

# THE SOUL KEEPERS

DEVON TAYLOR

*Swoon* READS

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*For Kelsey,  
who says she's designed for evil, but has only ever  
shown me patience, inspiration, and support.  
I love you, gorgeous.*

**“I AM THE AFTERMATH.”**

—CROWN THE EMPIRE

— PART —

ONE



# ONE

The fall was slow.

Through one mangled opening of the car, where a window had once been, he could see the earth and the sky tilting into one another, falling over each other with a weird sort of grace. Pine trees bristled against the cloudless sky, bruised and leaking color as the sun sank below the hills.

In another one of those slightly crooked, slightly grinning holes—a mouth with teeth of shattered glass—there was the gray asphalt of the road, rising to meet him, open and flat like the cracked palm of a steady hand. It was there to crush the car, with him still inside it. It was there to end him.

And it did.

When time unstuck itself from whatever ringing echo it had been momentarily captured in, he felt the raw pull of gravity, the unfiltered attraction of the earth. He felt it pull the car down, with him still inside it and the steering wheel tight in his hands.

There was time for one last glance in the rearview mirror, where his father's cornflower-blue tie had been snapping back and forth in

rhythm with the tumbling of the car. But the tie was gone. In the mirror he saw only the blackening sky and the first makings of constellations brave enough to show themselves on this horrendous night.

Then the car smashed against the road, his soul was torn from his body, and his life was suddenly, unceremoniously, over.

The edges of his vision rattled with an oncoming darkness.

He held it back, concentrating on the pain, on the sight of his own body wrapped up in the tangle of metal and plastic that had once been a newish Volkswagen Jetta—his mom’s car. The forest-green paint was scraped and stripped and wrinkled like a dirty shirt. All the windows were blown out, the glass strewn along the road behind the vehicle.

There was also the semitruck another few feet up the road, its trailer crumpled like the mangled spine of some long-hunted animal. It burned there, charring the road beneath it and sending an unhealthy-looking cloud of dark smoke into the air. He could see the FedEx logo peeling away from the metal of the trailer, flaking off and fluttering away on the rising heat of the flames.

He sat there with his legs under him, the uneven surface of the road digging into his knees and palms, registering all this with only a slight pinging against his senses. What he was really focused on was the *other* him, still hanging upside down inside the wreckage of his parents’ car, his face and hands white, his eyes vacant. A little trickle of blood escaped out of the corner of his mouth and ran up his cheek,

across his forehead, and into the thicket of his brown hair. The body was a warped reflection of the seventeen-year-old boy he'd previously been. And *previously* had been only moments ago, when his world was normal and right, empty of ruined cars and burning trucks.

And yet . . . he was still here. His lungs burned with the air he was breathing in. His body cried out from a million white-hot pin-pricks of agony. His head thudded and throbbed like the backbeat to some terrible house music. But he was also . . . *there*.

He could feel the accident, could feel the impact. His limbs and muscles ached with the force of it. But the body dangling inside that tomb of crushed metal was no longer his. It looked like him—it had his smallish nose and his wide, sometimes haunted-looking eyes. But it definitely didn't belong to him. How could it when he was sitting right here, breathing, aching?

Even as he thought it, though, the ache was fading, replaced by a bizarre numbness, a *nothingness*, as if the inside of his body had suddenly gone hollow.

On both sides of the concrete barrier that ran down the center of the highway, cars were pulling over, people leaping out, staring at the carnage with shocked eyes and open mouths. Some people were weeping, some were coughing from the smoke and the heat . . . heat that he suddenly could not feel.

A couple of men ran over to the car, to his body, and were reaching in. One of them looked like he was trying to find a pulse. Within the crowd, he could see other people holding their phones in the air, trying to get a decent shot. He was a spectacle now. Soon he'd be all over the internet, a viral tragedy.



“Hey!” he yelled at them. “Hey! Don’t do that! Can’t you see that I’m dead? I’m fucking *dead*!”

He didn’t need anybody to tell him that they couldn’t hear or see him. There was a part of him that already knew. It was the same part that knew he had “crossed over.” Or whatever the correct phrase was. Maybe someone caught the moment that the spiritual was peeled away from the physical. Maybe there was a picture on one of those phones that showed a ghostly fog in the shape of a human, hovering just above his body as it hung there behind the steering wheel in a horrid imitation of life as it was, as it would never be again.

He felt his arms and legs begin to shake. He fought to still them, afraid now. Afraid that he might shake himself into a billion little particles of mist and get carried away by the cool evening breeze.

Was he a ghost? A spirit? Was he just a memory, firing off in one of the last living neurons of his brain?

Something was going to happen soon. Either he was going to poof out of existence, or he was going to fade into a shadow, or he was going to follow a brilliant white light down a tunnel into oblivion. But *something* was going to happen. It had to. Otherwise he might go insane waiting. He shut his eyes. He waited for infinity to swallow him.

Meanwhile the *whump-whump-whump* of blood in his ears was beginning to fade—not necessarily slowing, just getting quieter—as if someone was turning the volume down on his heart. He was able to hear the world again: the animal trumpet of horns blaring and

brakes screeching as traffic came to a halt along the road, the whispery murmur of panicked conversations among the crowd, the haunted cries of distant sirens.

Someone—a woman from somewhere in the back of the crowd—had called 911. She was still on the line with the operator, describing the scene: “. . . a big FedEx truck and a . . . a sedan . . . I can’t make out what kind of car it is. It’s too . . . it’s too messed up . . . I almost got caught in it, too. It just happened out of nowhere.”

*Nowhere.*

Was that how they were going to remember this? Had he been flung out of “nowhere,” right into the middle of these peoples’ lives, maybe to linger there forever? Him and his parents?

His parents.

He opened his eyes and the destruction slammed into his senses all over again. The burning truck, the tinfoil ball that had been the car he’d learned to drive in . . . had *still* been learning to drive in. The sky was even darker now, bordering on black, and the fire lit the scene with its unsteady orange glow.

Peering in through the empty windows of the car, he braced himself for the sight of one of his parents’ bodies, trapped in the car the way his was, looking cold and empty. But he couldn’t see either one of them. In the backseat, where his father had been sitting, there was only a gnarled hole through which he could see the crowd gathering along the shoulder of the road, still trying their best to look more scared than interested, trying not to look like the rubberneckers that they were.

His father should have been there, in that space where there was now only empty air ringed with the ragged bite that had been taken out of the car.

He flicked his eyes to the front again and tried to look past his own body (someone had shut his eyes, at least) and into the passenger seat, where his mother had been sitting . . .

Nothing. The seat was empty, and the dashboard was covered in bits of broken windshield and streaks of something red that he wouldn't allow himself to believe was blood.

Panicking, he tore his eyes away, let them sweep over the spot in the backseat again, over the sight of the enraptured crowd on the far side of the road, and . . .

On the shoulder, in the front row of the gathered onlookers, there was a guy in a black blazer and dark jeans. He was around the same age, maybe even a bit younger, but with immaculate hair and one eyebrow cocked up in a slightly curious, slightly irritated expression. The guy was looking right at him.

He looked around at the other people, who were all fixated on the tangled metal and billowing smoke. He looked back at the guy in the blazer. Still staring.

He didn't know what else to do—he raised his hand and waved.

"Oy!" the guy yelled over the din. "C'mon, mate! I'm not gonna wait all day!"

"I . . . uh . . ." He pointed at himself in a silent question. Blazer Guy groaned and twirled his finger impatiently.

"Yeah, mate, I'm talking to you. Who the hell else would I be

talking to?” The guy turned and sidestepped into the crowd, disappearing behind a wall of bodies.

“Wait!” he called. “Hold on a second!”

He struggled to his feet. His legs felt rubbery and not quite his own. It took a moment for everything to balance out, but as soon as it did, he darted around the car, leaving his body there on its own, to the shoulder of the highway. The crowd stared past him, *through* him. He paused before going after Blazer Guy, looked back at the only part of his body he could see from here: a pale hand, open and dangling, frozen in a silent good-bye.

