CASANDER DARKBLOOM

&

THE THREADS OF POWER

A Sneak Peek

BY P. A. STAFF

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~ CHAPTER ONE ~

An Act Against Nature

Paris, France

In the beginning, when the universe was merely stardust and night, the world was woven from powerful threads of twilight and white.

Life and death. Good and evil. Dusk and dawn. That was the way things had been at the origin of time, before the clocks started spinning, the years flew by, and the strength of these threads began to weaken as people grew, evolved and spread across the world.

In some, the threads changed into different, muted shades of colour, but in many people, they dulled, faded and lost their powers altogether.

It was this fact that Claudius Bane liked to remind himself of often, especially on nights like this. Nights that were unusual. Nights when the uneasy, buzzing sense of something terrible was brewing in the air and he needed his courage the most. It brought him a great deal of comfort to remember that he was one of the special ones. Someone who had more magic, more stardust, more powerful threads still woven through his veins than most ordinary people around him.

A trait that marked him as different.

One that identified him as someone known as *an Other*.

A cold, brisk wind whipped against Claudius' cheeks as he strode purposefully along the banks of the Seine. It was almost midnight as lamplight reflected off the river's quaking water and most of Paris was asleep as the clocks approached the witching hour. Alone, he hugged his long, sweeping violet cloak tighter around his body, shivering. But it wasn't just the freezing weather which chilled him to the bone.

It was what he had come here to do.

And who he had come to meet.

The summons had arrived at noon yesterday. Truthfully, Claudius hadn't the faintest idea how a letter from the Normie world had even reached the Balance Lands in the first place. All he knew was that one moment, he had been sat at his desk, grading students' papers, and the next a single, starched envelope was floating through his window transported on an Airscaper's wind. At first glance, it looked as simple and innocent as any other letter. It was probably a message for the school from a teacher seeking a job, or a disgruntled parent complaining that their unruly child had ended up in detention again. But instead, it was a simple a note with a handful of words scrawled across the page in thick, black ink:

Bring the Book of Skulls and Skin.

121a Rue de la Noir, Paris.

Or else I'll tell them everything.

The sender hadn't signed their name at the bottom.

They didn't need to.

Claudius only had one secret he was willing to do anything to protect – and only one person who knew it. If that wasn't enough, the envelope's broken black and white seal – a young, snow-white bird entangled mid-flight with a scrawny, jet-black raven – had instantly sent a jolt of panic through him. It was the symbol of the Life and Deathmakers. The most powerful, dangerous, and rarest kind of Others to exist.

The Book of Skulls and Skin felt like a heavy, weighted stone in his satchel now. It was an old tome. An ancient relic. Normally it was buried six feet under, hidden in its own private reading room beneath the Grand Council's chambers in Balance London. It had its own patrol of guards to protect it, where it rested surrounded by a never-ending labyrinth of crypts. Just having it in his possession – when nobody knew it was missing – felt wrong. But bringing it into the mortal world – that was an act against nature.

Overhead, rain cracked the sky open and thunder roared in disapproval. With the Eiffel tower at his back, Claudius finally reached the address on the note and rapped on the apartment's door three times.

It cautiously creaked open after the final knock.

"Who are you?" a small voice whispered from the other side.

A child.

This certainly wasn't who Claudius had been expecting to meet.

He swallowed hard. "My name is Dr Claudius Bane," he said, before clutching his bag protectively closer and taking a step back into the shadows. "Someone sent for me

from Wayward School. I'm here to deliver a book, but I believe I may have the wrong address."

The door swung open.

"No," the boy standing inside replied determinedly. He emerged into view, his amber eyes narrowing with a newfound ferocity now that he knew who Claudius was. "I summoned you here, and you're late."

Words failed Claudius as he opened and closed his mouth like a gormless goldfish. The young boy staring back at him was only perhaps ten or eleven years old. He was round-faced, but tall and lanky like a string bean, with soot black hair. His eyes sparked like smokeless flames as they met Claudius's own, causing the older man to look away first.

This was impossible. He had expected to meet someone else – *anyone else* – but not this young man. If he really was an Other, how had such a young boy been smart and powerful enough to send a letter to the Balance Lands? What was this prodigy doing in the normal world? And, most worryingly of all, how did he know about the *Book of Skulls and Skin*?

Another uneasy feeling hummed in the air around Claudius now, thicker than before. *Fear*. He had seriously misjudged this encounter. The threads of power throbbed so violently within the boy before him that Claudius could feel them. Taste them. Smell them.

They felt like cold, lifeless fingers drawing lines up and down his spine. They tasted like grave dirt on his tongue and smelt like the stale scent of something no longer living. It made his stomach churn.

Deathmaker.

That was what this young man was. The Order of Others that he belonged to.

"Come in," said the boy sternly, holding open the door and stepping aside so Claudius could pass.

Still shook, Claudius wordlessly obliged.

