The engine growled.

A minute later, the truck flew off the dirt track and screeched onto asphalt, turning into oncoming traffic. There were plenty of other cars on the highway, some of them honking and swerving out of the way as the truck drifted onto the road. Its back end smashed into the guardrail on the opposite side, scraping and grinding across it, showering Jon and the purple-haired girl with sparks. Basil spun the tires again, and Rhett was suddenly choking on the smell of burning rubber, his senses triggered by the panic of being here, in a vehicle, on a highway, where all of this had started. Just before the tires caught purchase, Rhett saw the pack of psychons come bursting onto the road. If only the living people driving along the highway could see the terrors that surrounded them.

Basil nearly lost control as he yanked the truck into the correct lane and sped up.

"You really suck at this," Rhett said, grabbing the "oh shit" handle above his door so hard, he thought he might rip it off.

“You’re one to talk,” Basil griped.

Rhett ignored the jab. “I don’t get it. We don’t even have any souls on us.”

“Oh, they don’t need that excuse to come after us anymore, mate,” Basil replied. Rhett felt a surge of panic.

The highway wasn’t jam-packed, but it was still crowded. Basil maneuvered the truck around the other vehicles, gaining speed, weaving between lanes. Drivers were gaping at the truck that must have appeared empty, driving itself recklessly along the interstate. Rhett watched the speedometer climb from seventy to eighty.

And yet the psychons were keeping up. They dashed around some cars and vaulted over others, gaining on the syllektors.

A big semitruck was coming up on the right. Basil swerved to the left. Rhett watched in his side-view mirror as a psychon hopped on top of an SUV and used it to leap on top of the semi, keeping pace with Basil’s driving. The psychon clawed across the top of the semitruck . . . and then jumped off the front of the cab, falling toward Jon and the girl.

In one quick motion, Jon stood, propped his leg up against the tailgate, extended the ends of his staff, and swung. The staff connected with the psychon, zapping it with jagged bolts of electricity, and the creature became dead weight, crashing back into the asphalt.

Rhett watched in what felt like slow motion as a second psychon caught hold of the truck, stabbing its claws into the metal right behind the purple-haired girl’s head. As soon as she heard it, she lurched forward, just out of its grip. She swung around with something dense and meaty. For a split second, Rhett was convinced that it was her own

severed leg. But it turned out to be an oversize monkey wrench that she'd found somewhere in the truck bed. She had it by the narrow end and smashed the wide, toothy mouth of it into the psychon's face. It was enough to throw the thing off-balance. It lost hold of the truck and plummeted back down to the highway. Rhett could see it in the rearview mirror, scrambling to get back up, but it was shrinking fast.

Basil had his foot to the floor. The truck zigged and zagged between traffic, and slowly the remaining psychons began to get smaller, unable to close the distance. They dove over and around the other vehicles on the road, but they couldn't match the truck's speed. Eventually they became specks dancing across the uneven stretch of cars and trucks. After that they disappeared entirely.

Jon and the girl finally allowed themselves to relax, lowering their weapons and settling back down into the truck bed.

Rhett watched the woods as they flickered beside the truck, waiting for another attack. When none came, he decided that maybe this was the last they'd seen of the psychons.

For now.

THREE

Eventually traffic thinned out and they had the road mostly to themselves. No living people to potentially witness a truck that seemed to be driving itself at almost ninety miles per hour, no psychos to come rushing after them, and, best of all, no Urcena.

Everybody relaxed. And for the first time, Rhett let reality sink through him. He had escaped the horror of being a ghost, had escaped the torment of haunting a house that he had barely known but which had been his miracle home. It was the home that his parents had fled to when they'd given up everything else so that he could live. A debt that he would never have the chance to repay.

But he hadn't escaped it alone.

Shaking thoughts of his parents away, Rhett turned to Basil.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked. "Where are we going?"

"In due time, mate," Basil replied without taking his eyes off the road. He looked shaken and hollow, his cheekbones more pronounced, his eyes ringed with shadowy bruises. Or maybe that was just Rhett's imagination.

“Where have I heard that before?” Rhett said, managing to get a tilted smirk out of Basil.

