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Legacy of the Claw

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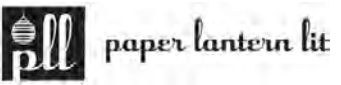
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Prologue

A LONELY CARAVAN TRUNDLED across the flat, brown terrain of the Dust Plains. In the back of one wagon, driven by two hunched men, a tarp covered a wealth of stolen goods: jewels looted from Gray City shops, two barrels of fine Parliament grog, and a girl with violet eyes.

The tarp stretched over her was backlit with sunlight and a shadow passed overhead. The girl heard a familiar squawk. A black carrion crow who followed the troupe was back from scouting. He was kin to the driver of the wagon, the man whom the girl understood to be the leader of this band of thieves.

The wagon soon came to a stop, and the girl could hear the sounds of a busy street. The wooden wheels creaked under her as the man and his companion stepped down from the wagon. Suddenly, everything was blinding light as the tarp was pulled back sharply. The girl shielded her eyes.

"Up. Up!" growled the man. He grabbed her arm and pulled her through a crowd, where he pushed her onto the center of a rickety wooden platform. There, he stood behind her with a huge hand on her shoulder. It wasn't a

kind hand, or a comforting one. He was making sure that she didn't try to run.

The girl thought about the reassuring hands of her father. She remembered how his hands would move when he'd explain things to her or to his advisors in Parliament. Like the Animas bond. He'd placed one hand on his own chest, and with his other, he'd drawn a line from his heart to hers. *It's a vibration, a kind of knowing. It means that you're not just connected to an animal—you're connected to Nature, and to the world. The Animas bond is a force that connects every living creature. And a noble person, a noble ruler even, uses this force for good.*

"Who'll take her?" the man shouted into the gathered crowd. "Only twenty snailbacks!"

She wanted to cry out—she wanted to tell everyone who she was, but she was too afraid. Her father was the king of all Aldermere. But the king was dead.

She was alone.

"Eighteen snailbacks!" the man shouted into the silence. Finally, someone raised a hand in the crowd. Suddenly, everyone was shouting bids. The auction had begun.

She clenched her fists. She wouldn't cry. She saw the crow, perched at the edge of the wooden platform, blinking his cold, black eyes at her. It wasn't fair. The leader of the thieves had kin here, in this terrible place, and she had none. She had always been embarrassed to be Animas Pig, but she'd have given anything for the comfort of having her own kin close to her now. Even the thieves in the crowd had their doggish companions with them. Coyotes combed the mob,

lifting snailbacks from unsuspecting pockets. But she was alone, alone. The crow cawed, laughing at her.

Her anger burned hot inside her until she thought she'd scream. Like an electric current, a terrible force moved through her whole body. She took her grief and terror and threw it, pushed it outward onto the kin of another.

The cawing of the crow became louder, sharper, as two coyotes from the gathered crowd lunged at him, brought him flapping and shrieking to the ground, and began to tear at his flesh and feathers. Her hands shook as she realized that she had caused it. She'd created violence like the violence she felt churning in her heart.

It was power like nothing she'd ever experienced. She could feel the bond that connected her not just to her own kin, but to *every* creature, just like her father had said. She could control it. She could *use* it.

As the crowd backed away, horrified—as the leader of the thieves bellowed for his comrades to help him pull the beasts off of his kin—the girl with the violet eyes remained still. Her mind turned toward her father and her little brother, now dead.

Why use our bond with Nature for good? she thought, as the teeth tore and the claws grabbed. It didn't save them. This new way of using the bond made her feel powerful, and in a world in which no one she loved still lived, she needed every ounce of strength she could muster.

One

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS LATER

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BAILEY WALKER ducked as a huge brown goose flew just past his head, coming to rest on the awning over the rigimotive station platform. The dark tortoiseshell cat, that only a moment before had startled the fowl into flight, wove between the legs of its human companions, meowing with satisfaction. Bailey patted down his messy, hay-colored hair, making sure no feathers had gotten caught in it.

"Are you ready, Bailey?" Emily, his mom, asked. She squeezed his shoulders with both hands before brushing a spot of dust off of his best shirt. "Just remember, no matter what anyone says about you—you are fine. You're more than fine. You're exceptional."

Yeah. Exceptionally weird, maybe, he thought. Bailey felt a sharp pang, but he nodded and smiled. He was leaving the Golden Lowlands and its pleasant farms, its rolling hills and sleepy, rambling towns—he was leaving

his *parents*—for Fairmount Academy, the most prestigious school in Aldermere.

Where he would soon be labeled a complete freak.