Inside, the apartment was furnished in a simple fashion. There was a plain brown table surrounded by plain brown chairs and flaky teal wallpaper which was peeling off the walls. Feeble silvery moonlight poured into the room through a tiny window, illuminating two rickety twin beds tucked away in the corner. On one of them, a frail-looking woman laid with her hands clasped on her chest. Raspy breaths rattled through her ribcage as Claudius and the boy approached. She had skin as white as chalk, hair as fine as silk, and wore a holey nightgown which had been eaten away by moths. For a second, Claudius thought he knew her. A flicker of familiarity tickled his skin. But he had never met anyone so weak and sickly in his life.

"Don't worry, mama," the young boy said, striding past Claudius and snatching the *Book of Skulls and Skin* from his bag. He knelt at his mother's side and placed the book on her lap. "I'll make you better. This will all be over soon."

"Aeurdan," the woman croaked, reaching out for her son.

The boy took her thin hand in his and opened the book. When Claudius saw which page he had landed on, the grown man leapt forward:

Blood rituals and power binding.

"What are you doing?" cried Claudius.

He never got an answer.

With a quick flick of his hand, the boy sent Claudius Bane flying across the room. Claudius didn't have time to shout before he collided against the far brick wall with a sickening *crunch*. Then, the young boy plucked a sewing needle out of his mother's dress pocket, before first pricking her finger and then his own.

"*No!*" Claudius yelled, reaching out a useless hand to stop him.

But it was too late. The sick woman's son had already closed his eyes and began muttering the incantation.

Suddenly, the woman started to scream.

Without warning, an impossible wind rose up and ripped through the apartment. The woman's pasty skin began to flake apart, turning to dust and disappearing into thin air. Her whole body grew smaller as her bones shrunk, until her clothes hung and flapped like fabric on a laundry line. Her eyes turned milky white and she gripped her son's hand harder, trying to tell him that something was wrong. Very wrong.

When the young boy opened his own eyes, they were filled with terror.

"Mama!" he howled.

“Look what you’ve done!” shouted Claudius. He climbed to his feet and rushed over, but by the time he got there, the woman had completely vanished, only leaving a few specks of gossamer dust behind.

“Mama! Mama!” the boy wailed, clawing at the place where she had been.

The impossible wind dissipated as quickly as it had come. Tears streamed down the boy’s face as Claudius spun around, searching for the *Book of Skulls and Skin*. What had he done? How had this happened?

His eyes finally fell on the tome, tossed aside under the other bed, at the same time as the boy saw it. They rushed towards it together. Claudius’s hands wrapped around the book’s leather first and for a brief moment relief flooded through him – until he was dragged backwards by a small pair of hands around his ankles. Claudius kicked out at the boy. The boy recoiled and screamed. Then, with one more flick of his hand, the boy catapulted Claudius Bane to the other side of the room with a mighty, invisible force.

This time when Claudius hit the wall, everything went black.

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

Curious and Curiouser

London, England

Seventeen years later…

Curious Mrs Crane's Shop of Even Curiouser Curiosities was the most special shop in all of London, though few people knew the real reason why. Behind its multi-coloured awnings and twinkling wind chimes, it seemed like any other shop – except it was home to the most weird and wonderful objects you couldn't find anywhere else. There were mirrors which, if you stared at them for long enough, gave you a glimpse into another world. Magical books whose ink whispered words from the pages and jumped from shelf-to-shelf when you weren't looking. Snow globes with scenes which changed with the seasons and clocks which spun backwards. But the most unusual oddity wasn't something that could be found inside the shop – it was outside of it. For there slept a young boy with the most extraordinary story, though he had no memory of anything at all.

For Casander, every day was a new day.

A blank page. A scrubbed slate. A blessing and a curse which meant that each day could never be anything like the last.

He could remember the basic things, like his name, *Casander*, and his age, *twelve*, but everything else that happened to him slipped from his mind, like mist through open fingers, at the end of the day.

Each morning, he would wake up, rub the sleepy-dust from his eyes and stretch out his legs – with no memory of what he had done the day before or whom he had seen the day before that. Casander didn't know how he had wound up sleeping outside the shop. Or if he had a home elsewhere, with parents who were missing him. It wasn't like he had anyone who could help him figure it out either.

Most of the customers who trickled in and out of the shop thought that it was such an odd place to be that they rarely came back. The only ones who took particular notice of him were the shop's owner, Will, and the little raven-haired girl who occasionally helped him stack the shelves. Neither of them thought it was polite to pry and stick their noses into someone else's business, so keeping a watchful eye on Cas from a distance was all they dared to do. He didn't bother them and they didn't bother him.

Until the incident with the bird happened.

And then, suddenly, the mystery boy outside the curiosity shop became very hard to ignore.

It all began on a wet, miserable Tuesday.

Casander didn't know much about himself, but he knew that he had always hated Tuesdays. Tuesdays were the nothing days. Not the dreaded gripe of a Monday, with the slog of a long week ahead, or the happy dance feeling of a Wednesday, when half

of the week was already done. In fact, the only good thing about Tuesdays was that *Crane's Curiosities* was usually quiet, meaning there were less snooty stares from customers and Cas didn't get a headache every time the bell above the door tinkled when somebody entered or left.

On this particular Tuesday, it was raining cats and dogs.

Perhaps if Cas had been able to remember something – *anything* – then that would have been the first sign that something was going to be different about this day.