In the rearview mirror, Jon and the girl sat staring past the tailgate at the road as it came spewing out from beneath the truck. Jon’s hat was still firmly fixed on his head, and the girl’s dark violet hair flapped in the wind.

“So . . . Jon . . .,” Rhett started, knowing he didn’t have to finish his thought for Basil to get the meaning.

“I know,” Basil replied. “He’s nonstop. A captain couldn’t have asked for a better crewman.”

There it was again. That word. *Captain*. And Rhett understood why Basil looked so unsteady. He was the captain now. It was a weird thing to say when there was no ship, but the crew were trained to follow the commands and decisions of one person, no matter what. And this captain’s decision to come and save Rhett had cost him three crew members.

Rhett didn’t know what was going to happen next, but he hoped he was worth that decision.

They kept driving.

Rhett’s mind finally cleared enough for him to pick up on the license plates of the few cars they passed. As far as he could tell, they were in Pennsylvania. And even though they drove for what felt like a couple of hours, they didn’t appear to leave the state.

The trees were all leafless and clawlike, reaching out of the

hardened earth at a sky that had been clear and pale with winter when they'd first emerged from the house but was now collecting gray clouds, threatening fresh snow. The day was fading away, the sky growing darker every minute, and Basil eventually switched on the truck's headlights.

The four of them were quiet the whole way.

Not long after it got dark, they came to a tiny side road tucked behind a low hill. Rhett wouldn't even have noticed it was there if Basil hadn't slowed down and turned onto it. It was barely a road at all, mostly packed dirt and petrified leaves. A few feet up, there was a rusted orange gate that appeared to be padlocked. Basil pulled the truck up to it and switched off the headlights.

"Jon," he called over his shoulder.

But Jon was already hopping out of the bed of the truck, staff in hand, though he had shortened and disarmed it for now. There was still a thread of bluish-purple light in the sky, peeking out from between the gathering clouds, just enough for them to see by.

Rhett watched as Jon pulled a set of keys from his pocket and used one to remove the padlock from the gate. He swung the gate open with a pained squeal, and Basil drove through. After Jon had secured the gate with the padlock and gotten back into the truck, they continued down the road.

They followed the path that had been crushed into the terrain as it wound around a few hills and carved its way through a couple of jagged rock formations. Basil never turned the headlights back on but seemed to know where he was going even in the growing dark.

How many times has he been down this road? Rhett wondered.

It must have been close to three hours by the time they completed their entire journey, and their destination was even less inviting than the house Rhett had been haunting. All shadows and metal and dread, like when Rhett had first seen the *Harbinger* cutting through those churning waves, black and monstrous. But he had come to learn that the *Harbinger* was a place of protection, of good work and good people, of hope.

The place that stood before him now looked as if it hadn't seen any hope in a long, long time.

There were several buildings and outhouses, all of them made of old brick and rusted iron. One long structure in particular must have been a factory building at one time, with a slanted metal roof crawling with dense patches of rust and broken by ragged holes. That fed into another, slightly larger building—taller, but not quite as long, and mostly brick but smeared with soot, as if there had been a fire. And from that building there was a tall, narrow smokestack made entirely out of red brick. There was no smoke coming out of it, though, and Rhett was starting to understand that there was probably a reason for that.

The whole thing was positioned practically on top of a river that rushed with the sound of winter runoff. Rhett could hear it even before Basil parked the truck.

“The Holiday Inn was all booked up?” Rhett asked, squinting out into the darkness as Basil put the truck in park and switched it off. The silence left behind by the purring engine was abrupt and unsettling. Not a sound except for the shushing of the river.

“Well, it was as close to home as we could get,” Basil replied. He

reached under the bench seat and pulled out his twin scythes, which used to look identical but were now almost imperceptibly different—a slightly more pronounced curve of the blade on one, as well as a difference in the wood that made the handle. They were different because Basil had lost one back on the *Harbinger*, when he'd ghosted Treeny.

Rhett shook the thought away, wanting to avoid thoughts of the *Harbinger's* sinking for as long as possible.

What Basil had said was true, Rhett realized. This place may have been bleak and abandoned, but it definitely had characteristics that reminded him of the *Harbinger*. The river, the smokestack, the metal . . . It was certainly no replacement, but it was a good reminder of home.