"You listen to your mom, Bailey." Bailey's dad, a lanky man with dark, curly hair, had dressed in his nicest trousers and donned a crisp wool flatcap, just to see Bailey off. Herman Walker had been speaking for days about the chance to see the towering, four-story rigimotive (the biggest in the Lowlands!) that would take Bailey to Fairmount. The rigimotive was the only available means of long-distance travel, but since neither Bailey nor his parents had ever left the Lowlands, they'd never had the opportunity to see it.

Bailey couldn't wait to board. The two rigimotive cars were like giant red metal houses, with four rows of copper-rimmed windows looking out on the plains. Gold-painted spiral staircases inside each car reached all the way to the top. The yellow dirigible, a huge oval balloon, floated above the rigimotive.

Bailey's father had explained how the floating dirigible would help the crew navigate the rigimotive over any broken-down track, as well as propel the heavy cars forward. His father's enthusiasm for the technology of the Age of Invention was infectious. Growing up, Bailey's dad had told him all about the Royal Tinkerers—a group of professors and engineers that had invented the rigimotive before Bailey had been born. His father said they would've gone on to create a faster, more efficient train—but like so many plans that were made before the murder of King Melore, these had died along with him. Bailey often wondered if his dad

hadn't taken up farming, like his parents before him, if he'd have become a tinkerer himself.

Today, even Bailey's mom had put on her best hat, a purple felt cloche with a bright yellow flower on the brim, and a pair of clicking brown heels to take him to the station. His dad's life-bonded hare, Longfoot, was excited too—Bailey watched as he swatted at the cat with mottled black and brown fur.

"You put the past behind you," his dad said, startling Bailey from his thoughts. "And don't worry about what other kids say. There's nothing wrong with you. Everyone moves at a different pace. You'll show them what you're made of."

Bailey had heard this speech, or some version of it, a thousand times before. But he nodded. "Thanks, Dad," he said, and meant it.

He would miss his mom and dad terribly. Emily and Herman Walker had adopted him when he was just a baby. Bailey had heard the story hundreds of times before: how he'd been found as a baby by his dad, crying naked underneath a raspberry bush, dangerously near the edge of the Dark Woods. He'd been underfed and very small. No one knew where he'd come from, or how he'd managed to survive on his own.

Bailey, of course, had no memory of being found. All he'd known growing up was that he was the adoptive son of an Animas Hare and an Animas Horse: both hardworking, kind, supportive . . . and, unlike Bailey, completely normal. They ran a wheat farm, and had raised him to work hard.

Work hard, and never turn down the opportunity to learn. He would forever be grateful to them. They'd always been so patient and encouraging—even when Bailey had started to show signs of being . . . well, *different*.

"Take care of yourself, my lovey!" His mom dabbed at her eyes. Oh, no. She was about to cry. Bailey hugged her quickly before she could make a scene—or call him "lovey" again.

"I will," he said. He disentangled himself from his mom's embrace and gave his dad a quick squeeze. His dad mussed Bailey's yellow hair, causing his mother to spring forward and comb it down again. Longfoot scurried over, and Bailey pulled away just before the hare could pee on his canvas shoe, which was the closest he came to expressing affection. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad. Bye, Longfoot."

"Don't forget to eat your grains!" his mom called after him, as Bailey threaded through the crowd. He heard laughter coming from a group of older students boarding the rigimotive ahead of him. His ears burned and he kept his head down. Maybe no one would know she was talking to him.

He could feel his mom's watchful and worried eyes on the back of his neck. He knew why she was worried—this was his first time away from home. He was anxious too.

But he was also excited. If there was ever a place that could give him, Bailey Walker, the hope of being normal—finally—it was Fairmount Academy, with the Animas trainer who might just have the answers Bailey needed: a man by the name of Tremelo Loren. His dad had scrounged

some pamphlets on Fairmount's history from their local Lowlands library when Bailey had first been accepted. In one, which had been published quite a few years before, he saw mention of the young teacher, Mr. Loren, who had developed a reputation in the Gray City by training everyday people to develop stronger bonds with their animal kin. Bailey planned to seek him out as soon as he arrived.

There was a long line to board the rigimotive. The Lowlands was made up of small farming villages, and though it stretched over more than a third of Aldermere, this platform was one of the only rigimotive stops in the region. Some of the students in this line had traveled by cart and wagon for many miles already.

The stairs had once gleamed bright gold, but the rigimotive car showed signs of wear. The paint had flaked off significantly, showing dull, plain metal underneath. The stairs creaked under the weight of the students climbing up and down. Bailey reached the first floor of the second car, where his and the other travelers' trunks were being hoisted onto racks by two porters, and kept climbing. It was his first time traveling away from home, and he wasn't going to waste it by looking out the windows of the first floor.