Not that it was literally raining cats and dogs, of course – that *would* have been a pretty worrying sign to ignore – but that *Crane's Curiosities* was filled to the brim with people. Usually on days like this, the rain and howling wind deterred anyone from venturing out to the shop. There were much nicer places to wait out the storm, like the Natural History Museum or even the dingy café around the corner. But instead, something was propelling people inside the shop in droves, and Will was surprised to find it busier than ever.

Trinkets and titbits were flying off the crooked shelves in a frenzy. People seemed to be buying just about anything and everything to avoid going back out into the drizzle. Will should have been delighted. But every time a customer came or went, the door opened to reveal the lonely boy sitting outside, shivering, and a wave of guilt rushed over the shop keeper.

"Hold the till," Will finally sighed, late that afternoon, turning to the young girl who helped him and heading towards the door.

Even before he had pushed it open, Will was already having doubts. He'd had a funny feeling about the boy from the first time he saw him, though he couldn't remember exactly how long ago that was. The mystery young man had been popping up here and there over the summer, though Will had caught him snoozing outside almost every day recently. Truthfully, seeing the boy randomly appear had become so commonplace that he was practically a part of the curiosity shop. Will had only caught glimpses of him at first; a flash of a dark silhouette or unusual-coloured eyes peering through the windows. Luckily, it was always when Will's assistant was around, otherwise the shop keeper would've sworn he was going mad. It was the little raven-haired girl's responsibility to keep an eye on the boy and make sure he wasn't causing trouble.

If he broke anything or got muddy footprints all over the floor now, Will knew he wouldn't forgive himself.

But he couldn't very well let the poor boy sit out there like a scolded puppy either.

"Look, kid," said Will, leaning against the doorframe. "I don't know who you are, or where you're from, or what on earth you're doing here without anyone, but you've been lurking around long enough that you've basically become my responsibility. You'll freeze to death in this, so come inside before I change my mind."

For a long moment, the shop keeper and the boy just stared at one another. They both look surprised that the other knew they existed. Whereas Will was about as ordinary-looking as an ordinary person could be – brown hair, a wonky nose, and a small smudge of dirt on one of his dimples being the most interesting thing about him

– Cas was the opposite. He was a scrawny runt of a boy, with dark curly hair and grey eyes, which had little flecks of violet in them. He was slightly knock-kneed too, since he was very leggy for his age, all gangly limbs sticking out of ratty, oversized jeans. And he always wore a pair of mismatched trainers. Today they were bright orange and polka dot green.

"Thanks," said Cas brightly, smiling a too wide smile which he hadn't quite grown into yet. "But forget about freezing in this weather, I'll probably end up swimming in it first."

The lashing rain was so bad that Cas *had* considered the idea of using the street as a slip 'n' slide, but he figured this probably wasn't the time to mention that.

As he stepped inside to wipe his feet and wring out his clothes, the shop keeper's eyebrows shot up into his hairline upon hearing Cas speak for the first time.

"W - Welcome to *Crane's*," stammered Will. "What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't," replied Cas. "I'm –"

But just as he moved to shake Will's outstretched hand, the second sign of something different happened.

Casander lost control of his arm.

The thrashing motion came on out of nowhere. One minute, Cas was holding his hand out in greeting, and the next, he had lost all control other than what general direction he wanted to poke it in. The energy that seized his limb was indescribably

great, yet at the same time, Cas had a feeling that this wasn't the first time this had happened. It felt like his body had been gripped by a great, invisible force. Tingling, sparking energy shot through him, up and down his arm and slowly spreading to his leg too, as if something were stuck inside him and desperately trying to burst out.

Behind the counter, Will's assistant looked up and was watching too. The girl had spent enough time ogling the strange boy to know that this wasn't a one-off. Something like this had happened to him many times before.

"I'm – I –" Cas began to say again, but then just as quickly as the tingling energy had come, it disappeared. He had full control over his limbs again. "I'll only be in here a minute or two," he muttered quickly, "to get out of the cold."

Before Will could ask what was wrong or offer help, Cas rushed into the shop. He briefly met the gaze of the girl at the counter, but promptly looked away.

Embarrassment and confusion swelled in Cas's stomach like a gnawing monster with tentacles, as he wove his way between display cases and tables. He passed twisted staffs, exotic pressed plants, and jewellery made from the scales of some sort of great beast, but none of them interested him. Spotting a quiet corner by a bunch of creepy, dead stuffed animals, Cas crouched behind a shelf. He pressed his forehead against the misty shop window as his insides cringed with shame about what had just happened. Leftover sparks of energy still made his arm twitch – but even though he didn't understand it, for some reason he wasn't afraid of it either. The feeling was like an old friend saying hello again. Whatever it was – whatever was wrong with him – had clearly been a part of him for a long time.

Why did it have to happen in front of all those people though? thought Cas.

He could deal with being weird – he was an impossibly forgetful, nobody boy who slept outside a curiosity shop, after all. But if the shop keeper and the girl didn't think he was a freak before, they certainly must now.

He sighed. "At least you don't have to worry about being a weirdo," he said to a stuffed raven sitting on the shelf. "Your last dilemma was probably whether to have worms or bread scraps for breakfast."