He turned and shuffled into the crowd.

Nobody noticed him.

He slipped between a few people, bumping into some, but none of them seemed to realize they were being touched. It crept him out. He hurried through the crowd and left it behind.

On the other side there was the rocky shoulder of the highway and a shadow-littered tangle of trees. The highway itself was a mess of cars and people, with traffic completely halted and angry honks rising into a chorus.

He turned, staring up the highway, back in the direction of the city, peering past the glare of headlights. He was still looking for the guy that had called to him—Blazer Guy. In the dimness of the night it was hard to tell what anyone looked like. He scanned the collection of bystanders that he’d just come through, but there were no blazers.

He considered waiting there for Blazer Guy to come back. Maybe

if he stayed put, the guy—or someone else like the guy, someone who could see and talk to him—would show themselves. But going back to his body, looking at that mess again . . . the idea gave him the shivers.

And there was still the problem of his parents. Where were they? Were they like him?

The trees stood by, as if waiting for him to decide—look for his parents, or keep looking for Blazer Guy. The shadows among the branches and around the tree trunks had turned to full-on patches of black now, hiding the fallen leaves and pine needles and bits of debris from the wreck that were scattered here and there. He wondered if somewhere within that curtain of darkness he would stumble upon his parents. He wondered if he really wanted to find out . . .

Ready to give up, he was prepared to just start wandering around, when he heard “Oy, mate!” from right behind him. He started, whipped around.

Blazer Guy stood in front of him, grinning, hands in his pockets, looking back at the wreckage, focusing, it seemed, on the burning hunk of metal that was the FedEx truck. He whistled.

“That’s quite a mess you made there, mate,” the guy said. “Not sure if you know this or not, but fire is usually not great for a vehicle’s overall state of being. Personally, I try to avoid fires when I can. I grew up in London, so I’m partial to the rain. You know what I mean? Well, I suppose not, given . . . well, this.” Blazer Guy gestured with a wide sweep of his arm at the entirety of the wreck, at the car and the truck and the onlookers.

“You’re . . . British?” he said. They were the first words that popped into his head, and they found their way to his mouth before he had a chance to stop them.

Blazer Guy looked offended.

“First of all,” he said, “I’m technically Welsh. And what, you’ve got something against British people?”

“What? No! I mean . . . I just . . . We’re in New York. I didn’t expect . . . I mean, I didn’t think . . .”

“Less than twenty miles from the international hub of the world, and you didn’t expect to see a British person?” Blazer Guy folded his arms and began tapping his foot. “You know, mate, it could be that I’m here to decide your fate. As in whether or not you end up . . . there.” He pointed up, at the black canvas of sky. “Or . . . there.” He pointed down, cringing. Blazer Guy leaned in and whispered, as if sharing a secret. “And you’re not off to an exceptionally good start.”

“Oh my God . . .” he started.

Blazer Guy hissed in a breath, cringing even more.

“Shit . . .”

Blazer Guy did it again.

He felt his legs give out, and he squatted down, covering his face with his hands, panic crashing around inside him.

But the guy was laughing.

“Don’t worry, mate,” he said, squatting down with him, leaning back on the balls of his feet. “I’m not here for anything like that. That was a pretty good laugh, though, right?”

He dropped his hands and glared.

“Maybe not,” Blazer Guy said. “How about we start over? I’m

Basil. Basil Winthrop. Pronounced with a long *A*, mind you. And you are?"

"I'm . . ."

For a second he couldn't remember. He grasped for it, but it wasn't there. He stood, and Basil—formerly Blazer Guy—stood with him.

"It's all right, mate. Some of it gets lost in the transition. The name especially."

He turned around, back to where the crowd stood and where there was now an ambulance and a number of police cars parked along the concrete barrier, their warbling lights making the whole scene look shimmery and unreal. Cops were pushing members of the crowd back. He looked past them, at the car, at the spot where he'd been sitting, staring at his own body as the last of his life slipped out of it. He thought about the tie—his father's tie, cornflower blue, jerking around in the rearview mirror like the head of an electrified snake.

"My name is Rhett," he said. "Rhett Snyder." He turned to Basil. "My name is Rhett Snyder," he said again, this time hearing the relief in his own voice.

"Rhett," Basil said, almost questioningly. "Rhett. Sounds like something you'd name a pet. Like a dog, or possibly a small, helpless rodent."

"My parents' favorite movie is . . . was *Gone with the Wind*," Rhett said, for some reason feeling the need to explain. "They named me after Clark Gable's character."

Basil pondered this, then said, "Ah. Yes, well, there's no accounting for taste, is there?"

"Listen, I don't know who you are or why you're here or what's happening. I—" Rhett stopped short. He felt dangerously close to cracking. Confused, alone, afraid, invisible. This guy—Basil fucking Winthrop—was about as compassionate toward the recently deceased as a vulture is to a zebra carcass. "Shouldn't I just be . . . dead?" he went on. "I don't know what's going on, but this . . . this isn't anything they ever went over in Sunday school."

Basil chuckled and leaned in, grinning. He said, "Oh trust me, mate. I know. When I took the old dirt nap myself, I hadn't expected any appendices to my time line. But here we are."

"I . . . sorry. You . . . ?"

"Yeah. I can regale you with all the perfectly unfortunate details later. But right now we have a boat to catch. Shall we?"

"Wait," Rhett said. "What about my parents?"

"Your . . . ?" Basil looked confused and then worried. "Oh. Then we really have to get moving," he said. "The others will be along soon. Your parents are . . ." He gave Rhett a serious look. "They're in good hands, mate. I promise."

Rhett glanced over his shoulder and considered the scene one last time. The crowd had been all but dismantled, pushed back behind a yellow perimeter of police tape. There was now a white sheet draped over the crumpled mess of the car, hiding the carnage and the sight of Rhett's body. The sheet fluttered in the breeze for a moment, catching the light of the fire-ravaged semitruck, now surrounded by firefighters dousing the flames with a hose.

Somewhere nearby, Rhett was now sure, his parents' bodies would be found and covered with sheets of their own, turned into



vaguely human-shaped spaces of emptiness, erased from the universe.

But if that was the case, why weren't they with him now?

Rhett turned back to Basil, the only person who seemed to have any of the answers. He was a pain in the ass, but he was going to take Rhett where he needed to go. He could only hope that his parents were there, too.

"Let's go," Rhett said.

# TWO

Basil navigated the highway and Rhett followed. They kept to the shoulder, following the road back toward the city. For a while they were entangled with the people who had abandoned their cars to check out the scene of the wreck, and Basil had an irritatingly graceful way of maneuvering around them. Nobody spoke to either of them, nobody *saw* them. Rhett knew that if he were to bump into someone, *he* might feel it—but would they? Basil swept through the clutter of bodies and cars like an ice-skater, hands behind his back, leaning forward with a determined hunch. Meanwhile, Rhett was having a hard enough time just keeping his feet under him.

“It takes a while to get used to, mate!” Basil called over his shoulder.

“What does?”

“Walking. Running. Eating. Anything, really. You’re essentially an apparition now. It’s all sensation and no feeling. Anything you think you feel is just made up in your head.” Basil said all this over his shoulder while dodging the confusion that had overtaken the highway.

Behind him, Rhett was still trying to match Basil's pace. They were moving up a short hill now, with the halted traffic beside them and the clear, glimmering night sky above them. Rhett felt like he should be out of breath—and was almost acting the part—but he didn't feel anything. Basil was right. He expected to *feel* the walk, the aching muscles, the burning lungs. Even though he was a mostly healthy teenager—or had been—Rhett was sure that by now he'd be running out of juice. And yet . . . nothing. Not even his bad ankle, which he'd broken in the sixth grade and had always bothered him after long walks through the city, was giving him any trouble. It was a weird sort of miracle.