Bailey wound his way up to the third floor. Stepping into the aisle, he scanned the wooden benches for a free spot. Bailey saw several older boys and girls sitting near the front, wearing telltale blue-and-gold ties loosely done under their collars. He suddenly felt very self-conscious, still in his linen shirt and his nicest pair of cotton work pants. A farm boy, at least until he got to Fairmount, where his trunk full of

new school clothes and his official Fairmount blazer could finally be unpacked. He was about to slink quietly into a seat in the back of the car, out of sight, when he heard someone call his name.

"Bailey, right?"

The voice belonged to a familiar dark-haired, bespectacled boy, sitting alone on a bench with a thick book in his lap. He waved at Bailey.

"It's Hal, Hal Quindley."

Bailey had seen Hal around his old school, but they'd never been in class together. He wore a dark formal vest with the pattern of webbed wings on the shoulders. It looked new, and a little too big for him. Instead of a tie printed with the Fairmount colors, he wore a maroon silk cravat that looked as though someone had tied it for him.

"Hi," Bailey said. Relieved to see even a remotely familiar face, he slid onto the seat opposite, stowing his rucksack under the bench.

Hal stretched out his hand to shake.

"I'm glad you found me," he said. "I saw all the Year Ones listed in the *Fairmount Flyer,* and yours was the only name I recognized. Fairmount only accepts a hundred new kids a year, and so there's only room for a couple students from our town. Some pressure, huh?"

"Yeah," Bailey mumbled, impressed. "Wow."

He glanced out the window. His mom and dad were still waiting for the rigimotive to pull away. He felt a sudden, wrenching pang of homesickness.

"It's more than *wow*," Hal said, adjusting the thick,

copper-rimmed glasses on his nose. "They say you've got to be pretty exceptional to get in. Makes me wonder how I managed to sneak by!"

Bailey smiled. He heard his mom's voice in his mind—*You're more than fine. You're exceptional*—and the momentary homesickness melted away into anticipation once more.

But before he could respond, a heavyset man in a bulging overcoat plopped down on the seat next to Hal, panting loudly. The man's coat had several cargo pockets lining the front and sides, all of them overflowing with cuttings of various plants. A portly badger sauntered into the row after him and curled up underneath the bench, his wet nose poking out through the folds of the man's coat.

"Third floor, Hal?" asked the man, out of breath. "Couldn't have given Dillweed here a little rest this morning?"

Instantly, Hal's face turned red. "This is my Uncle Roger, an apothecary. And that's Dillweed," he explained, pointing at the snout on the floor. "They've got some business in the Gray City, and Fairmount's on the way. Uncle Roger, this is Bailey. He goes to my school—I mean, he *went* to my school. I mean . . . He'll be in Fairmount with me."

Roger turned to Bailey with wide, interested eyes—eyes that peered through the frames of glasses as thick as Hal's.

"Well, well! Making fast friends already, are we!" he exclaimed. Dillweed's protruding nose huffed under the coat. "Doesn't get better than that. You'll have plenty of time to chitchat before we get to Fairmount. Two whole days on a

rigimotive! When I think that it would take only half a day if we were allowed through the Woods to the mountains, I tell you . . .” Roger threw up his hands. “Well, well. We’ll just have to get cozy.” He turned his attention back to Hal. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen your brother yet, have you?”

Hal made a face and pointed over his shoulder to the group of older students Bailey had noticed earlier. They were clapping and laughing loudly as one boy, with dark hair like Hal’s, played keep-away with another boy’s rucksack. The same tortoiseshell cat from the station platform sat nestled in the compartment overhead, batting at the rucksack as it passed. Roger rose from his seat with an exasperated sigh, and waddled over to put a stop to the game.

“That’s your brother?” Bailey asked. Hal nodded, obviously annoyed.

“Taylor. He’s Year Three, thank Nature, so I’ll only have to put up with him for two years at Fairmount. He’s a Scavage player,” Hal said matter-of-factly. Scavage, a game in which members of two opposing teams had to find and capture the other team’s flag with the help of their kin, was the most popular sport in the kingdom. Bailey had watched some Scavage games at his school, and his dad liked to listen to the big tournaments on the radio.