It might have been a trick of the light, but Cas could've sworn he saw the bird *blink* in reply.

Shaking his head, Cas reached out to stroke the raven's cool feathers, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling still swirling in his belly. He needed something to take his mind off it. As it happened, two very loud women were gossiping away like geese on the other side of the shelf.

"This place is an absolute hovel, Lupina!"

"Well, I know, Maggie, this odd little place wouldn't have been my choice of shop either, but we had to get off the streets."

"True. It's terrifying out there and I don't just mean the weather…strange folk in purple-and-white cloaks, traipsing up and down Oxford Street, clearly searching for something…"

"Or someone…they're stopping anyone who walks past. Some of us just want to go out and buy a new pair of knickers!"

“It’s been happening all over the world too, according to the news…for months now cloaked strangers have been spotted…in Paris, Madrid, Berlin…”

“Must be something to do with the government. Or the secret service…”

“Or they’re hunting a fugitive…”

“Or it’s a live theatre performance. And you know how much I hate drama troupes!”

Strange men. Purple-and-white cloaks. Looking for someone.

How curious.

At first, Cas was too busy craning his neck to hear the chattering women that he didn’t notice the bird’s feathers growing warm under his touch. It was only when something hard and sharp bit his finger that Cas jumped and looked back at the bird. The one that was now sitting with its head titled, proud as punch, on its perch.

Alive.

“*ARGH!*” shouted Cas, throwing his arms up defensively and stumbling back into a bookcase.

“*KRAA!*” squawked the raven. With a ginormous flap of its wings, it took off into the air, smashing a blue vase and sending a Grandfather clock swan-diving to the floor.

Immediately, the shop erupted into chaos.

The two ladies who had been clucking away like hens started screeching and frantically waving their arms, batting the bird away as it attacked their bouffants. Several others ran from the shop, shrieking, whilst one little old man kept running in circles screaming, “CALL THE POLICE! CALL THE POLICE!”

“*KRAA! KRAA!”*

Hurriedly, Will and the assistant girl scrambled around behind the counter, searching for a blanket or something else to catch the creature with. In the meantime, the bird had left the ladies alone and was now crashing into porcelain ornaments left, right and centre. Covering his head, Cas speedily crawled out from his hiding spot, wincing to avoid the torrential downpour of shattering ceramic. He cast a glance over his shoulder to check that the shop keeper and his assistant were still distracted, before spotting his chance to escape and darting towards the open door.

But just as he reached it, Cas skidded to an abrupt halt.

Two men, dressed in sweeping, swirly-patterned purple-and-white cloaks, their faces hidden under heavy hoods, blocked his way.

“Gotcha,” one of them snarled, reaching out a strong fist and grabbing Cas’s shoulder.

Cas didn’t have time to react. Before he could shout or struggle, the first man closed his arms around Cas and lifted him clean off the floor. Cas bucked, kicked and squirmed as hard as he could.

“Let go!” Cas raved.

“Hold still,” the second man growled, trying to shove a black sack over Cas’s head. He didn’t know what was happening, or who these people were, but even though he lashed out, he couldn’t break free until…

“*RUN!”*

In one swift motion, Will’s assistant grabbed one of the twisted staffs off a stand and swung it at the first man’s knees. He released Cas with a crippling yelp and collapsed, howling and clutching his leg. The second man dropped the sack and sprung forward, but tripped over the first.

“Come on!” the girl said, grabbing Cas’s hand and tossing the staff aside.

Together, they burst out of the shop into the rain.

The grey pavement was slick with water as they ran. They splashed through puddles, dodged around bemused pedestrians and nipped between buses, until another group of footsteps joined them. Cas chanced a look behind him again. This time, he saw the two hooded men gaining on them. *Fast*. Cas had no idea what was happening, and even less of an idea where they were going. Thankfully, the dark-haired girl seemed to know the way. They took a sharp left at a red telephone box. Two rights after they passed the cinema and the toy store. People gawked at them as they sped by, bumping into rowdy shoppers’ bags and scattering pigeons in their wake. But the girl didn’t stop until they reached a bridge overlooking the River Thames.

Without hesitation, she climbed up onto the railings.

“Come on,” said the girl, breathless, leaning down and reaching out her hand.

Cas balked. “*Are you mad?!*” he exclaimed, panting.

“Not as mad as those men will be if they catch us,” she said. “Trust me.”

“Trust you to *drown*.”

Cas spent a long, drawn-out second catching his breath and cast one final look over his shoulder. The cloaked men were at the end of the bridge now, sprinting towards them with unbelievable speed. One look down at the grey, choppy reflection of the river. One more look at the girl’s open fingers and the hooded figures, closing in.

He took her hand.

Cas’s foot had barely touched the top railing when the girl leapt off, taking him with her. Wind rushed by them in a cacophony of chaos. Passers-by on the bridge gasped and cried out in shock.

But Casander didn’t have time to hear anything before they hit the river, the grimy water swallowing them whole.

~ CHAPTER THREE ~

Welcome to Wayward

Cas didn't know if he could swim.

He thought he could, but then again it was hard to trust your own memory when you could probably claim the prize for World's Most Forgetful Boy.