Or maybe it was a curse.

After a while they came to the top of the hill and, finally, to the place where the traffic was thinning out. The honking horns and humming engines faded, replaced by the sound of rustling leaves and chatting night-birds. The highway stretched away from them, slipping into shadows, pointing the way toward the city skyline, which hung like an electric splash on the horizon.

"Nearly there," Basil muttered, and continued down the hill.

They went on for so long that Rhett began to believe they would make it all the way back to New York City before getting to wherever Basil was taking them. But finally, at some seemingly random spot on the side of the highway, Basil turned off and trudged into the smothering darkness of the woods. Rhett stopped and stared after him, listening to the crunch of his feet.

Basil must have realized that his new travel companion was no longer behind him, because he stopped and turned back.

“Coming?” he said. His face was only a flicker in all the black.

Rhett hesitated, but only for a second, before wading down through the detritus of the forest to where Basil stood waiting. He thought to ask questions. He thought to throw Basil into a tree and pummel him with his fists until Basil simply told him what he wanted to know. He thought to run.

But he didn’t do any of those things.

The highway quickly vanished behind them, lost for good behind thick trunks and waving branches. Ahead of them there was only more woods . . . and what else, Rhett had no idea.

Until he watched Basil step through a curtain of branches into an open area, thick with tall brown grass and dominated by what at first looked like an ancient ruin. In a way, that’s exactly what it was, but Rhett soon realized that it wasn’t as ancient as he’d first thought.

It was the collapsed shell of an old brick house, thick wooden beams creating an empty box in the middle of the clearing, with puzzle-works of moss-smothered bricks filling in the squares. The only mostly intact part of the house was the northern wall, the one facing Rhett and Basil, and the chimney, sad and crooked and pocked with holes. There was a wooden door in the one good wall, hanging on by only one rusted hinge.

Rhett was suddenly afraid that he’d made the wrong choice to follow Basil.

“Ready, mate?” Basil said, dusting off the arms of his blazer as if they were about to make a grand entrance at some party.

"If I knew what I was supposed to be ready for, I'd tell you," Rhett responded.

Basil only grinned, then kicked the old door in.

It swung away with a brittle *crack* into strange, murky light. Rhett saw bits of the door fly off and go spinning away. He expected a dusty, must-scented puff of warm air. What he got was a stormy breeze and a spray of brackish water. Behind the door, where more weeds and dirt and fallen bricks should have been, there was instead a craggy stretch of rock ending in a jagged cluster of stones. Beyond that: ocean and sky, gray and churning both, for as far as he could see.

Rhett opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. Whatever words he might have had to describe what he was seeing, they were lost on him now. His head swam. He looked around at the woods, the trees only standing there, bathing in the moonlight, uninterrupted by the bizarre wonder taking place right in their midst. If there had been any other person here—any other *living* person—he wondered if they might see the open door, hear the waves smashing hard in a burst of white foam against the rocks, feel the cold mist that came floating through.

"You're not crazy, mate," Basil said. It sounded like he was trying to be comforting, and it was surprisingly effective. "You might feel like you are right now. You just have to give it some time. Are you ready? We have a very small window of opportunity here, and if we don't make it through in time, we'll get left behind. I assure you."

Back in the direction they had come from, Rhett could hear the

far-off wail of sirens again. They were for him, for the body he'd shed and left in a broken heap inside his parents' mangled car. He stared through the door, at the endless ocean and endless sky that met in a dark line at the horizon. It wasn't what he'd expected—it was no light at the end of a tunnel—but this was what he'd been waiting for. This was infinity, ready to swallow him.

"Let's do it," he said to Basil.

"Good deal." Basil looked pleased. "Now, the first step can be a little disorienting. If you just close your eyes . . ."

But Rhett ignored him. He stepped past Basil, through the whispering grass, and then ducked into the doorway.

The ocean would have taken his breath away, if he'd had any breath to take.

It stretched out in every direction from the lone patch of rock he was standing on. It roiled and chopped and spat, like an angry animal. The sky was layered with dark, sagging clouds, bubbling and shifting as constantly as the ocean. In the great distance, Rhett saw jagged flickers of lightning.

He turned around, and there was the rectangular patch of woods, just hanging there, like a badly Photoshopped picture. Basil came through it, stepping onto the rock like a passenger boarding a train. As soon as he was through, the doorway faded, dissolving into specks of dust that crumbled and were carried away by the bitter wind. Now it was just the two of them, alone on a narrow shard of rock in the middle of this vast, unsettled ocean. Even though, according to Basil, he was probably just imagining it, Rhett felt his stomach churn.

“Did you forget who your tour guide is?” Basil asked, looking a little offended. “What if I was just putting you on about all that boat stuff? Maybe this is actually purgatory and you just willingly leapt into it with utter glee.”

Rhett had to yell over the crashing waves. “That would have been an awfully elaborate joke.”

“You severely underestimate my comedic ambitions.”

“You’re right about one thing, though.”

“What’s that?” Basil looked almost taken aback.

“Being stuck on this rock with *you* forever? That would absolutely be purgatory.”

For the first time since Rhett had met him, Basil cracked a genuine smile, and Rhett had to smile in response, in spite of the morbid surroundings.

“Well, lucky for you, the only thing I don’t joke about—much—is my job,” Basil said.

“Which is . . . ?”

“In due time, mate. In due time.”

“So what do we do now?” Rhett felt his impatience biting at him. None of this was what he’d had in mind back there, when he’d opted to leave his parents behind.

“Now,” Basil said, “we catch our ride.” He nodded over Rhett’s shoulder. Rhett turned, and his heart lurched. It might have been an imagined sensation, but to him it was really his heart. He felt the awe and the panic and the uncertainty and the fascination in that lurch. He wanted to say something, but, again, there was nothing to say.

It was more than a boat; it was a ship. A massive one. The biggest Rhett had ever seen. Bigger than anything that could have actually been built by human hands. It was all black iron and rivets, with two monstrous smokestacks on top that sent columns of coal-black smoke punching into the sky. It cut through the water, moving with slow, sure progress. It was taller than most of the skyscrapers Rhett had grown up looking at, and it had portholes dotting the sides with sparks of light like stars in the night sky. Metal groaned, engines hummed. It was more like a giant aquatic mammal than a sailing vessel. Rhett could think of only one decent word to describe the ship: *otherworldly*.

“Get ready to board,” Basil said.

“Board?” Rhett tore his eyes away from the ship. “As in get on that thing?”

“Well I’m not telling you to go beat at it with a two-by-four, am I?”

Rhett struggled for words. “Where . . . where is it taking us?”

“Patience, mate. There are colleagues of mine on board that are probably better equipped to explain all this to you than I am. I’m just here to collect you.”

The ship was closer, taking up most of the view on that side of the rock. The nearer it got, the more it started to blot out the sky. Rhett was in awe of it, but he was also frightened by it. It was all black, surrounded by a constant dark fog, and, despite the lights on in some of the portholes, there was no sign of any actual life on board.

There wouldn’t be any of that, anyway. *Not here*, Rhett thought, once again picturing the death that he’d only just experienced.



They waited.

The ship grew, a colossal shard of metal slicing through the water until it was nearly on top of them. Rhett could *feel* it—a low, steady thrum. The iron moaned as it bent and stretched, sounding more haunted than anything else Rhett had encountered so far.

The hull was only a few feet away now. Rhett and Basil were deep in its shadow. Above them, the hard black exterior and warbling columns of smoke were like a second sky. Within those columns, Rhett was sure he could see bolts of blue lightning.

A horn blew then, deep, deafening, so loud that it was almost like being submerged in water, a constant roar that blotted out every other sound. Rhett fought to not cover his ears. Basil already thought he was an idiot. He didn't need him to think he was pathetic, too.