“Scavage is the *only* reason he got into Fairmount,” Hal continued. “Taylor has one other talent and that’s being a jerk.” Hal removed his glasses and scrubbed at the lenses vigorously. Without them, his eyes looked almost crossed. “I’m Animas Bat, like my grandfather. And Taylor’s Cat, so we don’t exactly get along. They’re *all* Animas Cat”—Bailey

assumed Hal meant his family—"and that's why I live with Roger."

Bailey nodded. It wasn't uncommon for families with different types of kin to have problems, especially when one type of Animas was more aggressive than the other. Bailey remembered now why he'd seen so little of Hal at school. His wealthy uncle Roger lived near the periphery of the Dark Woods, and Hal was always whisked away right at the end of the last class, so they would get home before nightfall.

Looking at Hal now—his skinny arms, his outdated haircut and formal attire, and the thick glasses that made him look constantly surprised—Bailey found it hard to believe that he lived so close to the edge of the Dark Woods. For most citizens of Aldermere, the Dark Woods were forbidden, and the only people brave enough to live within its shadow were Animas Bear or Wolf.

The dirigible suspended above the car caught a gust of wind and pulled the rigimotive forward with a start. Bailey waved to his parents. Roger huffed as he settled back into his seat. Behind him, Taylor and his friends returned almost immediately to their game.

"That must have been your folks I was speaking to outside," Roger said to Bailey, as he returned to his seat. "Nice people."

"Thanks," Bailey said.

"So which are you," Roger asked, "Horse or Hare?"

This was it: the one question Bailey had been dreading. His Animas. Most people inherited from one parent or another, though a few skipped a generation. Roger clearly

wasn't aware that Bailey was adopted, which meant that he didn't have *either* a Horse or Hare Animas.

And that wasn't the worst of it. He'd even considered lying about it, telling everyone who was sure to ask at Fairmount that he was a Bear or a Snake—even a Possum! Anything was better than the truth.

"I . . ." Bailey could feel his palms begin to sweat.

"You don't have to say, Bailey," Hal jumped in quickly.

"Say what?" Roger asked, looking confused. "I merely asked—"

"*Roger,* he's . . ." Hal began. Roger looked from Hal to Bailey, blinking with confusion. "He's the adopted one," Hal said, looking down at his shoes.

Bailey felt himself blushing. Something about the hushed way that Hal had said "the adopted one" made Bailey think that Hal knew something more than he'd said. That was only to be expected, really. There was no way Hal wouldn't have heard the rumors, the taunts on the school grounds. He just hoped that Hal, the only other kid he knew from his town, would be decent enough not to blab about it once they got to Fairmount—at least until Bailey had a chance to ask for help from Mr. Loren, the trainer he'd read about.

"Ah . . ." Roger's eyes grew even wider behind his thick glasses, and he fumbled in a pocket for a handkerchief. It was clear to Bailey that Roger had heard the same whispers. He reached out and patted Bailey's hand. Bailey resisted the urge to pull it away. "I'm sorry, son," Roger said. "Insensitive of me."

At that moment, the bag that Taylor and his friends had

been tossing sailed past Roger's head.

"Sorry!" one of Taylor's friends shouted.

"Ruffian!" Roger trumpeted, and grabbed the bag. He marched up to the front of the car and began shouting at Taylor, who was doing a very bad job of looking sorry. Dillweed curled into the shadows under Roger's empty seat, emitting a soft snore. The boys were quiet for a minute as Roger lectured the students up front on rigimotive etiquette.

Hal was the first to speak.

"Listen, if I wasn't supposed to say anything . . ." He faltered. "It's just that I thought *everyone* knew."

"Not *everyone,*" Bailey said. Bailey turned to watch the fields and pastures of the Golden Lowlands slide by, hoping Hal would take the hint: he didn't want to talk about it.

Riding the rigimotive turned out to be stranger than Bailey had imagined. Sometimes, when the wind was strong, the dirigible moved faster than the car's wheels on the tracks, and the rigimotive would sway and buck, causing Bailey to feel a little nauseous.

Roger had been right about the long journey too. The prospect of an overnight stay onboard wasn't pleasant, even though underneath the benches were narrow foldout cots for overnight journeys. Many of the overhead cubbies designated for traveling animals were being used for storage, so the raccoons accompanying one family on the second floor had come up to the third, and were blocking the aisles. The electro-current generated by the tracks was unreliable, and so, in addition to the electro-wired lights that occasionally flickered on and off, gas lamps had been hung every few

feet along the central aisle of both the cars. Passengers had to duck as they walked to make sure they didn't get hit.

A dining area on the ground floor provided wrapped sandwiches—cucumber and onion, spinach and cheese, and city trout and tomato for those who ate fish. But Bailey could hardly stand the thought of food as the rigimotive rocked with each gust of wind.