Still, everyone could doggy paddle…right?

The dark waves of the Thames closed in around him. Cas flailed his arms and kicked his legs, but every stroke felt like ice against his skin. Water rushed into his ears, drowning his senses and dragging him down. It felt like being sucked into another world. A world where the time between seconds lived, where dreams and nightmares came to play when the sun was up, and where he imagined his memories scuttled off to when they slipped away from him at the end of every day.

But Cas knew he couldn't give up.

A tiny, kindling spark inside him wanted to fight. He summoned every ounce of strength and beat back against the current. He fought against the waves. The bright light of the surface shone above him, a dazzling beam, growing nearer as he swam…

Up, up and up until…

GASP.

He broke through the surface, gulping in fresh air. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

A second later, the *Crane's Curiosities* girl bobbed up beside him. Chilled to their cores, they swam to the shore and clambered onto the bank, soaked through and spluttering like a pair of soggy sock puppets.

It was only then that Casander realised they weren't in London anymore.

The rain-soaked, busy roads and skyscraper buildings had been replaced with sunny, green open spaces and clusters of swaying willow trees. Chirping birdsong floated on the air instead of the angry *beeps* of cars and *honks* of trucks. But, most importantly of all, the hooded men were gone.

For now.

None of it made any sense. What had just happened? Where had the city gone?

Cas opened his mouth to speak, but the sopping wet girl beat him to it. "Don't freak out," she said, holding her hands out as if to steady him.

Cas's jaw dropped open. "What –"

"Look, there's no time to explain," she said, squeezing the last drops of water out of her pinafore. "I don't need to be the Oracle to know what you're going to ask. *Where are we? How did we get here? Is this even real?* Just spare me the questions, OK? I'm going to take you to someone who can answer all that – and more – but right now we need to move. Those hunters will be back any minute. They won't stop until they find you."

"*Find me?*"

Flabbergasted, Cas scrambled to his feet and followed the girl as she began climbing up the grassy hill leading away from the river.

"Who are you?" blurted out Cas. He couldn't help himself. The words escaped him before he could stop them.

The girl cast him a sideways glance. "I said none of those questions."

"Technically, you didn't say I couldn't ask that."

"*Technically*, I didn't say you could ask anything."

"Well, *technically* what you just did was kidnapping," Cas pointed out, jabbing a finger back towards the water, "so tell me who you are before I start shouting *stranger danger*. The hooded men will easily find us then."

The girl glowered at him, daring him to challenge her. At any moment, their pursuers could be hot on their heels, but nonetheless Cas sucked in a deep breath, opened his mouth and –

"Warrior," she said hurriedly, eager to avoid a scene. "My name's Warrior."

Despite introducing herself, she sounded distinctly peeved.

"That's an interesting name –" Cas began, trying to be polite. But before he could get a conversation going, the girl rolled her eyes and marched off ahead. Her strides were brisk and purposeful, like he was a nuisance fly she was trying to shake.

Clearly, she wasn't the chatty type.

The girl was the same age as Cas and too short and delicate to be frightening really – but something about her still thrilled and terrified him to the bone. She had poker straight, black hair, which was bright red at the ends, and narrow, hooded, almond-coloured eyes, not dark enough to be brown yet too earthy to be amber. Her gaze was fierce enough though. It burned through Cas with the intensity of a blazing north star. It was the gaze of someone who could either be your best friend or your worst nightmare.

Maybe it was foolish, but Cas refused to silently trail along in her wake.

"Who were those people?" he said, struggling to catch up.

"Heretics," Warrior called over her shoulder.

That information was about as useful as a chocolate teapot. "Why are they chasing us?"

"Not us, *you.*" She shot him a look of utter disbelief. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me," said Cas. "I don't know what I've done. I barely even know who I am!"

Warrior fixed him with a piercing, *stop-joking-around* look, but Cas was too busy to explain. He was trying to rattle his brain, desperate for a speck of sense to fall out.

Crikey, he thought. *What* have *I done?*

The trouble with having no memory was that the possibilities were endless.

Had he robbed a bank? Tripped up a dithering old grandma? Run down the high street naked in only his most embarrassing, rubber ducky underwear and socks? The

hooded men hadn't looked like police, but they had to be something similar. Bounty hunters. Or secret service, looking for a fugitive like the chatty ladies had said – for all Cas knew, he could have been anyone from an international jewel thief and super spy to someone who had simply walked out of a newsagents without paying for a chocolate bar.

Cas felt lost, so lost, not knowing the answer, but Warrior couldn't be suggesting that they had seen what had happened in the curiosity shop. She just *couldn't*. People weren't hunted for accidentally spooking a loose bird that must've got in through a window. Because that was all that had happened – what *must* have happened – there was no other explanation for it.

As he slipped and slid up the bank, Cas felt it again. That unusual, tingling sensation. He tried to keep walking, even as the girl slowed down to meet him, but it was no use. Within moments, the same thrashing, jerking motion that had overcome him before seized control of his right leg once more. He was forced to stop moving until it did.

Warrior's eyes widened curiously. "That happens to you a lot, doesn't it?"

Cas shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know."