The horn cut off, leaving only the comparably quiet sound of the ocean, and the ship stopped moving. It floated there, looming over them, a monument to darkness.

"What now?" Rhett asked, unable to stop himself.

But before Basil could respond, a door on the side of the ship opened with an iron screech. It swung outward. Behind it, there was a square of light that was nearly blinding against the obscurity of the ship. But Rhett could make out a metal ramp extending out of the doorway like a rusty tongue.

The ramp crunched into the rock at Rhett's feet, an invitation—or maybe a lure. He looked to Basil for guidance, raising his eyebrows. Basil just stepped onto the ramp, hands clutched behind his back, and began closing the gap between himself and the ship.

“Coming, mate?” he called over his shoulder, just as he had back in the woods.

Rhett glanced around. If he didn’t get on board, the only other option would be to hang around on this damned rock for the rest of eternity. Or go for a swim . . .

He stepped onto the ramp. It only took fifteen steps to get to the ship.

And to his new life after death.

# THREE

The light swallowed him up, and so did the ship.

Rhett waited for his eyes to adjust, but they didn't need to. They didn't burn or water from the brightness. He could see just fine. Nevertheless, the light was so intense that it hammered into his retinas, shining off the white metal of the walls. If he had been alive, he might have been blinded.

He stepped farther in, following the foggy shape of Basil's shoulders into the brilliance. Their feet clanged on the floor. Rhett felt himself reaching out in front of him, prepared to slam into some oncoming mass.

Then he did run into something: Basil.

"Oy! Watch where you're going," Basil hissed. Rhett took a step back. He heard an iron screech and Basil's voice again. "Through here."

And all at once the light was gone, replaced by an unsettled orange glow that was constantly wrestling with the shadows. Firelight.

Rhett shifted on his feet and heard the creak of wood beneath him. Whatever metal hallway they'd gone through to get inside the ship was gone. They were now standing in a large, open cavity.

There were splintered wood floors and wooden railings that went all the way around the periphery. The most curious thing was in the middle, jutting up out of the floor and connecting with the ceiling, almost like a support. It was a ship's mast, complete with the worn-out, weather-beaten sail. Up at the top, where the mast met the ceiling, Rhett could see the crow's nest, a rickety basket that leaned precariously to one side.

Rhett didn't quite know what to make of it. And in the gloom of the torches that were leaning away from the outer walls, it was hard to say that he was still on the same boat. Had Basil performed another one of his party tricks and sent them somewhere else? To another point in time altogether? Was that even possible?

He didn't know. He didn't know anything about how any of this worked. Was this hell? Was this some kind of punishment?

All at once, Rhett wanted to weep. But when he imagined the pressure behind his eyes, imagined the tears falling down his face, it was only an image that floated up in his mind. His body stayed calm and still and . . . lifeless. There was no sweat on his hands, no tremble in his fingers. His body betrayed nothing of the chaos that was erupting in his head.

Desperately, he looked to Basil, who had given him that tiny bit of comfort back in the woods. But Basil was smiling, watching Rhett and allowing that internal panic to play out.

Basil said one thing, leaning in with his arms folded: "Welcome aboard the *Harbinger*."



For a while they passed through halls made of gray, rotted wood, freckled with barnacles, and swollen with moisture. As the ship leaned and swayed with the waves, the wood groaned and cackled in response.

Then they stepped out of the smoke and mildew into a long passage of metal bulkheads that were lit by sickly yellow bulbs. The passage was narrow, suffocating. Rhett had always had a touch of claustrophobia and could feel it raging around inside his mind now. But, again, his body was quiet—no hyperventilating, no damp forehead. Somewhere within him, a connection had been broken.

At the end of the passage, Basil spun the handle on a door and pushed it open. Beyond it, there was a massive ballroom with thick, polished wood columns and a wide staircase leading up to some other part of the ship. The floor was some elegant, decorative carpet, covered in flowers and swirls of gold fabric. Above it all was an enormous, twinkling crystal chandelier, wide at the top and tapering to a point. *Here. You are supposed to be here*, the chandelier seemed to say. *This is the dazzling landscape of your dreams.*

*Yeah, right*, Rhett thought, and for one horrible second, he believed that he wasn't dead after all. Maybe he was just unconscious, lying on some gurney back in New York, wandering around the bizarre confines of his psyche—not the landscape of his dreams, but of his nightmares.

Basil caught him gaping at the chandelier.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" he said.

Rhett looked back through the bulkhead door, at that long

yellow tunnel. “I just . . . I just don’t understand. What is this? What’s happening?”

“Nothing’s *happening*, mate. It’s just the ship. The *Harbinger*, at some point well before either of us was even a speck on the genetic radar, was just a lowly rowboat. Now it’s . . . all this.”

Rhett blinked at him, and Basil laughed.

“It’s true! The rowboat is still here. Somewhere. I’m sure the captain will show it to you sometime. He showed me, but hell if I can remember how to get to it. Anyway . . . over the centuries—the *eons*, I should say—the *Harbinger* has . . . well, grown.” He sighed, admiring the chandelier. “I suppose I’ve said too much, though. On our way.”

And with that, Basil took to the stairs, ascending them with his strange grace to the point that he appeared to be floating rather than walking.

Rhett shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut, trying to elicit some kind of response in his body to the fretful storm going on in his mind.

But he got nothing.

Basil disappeared up the staircase, beyond the glimmer of the chandelier. With no other options, Rhett followed him.

The stairs wound their way up through the ship, changing their appearance seemingly at random as they went. One moment they were the same polished wood and carpet as the room with the chandelier.

At another, they were solid steel with diamond grooves and flaking paint. Then they were made of gray and decaying wood, like the room with the mast in it. Finally, they were made of metal-lined glass, beneath which was the wavering, ethereal glow of water—some kind of tank or aquarium, although Rhett couldn't see any fish.

He expected to be tired after all those stairs. But of course, when he finally caught up with Basil at the top, his lungs continued to take in air normally, the thing that might have been his heart pumped obliviously along, and his legs—his bad ankle—never made a peep. In a weird way, Rhett wondered if this was how it felt to be Superman—ignorant of pain and yet somehow longing for it.

Basil was waiting for him, hands in his pants pockets, leaning back on his heels. He was whistling some old-timey bandstand song.

"Take you long enough?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"Sorry . . . I . . ." Rhett hardened his gaze and swallowed whatever the rest of that statement was going to be. He was done apologizing. Why should he have to be sorry for being freaked out?

"Ah . . ." Basil said, sounding amused. "He's got a bit of tough skin on him after all. Good for you, mate." He smacked Rhett on the shoulder. "You ready to meet the rest of the gang?"

"The . . . rest . . . ?"

The stairs had led them up what must have been a few dozen or so different decks of the ship. Now they were standing outside a set of polished steel doors, a look that was a little more modern and familiar. They reminded Rhett of so many doors in New York, battered and commonplace. Here, the sight just freaked him out. He willed his skin to break out in goose bumps and, miraculously, it

did. They crawled across his arms in a delightful chill. He could see them breaking out and then fading away. It seemed that the mind still held an insurmountable amount of control over the body. If Rhett *wanted* a physical reaction, he could force himself to have one—feeling with the senses was no longer involuntary. Deep down, below all the layers of confusion and anxiety that had been settling in on him like strips of tight, smothering gauze, he was fascinated.

Basil pressed a button near the doors and they split apart, disappearing into cavities in the walls. Rhett stared.

Beyond the doors was an entirely different part of the ship, an up-to-date, twenty-first-century paradise. It was a large atrium, wide open, with winding stairs to different levels that went back down into the ship for as far as Rhett could see. Here there was no rapid change in decorum. Everything was polished steel and glass, lit by a soft, bluish glow. Rhett felt like he was standing in the belly of a starship rather than some rusty old sea vessel. And besides that, there were *other people*. Throngs of them, milling about, working behind the glass walls of some of the rooms, talking together with folded arms and invested stares. They were all in darkish clothing, and they all appeared to be human. At least, on the outside they did. There were races and ethnicities from all over the world. But no space aliens or monsters that Rhett could see. For now.

