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# ARKSPIRE

## REVENGE OF THE MISFITS

*Books by Jamie Littler*

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JAMIE LITTLER




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For all the misfits

# THE ARCANISTS

tyrants
**Supreme ~~Rulers~~ of Arkspire**
of their own interests
**Selfless Protectors, Defenders of Justice,** Yeah, right.
**Beacons of Light Amid the Darkness**
They ARE the darkness!

## ~~THE SHROUDED~~ Killed by The Enigma.

The youngest of this generation of Arcanists. She is a shepherd to the dead, guiding them safely beyond the Veil. She can animate the shadows, turning them into weapons against the enemies of Arkspire. She is the leader of the Order of Midnight.

## ~~THE MAKER~~ Got by Cinder.

Inventor of the fantastic, creator of the impossible. He is the visionary mind behind the fantastical machines that have aided in making the city of Arkspire so prosperous, his manufactories gifting the city power and light. He is the leader of The Order of Invention.

## ~~THE TEMPEST~~ Another point to Cinder.

With his power over weather, he brings the rain and sun needed for Arkspire to thrive, whilst turning the wrath of the storm on those who would threaten its walls. He is a

guardian of learning, a shining light of wisdom in a world of dark ignorance. He is the leader of the Order of Radiance.

## THE ENIGMA

*Still at large – Arkspires now totally in his slimy grip.*

A mystery wrapped in a conundrum, he is a master of illusions, a bringer of whimsy and entertainment to the city. He has the ability to unlock a doorway to any location in the world, the giant gateways of this district providing vital passage beyond the Badlands to the fertile lands that feed Arkspire. He is the leader of the Order of Gateways.

*Hidden in the shadows and waaaaay more dangerous than she seems – maybe even worse than The Enigma, if that's possible...*

## THE WATCHER

With the power to see through the eyes of the animals she can command with a thought, The Watcher keeps watch over the city – an ever-vigilant guard against the threats outside and in. She has not been seen in person for many decades, so long now, in fact, that few remember what she looks like. Many assume this is deliberate, a part of a plan no doubt in aid of the city and all who live within it. She is the leader of the Order of Iris.

*Three down, two to go!*

ISSUED BY THE ORDER OF GATEWAYS

# ★ WANTED ★





## JUNIPER & ELODIE BELL,

### FOR TREASONOUS ACTS, INCLUDING:

- Aiding in the assassination of Their Worships The Maker, The Tempest and The Shrouded
- Attempting to Assassinate His Worship The Enigma with an Illegally Summoned Demonic Entity

**SIZEABLE REWARD FOR THE CAPTURE OF EITHER GIRL**
**ALL HAIL HIS WORSHIP THE ENIGMA!**

May prosperity follow the Order of Gateways and all those under its protection!

**LONG MAY ARKSPIRE STAND!**





# 1

## DESERT GHOSTS

The dry earth cracked beneath the girl's boots. She darted between dust-covered boulders and crumbling ruins, pausing only long enough to check the coast was clear.

Juniper Bell was being followed; she knew it in her gut. And not by a person. This thing, whatever it was, wasn't human. At least not entirely. She was pretty sure she was being hunted by a Shade.

The Badlands were a harsh place at the best of times. If it wasn't the merciless sun doing its very best to scorch you from its sands, it was the freezing

nights making you question whether the world had ever been warm at all, even once. Mirages and hallucinations weren't uncommon out here, but Juniper knew this was different.

She caught quick movements out of the corner of her eye.

Something slinking in the shadows, close but never seen.

Strange behaviour for a Shade. Normally they'd just swarm mindlessly towards the closest victim. They weren't usually this . . . *thinky*. But after a lifetime of avoiding danger on the streets of the Dregs, Juniper had learned to trust her instincts.

'I know you're out there,' she whispered as she ran. 'You sneaky-ghosty-stalker-thingy.'

She didn't appreciate being hunted, not one bit.

Her plate was full enough, thank you very much.

She kept running, under the shadow of a weathered bridge. Whether it was a Shade or some other nasty, Juniper didn't intend to hang around to find out.