"Well, I've seen it happen a bunch," she said. "Whenever you've been outside the shop, I've been watching you. It mainly happens when you get up from sitting down or go from standing still to moving. I call it your funny leg."

Now that the energy had subsided, they began to scale the hill again, together this time.

Cas raised an eyebrow. “You mean, I’m not always outside the shop?”

She huffed. “You come and go.”

Both he and Warrior knew that wasn’t the information he was really focusing on though.

His *funny leg*.

So, Cas thought, *I was right. This thing – this condition – has always been a part of me, even if I can’t remember it.* It was as much a bit of his body as his hair, or his eyes, or his short, stubby nose.

“I hope you don’t mind that I call it that,” Warrior said quickly, colour rising in her cheeks as she toyed with the ends of her hair. The strands now looked the same warm pink colour as her flushed face. “It’s just that it only seems to affect your leg and arm…well, your leg mostly…and *funny arm and leg* is a bit of a mouthful…”

“No,” said Cas. “I like it.”

He genuinely did.

Having a name for the unusual energy inside him felt like a relief. He still didn’t know what it was, but naming it felt like being one step closer to accepting it. To understanding it. *Funny leg* was perfect too. It was light and cheerful, which made the gnawing confusion feel less heavy. And it was odd, which was exactly what the tingling feeling felt like.

Cas grinned at the girl, glad that they were finally talking. Yet when he looked back, he couldn’t help noticing the ends of her hair were definitely bright red again.

How odd.

Once they reached the top of the hill, Cas looked around for any sign of where he was. As if by magic, there was one quite literally in front of them. An old, rickety signpost was planted in the ground with two crooked arrows pointing the same way along a winding, dusty path: *Wayward Town, 782 paces and 1 hop* and *Wayward School, 1,203 steps, 3 skips and a jump*.

Warrior started walking along the track, but Cas thrust out an arm to stop her.

"Wait, where are we going?" he said. "I need answers. About who those men were. About where we are and what's going on."

Warrior glanced skyward again. *One day, she'll be unlucky and the wind will change, and her eyes will get stuck like that,* thought Cas. "I said I would tell you everything, remember?" said Warrior. "We just need to lose the Heretics first."

"*Heretics, heretics,*" repeated Cas. "You keep calling them that, but I don't know what it means."

"Surely even you can figure out they aren't exactly going around throwing tea parties and handing out kittens."

Cas bristled. First, this rude girl had the audacity to throw him in a river, now she was being as stubborn and unhelpful as a goat. Just as Cas opened his mouth to dish back a retort of his own, the sound of splashing and gruff grunts carried up over the hill behind them.

“Come on, quickly!” said Warrior, eyes wide as she grabbed Cas’s arm and hauled him along.

Without another word, the pair took off sprinting along the winding track. As swiftly as their legs would carry them, they scurried along the path through a copse of gnarly, withered trees, picking their way through brambles and shrubs as if it might somehow help the Heretics lose their scent. When they crashed out the other side, Cas could see a small, shimmering town in the distance. It was very unusual, surrounded by what looked like tall, white spikes with multicoloured ants swarming around them – except as they drew closer, Cas realised the white spikes and ants weren’t spikes and ants at all.

“Move along! Move along!” cried a group of guardsmen in orange livery, patrolling the high structures. The brass buttons on their pumpkin uniforms glinted in the sun as they ushered people past them, one-by-one.

A crowd of people were swelling and sweeping through a set of towering, bone-white crystal-like structures on the edge of the town, the throngs and droves adorned in different coloured cloaks as they wove between them.

“What are these?” said Cas, gaping up at the tall, gleaming structures as he and Warrior joined the ruckus. A dreadful wave of nausea and *something else*…something invasive, squirmy and prickling, like his innards were being examined from the inside-out…passed through Cas as they strode through.

“Wards,” said Warrior, passing between the structures with nothing more than a shiver. “And those are wardsmen,” she went on, pointing to the orange border

officers. “Both designed to let people who belong in this world in and keep people from the ordinary world out.”

Cas faltered and blinked. “W- we’re in *another world?!”*

That couldn’t be right.

“Welcome to Wayward,” said Warrior, gesturing towards the town with an elegant twirl and a flourish. “The most wonderful place in the Balance Lands.”

Cas froze.

A million more thoughts and question buzzed through his head, but it wasn’t any of them which rooted him to the spot. Just as Warrior turned to do another flamboyant spin, he caught sight of something terrible and frightening in the crowd. Only yards behind them, bobbing and shoving through the masses on the other side of the wards, were two purple-and-white hoods.

Warrior stopped dancing. She had spotted them too.

“Let’s go,” said Cas, trying to heave her away.

Warrior batted him back. “We can’t outrun them.”

Cas couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Well, we can certainly try.”

“No, wait,” she said feverishly. Her eyes scanned their surroundings as if she could sense something. She wasn’t the only one. People around them were looking from ward-to-ward too. “*Come on, come on, come on,”* Warrior muttered over and over again under her breath.

“What are you doing?” shouted Cas, panic spiking his voice. The hooded figures were drawing nearer. They were almost at the boundary. He tried to pull Warrior away again, on the brink of running to save himself, when all of a sudden a great shudder reverberated from the ground beneath their feet.