"It's a steel mill that closed up three or four decades ago," Basil continued as he came around the front of the truck. "We were on the run from the psychons, trying to lie low. We found this place tucked away back here."

Jon disembarked and helped the girl onto her one good foot. He half-carried her as she hobbled across the lot, still carrying her dismembered leg. The four of them moved slowly toward the factory. It was dark and shapeless in the cloud-covered night, blending with the near-black clouds that hung low in the sky. And as the four of them trudged across gravel and weeds, new snow began to fall.

Rhett caught sight of two other trucks parked under a precariously leaning awning near the factory's main building. There were license plates on both, but Rhett doubted that they really belonged to the vehicles. The only way the syllektors would have been able to get their

hands on the trucks was if they stole them from the living, which brought with it its own risks.

The river swept across its banks just beyond the factory, and as they got closer to the building, Rhett could hear murmuring voices and the crackle of fire.

Basil stepped up to a big rolling metal door and knocked three times quickly, three times slowly. A moment later, something beyond the door clicked, and it rolled up with a clatter. There was a group collected there, several dozen syllektors waiting to see who was returning, Rhett guessed, and he felt a pang of guilt at knowing half of the original party that had set out was not coming back because of him.

“Captain,” one of the women at the front of the group said, nodding at Basil, and then she scanned the rest of their faces. Before she even got to Rhett, she put her arms out toward Jon. “Jon,” she said, her voice relieved and elated and almost scolding at the same time.

“Mom,” Jon replied. He put out his free arm, still helping to hold the injured girl up. The woman embraced him and squeezed him tightly.

Rhett gave Basil a curious glance.

Basil leaned in and whispered, “They died separately. Years apart. Both just happened to end up on the *Harbinger*.”

Rhett shook his head, amazed that after everything he’d seen, there was still something to surprise him.

As Jon’s mother let him go, a group materialized out of the crowd and took the girl, along with her leg. Rhett wanted to thank her, but she was carried away before he got the chance, the last glimpses of her dark hair bobbing between the bodies of the gathered syllektors.

Jon and his mother watched the girl go as well, wincing slightly. Then his mother turned to Rhett, her face beaming.

“You must be the Twice-Born Son,” she said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Mom,” Jon said, elbowing his mother in the side.

The rest of the group stared at Rhett with that same look of fascination and some species of reverence. Some of them were faces that Rhett recognized just from passing them aboard the *Harbinger*. Others were complete strangers to him. He felt the weight of their gazes pushing into him.

“All right, everyone!” Basil called. “I know you’ve got a fandom going here, but let’s clear the way!”

The group began to break apart, opening up the doorway into the factory. Jon’s mother, with her arm still draped over her son’s shoulders, looked past Basil, peering out into the dark expectantly.

“The others?” she murmured to Basil.

Basil only shook his head at her and continued on inside.

Rhett followed him . . . and then had to stop short before he could go any farther.

The inside of the factory was even more miserable and forgotten than the outside. The high ceiling sagged, the metal beams twisted and stretched, and the corrugated roof eaten through by rust let flakes of snow come fluttering inside. The floor was all concrete, cracked and buckled and wet. Thick iron support beams placed every few feet or so were the only things that kept the building upright, and among them stood empty barrels with fires burning inside, crackling

and hissing, combatting the invading snow and the constant sound of the river outside.

The syllektors themselves—only a couple hundred of them, as far as Rhett could tell—looked nothing like the syllektors that he remembered from the *Harbinger*. Of course, some of them *were* syllektors that he recognized. But aboard the *Harbinger*, they all had work to do, they all had purpose, something to keep them moving. Here, now, they looked lost.

Some of them sat with their backs up against the walls, staring across the factory floor at nothing. Others paced or busied themselves with silly tasks, like the man in a far corner who was poking at one of the fires with a stick, apparently stoking it even though it burned powerfully. And some of them, Rhett noticed, were far worse than he could ever have imagined. While most of the syllektors looked calm and comfortable for the most part, their bodies reactionless to the cold and the elements, there were several groups among them that looked frozen and hungry. They huddled around the fires, bundled in thick coats, their lips shivering, their faces shriveled and sunken. They looked like they were starving. They looked like they were *dying*.