Here was a group of middle-aged men, hunched together around a wide sheet of paper, pointing at it, commenting, nodding in agreement.

Here was an elderly woman, trotting up a set of steps to another deck with the same stamina as a twenty-something jogger in Central Park.



Here was a little kid, tinkering under the light of a workbench in another room, her hands busy with some kind of contraption, putting it together or taking it apart.

Rhett stood at the railing, peering down at the hivelike commotion, feeling the ship list and pull. He wanted to be nauseous, and for a moment, because his brain made it happen, he was. But he was also excited. More and more, the notion that he might be dreaming, that this was all just some sort of mental interpretation of the damage he'd suffered, was fading. His imagination did not have the capacity to think any of this up. He hadn't been a jock, but he hadn't been too deep into creative arts, either. He had no talent for artistry or writing or music. He couldn't catch a football to save his life. Rhett Snyder had been a pebble wedged into the tiny divide in the concrete pillars of high school, dropping between the cracks and vanishing there.

But this. This was no product of Rhett's—or anybody else's—subconscious. And the fact that there were other people, people who were like him and would understand him and might even be able to explain what was happening to him, was more exciting than anything he'd seen so far. It gave him hope. Hope that his parents were here somewhere, waiting for him.

"We call this the Column," Basil said. "Pretty much the only part of the ship that we stick to unless our . . . uh . . . duties take us elsewhere."

Rhett glanced sidelong at Basil and caught that irritating, know-it-all grin.

“And these fine folks,” he continued, gesturing around at the busy clusters of bodies, “are the crew of the *Harbinger*. Myself included. And now you.”

He was so matter-of-fact about it that Rhett almost missed the last part. But he did catch it, and his resolve hardened again.

“I’m not going to be part of any crew,” he said. “I don’t know why you brought me here or even who the hell you really are. But I told you, I’m just interested in finding my parents. I . . . I don’t think I’m supposed to be here, and I don’t plan on staying.”

Basil’s cheery demeanor was unfazed. “We’ll see, mate. How about you come have a chat with my team and you can see how you feel after?” He was gesturing across the open part of the atrium, to the other side of the deck, where there was a tiny collection of people who looked close to the same age as Rhett and Basil—two girls and one massive guy. Basil was already moving in their direction.

When Basil approached, one of the girls rolled her eyes at him. She had dark hair, brown eyes, and long legs in a pair of dark pants. She was also muscular, toned through her arms and shoulders—obviously not a physique that was gained after her death but something she must have had prior to it. In other words, not someone that Rhett would have had the courage to ask out on a date.

The other girl was scrawny, probably the youngest of them all, and up close Rhett could see that she was probably closer to middle school age. There was a smattering of dark freckles across her cheeks, some of them the same color as her red hair, half-hidden by the too-big pair of glasses she had on. She was hunched over some

sort of tablet—an actual electronic device, from the look of it—poking at it, biting her lower lip, not really acknowledging anybody but still appearing to be tuned in to the conversation.

The guy, who was standing beside the girls with his arms crossed like a dam about to break, was an easy six foot seven, six foot eight, maybe. His arms were roiling pockets of sinew and wiry veins. His neck was a bunch of dense cables, popping and flexing. His skin was thick, and his skull was probably thicker. You could have sharpened a knife on the guy's bicep and he wouldn't have noticed.

“So you've returned from your supersecret mission,” the first girl said to Basil, the malice on her tongue almost visible. “And it appears to have gone well. Not sure why it needed to be such a big secret, though.” She turned the malice in Rhett's direction. He didn't waver. He might not have been brave enough to ask her out, but he knew how to stand up to people like her. “We just got back from there,” the girl continued, eyeing Rhett with a mixture of fascination and repulsion. “We got his—”

“Mak, Rhett. Rhett, Mak,” Basil said, cutting her off without any deficit in cheer. He patted the scrawny girl on the shoulder. “This is Treeny, our resident technological empress. And that enormous chap, whom you might have mistaken for a large tree, is Theodore Sampson Tinderbuff the Third. We just call him Theo.”

Rhett looked up at Theo, who was holding his hand out. They shook, and Rhett swore he heard something in his hand crack under the force of the grip. But he didn't feel any pain, barely felt the handshake itself.

“Pleasure,” Theo said in a dense, almost comic New York accent.

“You lookin’ for a spot on our crew?” He spoke like a 1940s gangster. Rhett was mystified.

“I . . . uh . . . I don’t . . .”

“What? Words ain’t ya strong suit?” He said *words* like *woyds*.

The first girl—Mak—interjected. “He absolutely does not have a spot on our crew, Theo. What he needs is a spot with someone else. Or maybe out in the water.” She smiled in a way that looked more like a grimace.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa there, ninja princess,” Basil said, stepping between Mak and Rhett. “I told you I had a feeling, didn’t I? I gave you as much information as I had. I didn’t know where I was going until I got there . . . and found *him*.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Rhett.

“You didn’t know where you were going, but you had to get *off* the ship to get there?” Mak asked. She squinted her eyes at him and licked her lips—a predator waiting out her prey.

But Basil just laughed. “And how exactly did *you* get aboard this luxury vessel?” he asked her. “Hmm? Did you ride in here with a cloud stuck between your legs?”

Mak’s mouth twitched, just slightly, and Rhett imagined that now would have been the time that, in the living world, her face would have flushed with color. She said nothing.

“That’s right, love,” Basil jabbed. “I came and rescued you, too, didn’t I?”

Mak dropped her arms and stuck a finger in Basil’s face. “You did *not* rescue me.”

Meanwhile, Theo stared on from his separate altitude, and

Treeny prodded her screen. Rhett stood just outside the confrontation, not sure what to do. He looked around at some of the other crew members lumbering around. A few of them glanced in the direction of the argument, but nobody spoke up or seemed bothered by it. *What the hell did I get myself into?* Rhett thought.

The exchange between Mak and Basil continued, with each of them poking the other with their verbal swords, most of the content going right over Rhett's head. Mak asked Basil why he couldn't have just used one of the *regular* doors on the ship to go run his "little errand." Basil asked Mak why she was so "nosy and disrespectful." Mak told Basil that they were supposed to be on the same team, that "gathering" was a "group effort." To that Basil said only one thing: "Not this kind of gathering, sweetheart." This seemed to set ablaze a whole new kind of fire in Mak.

Theo and Treeny stood by like a couple of witnesses to a fistfight, not really wanting to get involved but thinking that they might eventually have to.

Rhett decided he had two options: turn around and try to find his own way off this damned boat, or . . .

"Hey!" he yelled at the squabbling pair, feeling a bit like a meek human screaming at a tornado to stop turning. "Hey!" he yelled again. His voice rang along the steel railings of the atrium. It was enough to get Basil's attention.

"Just one second, ma—"

"No!" Rhett cut him off. "And I swear to God if you call me *mate* one more time, I'll choke the life . . . or whatever . . . out of you before *she* gets a chance to." He stabbed his index finger at Mak,

whose eyes widened ever so slightly. “Someone needs to tell me what the fuck all this is about before I take off and start looking for my own answers.” He felt the anger absorb his courage, and he glared up at Theo. “*Capeesh?*”

There was silence among the five of them. Basil and Mak stared at Theo, who was staring at Rhett. Rhett wanted his heart to race, wanted to feel the pounding hooves of adrenaline quiver through his body. He thought about it, focused on it, and a second later felt that lovely, frightening sensation that so often accompanies moments of pure stupidity.

But Theo just looked over at Basil and said, in that mobster drawl, “I like this guy. He’s a character.” He looked back at Rhett. “You gotta be a New Yorker”—(*New Yawk-ah*)—“with a temper like that.”