She could feel eyes watching her every move, mirroring her footsteps like a hungry shadow. As swift as a desert fox, Juniper pressed her back against a crumbling stone wall. Peeking round the corner, she scanned her surroundings.

No obvious sign of danger.

Just a barren landscape stretching on forever, punctuated with the colossal carcasses of ancient towers rising out of the dunes like the sun-bleached bones of some forgotten monster. The remnants of the great Arcanist empire.

Sweat trickled unpleasantly down her back. It was still warm despite the setting sun, but she had to return to her camp before nightfall. It was the only remotely safe place in this hostile land.

She could see the top of the tower she'd been using for shelter, rising above a ridge dead ahead. It wasn't far. Soon she'd be safe. But those eyes. Those hidden eyes. She could feel them boring into her, getting under her skin and making it crawl.

'You got this, Juni,' she told herself, a phrase she'd taken to saying more and more recently, as if repeating it would somehow make it true.

One last deep breath.

She ran harder.

It wasn't easy, the uneven sandy ground stealing her momentum, but she forced herself forward. She leaped over the ridge, surfing down the scree towards the ruin she'd called home for the last month. Slamming into the barricade she'd placed in the entranceway, she shifted the piled-up furniture just enough to slip past into the cool darkness of the circular tower.

Chest heaving, her breath coming hard and fast, she stole a glance back outside.

Nothing.

Or was there?

Stones tumbled down the ridge she'd just come from, though whether she'd caused it she didn't know. She peered closer. The air shimmered in the heat, sand blowing into dust devils.

Then came the gasping wail.

It was sharp and pained, like a soul crying out in despair.

Encouraged by the ice spilling down her spine, Juniper shoved the barricade back into place. Of course she wasn't sure piled-up furniture could stop a vengeful spirit, but if pulling your bedcovers over your head worked, it was worth a shot.

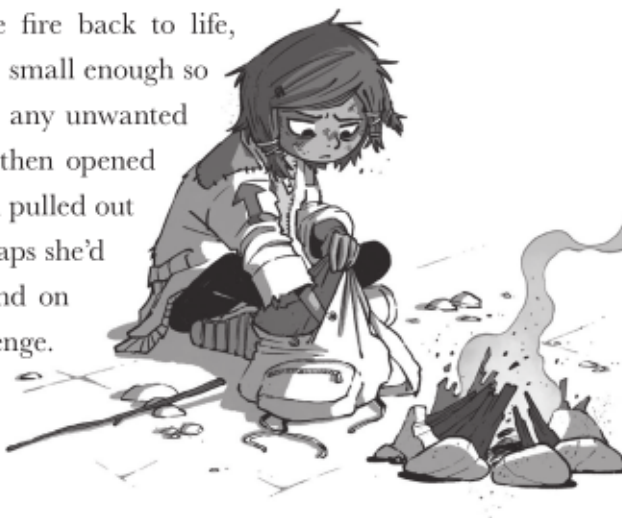
With the door as secure as it could be, Juniper ran up the winding stone staircase, eager to put as much distance between her and the outside as possible. The tower was open to the darkening sky above, its roof long lost to time. While it may not sound like something you'd particularly want from a shelter, it did mean she could peek out from the top, using the place as a lookout. It was one of the main reasons she'd chosen it as her base. The ability to see approaching danger was invaluable out here, Juniper was learning. The many mutated

predators that stalked the desert were bad enough, but the roving bands of smugglers were even worse. After all, a sliced throat was a much simpler way to convince a witness not to reveal their illegal activities to the wardens or rival gangs than a convincing argument.

Juniper peeked over the wall and searched for the source of the bone-chilling wail.

She could see Shades in the distance, but they were too far away to have been the cause. They glowed faintly, like eerie blue lanterns drifting through the ruins, endlessly searching for those who'd stolen their bodies. The usual revulsion she felt at the sight of them was softened with sadness now. She knew it wasn't their fault they were like this.

Convinced the Shades were unaware of her presence and unable to see any other sign of immediate danger, Juniper allowed herself to slump down beside the campfire she'd made, exhaustion washing over her. She stoked the fire back to life, ensuring it was small enough so as not to draw any unwanted attention. She then opened her satchel and pulled out the meagre scraps she'd managed to find on that day's scavenge.