But how could that be when they were already dead?

“Mate!” Basil called. He had crossed the entire length of the factory floor and was waiting by a set of rickety metal steps. They led up to an office that was wrapped in cracked, dirty windows. He seemed impatient, and again Rhett couldn’t help but notice the difference between this Basil and the Basil who had originally brought him aboard the *Harbinger*.

“Coming,” he said quietly, taking one last look around at the syllektors. Some of them glanced his way and rolled their eyes. Some gave him quick, wondering glances. The rest were indifferent, lost in their own misery. It was like some kind of post-apocalyptic world captured just inside the walls of this factory. And that made sense, didn’t it? The sinking of the *Harbinger* had been their apocalypse, and now they were trying to exist in the world after it.

A hand smacked against Rhett’s shoulder, startling him. Jon was standing behind him.

“It’s not great,” Jon said, looking around, matching Rhett’s gaze. “But hopefully you can help us fix it. Basil has a plan. You’ve got your power. I believe we can get out of this.”

Rhett could only nod, remembering what he’d told Basil and Mak right before he let them ghost him. He’d said something very similar. But now . . .

Basil was climbing the steps to the rundown office, leaving him behind.

Jon gave Rhett another nudge.

“Go on and save us,” he said.

Rhett climbed the metal steps, listening to them creak and rattle beneath him, trying not to think about how much it reminded him of that first time he set foot on the bridge aboard the *Harbinger*. The first time that his parents’ death had really sunk in. The first time he’d had a conversation alone with Captain Trier, who was gone now, ghosted like so many others. The image of the captain disintegrating

in front of him, breaking down in his arms and being swept away by wind and rain, was still fresh. To Rhett, it felt as if it had happened only hours ago.

He stepped inside the office, wrapped in its dirty windows that looked out over the entire factory floor, where fires burned and syllektors meandered and hulking pieces of machinery still sat crouched in corners and along walls like rusty tombstones.

The inside of the office was even more depressing. Everything was lit by a few dripping candles that were placed around the room. There was a wooden desk in the center that was splintered and swollen with water damage but still stood on its own. A couple of folding chairs on either side of the desk, a moldy carpet that filled the room with must. The walls were mostly bare, except for an oversize corkboard that was cramped with papers: newspaper clippings overlapping one another, a couple of maps with red thumbtacks poked into them, and a calendar that Rhett didn't dare look at. He took his eyes away from the wall and forced them to find Basil's. Rhett wanted to hear everything from him, and he wanted it straight.

"Tell me," Rhett said quietly.

Basil had lowered himself into one of the chairs, tossing his scythes onto the desk as if they were just a set of keys or a stack of junk mail. He put his head back, with his hands laced in front of him, and closed his eyes.

"What do you want to know?" he said.

"Everything," Rhett replied.

Basil grinned without opening his eyes. "I feel like we've had this conversation before."

“I’m serious, Basil. What the hell is happening out there? Why do some of the crew look so . . .”

“Tired? Hungry?” Basil asked. “Cold?” He opened one eye and looked at Rhett.

Rhett just nodded.

Basil sighed and finally leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the edge of the desk. He stared through a hole shaped like a warped stop sign in one of the windows. Beyond it, the dreary light of winter and the pulsing orange firelight bled into each other.

“Some of the crew have started calling it the Ash,” Basil said.

“I . . . don’t know what that means,” Rhett said.

“When we left the *Harbinger*, we took as much as we could,” Basil continued, as if Rhett hadn’t spoken at all. “Most of us already had our weapons on us. Some of the other crew who joined up with us later had raided the armory and grabbed everything they could carry before fleeing the ship. They were bloody brilliant for doing it, too. Otherwise we wouldn’t be nearly as armed as we are.”

Rhett stood with his arms folded across his chest, watching as Basil reached into one of the desk drawers. It opened with a wooden groan. Basil pulled out something that glinted in the unsteady candlelight and tossed it to Rhett.

“Somebody somewhere picked up this ridiculous thing,” Basil said. “And here I thought we’d seen the last of it.”