Everyone around the wards at the boundary of Wayward stumbled. Everyone, that was, apart from Warrior – who wore a wicked, knowing smile, which grew steadily wider as she turned to face Cas. “Just watch for a second - you’ll see!”

Sure enough, a moment later, Cas did.

As the first tremor rocked the earth, the two purple-and-white hooded men struggled to stay standing. Their legs quaked and shook as they rode out another vibration, until, as soon as it passed, they surged forward, shoving brightly cloaked men, women and children aside, before their hungry eyes locked on Cas and Warrior in the same second everyone was knocked off their feet.

Cas’s stomach lurched as he was roughly thrown aside by what felt like an earthquake. *Great, just what they needed on top of everything.* Only it couldn’t have been an earthquake – everyone else milling about further into Wayward Town was still merrily going about their business, as if they hadn’t felt a thing. When Cas scrambled upright again, he was shocked to glance back across the boundary and see…*nothing.*

No brightly cloaked people. No hooded men. Everybody who had been outside the wards when the second, bigger impact had hit was gone. Just gone.

“Let’s go,” said Warrior, holding a hand out to help Cas up. “We need to keep moving. The Heretics will easily find us again soon.”

Cas barely had time to brush down his knees before Warrior was hurrying them along into the town once more, let alone look around. As he was towed along, he could’ve sworn the scenery around Wayward had changed. Cas caught a glimpse of what he thought were sand dunes and thundery clouds, but that was ridiculous. The sky above them in Wayward was still clear and sunny. Besides, the town couldn’t have moved…could it?

He must’ve just caught the countryside in a blur.

“Are you going to start explaining things yet or not?” said Cas.

He had the overwhelming urge to pinch himself. If this wasn’t a dream, maybe they really were in another world – nothing else could explain the impossibility of it all.

Warrior raised her chin to soak up Wayward’s warm and pleasant weather. “Wayward is like a checkpoint,” she said, calling the words out over her shoulder as they stalked deeper into the town. She let go of his hand. Cas rushed to catch up with her. “A halfway place between this world and the Normie world. And everywhere else. That’s how it got its name – *Wayward. Way* through the *wards*.”

“That’s very interesting,” Cas scoffed, “but –”

“Wayward has a tricky habit of moving about of its own accord. It jumps from place to place whenever it likes. If you’re coming here from the Normie world, you always get spat out wherever Wayward is at that present moment. And it’s the same if

you're coming here from anywhere in the Balance Lands. You *always* have to enter Wayward through the wards, that's how they can make sure that you're an Other."

"An *Other?*"

"Someone with threads of power, with magic, who belongs in this world. Not a Normie."

"Normie?"

"Normal folk." There was that annoying eye roll again. "Keep up. You can leave Wayward and go to anywhere in the Balance Lands you want, but even though no-one knows where Wayward will show up next, all the Heretics have got to do is imagine coming here and then they can use any waygate to reach it. That's why you need to pick up the pace, slowcoach."

Heretics. *Wards. Waygates. Balance Lands. Threads of power.*

The words coming out of Warrior's mouth were so strange that Cas didn't know where to begin. It was all gobbledygook. Poppycock. Drivel and nonsense.

"Step on it, dawdler," she chided, shoving Cas ahead of her. "Didn't you hear me? We haven't lost them yet. We need to get somewhere safe."

Safe, thought Cas, reminding himself of his priorities. *Yes, safe.* He didn't have a clue what was going on, but seeing as Warrior was the only one who apparently did, he had no choice but follow her. He matched her brisk pace, silently mystified, as they trekked along the sloping, cobblestone streets leading to the centre of town.

At first glance, Wayward looked like any other village. It had shops and taverns and children playing in the street – except there seemed to be mirrors and water fountains at every turn. Cas did a double-take when he saw a heavily bearded man walk towards a mirror resting upright outside a pub and…*disappear into it*. Nobody else seemed to notice the vanishing man, so Cas had almost convinced himself that he had imagined it – until he saw a woman walk straight into a mirror hung on the door of a bookshop. Then two friends in blue cloaks vanished after jumping into the basin of a fountain.

Was this how they had travelled here? Were the reflective surfaces some kind of –

"Portals," said Warrior, catching Cas staring and answering his unspoken question, as if she could read his mind. "Or as we like to call them, waygates."

Cas sucked in an incredulous breath.

"The Balance Lands is a perfect mirror image of the Normie world," Warrior explained, "down to every country, city and street – with a few twists of our own, like Wayward. That's why it only makes sense that reflections are how we can travel from that world to this one. Or move from place to place within the Balance Lands itself."

"And we came through – through one of those?" Cas mumbled, nodding towards a mirror set outside an old-fashion supermarket.

"Exactly," said Warrior, before casting him a half-threatening glare. "But don't go shouting about it from the rooftops – technically we're not supposed to travel through waygates alone until we're older. It's very hard to learn how to do. It would've been almost impossible for you on your own if I hadn't taken you with me."

"*Kidnapped* me, you mean," corrected Cas.