A gristly bit of jerky and a hunk of bread almost as hard as the rock she'd found it on, thrown from an overturned smugglers' cart that had been attacked by some horror Juniper was too tired to try to imagine.

And this had been a good day.

Her belly grumbled, aching nearly as much as her sore limbs. After a small wrestling match, she managed to break the bread into pieces and did her best to chew a chunk without losing another tooth. Juniper's long weather-beaten coat rustled and a small furry face poked out of a deep pocket, its nose twitching.

It was McGrubbins, the pet rat of her oldest friend Madame Adie. Juniper had been looking after him ever since Madame Adie had been . . . had been . . .

Her heart clenched, painful and cold.

Since she'd been *taken*.

Juniper handed McGrubbins a chunk of bread. 'Here you go, buddy. Savour it – it actually tastes like real grub, unlike that stick we had yesterday.'

He squeaked gratefully.

She smiled, then looked up at the darkening sky. Towers loomed over her like judges about to sentence her for her many crimes. Each one had once belonged to an Arcanist of the past, known to the people of Arkspire as the Betrayers. Each one a power-hungry tyrant, and each one dead, murdered by each other's greed.

'Guess I got my Arcanist tower in the end,' Juniper said bitterly, looking round at the broken, forgotten shell that surrounded her. It was a sorry place, perfect for the leader of the failed Order of Misfits. 'Never give up on your dreams, that's what they say, right?'

McGrubbins made a sympathetic squeak.

From the few dry, brittle books Juniper had found scattered about the tower, she'd learned that her new home had once belonged to an Arcanist known as The Walker.

*Couldn't have been all that impressive if tower size is anything to go by*, Juniper had thought, as most of the surrounding towers dwarfed her own. And still, they looked like sandcastles compared to the five great towers Arkspire was built around.

It was always a competition with the Arcanists. Always a race to power, stepping on the broken backs of those weaker than themselves to reach greater heights.

'What do you reckon The Walker's powers were?' Juniper asked McGrubbins, whose ears twitched in response, his cheeks bulging with breadcrumbs. 'D'ya reckon he could walk really fast? Or really far? Or maybe he could walk backwards without looking where he was going?'

McGrubbins wiggled his nose and took another bite of bread.

'Hey, it's not as easy as it sounds! I once tried it and ended up with my head in a mop bucket.'

McGrubbins seemed unimpressed.

'Yeah, I guess you're right.' She tried taking a bite of her own food. 'No wonder he was taken out if that was all he could do.'

There had once been a hundred Arcanists, but now only two remained.

The Enigma and The Watcher.

*Two too many*, thought Juniper. She'd been so close to getting rid of them. But she'd been forced to run, and now she was stuck out here in the Badlands with no way back.

Anger heated her blood, providing fuel to keep going where food did not.

Finished with his bread, McGrubbins squeaked his thanks and scurried back into the folds of Juniper's coat.



'Not feeling talkative, huh?' Juniper asked, only just managing to hide her dismay. She hadn't spoken to another person in a month. Not that she didn't appreciate McGrubbins's company. He was a very distinguished rodent. It was more the fact she had too much to say to the rat these days. It couldn't be healthy, could it? Talking so much to something that never answered back? Maybe she should invite the Shade that was stalking her inside, after all?

Maybe then she wouldn't feel quite so lonely.

She tried not to think of the night she'd lost Madame Adie and so much more. She tried to ease the sensation of her heart being crushed, the feeling she got whenever she thought back to The Maker's funeral celebration. That awful, awful night when everything had gone so terribly wrong. But try as she might, the memories wouldn't be ignored, and the encroaching night felt all the darker for it.



# 2

# STARGAZING

Juniper struggled to sleep. She just couldn't get those she'd left behind out of her mind.

Papa's quiet, thoughtful advice.

Laughing and scheming with Thea, who always had a smile to share.

Everard worrying that his perfectly messy hair was messy in an imperfect kind of way.

