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Opening extract from

Sorrowline

Written by

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Published by

Random House Children's Books

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Sorrowline

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ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

First published in 2013 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN: 978 1 849 39523 6

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Prologue

PROPHECY

Rouland wiped the blood from the length of his sword on the heavy curtains of the Parliament Chamber.

Around him, splayed on the floor, were the Ealdormen of Ealdwyc, their faces frozen into hideous death masks commemorating the terror and anguish they'd felt as Rouland had impaled each one in turn.

He walked amongst his victims, stopping to close their petrified eyes. He owed them that much, he supposed. These men and women had formed the High Assembly of the First World, representatives of the noble families that had reigned for centuries. They had been his peers. Some, he had even considered his friends.

The sword glowed softly in his hand. It had been a long time since it had feasted like this. Rouland felt its impatient tug and made a mental note to place it somewhere safe. It was getting far too strong, but he knew he would need it, if the Prophecy was to be believed.

The Prophecy. Rouland cursed to himself. It was because of the damned Prophecy that he had been forced to annihilate the Parliament. He felt anger surge up through him and he kicked the nearest body. It was Durer. Once, years ago, he had been his closest ally, their friendship sealed in battle. But Durer's voice had become

the loudest in dissent. He had openly challenged Rouland's term as Prime Ealdorman. In retaliation, Rouland had killed everyone in the Parliament, saving Durer till the end. But murdering old friends had not held the pleasure he had thought it would. He looked at the bodies, one on top of another, and he felt suddenly alone.

All because of the Prophecy.

The door clicked open and a dark figure entered, a lean woman in a close-fitting suit of armour. Rouland felt his mood lift at the sight of his faithful servant, Captain Alda de Vienne, and his wicked beautiful face cracked with a smile.

'I'm done,' he said unemotionally. 'Hang the bodies on the gates so all can see them.'

Captain de Vienne nodded as she inspected the room.

'You understand why?' Rouland asked, his tense exterior eased in the private company of de Vienne.

'The Prophecy,' de Vienne replied. 'It is upon us at last?'

Rouland fell into the high chair at the end of the Parliament Chamber and threw his legs over the side. 'It is sometime in September 1940 – everyone is in agreement on that point – And the month and year are upon us now. I have studied all of Hafgan's work, even those volumes lost to us, and if my calculations are correct the Prophecy will begin today. I am convinced of it.'

'The boy from upstream will arrive today?'

‘So the Prophecy tells us: a boy from upstream, from the future, will come among us and bring an end’ — he gestured around him — ‘to all this.’ It was more than logical deduction, Rouland conceded to himself. There was a growing feeling, an apprehension deep within. He could feel the shifting tides of destiny all about him, coming together into a crescendo of events. Things were happening.

His eyes shifted quickly. ‘I will not allow my reign to end. You and your sisters must begin your search. He will be with us soon.’

Captain de Vienne bowed, then left Rouland alone with the corpses.

The grand chamber became silent. Rouland was aware of the sword again, glowing, throbbing. He pressed it into the nearest body and allowed it to feed from the last scraps of life-force before he stood to leave.

Now his great mind began to calculate the multitude of events that could unfold from this moment onwards. Then, for a brief instant, he thought about the boy. Somewhere upstream, ahead of him in time, was *the boy*. The boy from the Prophecy. Rouland tried to picture him, to imagine what he might look like, what year he might live in. He realised the futility of his mind-game and felt foolish for trying. Rational thought took over again and he returned to his plans.

He pulled the sword from the body and stared into the

shadows. An elongated caped figure grew out of the dark corner. As it bowed its shrouded head to Rouland, a trail of smoke drifted from within its feathered hood.

'Come,' Rouland said to the Grimnire as he walked out of the Parliament Chamber, 'we have much work to do.'

1

DEPARTURES

The day Jack Morrow left this world was abnormal in its beauty. The summer sun painted the grey city in vivid colours that hid its rot and decay. Yet in spite of it all Jack felt a sickening anxiety gnawing at him. Today was not like all the other mundane days. Today was different.

'What happened to you?' Jack's father stared at him from the entrance of the cemetery, his face a mix of concern and anger.

Jack's exhausted mind tried to conjure up something convincing, something his father might actually believe, other than the truth. But his father was an expert at the little lie. He could tell them with conviction, and spot them in others with ease. Lying was pointless, he decided.

'I'm all right,' he mumbled.

His father frowned. 'Who was it?'

'Dad, I'm fine.'

Jack's father stared at the bruise on his son's face, at the smear of blood and sweat that marked his T-shirt. 'Was it Blaydon again?'

‘It’s nothing.’ Jack thought about his missing mobile phone, stolen in between punches, and shuddered. His father had bought it for him and Jack couldn’t face telling him about it yet. And this wasn’t the first time. He seemed to attract the attention of the school bullies more often than he deserved. He stood apart from his schoolmates, had never fully been allowed into their trust.

Inside the walls of the old graveyard, hidden in mournful shadows, the air was cooler. The mature trees repelled the warmth of the bloated sun, while all around the grey sea of London’s high-rise buildings soaked up the fleeting moment of colour. Not too far away the laughter of children’s play wafted in on the dry air, momentarily overpowering the perpetual drone of traffic. It was the last joyous bellow of summer, the last moment before Jack’s life unravelled.

They walked on, neither speaking. Jack’s stomach was in knots. The moment was coming when he’d have to tell his father about the phone. They sat at their usual bench, on autopilot. In front of them was the grave, the headstone that pulled them together when everything else was trying to drag them apart.