"*Saved your sorry butt,*" amended Warrior, raising an eyebrow. "You're welcome."

Ignoring her, Cas shuffled closer to the mirror outside the old-fashioned store to get a better look. Its reflection rippled and shimmered like it was alive. It made him lightheaded to stare at it. But then between one ripple and the next, he managed to catch a fleeting glimpse of the Normie version of London they had just come from, the dismal grey cityscape miraculously transformed into something magical in the mirror's gilded frame. Eagerly, Cas reached out a hand to touch it, only for the scene to shatter and disappear without a trace.

Two entire worlds – both this one and the Normie one – were *literally* at their fingertips.

They could go anywhere. Do anything.

Cas's eyes lit up excitedly, all worries and fears slipping away. "Where are we going?"

He had always wanted to see the world, even if he knew he wouldn't be able to remember any of it by tomorrow. He wanted to see the whimsical, watery canals of Venice and the dizzying heights of Machu Picchu in the mountains of Peru. They could climb Mount Everest, or watch the sun rise over the Egyptian pyramids, go white-water rafting in New Zealand, or drink tea surrounded by perfectly pink cherry blossoms in Japan.

“Funnily enough, the safest place for us is here,” said Warrior. She tugged Cas on. He cast a wistful glance back at the reflective surface as they reluctantly departed. “Somewhere else in Wayward, still inside the wards but outside the town. We’re almost there.”

Finally, they moved out of the village and onto the single, winding path again. The sun was beginning to set now, dipping blood orange behind the horizon, turning the sky bubblegum pink and blue. This time, the road led towards a large, lonely mansion set atop another steeper hill. A second rickety signpost with peeling letters read: *Wayward School.*

Like Wayward Town, the school was also surrounded by pearly stalagmite wards.

Warrior waggled her eyebrows and grinned wickedly as they approached. “Now this is where it really gets interesting,” she teased, her hair turning a mischievous shade of orange. “The wards outside Wayward may judge whether someone is an Other or not, but these ones judge if you have a bad soul or evil intentions. If you do, they light up red and trigger a warning alarm so loud that it could be heard in Balance London. The wardsmen will show up and whisk you away to Nowhere prison before you even have a chance to hold your hands up.” She winked. “Let’s hope you’re a good ‘un.”

Cas gulped. His stomach dropped into his shoes.

Oh no, he thought, as he walked towards the wards. This was bad. Very bad…what if he set them off…what if he was a terrible person or had done terrible things that he couldn’t remember...what if that was why the Heretics were chasing him…

Squeezing his eyes shut, Cas poked out his toe, stepped across the boundary and….

Nothing.

Only silence and a cool September breeze wrapped around him.

He peeled one eye open and saw Warrior clutching her sides with laughter. “Look at your face!”

But Cas didn’t care.

His stomach leapt back up into its rightful place and he uncurled his nervous fists. They had passed through the second set of wards. He hadn’t set them off. Whatever he had done inside the shop, whatever reason the hooded men had for hunting him, it couldn’t possibly be that bad.

“Relax, we’re safe now,” said Warrior, reassuringly patting his stiff shoulder. “Nobody can hurt us here.”

Now that they were on the other side of the wards, Cas allowed himself to fully take in the sight before them.

Wayward School was an old, magnificent building, more beautiful and grander than anything he could have ever dreamed. Everything about it made him surer than ever that this was a fantasy. The school was a cross between a stately home and a fortress, with climbing ivy winding over every cream stone wall and wrapping around two ornate marble columns, which bracketed the largest double doors he had ever seen. Cas and Warrior slipped between two heavy wrought iron gates shaped like the curling letters *W* and *S* and crossed a short, wooden bridge over a moat.

From there, Cas could see the whole grounds. There was a sky-high tower towards the east and where the moat ran down into a deep boating lake towards the west. Enormous trees and vines spilled out of the north wing of the building, creating a tunnel which led down to luscious green lawns and a dense forest, where a small, creaky greenhouse and little lodges sat dotted between the trees, puffing out plumes of homely charcoal smoke. Even further away in the distance, a small graveyard sat eerily undisturbed, surrounded by mausoleums. Before Cas knew it, they were climbing up the marble steps leading to the front doors.

Up close, the school doubled in size, at least five storeys high and incredibly wide. Above the doors, *Wayward School for Most Prestigious Others* gleamed in large, curling shiny script. As did the motto:

Vitas, Mortus, Terran, Ignuus, Aqus, Kaeli

~ Unus omni das stratera ~

A platinum school crest made up of five separate seals (two entangled birds; a leafy plant woven around a rock; a wave; a fireball and a swirl of air) sat below.

"Woah," Cas breathed, his mouth parted in surprise.

Warrior grinned. "Excellent goldfish impression," she commended. "But, yeah. I suppose this old hovel isn't half bad."

Half bad?

Cas had never seen anything so stunning in his life.

“Behind these doors lie the answers to all your questions,” Warrior said cryptically. “Everything that’s just happened. Everything you’ve ever wondered about yourself.”

Cas’s heart hammered like a jack rabbit in his chest. Warrior raised her hand and knocked on the door.

“Welcome to Wayward School,” she said. “Or as I like to call it, home.”