“Oh Jesus!” Mak hissed. “Enough with this.” She stepped up to Basil until they were almost touching noses. “*You* can talk to him, then,” she said in his face. And then she stomped away, her boots making hard metallic thumps as she went.

Basil waited, then said, “She’s a right pain in the ass sometimes. I swear. Come with us, ma . . . er . . . Rhett. I guess I’m in charge of explaining things to you now. If you’re still interested.”

Rhett was. For now.

He felt like *he* was the one who was about to be interrogated, instead of the other way around.

The room was as cold and sterile as the rest of the Column, all

polished steel and hard edges, a metal table and a couple of chairs, that same icy glow. If it weren't for the subtle shove and tug of the waves, Rhett might have forgotten he was on a ship at all. He wasn't sure if he was one to get seasick, having never been on a cruise or anything before. But when he tried to will himself to feel nauseous, it took a lot more effort than he expected. He decided that getting seasick probably hadn't been a thing for him when he was alive.

Basil, Treeny, and Theo squeezed into the tiny room with him. They stood on the other side of the table, with the glass wall looking out at the rest of the atrium behind them.

"This is one of our workrooms," Basil explained, finally sounding serious. "The crew is made up of teams, usually just a handful of people each. Sometimes we like to have meetings or get-togethers or shindigs or whatever. These rooms are good for that sort of thing."

"I'm glad," Rhett said. "I was beginning to think you tortured people in here."

"No, there's a whole other part of the ship for that. Shackles and chains. The whole bit." Basil grinned.

Rhett crossed his arms and glared. "Tell me everything."

"Everything? Oh God . . . well, I was born in Wales—"

Rhett stood up, shoving his chair into the wall behind him. "It was nice meeting you, but I don't have time for this crap."

"All right, all right, all right!" Basil cried, putting his hands up. "Sheesh. You're just as bad as Mak, aren't you?"

"This is my *life* we're talking about," Rhett said, his teeth grinding together. "Is that funny to you?"

Basil sighed. “Yeah, all right, I get it. And, more accurately, it’s your *afterlife* we’re talking about.”

Rhett nodded, letting that sink in, feeling the reality of it confirmed.

“Fine,” he said, more calmly than he expected. “So then, what is . . . all this?”

“Mak was supposed to be the one to explain everything to you,” Basil replied. “She’s better at being . . . well, blunt. But I’ll do my best. As I said, this ship, the one we’re on, is called the *Harbinger*. Its most important function is the transportation of . . . goods.”

“What goods?”

“Souls.”

Rhett opened his mouth, closed it again.

“Souls,” he said. Not asking, just restating. It wasn’t really that hard to believe—he had already come to terms with the idea that he was dead, but to hear it out loud . . . “Like, *our* souls? Yours, mine, theirs?” He gestured to Treeny and Theo.

“Well, yes,” Basil replied. “But we’re different.”

“Different how?”

“You see, the *Harbinger* has collected millions upon millions of souls since the beginning of . . . well, forever. And they’re all still on board.”

“How is that possible?” Rhett asked. The ship was big, but not that big.

“We’ll get there. But what’s important to understand is that those souls don’t just appear on board. They need someone to collect them.



That's us." Basil swept an arm around the room and motioned at the window behind him. *Everybody*, he was trying to say. "And you," he continued, leveling his eyes at Rhett.

Rhett lowered his gaze, trying to absorb the words, letting the pieces fall into place.

"C'mon, mate," Basil said quietly. "You're an intelligent bloke. Do I need to spell it out for you?"

"You're . . . Death," Rhett said, mostly to the hard surface of the table. "As in capital *D*, cloak and scythe, Death." He looked up.

Basil was grinning appreciatively. "That's right. Although, the cloak and scythe are a bit seventeenth century. And not really our style, as you can see." He tugged at the lapels of his blazer. "We go by our original name now—syllektors."

"And . . . I . . . ?" Rhett raised his eyebrows.

"Correct. You're a syllektor. An official member of the club. Don't expect a membership card or anything, though." Basil shrugged.

"I still don't understand," Rhett said, standing because he couldn't help but pace when he was anxious, even when his body felt nothing of the anxiety itself. "Why am I so different? Why are *you*? I mean, if every soul ends up on the *Harbinger*, what makes someone a . . . you know?" He didn't want to say it. The word would have felt funny in his mouth, like trying to pick up a foreign dialect. And there was something even more concerning about the way this conversation was headed, something else he couldn't quite muster the courage to speak out loud.

"Trauma."

The voice was so tiny that Rhett almost didn't hear it. It was

Treeny, speaking for the first time. Her face was still glued to whatever she was working on, but her eyes flicked toward Rhett just long enough to confirm that he had heard her. Rhett waited for her to explain, but she wouldn't elaborate.

Rhett turned back to Basil, who was nodding solemnly.

"What does she mean?" Rhett said.

"There's no definitive algorithm," Basil started, "but the ones who become syllektors when they die are usually the ones who die as a result of some sort of traumatic event. Murder, war, plane crash . . ."

Then all three of them—Basil, Theo, Treeny—spoke at the same time, all of them staring at points in the distance that could have been a foot away or a mile away.

"Gunfight," Theo said.

"Train accident," Basil said.

"Drowning," Treeny said.

Rhett could only stare, trying to absorb their meaning. "So . . . all of you . . .?"

Basil nodded again. "Mak, too. In her own way, of course."

Rhett sank back into his seat, emptying his lungs with a *shew* sound. What he was releasing, he didn't know. It could have been air, it could have been nothing at all. But it felt good to let it out. He looked around at the other three. Kids, like him. That's all they were. And all of them were dead because of something stupid and horrible and pointless.

And now that he understood why they were all here, he had to ask the question that he'd been avoiding.

“And . . . what about my parents?” Rhett asked slowly, bracing himself.

“They’re here.” Treeny again, still staring into the washed-out glow of her tablet. “But they’re not syllektors. They’re not like us.”

Rhett put his hands over his face, resisting the urge to scream, to grab the chair he was sitting in and toss it through the window and down the spiraling stairs of the atrium beyond.

“But . . . *why*?” he groaned. His brain felt like it was breaking apart and putting itself back together over and over again. But the tears that he expected weren’t there. Of course not. The only way he could truly feel anything anymore was when he made the conscious effort to do so. And he had no interest in showing his grief to these people.

“Like I said, mate,” Basil continued, “it’s not an exact science. Plenty of people die in horrible ways, but only a fraction of them turn into syllektors.”

The room was full of a bloated quiet, heavy with Rhett’s silent mourning and Basil’s discomfoting calm.

After a moment Basil went on: “Our job now is to go out and collect souls. Thousands of syllektors on board, grouped into teams, tasked with bringing the dead back to the *Harbinger* until it reaches its destination.”

“Which is where?” Rhett asked, finally looking up again.

Basil lifted his shoulders, then let them drop heavily. “That’s a question that no one here can answer for you, mate. Even if they wanted to.”

Rhett’s mind wandered back to his spot in the driver’s seat of his

parents' car, his hands gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles were the color of steam, the world twisting around them, filled with glass and rubber and occasionally a beautiful sky. What had he been thinking then? Did he expect to die? Had he been prepared for his life to be stamped out, for the last shreds of his existence to be flung out into blackness, into silence?

Maybe. But no matter what he had been thinking while the car was still in the air, he could never have imagined the *Harbinger* or its crew.

"So now we get put to work," he said. "Is that it? We all die in terrible, horrifying ways and our compensation for that is a job? I'm not even sure you can call it a job. It's . . . it's a punishment."

"It's a second chance." A new voice. Rhett started at the sound of it and looked up.