‘I have to go away for a while,’ Jack’s father said eventually, his voice filled with a cool apprehension.

Suddenly Jack’s worries over the phone were forgotten. ‘Away? Where to?’ Though he already knew the answer. He had watched and listened these past few months and

he knew the dirty secret at the heart of his tiny, deformed family: his father was a small-time thief – and not a very good one, by all accounts. The visits by the police, by lawyers and social workers, could only mean one possible outcome: his father was going to prison.

'How long are you going away for this time?' he asked.

'A long time, son.'

'Why? Why can't you just be a normal dad?'

'It's complicated. Grown-up stuff. You'll understand one day, Jo-Jo.'

'Dad, I'll be thirteen in a fortnight.' Jack flushed as hot angry blood filled his cheeks. No one called him Jo-Jo any more. It had been his mother's nickname for him, and the name had died with her.

Overhead, an aeroplane banked lazily towards City Airport, whining and growling as it slowed for landing. Jack looked up at the cobalt sky and the blinding light forced his pupils to shrink to a tight dot under his dark eyebrows. He was tall for his age, taller than most in his class, and his wiry frame made him appear uncomfortable and awkward, no matter how he sat. His cherry-brown hair needed cutting; it was too thick, too long for this heat. Besides, its uncontrollable wave was all the more apparent the longer it got. But he'd lost interest in his appearance. It was easier just to stop looking in the mirror.

Jack's father put his hand on his son's shoulder. 'You remember your Aunty Lorna? You met her a few years ago.'

‘No,’ Jack lied. He wasn’t going to make this easy.

‘Well, she remembers you, and she’s looking forward to you staying with her in Brighton while I’m away. It won’t be so bad . . . ’ Jack heard the doubt in his father’s strained voice.

‘Dad, I don’t want to go. I don’t want to move in with anyone else. I want to stay with you.’ Involuntary tears rolled down Jack’s red cheeks.

‘You can’t! Don’t make this any harder than it already is.’ Jack’s father stood quickly and paced up and down the avenue of graves. ‘I’m sorry, I have no choice. Aunty Lorna’s coming tonight to pick you up. We need to get all your things packed before she gets here.’

In the past Jack had stayed with his nan, but she had been ill since last year and they’d moved her into a nursing home. She was too old, too forgetful, too ill to take care of him any more.

He rubbed the tears from his cheeks, then watched them fall into the coarse dirt below, turning it a dark brown. His world was crumbling around him.

‘You won’t be able to come here for a long time, Jack. But me and your mum will still be with you. You know that, don’t you, son?’

‘Mum’s dead.’

Anger flashed over his father’s face. He opened his mouth as if to shout at Jack, then his face unravelled. He walked over to the granite headstone. ‘Look at your mum’s

grave. Remember it. Picture it in your head. No matter how far apart we all are, we can still remember being here, together. Do you see?'

Jack didn't understand. Everything seemed so pointless and trivial. He looked up at his mother's headstone. He already knew every curve, every letter. He'd spent hours sitting beside it. Sometimes he'd talk to her as if she was there with him, listening. Some days – the bad days – it was difficult to picture her face. He would fight to hold onto his vague memories of her, yet still they fell away, like a precious thing slipping through his open hand. He wanted to hold onto her for ever, to keep every image vivid, every colour clear, every smell pure. But when things got really bad, when it felt like he'd forgotten who she was, he'd come here to be close to her again.

Jack left his dad on the bench and walked towards the stone, his legs feeling weak and heavy. He knelt next to the headstone and let his fingers trace the letters embedded in the rock. There was a flash of white light deep inside his mind, sudden and cool, like a heavy curtain pulled away from a brightly lit window. Jack recoiled. For a moment he had felt he was falling into the stone, sinking through its surface. The sensation was followed by an empty sadness, as if his body longed to continue into the gravestone. The experience was shocking and exhilarating and he looked to his father, but

his dad was still just sitting on the bench, lighting a cigarette, oblivious to his son's encounter.

Jack's hand moved back towards the stone, almost of its own will, making contact with the hard surface again. The flash returned, cooler and stronger this time, and a yearning to enter the stone flowed from the back of his mind, outwards to the rest of his body. Tears fell uncontrollably as new memories of his mother erupted in his mind. He saw himself, as if through her eyes, new-born and fragile. He felt the weight of his tiny body cocooned in her slim arms. Suddenly it was his second birthday and he could smell her subtle perfume mixed with cigarette smoke. Jack stared at this forgotten child, this echo from his own life seen from a new perspective. He wondered how he could remember this.

Then it was Christmas Day, the taste of burned potatoes caught his throat, and he heard her laughter. *Her* laughter, like it was yesterday. Every instant of that day burst onto his senses like an explosion. It was the last Christmas they had spent together as a family, before things had fallen apart. Everything came at once. All the moments of his life jostled in front of him, unbidden, viewed through the prism of his mother's mind. It overwhelmed him.

He slumped onto the stone, its hard surface rubbing against his cheek. Already, these memories seemed to be slipping away. He wanted to follow them, follow them to

their source. His mother was so close, all he had to do was to reach out and she would be there.

Jack reached.

Jack's father shivered; the air had abruptly turned cooler. The sun disappeared behind a thickening band of cloud, and the summer seemed to go with it.

He looked up. Jack wasn't at the gravestone. He stood quickly, searching in every direction at once and his stomach lurched as he realised with a sinking dread that he was completely alone.