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Opening extract from

The Mortal Knife

Written by

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Prologue



verywhere he looked, the dead were waiting.

Luc Mortson sighed and stared around the Hinterland, allowing himself one moment to stop and breathe, before he resumed his work. Anything longer than that was a luxury he couldn't afford when hundreds of souls stood beside him in the Hinterland, staring at their own bodies and trying to understand that their physical lives were over.

Why did these jobs always seem to happen at night? Luc stifled a yawn and watched his father Nathanial working, dressed in his usual suit and camel-hair coat. A landslide had engulfed an Italian village overnight, killing hundreds as they slept. The Mortsons had been at home in London, tucked up in bed when their death senses flared. There was no choice but to get up, get dressed and get out of the door. After all, they were Lumen – the guardians of the souls of the dead.

Nathanial had his hand on the shoulder of a middle-aged man, his mouth close to the man's ear, chanting the directions the soul needed for his journey onto the Unknown Roads. Luc

could see the soul's face relaxing and knew that any second the man would step through his Light and say goodbye to the physical world. Sure enough, a moment later the man moved forward and disappeared, leaving only his crushed body behind.

Luc winced at the sight of the bodies, fidgeting with the keystone round his neck. Most humans couldn't see the Hinterland until they were dead – which was just as well really. It would only freak them out. The Hinterland was another realm, a borderland between physical life and the next life. It lay on top of the physical world like a clear film covering a map, allowing souls a one-way view of the world they were leaving behind. Most souls were happy enough to go, once they realised their souls had plenty of life in them yet.

Nathanial came over and gave him a brief smile. 'We're getting there. Most of the fast-response Lumen are here now. You can rest when we're finished. Go and help Aron.'

Luc nodded and searched for his older brother. When a big disaster like this struck, specialist Lumen had to get there fast and give directions to the souls before they wandered into their Lights, confused and frightened. None of them had expected to die tonight; none of them were prepared mentally. If they went through their Lights without directions it was easy to get lost on the other side. Fast-response Lumen came from every part of the globe to prevent this.

As Nathanial moved away, Luc called after him. 'Where's Adam?'

Nathanial's jaw tightened. 'He's over there sitting down. He's . . . indisposed.'

Luc's eyes roamed through the crowd until they locked on a

small figure huddling by what used to be a house. His younger brother was bent double, retching. 'Oh right. Nothing new there then.' He grinned. What was it with Adam? He was a Mortson like the rest of them. He had the same blood and the same keystone but somehow the Mortson talent had missed his younger brother out. Adam was fifteen but he was still at *school* – and what self-respecting Luman stayed at school after the age of eleven?

'Get back to work, Luc.' Nathanial sounded sharper than usual.

Luc frowned as his father walked away. He turned his attention back to Adam, watching him wipe his mouth on his hoodie sleeve and edge towards another soul. His brother was in disgrace. Adam had done something major a few days earlier – a solo job. Guiding a soul into his Light all alone, without supervision from a full, Marked Luman.

Luc couldn't understand it. What was Adam trying to prove? He hated coming on jobs at the best of times – so why would he go and do one on his own? Breaking Luman law was a big deal. It was the kind of thing that could bring your physical life to a fast end.

Luc shrugged. It wasn't his problem. Adam was a moron at times but he was all right. He searched for a soul and found a girl about his own age. Dying at seventeen didn't seem fair but Luc pushed away the unexpected pang of sadness he felt. Lumen didn't decide who lived and died – they just dealt with the fallout.

He moved towards the girl with his biggest smile. He was good at being a Luman. He was even better with the ladies.

Chapter 1



he holidays were over. All over London, thousands of alarm clocks were ringing, beeping and blaring into life while owners muttered, cursed and battered them into silence, creeping deeper beneath the covers for a few more minutes in bed.

Not Adam Mortson. He'd been up for hours, pacing round his bedroom, watching the digital numbers on his clock flicker and change, heartbeat by heartbeat. Now he grinned at his reflection in his bedroom mirror, uniform immaculate, shoes gleaming, hair . . . under control. Half-term was over. He was finally going back to school. *Brilliant!*

He skipped downstairs and into the kitchen. No one else was there and he hummed under his breath while he waited for the toaster to pop. It would be nice to eat without having an angry audience. Meals had been a bit tense for the last week.

It hadn't been a typical half-term holiday, even by his standards. In fact, on the first day of the holidays he had thwarted a suicide bomber and saved lots of innocent bystanders. He'd followed that up by doing an underage soul guiding, sending

the bomber's soul into the afterlife before he had come of age and without a Marked Luman present. He'd known he was going to be in trouble. What he *hadn't* realised was just *how* angry his father was going to be.

Was it really only a week ago? He'd been with Melissa before he got home. As soon as he opened the front door a not-so-welcoming committee was waiting for him. Nathanial and Elise were standing, arms folded, faces grim. Auntie Jo was there too, just behind, and for once she wasn't smiling. There was no sign of his older brothers, Aron and Luc, or his younger sister Chloe – but he was pretty sure they were lurking nearby, ears flapping like radar dishes.