Rhett caught the item by its handle—smooth, polished wood with metal rings for him to slip his fingers through. He caught it deftly, relishing its comforting weight in his hand. His knuckle blade. He couldn’t help but grin.

One side of Basil's face jerked up in a half grin for just a few seconds, but then he went on.

"We abandoned the ship just as it went down. Actually, we had to swim our way out because all the doors were completely underwater by the time we got out of the steam room. It was . . . a mess. But we escaped. There was just a handful of us at first, Jon included. You've already noticed how brilliant that kid is. After we got settled—and avoided a few psychons—he came up with a way to broadcast a signal to other syllektors who were left stranded in the living world, to put out a call for them to join us. He actually rewired the thing to help us communicate with you while you were in spooky-land. Calls it the 'spirit radio,' but whatever. To each their own, right?" He chuckled, but it didn't sound right. It sounded more like he was gagging.

"Anyway," Basil continued, "we got off the *Harbinger* with as much as we could. Some of us have met up here, and we've fought to be able to continue on with our plan, which was to find you and somehow get back to the ship so that you can . . . do whatever it is you think you can do. We've stolen things from the living, but mostly we've tried to stick to ourselves, stick to using everything we were able to get from the *Harbinger*. But there's one thing we couldn't take with us when she went down." His voice was low, almost agitated.

"What's that?" Rhett asked.

"Her power," Basil replied, finally locking eyes with Rhett. And what Rhett saw in them was not just a sad, broken kind of determination, the kind that comes when you have nothing left to lose, but a white-hot rage. "*Our* power. The thing that keeps us from feeling, from hurting, from falling apart." He paused and scrubbed his hand

over his face. “It starts with the cold. Bone deep. So cold you can barely think straight. And then there’s the hunger. *Real* hunger. Hunger that most syllektors haven’t felt in ages. After that there’s aches and pains, stiffness. Then there’s the rash. And eventually . . .” He looked up at Rhett again, and Rhett understood. Eventually, the syllektors were ghosted by it—the Ash, Basil had called it.

“There’s a . . . rash?” Rhett asked.

Basil nodded. “Black as night. Comes across your skin and hardens and then breaks apart into what looks like . . . well, ash. Basically, it’s just a very, very slow way of being ghosted.”

“But . . . what causes it?”

“As far as we can tell, simply being away from the *Harbinger* for too long.”

Rhett looked at the uneven wooden floorboards, listened to them creak as he swayed from foot to foot. The question that he’d been dreading lurked at the tip of his tongue. He couldn’t put it off any longer. He had to know.

“Basil,” he said. “How long has it been?”

Basil didn’t look at him, didn’t even acknowledge that a question had been asked. But his eyes flicked to the calendar on the wall.

“Basil,” Rhett said again. “Tell me how long it’s been.”

There was a long pause, bloated and heavy and uncomfortable. And then Basil sighed, burying the heels of his hands into his eyes, forcing the words out through gritted teeth.

“It’s been two years, mate.”

If Rhett had flipped his senses on in that moment, he would have

puke all over the floor. Instead, he sank into one of the hard metal folding chairs, feeling his eyes go wide and his mouth fall open. Two years? *Two years?*

“Jesus . . .,” he whispered.

The silence drew out between them, and Rhett felt the weight of all that time collapsing on top of him. Had he really been stuck in that awful prison for two years? It had felt like an eternity. And toward the end he had been sure that he would never see anything other than those constantly changing shadows, the ceaseless flickering of the seasons. But to truly know how long he had endured that . . . It made his mind want to implode.

Rhett glanced up at Basil, who was now sitting back in his chair, his overcoat still on, wrapping his arms around himself. He was shivering.

“Oh my God,” Rhett said. “How long have you had it?”

Basil shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t dick me around, Basil. *How long have you had it?*”

Basil stared at him for a moment, searching his face for any way around the question. But Rhett wasn’t backing down. Basil sighed loudly and yanked up the sleeves of his coat and blazer.