By sunset, most of the passengers had given up on polite conversation, and were claiming benches and cots on which to doze. Bailey at last managed to keep down a city trout sandwich, and then he unfolded the cot opposite Hal. Roger, claiming not to be tired, was pacing the aisles. Dillweed had awakened from his nap, and he sat on the floor nearby, scratching various itches. Bailey rolled over and closed his eyes, trying to sleep under the flickering gas lamps and the hum of the huge dirigible above them.

He did sleep, at last. He dreamed of becoming a bird, and then a fox; then he was an ant, crawling under the shadow of a great mountain.

Bailey woke as something fluttered against the window. The gas lamps had been dimmed, and the sound of soft snoring filled the car.

"What's going on?" He sat up, balling his fists in his eyes. Roger was not in his seat. Hal was staring out of the window.

"It's just a bat," Hal said. "I couldn't sleep. Nothing new for me." He lowered his voice to a whisper, and leaned closer to Bailey. "We're coming up to the mountains. The Velyn Peaks."

Bailey shook off the haze of his dream. He squinted out the window. Beyond the glass, the trees of the Dark Woods towered above them. The moon hung high over the treetops. Through the tall branches, Bailey could see the tips of the legendary Velyn mountains, white and glimmering in the near distance. After another minute, there was a break in the tree line, and Bailey got a full view of the mountain range ahead, silhouetted against the pitch-black night sky. They looked empty and barren.

Bailey shivered. The Velyn Peaks stretched across the kingdom to the south of the Lowlands, and up toward the west, where the cliffs of Fairmount were. In the Lowlands, it was easy to think of the Velyn as very far away.

But as they drew closer to the academy, the looming, ominous presence of the mountains was undeniable. Boogeymen haunted the mountains. Ghosts and killers walked those white peaks—at least, that's what everyone said.

"Do you believe all the stories about the lost tribes of the Velyn?" he asked Hal. According to the stories, the Velyn were a mysterious group of men and women who'd been tough enough to live up there in the mountains, mostly because they shared the Animas bond with powerful beasts like grizzly bears, wolves, and giant mountain cats.

Hal shrugged. "You remember the History teacher, Mr. Elliot?" Hal asked. "He always told us that the Velyn were real people—escaped criminals mostly, people running from the law. But I don't know. My mom used to tell me that the Velyn men could turn into animals, and steal children who

misbehaved. Only when I didn't eat my sprouts, though."

"My mom told me that one too," Bailey said, smiling. He turned back to the window. When he stared up at the mountains, he felt a flickering in the back of his mind, like the fluttering of wings.

Bailey tried to shut out the chugging of the rigimotive, and focus only on the silence in the trees, the faintest whisper of wind. He closed his eyes. His dad had tried to teach him so many times to connect with the animals around him, never with very good results. *You're not so different,* he'd said during those lessons. *You just need a little focus.*

He heard the branches of the trees scraping against each other in the breeze, and under that, a rustling, like the shuddering of dry leaves. It was a sound he was sure he hadn't heard earlier, through the window. It seemed to be buzzing in his very ears, as if he wasn't in the rigimotive car, but right out there in the trees, standing still, listening. He felt a leap of excitement.

"Something's out there," he said in a whisper, opening his eyes. The sound in his ears immediately died away. "I can feel it."

"What do you mean?" asked Hal. "Has that ever happened to you before?"

Bailey stood up. He had to get closer. He moved down the aisle to the back of the rigimotive car. Hal followed him.

He *had* felt something different, a stirring that had never happened when he'd been training with his dad. If he could just get outside somehow, maybe that feeling would come back . . . He reached the back of the rigimotive car and

grabbed ahold of the brass handle that opened the car door.

"Bailey!" Hal whispered fiercely. "We're not supposed to move outside the car!"

A couple of passengers stirred, and one bright-eyed raccoon popped up from a blanket to blink at him. Bailey ignored Hal and opened the door. The wind outside on the platform blew Bailey's hair back from his forehead, and the machinery chugging below echoed in his ears.

If only I could focus, Bailey thought. If only I could get closer. He stepped forward onto the platform. The tops of the trees were lit by silvery moonlight; shadows raced and skidded across the ground. Only yards away from the tracks, the trees began to come together and form a thick, leafy wall—the beginning of the Dark Woods. In the trees, Bailey saw a flash of something white. He blinked. Was it a trick of the moon?

No. It was an animal.