She even missed Elodie, her twin sister who couldn't have been more different to her, despite their identical features. She missed Elodie's determination, her drive to make things right. Heck, she even longed to hear one of Elodie's snobby lectures, if only because it showed someone cared enough about her to complain.

Out here Juniper felt forgotten.

As though she no longer existed.

She dreaded what might've happened to them all. She'd gone against their advice, trying to save Arkspire from the Arcanists herself using an unpredictable demon monster they'd tried to warn her about. OK, maybe the demon monster was kind of a friend. They'd named him and everything. Cinder. And he'd been connected to Juniper in ways she didn't really want to think about now.

Perhaps unsurprisingly she'd failed (pretty spectacularly too). She'd been labelled a traitor, a public enemy, and now her loved ones would surely be paying the price.

Had they been arrested? Would they be used as bait to lure Juniper out? Or had they gone into hiding like her? And scariest of all: was Elodie still next in line to Inherit The Watcher? The thought alone made her feel physically sick.

She turned over on the hard floor, staring up at the star-speckled sky.

Were they looking up at the same stars, thinking of her too?

Or were they glad she was gone after what she'd done to them all?

'No!' Juniper said aloud. 'It wasn't my fault! It was *them*.'

It was the Arcanists who'd threatened their lives,

who'd murdered Nyx and Madame Adie. It was the Arcanists who'd been crushing Arkspire under their boots for a thousand years – who'd hid the terrible dark secret that they stole the bodies of the city's children just so they could continue clinging to life. So long as they got what they wanted, they didn't care that the ritual created the vengeful Shades that plagued the city. They didn't care how many died. They didn't care that their actions had killed Mama.

The Enigma was bad enough, but it was The Watcher who was truly dangerous.

She was up to something, something big; Juniper could feel it in her bones.

She'd made a fool out of Juniper without ever even revealing her face. She had The Enigma dancing to her tune, even if he was too proud to admit it. She even had Elodie wrapped round her finger, whereas Elodie could barely stand to look at Juniper, her own sister. Elodie was next in line to Inherit The Watcher's powers – unwittingly allowing The Watcher to steal her body and soul.

'None of this would've happened without those slimeballs!' Juniper yelled, startling McGrubbins. She threw what was left of her bread at the wall.

Incredibly it chipped the stone.

She gritted her teeth. Well, those slimeballs hadn't

counted on one thing. If Juniper was anything, it was stubborn. And she wasn't giving up.

Mama wouldn't want her to.

Juniper would make the Arcanists pay for what they'd done. She swore it to herself, to Mama and the stars above.

She'd return to Arkspire and rescue Elodie from The Watcher's clutches, proving she was still a sister to be proud of. She'd avenge Mama and Madame Adie and all the lives ruined by the Arcanists. She'd clear her name and save her friends and family. And then the hurt she'd seen in Thea and Elodie's eyes that night would be nothing but a distant memory. Instead of looking at her like she was someone they no longer recognized, they would pull her into a big hug. They would thank her for saving them, for saving the whole city and every Inheritor who'd have had their lives stolen from them by the Arcanists' greed.

'I'll make things better,' she whispered. 'I'll make this right . . .' She wasn't sure who she was trying to convince, but as no one was listening, she suspected it was herself.

She shivered, her small fire doing little to keep the growing chill of the night at bay. Out of habit she made to hide her face away in the red scarf as she always did when she needed comfort. It had once belonged to

Mama – the last keepsake she had of hers. Only it wasn't round her neck where it could usually be found.

She'd lent it to someone else, and that brought to mind the missing piece of the puzzle. A very important yet insanely dangerous piece that was key to Juniper's victory. Fishing through her satchel, she retrieved the small spellbound mirror she always kept with her.

'Cinder?' she whispered. 'You there?'

There was no reply. No shift in the glass. Just her own tired face looking back at herself, channels drawn through the dirt on her cheeks by tears.

If there was one person guaranteed not to be thinking kind thoughts about Juniper, it was Cinder. And, really, who could blame him? He'd spent centuries imprisoned within a magical mirror thanks to the Arcanists, and the experience had driven him half mad. He'd rather have died than go back into captivity. But Juniper had imprisoned him anyway, despite promising to stand by his side.