He stood in the doorway, tall and broad-shouldered, almost as big as Theo but not quite. He was dressed in a dark uniform that was pristine, angular, creased to perfection. It was more like a geometric shape than an article of clothing. The skin of his face was coated in a gray beard and lined with age. There was a captain's hat on his head that matched the rest of his uniform, straight and true, not a speck of dirt or dust anywhere. His eyes were alert, smoldering into Rhett with the intensity of the sun.

"Captain Trier," Basil said, stepping back, immediately handing the room over to the newcomer.

"Mr. Winthrop," the man—the apparent captain—said. His voice was gravelly, yet dense with power. "How's our new arrival?"

"Acclimating," Basil replied. He shot Rhett an uncertain look.

Rhett's outburst probably hadn't done much for Basil's confidence, but Rhett was far from concerned about that.

"So this thing does have a captain," Rhett said. "Who'd you have to kill to get that job?" All at once, the fire and the petulance that had so plagued Rhett during the last few years was back in full force. It was this same challenging attitude that had landed him—and his parents—here. But once he got going, it was nearly impossible to stop, like a snowball that eventually rolls itself into a full-fledged avalanche.

Captain Trier only smirked. "I know this is all pretty overwhelming, Mr. Snyder. But—"

"Overwhelming?" Rhett said, his voice cracking. "We passed overwhelming the second I didn't just poof out of existence. Where we're at now is . . . unreal."

There was another long span of quiet in the room, with Theo and Basil watching Trier nervously and Treeny seeming unfazed.

Trier maintained his slanted smirk, though. It seemed his calm was unshakable.

"So you think that being on this ship is some kind of purgatory," Trier said. His hands were clasped behind his back, his shoulders jutting like perfectly straight shore cliffs.

Rhett thought about that word—*purgatory*. He'd used it earlier with Basil on the rock. He'd cracked a joke about being stuck there with Basil forever, and Basil had genuinely smiled. Rhett's stubbornness dimmed. What kind of purgatory was it when someone could crack a smile like that?

"I . . . I don't know," Rhett said, feeling defeated. "Maybe *purgatory* is an overstatement. But having to work as a spiritual tour guide for the rest of eternity definitely sounds like a punishment to me."

"Punishment for what?" Trier asked.

Rhett didn't want to think about the answer to that. He knew what his punishment was for. The rest of them didn't need to know. He said nothing.

"Punishment from whom?" Trier pushed. "Certainly not me. I only give punishments to crew members who have made vastly unwise decisions aboard this ship."

Rhett could only look at him, his body unable to provide a response to the emotions that thrashed and gnawed at his mind.

"The question, Rhett," Trier continued, "is whether or not you think you *deserve* a punishment."

The words hit the room like an anvil into dirt, thumping into the heart that Rhett now knew he could feel beating in his chest. The rest of his body was inept at feeling anything, but the heart was there. Rhett hated it more and more with every squeeze of its pulse.

"You don't have to answer that right now, Rhett. You don't have to answer it at all. Because either way, we're not here to punish you." Trier turned to the glass wall, hands still held together behind his back, as if addressing the ship as a whole. "Basil, how about you? Do you feel like your time on the *Harbinger* has been a punishment?"

"No, sir," Basil replied without hesitation.

"Oh wow," Rhett said. "Now I'm convinced."

Trier chuckled. "You and Basil will get along very well, I think."

"I apologize, Captain," Basil said through the side of his mouth. "I didn't realize he was such a cheeky bastard until just now."

"Rhett," Trier went on, waving Basil off, "the syllektors aboard this ship are doing the most important work there is. They are a guiding light. Without them, the souls of the dead would be left to wander the world. Alone. Afraid. Confused. You know how it felt right after your death. Imagine feeling that way forever."

Rhett had no reply for that, either.

"You can be angry, Rhett. You can be sad. You can be whatever you want to be. But you have a chance to shape your death into something meaningful. This *is* a second chance. Use it."

Heavy silence again, as if all the oxygen in the room had been replaced with damp gauze.

Finally, Rhett shook his head.

"I'm not interested," he said. He stood, unsure of what was going to happen next. Were they going to make him walk the plank or something? Lock him up somewhere? Strangely, he was more afraid now than he had been at the prospect of having to collect souls forever. He started for the door, hoping that he could slip out and find a way back to New York before Trier started offering him the consolation prize.

Trier sighed. Not impatiently, but with a certain amount of flustered surrender. The words *I didn't want to have to do this* seemed locked behind his lips somewhere.

"What about Roger and Ilene?" he said.

Rhett stopped, head down, chest heaving. If he opened his mouth,

nothing but a haunted, horrified scream would come out. So he kept it clamped shut.

"They're on board," Trier said. "Not in this form, unfortunately—they're not syllektors. But they are on the ship, Rhett. I could help you find them. I could help you communicate with them. If you help us, if you perform the duties that you were obviously chosen to perform, I can help you."

Rhett looked back at the captain, who stood in that same insanely rigid position, waiting. Rhett searched for the sincerity in his eyes. He couldn't find sincerity, exactly, but he found no deceit, either. His eyes flitted over to Basil, looking anxious and confused. Apparently, Trier's proposition was something that he hadn't expected.

*Roger and Ilene*, Rhett thought. His parents. The words repeated themselves, running through his head on a constant loop, like a radio station tuned to static or an orchestra perpetually caught in those first few seconds when they're warming up their instruments. Eventually the names would go from having actual meaning to just being noise, a scream slicing into him like a piece of glass. If he let them.

Rhett stood up straight, taking in a deep breath of whatever passed for air around here, and tried to think with some version of clarity.

"Okay," he said after a moment. "I'm in."

They stepped out of the room, back into the tumult of the complex, seemingly unnoticed. There were a few brief glances in their direction, specifically aimed at Rhett, of course—the new and strange



face among them. But otherwise, the crew appeared to keep to themselves.

Captain Trier gave Rhett and the others a stiff little bow, hands still behind his back as if they had been glued together, then went to a spiral staircase at the other end of the floor. He ascended into some other darker part of the ship, consumed partly by shadow, and then vanished completely.

“That’s the bridge,” Basil murmured in Rhett’s ear. He must have caught him staring. “You’ll have to check it out sometime. Great view.”

“Huh” was all Rhett could think to say. His brain felt like an avocado that had just had its pit gouged out. He wondered faintly if he might be going into shock. His body would never respond to such a thing. But his head felt empty and light, as if someone had just taken him by the neck and shook him until all of the gray, wormy matter that made up who he was had come spilling out of his ears. In fact, this whole thing felt a lot like having hands around his throat.

“Anyway, you’ll probably want to eat and get some rest,” Basil said. “Allow me to show you to your quarters. Since it appears that I’m also now your bellboy as well as your orientation trainer.” He was watching Theo and Treeny, who had given cringe-y smiles and curt waves before retreating toward the lower decks of the ship. It was just Rhett and Basil again.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Rhett said, putting his hands in a T shape like an NFL referee. “Back in New York you said it . . . it’s all sensation and no feeling. I’m not hungry *or* tired. And I could probably jog two

hundred laps around this ship without ever needing to catch my breath.”

Basil chuckled. “That’s true. You don’t *have* to do anything. None of us do. We don’t need food. We don’t need sleep. But we do those things anyway.”

“Why?”

“Sanity, mate. It helps keep you feeling normal. You’ve already figured out how to sort of *make* your body react, yes?”

Rhett’s mouth dropped open slightly.

Basil laughed again. “Don’t look so shocked. You didn’t think you were the only one who figured out that little trick, did you? You’ve only been dead for, like, five minutes. There’s plenty left for you to understand.”

“So even though you don’t have to, you still eat,” Rhett said, trying to redirect the conversation back to its starting point. “And sleep and everything else to . . . what? Keep from totally cracking up?”

Basil cocked a finger at him.

“You got it, chap,” he said. “Imagine another three or four days of just sitting in your room, trapped in your own head without any desire to do *anything*. You’d tear your own eyes out before a week was up.”