At least, Bailey *thought* it was an animal, but it wasn't like any animal he'd ever seen. It was huge, disappearing and reappearing in between the gaps of the trees, glowing in the moonlight. Like a ghost, he thought. It seemed to run along with the rigimotive as it passed the forest. Bailey felt his blood go cold in his veins. After a moment, the flash of white disappeared altogether.

"What in Nature do you think you're doing?" a man yelled.

Bailey felt a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back through the door into the dim light of the car. It was a conductor in a worn uniform, with sharp blue eyes. Behind

him was Roger, with Hal's older brother, Taylor, close at hand. Dillweed the badger and Taylor's dark, sleek cat skittered up the aisle behind them.

"You could have gotten yourself killed, going out there while the rigi's in motion!" the conductor said as he closed the door behind Bailey with a loud *whump*. Bailey could hear the disgruntled murmuring of passengers who didn't appreciate being woken up.

"Already in trouble, and we're not even there yet," said Taylor, who looked down at Bailey with a mocking smile. "Got something to prove?"

"Bark off, Taylor," said Hal, appearing in the doorway behind his brother.

But Bailey was still reeling from what he'd seen. The animal he'd spotted seemed like something otherworldly, watching the train . . .

"You all right, boy?" asked Roger.

"I—I saw something *huge* out there," he blurted out.

Roger narrowed his eyes at Bailey. Taylor, who stood behind him, laughed with a snort.

"A wolf?" he asked. "There are plenty of wolves in the Dark Woods."

"No, it wasn't that," said Bailey. "It was all white . . ."

"That doesn't sound like anything in these parts," said the conductor dryly. "Sometimes a bear will wander close to the tracks, but they're your average brown or black variety."

"Too true," said Roger loudly, clapping a heavy hand on Bailey's shoulder. "Must have been a trick of the light."

"It was there," said Bailey. "It was much bigger than a

bear—and it was so bright. It almost glowed . . .”

“Was it a gh-gh-ghost?” asked Taylor, wiggling his fingers in a mocking gesture.

“Go back to the front, Taylor, before you get on my last nerve,” snapped Roger. “And, Bailey, come sit down and calm yourself. You just saw a wolf or coyote, that’s all. Enough of these stories.”

Bailey hung back, angry and embarrassed, while Roger and Taylor returned to their seats. Other passengers in the car were looking at him. His ears were hot. He knew that he had seen something—hadn’t he? For a second, he wondered if Roger were right and he had mistaken a wolf for something else. But no. The creature he’d seen had been large enough to spot from several yards away, and had been a pure, snowy white.

“I know what I saw,” said Bailey quietly to Hal.

“Sure, I believe you.” Hal sat down on his cot, but didn’t climb in just yet. He was still fidgeting; Bailey could tell he wanted to say something more.

Around them, the excitement of Bailey’s scolding had died away, and the murmurs of their fellow passengers had been replaced with low breathing, snores, and the occasional rustle of feather and fur.

“Look,” said Hal. “I just want you to know . . . I’m not going to tell anyone about . . . *you* know. If you want to keep it a secret when we get to Fairmount, you can count on me.”

“Keep what secret?” Bailey asked, even though he already knew what Hal was talking about. But he wanted to know

for certain just how much Hal knew about him. "What have you heard?"

Hal breathed in deeply, as if to steel himself against the words. He leaned in close to Bailey's ear.

Then he said them, the words that hurt Bailey like a physical blow, like nothing but the truth could do:

"You have no Animas."

Two

FAR FROM THE LOWLANDS and the dim gas lamps of the rigimotive, a small, dark shape circled the sooty factories of the Gray City, sweeping high over a stream of acrid smoke. It dipped past the far edges of the skyline, pulling its wings closer to its body as it careered over the rooftops, then spread them wide as it finally came within sight of the copper roofs of the palace, the home of Parliament. It let the air currents carry it straight to a window ledge halfway up the wall of a rickety tower on the palace's western side. A scar of smoke damage from the fire that had burned down half the building almost thirty years ago still showed on the tower's outer wall.

The owl settled on the sill of an open window, which overlooked a narrow, twisting staircase. At the bottom of the stairs was an archway that let in a shaft of light from the hall. Around the corner, a group of officials talked loudly about Parliament business. In a moment so quick that only the owl saw, a foot in a canvas shoe appeared in the shaft of light from the door, then was quickly pulled back into the shadows.

The owner of that foot, a thirteen-year-old girl named Gwen, stood very still in the dark corner by the archway and waited breathlessly for the Parliament members in the hall to move on. The owl on the windowsill cocked its head, but made no noise. The officials in the hall at last ambled away.