But she'd had to act, right?

What was she supposed to have done? Let him destroy the whole city in his quest for revenge?

Because he was certainly powerful enough to do it. He was The Visitor, after all, the god-like being who'd brought magic into this world in the first place. It was a revelation Juniper would've found hard to believe, had

she not seen Cinder's power for herself. It had been terrifying.

But he was still her friend.

At least she hoped he was.

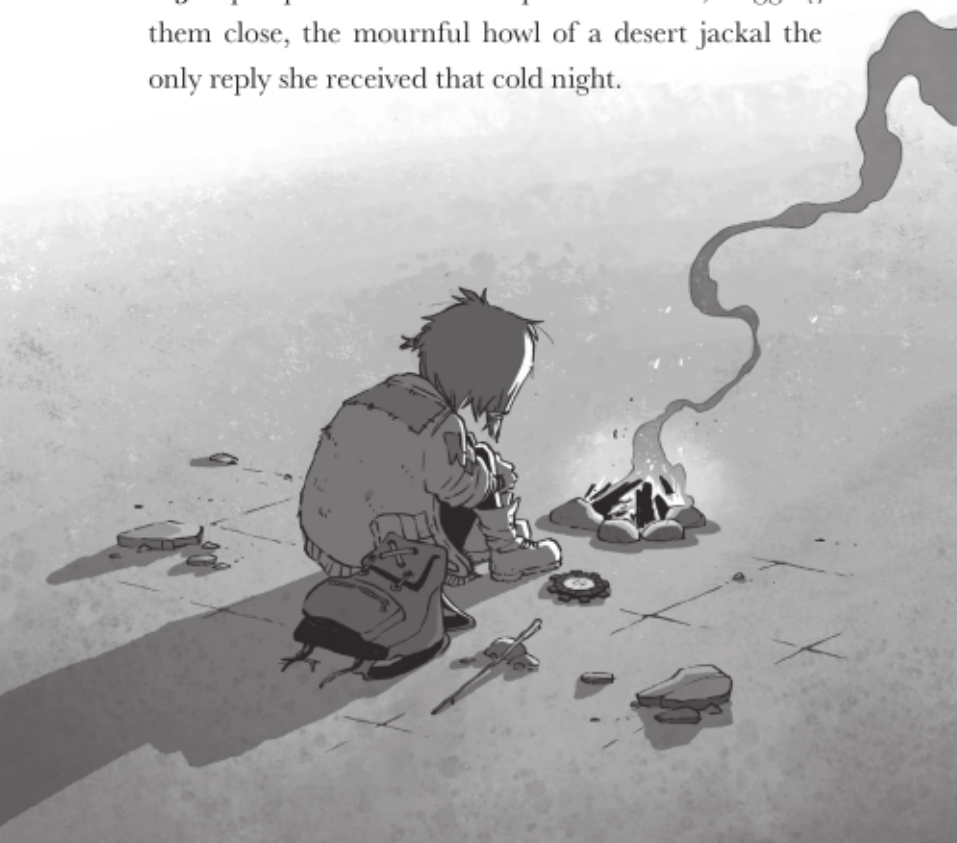
'Please answer me,' Juniper pleaded.

She waited. Still nothing.

'I – I need to hear your stupid voice. Even if it's just to have a go at me. Anything. Just . . . please . . .' She swallowed the lump in her throat. 'Please don't leave me alone like this.'

But the mirror only revealed her own reflection.

Juniper pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them close, the mournful howl of a desert jackal the only reply she received that cold night.





# 3

## ECHOES OF THE PAST

In spite of how incredibly dangerous it was, life in the Badlands could be surprisingly tedious. The Arcanists had seen to that centuries ago, scorching the world of its natural beauty during their stupid, selfish civil war. Nothing seemed to be able to grow in the echoes of their deadly magic, save for hideous mutated creatures loping and scratching for scraps.

Wolf-like monstrosities with too many jaws and more tongues than seemed strictly necessary.

Ape-shaped creatures who could manipulate their shadows to hunt their prey.