They were moving down the staircase now, descending through the middle of the Column, with Basil subtly leading the way. Rhett wasn’t sure what time it was—there didn’t appear to be any windows to the outside—but the number of crew members milling about the atrium seemed to be thinning out. How could anyone tell when they were supposed to do anything?

“And what exactly would that do?” Rhett asked, reeling himself back in.

“What would what do?” Basil said over his shoulder.

“What would tearing my own eyes out do? Would a new pair just appear? Would they grow back over time?”

Now Basil was actually laughing out loud in short, barklike yips. “You would just go bloody blind, mate,” he said. He ditched the stairs three or four decks down and made his way to another pair of doors.

“What do you mean? I thought we were . . . invincible or whatever.” Rhett was genuinely curious.

Basil stopped and turned to face him.

“Listen, man,” he said, letting his chuckles die off. “It’s obvious you watched waaaayyyy too much TV as a living person. But that’s not how it works. You might not feel the pain, but this version of yourself—this vessel that’s mostly made up of your soul—operates under the same principles as your living body did. If I were to rip your arm off right now, you might not be all that bothered by it mentally. Physically, though? You’d be down an arm.”

Rhett was trying to make sense of it. If they were invisible to the living and were no longer made up of any kind of physical matter, how could they still be hurt the same way?

“So . . . what happens if this *vessel* were to be destroyed completely?” he asked.

“Ugh! You ask a lot of bloody questions.” Basil threw his hands up and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I am not cut out for this part of the process,” he murmured under his breath. “Listen, how about

we table this for now, okay? The bottom line is this: Don't get hurt. Your spirit body heals itself the same way your physical body did. Period. And if your head gets lobbed off?" He shrugged.

"Got it," Rhett replied. There was poison in the way he said it. Why would Basil bring him here if he wasn't willing to answer any of his questions? Basil wasn't hiding his annoyance, and neither was Mak. Treeny and Theo seemed indifferent, but still, the only one who seemed to want him here was the one person who had genuinely gotten under Rhett's skin: Captain Trier. But it wasn't even that Trier just got under his skin; he had probed into the most sensitive part of Rhett's life, and then he'd used it against him.

Basil could sense the irritation in Rhett's voice, could probably see it in his eyes, too.

"Don't be sour, mate," Basil said. "It's just been a while since we've had a new recruit. They used to come in all the time. We're a little out of practice at the whole 'welcome to the team' thing. That's all."

Rhett nodded, clamping his mouth shut to keep more of his questions stifled.

They moved on.

Basil showed him the mess hall, which was weirdly reminiscent of the cafeteria at Rhett's high school. It was all the same steel furnishings and chilly lighting, but there was actual hot food lined up at a buffet-style counter, steaming under the warm yellow beams of the heating lamps. Rhett didn't know if any of the food was real and at first couldn't smell it. But he willed his nose to take in the aromas. And then he willed his stomach to growl longingly. It was

weird having to force himself to do the things that used to happen on their own, especially his hunger. But the perks were obvious. You could choose when to want food, when to want sleep. You could filter your emotions in a way that even the most apathetic sociopath among the living could not. In a strange way, it was kind of freeing.

Rhett and Basil made heaping plates for themselves, eating in silence, focused only on the task at hand, which was to wreck the hell out of all that food.

And despite everything that he had seen and experienced since the moment of his death, Rhett was still surprised when, after two plates of food, he still wasn't full. He had stopped sending the signals to his stomach to *act* hungry a long time ago. He had eaten way past his normal, *living* capacity for intake. He was also afraid that if he forced his stomach into experiencing the sensation of all that food he'd just stuffed down his throat, he'd yack it all back up. Then again . . . if the food wasn't actually there in the first place, if it was just some trick of the spiritual world, then had he really eaten anything at all?

He decided that line of thinking would only send him right down the rabbit hole into insanity.

After dinner, Basil showed Rhett a few of the *Harbinger's* other amenities.

There was a gym, a café, a library, a movie theater. None of them were advertised in any grand fashion, only with metal plaques above their entrances. Yet it still made Rhett feel like he was taking a tour of a shopping mall.

“Who knew that turning into a grim reaper would be so . . . lavish,” he said to Basil.

“Lucky for you,” Basil said gravely, “we’re not even close to grim reapers.”

There was something weird about the way he said it, and Rhett wanted to hear more. But Basil didn’t offer an explanation.

The final stop on the tour, obviously way past what qualified as bedtime since the hallways were all but deserted, was the living quarters. They were down on one of the lower decks of the Column, where hallways fanned out from every side and were lined with numbered doors.

Basil led Rhett down to the very end of one of the halls, to a door at its throat marked with the number 0312.

“Anyway, here you are,” Basil said. “I’ll deposit you here for now and . . . uh . . . meet me in the mess hall in the morning?”

“How am I supposed to know when it’s morning?”

“Well, most of us try to get on the same schedule. Every eight hours, give or take. When you can hear people moving around out here, you’re probably safe to head up.”

Rhett glanced at the door, suddenly nervous. He was about to be left here alone.

“Seriously, mate,” Basil said, putting a reassuring hand on Rhett’s shoulder. “Try to sleep. You might not feel like you need it. But up here?” He pointed at Rhett’s forehead. “You definitely do.”

With that, Basil turned on his heel and headed back down the hall.

Rhett watched him go for a moment, until he was out of sight. And then the silence fell in like a flood of water. He couldn't even hear anyone snoring or talking in their sleep. And why would he? Death was not a translator of those strange quirks of the living.

He opened the door to his cabin and stepped inside.

At first he was delighted to see a porthole window, a thick eye staring out at the gray world. But then he could see the waves and the sky, still bubbling and frothing like a witch's brew. Lightning chiseled down from the sky not too far away, illuminating the water . . . and the enormous creature turning over just beneath the surface. It was mostly just a shadow, but it was at least half as big as the *Harbinger*, with a long, serpentine tail that seemed barbed and jagged on the end. Rhett could just barely make out the shape of it. And then, with the lightning, it disappeared back into the dark.

He forced his attention toward the little room again, glad now that he had opted not to traverse the deadly ocean, and pushed the monster from his thoughts (as much as he could, anyway).

There was a little sink and mirror near the door, a narrow closet (for what, he didn't know—he hadn't brought anything with him), a couple of shelves by the window, and a solitary bunk with a neatly folded blanket and pillow waiting to be used, all dimly lit by a single light in the center of the ceiling.

The empty closet reminded Rhett of something. He slipped a hand into his jeans pocket and dug around. He was looking for his phone, but it wasn't there. A lot of good it would have done him anyway. There couldn't possibly be any decent cell reception in the after-life. He thought there might have been a picture of his parents on

there somewhere, though. Maybe that's what he'd really been looking for.

He stood at the sink, looking into the tiny mirror. He appeared the same, as far as he could tell—his dark hair darting out in all directions, his brown eyes. It was all there. And yet he could tell that it wasn't really him. It was a projection, a suspect sketch of who he used to be. Close . . . but not quite right.

Clear, cold water came out of the faucet when he turned it on. He cupped his hands under it, telling his fingers to feel the numbing power of the water as it trickled over them. He splashed some on his face and sent the same signals there. He shivered, and it almost felt like he hadn't forced himself to do so.

When he turned off the faucet, he could still hear water dripping, a lot of it, as if something had sprung a leak somewhere. Actually, it sounded as if the water was splashing onto the floor right behind him. He turned around, expecting to see a puddle on the floor and some sort of burst pipe above his head . . .

But there was nothing there, and the sound of dripping water had faded. He shook his head. It was probably just the sink draining.

When he lay down on the bunk, he was just below the window and thankfully couldn't see out into the uneasy shadows. There was no moon, no sun, nothing to judge the time by. Just that constantly roiling gray sky.

Eventually he willed his eyes to shut, willed his shouting mind to quiet down to a whisper, and willed his body to sleep.