Gwen exhaled for the first time in what seemed like entire minutes. The members of Parliament were used to Gwen—she was apprenticed to the Elder, who had been in Parliament since the time of King Melore. But tonight, she needed to remain unseen. The Elder was leaving on a secret mission, and she was determined to go with him. She hoisted her rucksack onto her shoulder and ran her pale fingers through her short, flame-red hair. She'd tried to give up the habit a thousand times, but she couldn't help it. She felt jittery, as though feathers were rustling in her belly.

The owl hopped once on the windowsill as she passed it on her way up the stairs, and then took off again into the night. She could feel, however, that it had not gone far. She was learning (slowly) to distinguish individual members of her kin when there were several of them around, even getting so close as to intuit their names. She felt a warmth, a kind of buzzing in her chest as she sensed the group of owls in the tower room above her, and one flying, buoyed by the wind, just outside.

At the top of the steps, Gwen lingered in the darkness by the open door to the tower room. Sure enough, a cluster of owls sat together in the rafters, looking down at the shelves and shelves of dusty old books, and at the room's only human occupant: Elder, an old man with wild gray

hair and shrewd eyes. He was busy stuffing objects into a canvas sack. His worn jacket and waistcoat had once been carefully embroidered with the patterns of wings, but those patterns were now an almost illegible tangle of loose brown and silver threads.

The Elder had known her since she was just another ratty orphan of the Gray City. He was Animas Owl, like her, and when he'd caught her trying to pick his pocket one day in the Gudgeons, a grimy, crime-riddled slum in the Gray City, he hadn't gotten angry. Instead, he'd taken pity on her, and brought her back to the palace to be his apprentice. Apprentices slept in clean, warm rooms downstairs near the kitchens, and attended morning classes until the age of twelve, after which their only charge was to serve a member of Parliament. But apprentices had fallen out of fashion since the days of Melore, and her classmates had been few and far between. Most of her learning came from the Elder himself. Before he took her in, she had been dirty, alone, and half-starving, with no companions except a small band of other child thieves. She'd known then that she was Animas Owl, but had never known how to connect to her kin, how to slow her breath and clear her mind so she could sense them and learn from them. The Elder had taught her that. He was the closest thing to a father she had. If he was leaving, then she would go too, even if it meant following him out of the palace in secret.

The Elder sighed. "Gwendolyn," he said softly, without turning around, "if I were a pair of hardy boots, where in this study would I be hiding?"

Gwen exhaled. How could she have thought she would remain undetected? The Elder must have known she was coming as soon as the owls perceived her.

She stepped out from the shadow into a cramped, cluttered room. There was barely enough space for the two of them to stand next to the Elder's claw-footed desk and the many shelves of books that lined the hexagonal walls.

"Did you try the closet?" she asked.

The Elder shook his head. "Would you believe, it's only full of more books?"

Normally, Gwen would have laughed. But instead she gripped the strap of her rucksack tightly and steeled herself.

"I'm coming with you to the Seers' land."

The Elder didn't stop packing. He didn't even look at her.

"My rain cape has also gone missing, it seems . . ." he murmured.

Gwen peeled away from the doorway and located his rain cape, which was inexplicably balled up under his bed. She stuffed it into the traveling bag on the desk for him.

"I worry about you," Gwen couldn't stop from blurting out, even though she knew she could say nothing to stop him from leaving the palace. "You need me with you."

The Elder rested his eyes on her momentarily. "You're right, child. I do need you. But I need you *here*. I need your eyes on Parliament while I'm gone. There's no longer any doubt in my mind that Viviana is taking steps to overthrow them." He lowered his voice. "Her Dominae party becomes larger every day."

The Elder sorted through the random pile of objects

he'd recovered from a cupboard under the bookshelves: a shoehorn, a bundle of maps tied with string, and finally—

"Aha!" he crowed, tossing the boots toward Gwen, who caught them and set them beside his bag.

"Since her reappearance here in the city, Viviana has let her anger and stubbornness guide her. As Melore's daughter, I had some hope that her emergence might mean a return of prosperity for Aldermere, after so many years of the Jackal's rule. Parliament was right to chase the Jackal from power—but they've lost their way. When Melore presided over them, Parliament was efficient and fair. Now there's so much corruption. We take from the people, and yet nothing is accomplished, no progress at all . . . We need a real leader." He straightened up and moved over to the shelves. On one of them stood a silk toy piglet, which looked as if it had once been loved dearly. The Elder picked it up and ran a finger along its stitched back.