Horse-things that screamed out into the night and could phase through stone.

Juniper's days generally consisted of avoiding said impressive collection of horrors while hunting for water or scrounging the remnants of smuggler camps for food. It was slightly disturbing how normal she found prising a mouldy hunk of bread from the hand of a corpse now.

Turned out this wasn't the first time Juniper had been among these haunted spires, though she hadn't known it at the time. She'd been amazed to discover it was the exact same place The Enigma had brought her on the night of The Maker's funeral celebration.

The night everything had gone so terribly wrong.

Not that her brief familiarity with this region helped. The place was like a maze, and mutants weren't the only things she had to look out for. Lingering magic from the civil war still plagued the land, flickering to life without warning, continuing to ruin what little was left.

Fiery rain.

Orbs of light that would crush anything close in a well of intense gravity.

Voices lifted on the wind that could drive you to insanity.

Juniper never travelled too far from the paths she'd learned were safe, or at least as safe as you could be out here. It wasn't like she'd even have the energy to anyway, what with the small amount of food and water she managed to salvage.

And this was her daily schedule. Water, food, avoid death. Rinse and repeat, day in, day out.

'Till I figure out a way back into the city, I guess this is my lot,' Juniper mumbled. 'Scrounging for scraps like a rat.' She turned to McGrubbins who sat on her shoulder. 'No offence.'

'None taken,' she assumed he answered.

Yeah, she really needed to talk to a human, and soon.

She kind of hoped The Watcher was spying on her now, through the eyes of the small desert critters that lived out here. Seeing how she survived, despite the odds. How she kept going, just to be obnoxious. Just in case she was, Juniper would make rude hand gestures at any rodents or birds she saw.

'Nothin' personal,' Juniper would say. 'Just tryna say hello to an old friend.'

And so it was that Juniper set out that day, early in the morning when the sun wasn't too hot, to carry out her well-practised routine. She threw a particular hand gesture at a passing pigeon as she left just for luck.

*

She saw them before they saw her.

About an hour into her scavenge, she heard the telltale squeak of a wagon wheel rumbling between the ruins and ducked behind a wind-beaten archway. The wagon was pulled by two scraggly horses and accompanied by at least a dozen relic hunters, each as tough as boots and as hard as weeks-old desert bread. They wore wide-brimmed hats and tattered bandanas, revolvers holstered at their hips.

'Tungsten's crew,' Juniper whispered, recognizing the hammer tattoo each of them wore. If Arkspire had a criminal kingpin, it was Boss Tungsten – self-named Duke of Crime, High Lord Executioner and Marquis of All Things Dubious and Unsavoury.

'Bleedin' sparks have spooked the mules half to death!' one of the smugglers complained while doing his best to calm the animals as they stomped and snorted, their eyes wild and white.

Juniper had seen the 'sparks' he spoke of – a crackling magical storm a few miles from the path she'd taken earlier.

'Useless beasts,' said another.

'You won't be sayin' that if the horses bolt an' leave us stranded in this Visitor-forsaken place,' the first grumbled.

'An' you won't be complainin' when you get your cut

from today's haul. Now do your horse whisperin' an' let us find what we came to find!'

'Ain't nothin' worth our lives,' the first smuggler grumbled as his comrades slinked into the surrounding ruins.

Juniper cursed under her breath. They were blocking her tried-and-tested route to a creek she'd discovered. It was the only path she knew of that wasn't prowling with monster jackals and acid-spitting desert cats. Clearly Tungsten's crew knew this too.

'No choice but to go round,' she conceded, eyeing the stairways and bridges that connected the towers like stone cobwebs. She turned to McGrubbins. 'Whaddya say, you up for a climb?' He absolutely did not look up for a climb. 'Yeah, I hear you, bud. Always gotta make things harder, Tungsten's boys . . .'