There, stretched across Basil’s forearm like an ugly, lopsided tattoo, was a black splotch maybe the size of a small book. It was malformed and faded into the veins of his arm in dark squiggles. Rhett wanted to reach out and touch it but was too afraid. Afraid for his friend, afraid for the crew of the *Harbinger*.

“Mak?” Rhett asked.

Basil shook his head, pulling his sleeve back down again.

“She doesn’t have it,” he said. “And she doesn’t know that *I* have it, so you better keep it to yourself.”

“You haven’t told her?”

“No. We aren’t exactly on the greatest terms right now.”

“Why? Because you wanted to come find me?” Rhett knew that Mak had never been his biggest fan. By the time Urcena attacked the *Harbinger*, though, they had become almost friends. He knew how logical she was. She wouldn’t have wanted to waste resources on a wild goose chase.

“No,” Basil replied quietly. “Because I *wouldn’t* come find you.”

Another enormous silence thudded into the room.

“Oh” was all Rhett could think to say.

“Oh c’mon, mate! It’s not like I didn’t want to. It’s just that . . .” Basil searched for the words. “It’s just that we were never going to have a hope in hell of getting our ship back if we couldn’t regroup and strengthen our morale. I mean, the *Harbinger* spit us out in bloody Indonesia, for God’s sake! It’s been one setback after another. For two fucking years. And when we couldn’t find you where you died, on the highway . . .”

“You gave up,” Rhett said.

“No. Not then. I gave up after we went to your *apartment* and you *still* weren’t there. We got attacked by psychons there, too. Lost two more syllektors. That’s when I gave up. But Mak . . . She hasn’t stopped believing. And I shouldn’t have, either.”

Rhett stood and pushed a heavy breath out through his teeth.

“Well, don’t get your hopes up just yet,” he murmured. “We still

don't even know if I can do . . . I don't even know. Resurrect the entire *Harbinger*? And for what? So Urcena can turn around and sink it again? It all sounds so impossible."

"It probably is. But you don't have any other choice, mate. We have to get the fight out of the living world as soon as possible."

Rhett turned back to him. "What do you mean?"

Gesturing to the corkboard filled with the newspaper clippings and maps, Basil said, "Psychons are killing the living. And there are syllektors helping them."

Rhett kept on staring at his friend but with eyes that were steadily growing wider. He turned those eyes back to the board, and he let the information there flood over him.

It was crammed with overlapping articles about tragic accidents caused by "strange" or "mysterious" circumstances—fires starting out of nowhere, buses flipping over in stand-still traffic, windows shattering forty floors up and the falling glass slicing into groups of tourists—things that looked like accidents but felt like something else. The most recent article was about a cruise ship that was overrun by chaos in the middle of the Baltic Sea, with several of the few survivors claiming to have witnessed people being torn apart by some "invisible force" right in front of them. The cruise ship eventually capsized after an explosion on board blew a hole in its starboard side. There were one hundred and nine casualties.

"Oh my God . . .," he whispered.

"This is what we know," Basil said after Rhett was finally able to tear his eyes away from the corkboard. "We know that when the *Harbinger* was attacked, it was a coordinated effort led by our favorite

unholy-monster-child,” Basil went on. Some of his humor had resurfaced, and Rhett was glad to see him looking a bit more animated. “And *she* had Treeny’s help. Or, as the case turned out to be, she was using Treeny. And then she was using Theo.”

A chilly drop of guilt ran through Rhett at hearing Theo’s name. He’d inadvertently ghosted the big guy, and the thought of it still made his heart feel heavy and sore.

“Right,” he interjected, if only to get his mind off Theo. “I think she needs to use someone as a . . . a conduit or something.”

Basil cocked a finger at him. “Righto, mate. The thing is, Urcena may seem all-powerful, but she needs some kind of soul to latch on to in order to manifest herself.”

“Back at the house,” Rhett said, “there was someone in the trees. Some guy. I only saw him for a second, but I knew he was a syllektor.”

Basil nodded. “That’s the leader of the other group of syllektors who survived. And he’s almost definitely Urcena’s new . . . conduit, as you called it. His name is Anton Markeski.”

“Great, so he’s a Bond villain.”

Basil genuinely chuckled for the first time since they had escaped the house.