"Those were better days," he said quietly, and Gwen knew that he was remembering Viviana as a child. He'd told her about Viviana—beautiful and stubborn, with untamable black hair and curious, violet eyes. She could imagine the young princess, before her father's murder, clutching the silk toy as she ran about the halls of the palace.

He sighed. "For so long the people have believed in a half-cooked prophecy about the return of a true leader—and I admit, when Viviana first announced her return to the city, I myself almost believed those rumors. But her behavior, her cruel ideas about Dominance—she's not the child I knew. She has nothing in common with her father. I'm convinced

that she is beyond my help, or my friendship." He shook his head, regret written plainly on his thin, weathered face. "If only her brother had lived—" The Elder's voice broke. It obviously still pained him to think of Trent, the child he could not save, who had burned along with half of the palace.

Gwen shivered, and placed her hand on his arm.

"If so much troubles you here in the city, why leave? The Seers haven't spoken to anyone in years. Some say—some say there are no Seers left." She swallowed.

The Elder patted her hand warmly, cleared his voice, and continued. "I must go to the Statue of the Twins, where the Seers once resided. Clears my mind. There are rumors of unrest in the forests and the Lowlands as well. I must seek out what allies we may have left."

"All the more reason I should go with you! You'll need someone to protect you," she said, even though she knew what his answer would be.

He shook his head. His gray hair was tufted like the feathers of one of their owls. "You must stay here and make sure that no one tries to take over my study again, eh?"

Gwen nodded stiffly. The Elder's joke did not seem funny to her. For too long the Parliament had been divided. Some senators wanted to bleed out the corruption and elect a new monarch; others wanted absolute power for themselves, and often bought and received favors in order to get it. Chambers in the palace seemed to shift as often as allegiances. After many years of occupying a study near the royal apartment, the Elder had been shuffled out and up, into a cramped tower that looked out over the ports and the harbor market of the

Fluvian river. Every time the wind blew from the south, it caused the tower to sway slightly, and carried with it the pungent smell of fish.

The Elder moved to the desk and opened the smallest drawer.

"Here," he said. Gwen watched, surprised, as the Elder pulled the drawer completely out from the desk, revealing a hidden compartment. The Elder set the drawer on the desk and removed a thin leather box, only as long as the palm of his hand.

"I want you to keep this safe while I am gone. It is an instrument of great power."

Gwen marveled at the box before opening it. The real leather, very rare, used only for special objects, was smooth and almost red. The use of an animal's skin meant that the object had great value, and was made to honor the animal who died, most likely of old age. The box had been lovingly embossed with the emblem of a boy and a fox—the Twins of legend. She opened the box, her hands shaking slightly. But almost immediately, she felt disappointed. Inside was nothing more than a rusty old harmonica.

"I . . . I don't know how to play," Gwen said, trying to conceal her confusion.

"That doesn't matter," said the Elder. "It's a relic of the last True King. The leather is pigskin, made as a gift to the king in honor of his daughter's eighth birthday, when she Awakened to her Animas, the pig, like her mother. But the instrument—that is much older. Melore believed that its music could strengthen the Animas bond."

"How can that be?" Gwen asked, baffled.

The Elder lowered his voice. "Melore was a good king," he whispered, "and very intelligent. He believed that the Animas bond did not only exist *here*"—the Elder pointed to his head—"but all around us. He believed it was a frequency, a vibration. It was everywhere."

Gwen looked up at the owls clustered on top of the high bookshelves. One among them was a dark brown barn owl named Grimsen, with whom the Elder had bonded for life. Once life-bonded with a member of their kin, a human could see through their eyes, like looking at a photograph, almost at will. Life-bonded humans and their kin were like two halves of the same soul, and one's well-being was intimately tied with the other's. Gwen had not experienced this with one particular animal, an owl like Grimsen that she could consider part of her own self. She looked at the small instrument in her hands. How wonderful it would be if just learning to play a few notes—the right notes—would strengthen her Animas connection, making her strong enough to bond with one particular owl, to see clearly what it saw. Maybe then she could be of more use to the Elder.

"Keep it safe," the Elder said, and his voice turned stern. "You never know when a tune might come in handy."

Gwen forced a smile.

Above them, Grimsen screeched, and a large brown feather fell to the floor. The Elder closed his eyes as though listening. And he *was* listening, Gwen knew. He was listening and seeing as the owls saw.

"Stirrings," the Elder said, after a minute. He opened

his eyes again. “An old presence in the Dark Woods has emerged anew . . .” The Elder turned to Gwen and smiled, with a hint of mischief flashing in his eyes. “Dangerous times ahead. Oh, yes. Dangerous and exciting times.”