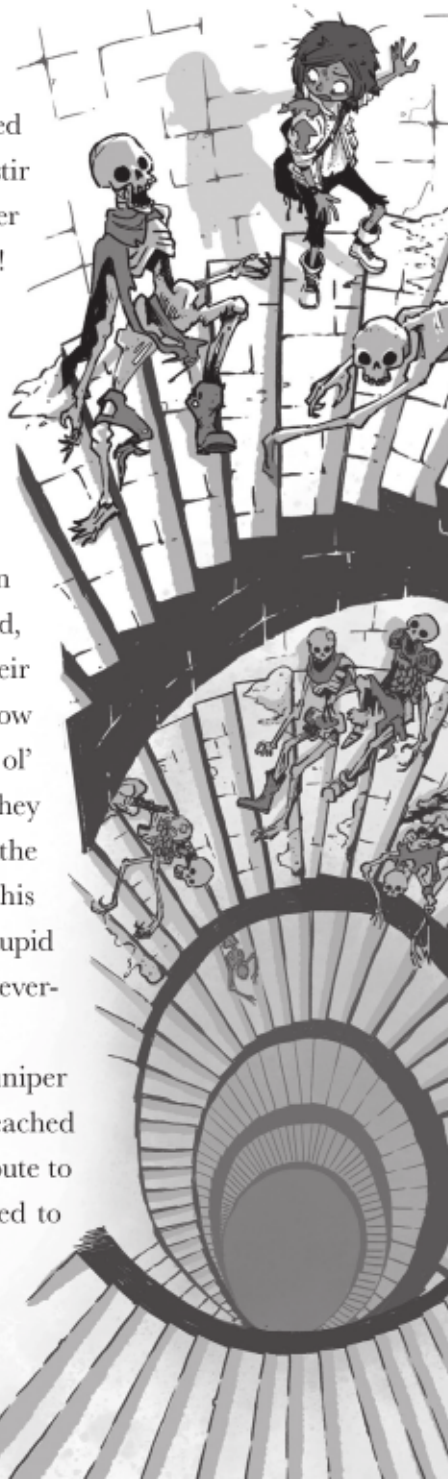
Juniper spotted a narrow tower with steps to a bridge that passed over the gang. They were as steep and difficult to climb as they looked. Normally she'd be in her element, but she didn't usually roof-run on a diet of breadcrumbs. She slid her shoulder along the curved wall for support, her chest heaving for breath, her clothes soaked with sweat. Her pathetically weak limbs threatened to give out at any moment.

'What say . . . we swap round . . . and you carry

me for a bit?' Juniper asked McGrubbins. He didn't stir from within the shade of her coat pocket. 'Oh, c'mooon! Your little arms are stronger than they look!'

The skeletons she discovered during the climb didn't fill her with confidence either. They lay slumped on steps and in broken alcoves as she passed, watching her climb with their mocking grins. She knew how they felt; she fancied a good ol' die right about then. Were they the long-dead remains of the people who'd once lived in this ancient city, or people stupid enough to climb these never-ending stairs?

After far longer than Juniper would've liked to admit, she reached the bridge that crossed the route to the creek below. She collapsed to the floor, the world spinning.



*'Visitor,* I –' she started, before catching herself. It felt weird, using Cinder's true name to swear oaths and mutter curses.

Force of habit.

'Man,' she corrected herself, 'I have *got* to have a proper meal. I can't go on like this . . .' McGrubbins poked his nose out, sniffling encouragingly. 'Sorry, I haven't actually got any food. What's that? Yeah, you're right . . .' She reached for the ledge and hauled herself up on to trembling legs. 'Ain't gonna find anything loungin' round here either . . .'

The whole bridge looked worryingly damaged, with cracks Juniper could've easily stuck her hand into tracing through the stonework. In fact, the surrounding towers looked wrecked too. Bridges lay collapsed on top of mountains of rubble and broken masonry, as if something had torn through it recently.

It was then that it hit her, realization filling her veins with ice.

She knew this place.

It was the exact bridge that The Enigma had taken them to on that night. The bridge where she'd been attacked by The Tempest, only surviving thanks to Cinder, who'd ended his evil for good.

But that meant it was also the place where . . .

She saw it before her thoughts could catch up.

Her heart skipped a beat, then went into overdrive to make up for it.

It was the thing she'd been dreading stumbling upon, more than mutated predators, relic hunters or magic storms.

Madame Adie's body.