“How many are there in this *other* group?” Rhett asked, still trying to wrap his head around the idea that there were syllektors out there helping the psychons. Helping *Urcena*.

“We’re not sure,” Basil said. “One or two hundred, maybe. Could be more. Most of them probably aren’t even aware that Markeski is being used by Urcena. They’re just following him because they’re against us and what we stand for.”

“Which is?”

“You, mate.” Basil looked away uncomfortably for a moment, trying to find the words in the grain of the wooden desktop. “You heard Jon’s mom out there. You’re the Twice-Born Son. We had to talk you up a bit to get people behind the cause, behind the idea that the *Harbinger* could somehow be saved. Problem is, nobody’s actually seen you do what you can do. So what we mostly succeeded at was pushing people away. Markeski took advantage of that, started doing the opposite of what we tried to do. He and his whole group blame *you* for the sinking of the *Harbinger*.”

Rhett stepped up to the windows that lined the outer walls of the office and stared out at the factory floor, where by now most of the crew were hunkered down, either willing their bodies to sleep or not bothering and just sitting, watching the fires burn in their barrels.

He understood why they would want to blame him. He understood that his power, his revival—it was all cause to be suspicious. The power really was the thing that Urcena had been after. She would have torn that ship apart to get it. But the crew didn’t understand that. All they saw was one syllektor who stood out from the rest, who was a target for this evil thing that had destroyed their home.

“So Markeski’s group, the ones that don’t know the full story, they’re helping the psychons attack the living because . . . why?” Rhett said quietly.

“Because right now they don’t have any other choice. Urcena and Markeski ghost any syllektors that get in their way. Urcena’s promised to leave the crew alone so long as they do what she wants until

she can get her hands on you. All she's wanted up until today is to keep her army fed and happy."

"And they really believe that once Urcena has me she'll go away? Just like that?"

Rhett could see Basil nodding in the smudged reflection of the window.

"That's the gist of it. Their group doesn't believe that the *Harbinger* is ever going to be resurrected. They're trying to start a new way of the afterlife. One where syllektors remain on this plane with the living and have a twisted partnership with the psychons. For every soul that's gathered and protected, another one is sacrificed to the big bad creepies. It's sick, but they're convinced it's the only way to keep on existing. They'll do whatever they have to in order to get there. But first they have to get rid of Urcena. In order to do that . . ."

"They have to help her get rid of me," Rhett finished. *The only way to win is if everyone keeps playing.*

Basil didn't respond, but the pause was answer enough.

After a few minutes, Rhett said, "Jon told me you have a plan. What is it?"

There was a clock hanging above the door. Rhett had been listening to it tick during their entire conversation. Now Basil looked up at it, and Rhett followed his gaze. His body wasn't tired, but his mind was exhausted.

"We can go over it in the morning, mate," Basil said. He stood and stretched out his arms. Rhett could hear crackling in Basil's bones, and halfway through the stretch, Basil put the back of his hand to his mouth and yawned. It was almost as if Basil weren't dead at all. And

Rhett knew that somewhere under all those layers, his friend was deteriorating. He had to help him.

“Mak should be here in the morning,” Basil went on, obviously ignoring Rhett’s concerned stare. “We can all get together and talk then.”

“Okay.” Rhett turned away, ready to head down and join the rest of the crew where he belonged.

“Oh, mate, there’s one other thing,” Basil said.

Rhett looked back.

“I need a first mate.” Now Basil was grinning the same old idiotic grin that Rhett hated and also kind of loved. “Mak won’t do it. Neither will Jon, which was kind of a surprise. And nobody else is really . . . qualified.”

“You mean trustworthy?” Rhett asked, smirking himself now.

Basil chuckled again. “Exactly.”

“Glad to know I was number three on your list,” Rhett jabbed.

“Listen, I’ll put you right back where you came from,” Basil said. Even though it was meant to be a joke, the gravity of everything fell in on top of them again. They just couldn’t escape it.

“I’d be honored,” Rhett finally said.

“Good lad,” Basil replied, and stuck out his hand.

They shook and then, without another word, they hugged. Because what else was there to do when their entire world had fallen apart around them, when the last little slivers were about to slip through their fingers, but hold on to each other?