The toaster popped and Adam's cheeks burned at the memory of the conversation that had ensued. He'd been grounded of course, just as he'd known he would be – but the direst threat of all had been made; that he wouldn't be going back to school. Only Auntie Jo's arguments had saved him, although she'd seemed reluctant, as if wondering whether she was doing the right thing.

Auntie Jo had always been Adam's ally in the fight to stay at school – something no one else in the family could understand. The Mortsons were Lumen, guardians of the souls of the dead. They didn't need to go to school. Most Lumen – like his brothers and his sister – had left at the end of primary school, having learned to read and write. Besides, they got plenty of lessons at home, taught by their mother Elise and a reluctant Auntie Jo. The boys learned all about guiding souls, while Chloe was taught how to be a perfect wife and hostess.

The Mortsons were expert Lumen, specialising in helping the most tricky souls, those who had died suddenly or unexpectedly.

In fact, Adam's father, Nathanial Mortson, was High Luman of Britain, overseeing all the souls and Lumen in his Kingdom. Aron and Luc were both showing signs of the Mortson talent – and everyone expected Adam to show the same promise.

The problem was that Adam was pretty much the worst Luman in history. Every time he swooped – stepped into the Hinterland and travelled to a newly dead soul – his nose would start bleeding madly. He never knew what to say to the souls other than, 'Erm . . . sorry, you're dead.' And worst of all his stomach had a habit of getting upset in the Hinterland. No soul wanted their last sight on earth to be a fifteen-year-old throwing up on his trainers.

Adam knew he wasn't meant to be a Luman. He wanted to be a doctor. Unfortunately this was the maddest thing anyone in his family had ever heard. During their teen years Lumen children were normally 'home-schooled' – not that the authorities knew what kind of 'education' they were getting. Adam had fought tooth and nail to stay at Bonehill Charitable School and hang out with his friends and Melissa – but he knew his parents were starting to have second thoughts. They'd put up with it so far but their patience was running out . . .

Adam sighed and smeared marmalade on his toast. He had just lifted the first slice to his mouth when the back door opened and Nathanial and Luc walked in, obviously back from an early morning call-out. Adam froze. Nathanial stared at his uniform, gave him a stiff nod, then stalked out of the kitchen, leaving Luc and Adam alone.

'All right, leper?' Luc said cheerfully, snagging one of the pieces of toast. 'I keep meaning to get you a bell so you can

ring it and shout "*Unclean, unclean!*". At least we'll know when you're in a room – no nasty surprises for anyone.'

Adam scowled. *I did the right thing,* he told himself for the millionth time. *The people I saved were innocent. They didn't deserve to die! And the bomber didn't deserve my help onto the Unknown Roads.* He was in trouble for the bit his family knew about – the underage guiding. If they knew the rest he would be dead right now. Literally.

Luc pulled out a chair, interrupting Adam's thoughts. 'You know, you should be welcoming me with open arms. I'm pretty much the only one in the house who doesn't hate you.'

'Sam and Morty still like me,' Adam muttered.

Luc sniggered. 'Yeah. They're *dogs*, Adam. I was thinking more about the human occupants.' He swiped another slice of toast, ignoring Adam's curses. 'So . . . back to school. You'll get to see your girlfriend again!'

'She's not my girlfriend,' Adam said. *Yet*. His heart sang a happy song, remembering how it felt to finally kiss Melissa Morgan. She'd liked it too! Well, OK, she'd given him a six out of ten but he reckoned with a bit of practice . . . He threw more bread in the toaster, humming to himself.

'Ahhh, Adam's in lurrrrve,' Luc trilled. 'You enjoy it, seriously. It's only a matter of time before you get caught and then you'll be more in the doghouse than the actual dogs.'

Adam glared. In a world of arranged marriages, having a girlfriend was just one more forbidden thing for a Luman. Lumen tended to get betrothed at an early age (to other Lumen of course) and married young – not that Luc ever had any problems with ignoring the rules and impressing the opposite

sex. 'Why would I get caught? It's not like *you* never go out with people. *You* never get caught.'

Luc snorted. 'Yeah, but I'm me and you're you. It's like comparing something really clever with something . . . really not clever. Plus I don't go all goggle-eyed over girls. I'm like James Bond. In, complete the mission and get out while the going's good. You're more like Romeo – and that story didn't end well.'

Adam applied a vicious smear of peanut butter to his toast and grabbed his schoolbag. 'I don't care what you think. Everything is going to be fine.'

He could still hear Luc's laughter ringing in his ears as he stalked out of the back door.

Adam's anger faded as he sat on the bus to school. There was no point getting mad at Luc – or indeed any of his family. None of them could understand why he wanted to go to school, even Auntie Jo. Why would they? They didn't *want* to be normal. In fact, the very idea of being normal left Luc cold! Luc *liked* being a Luman. He liked not going to school and swooping and guiding souls – but then he didn't throw up or get nosebleeds every time he did it. Aron, Adam's eldest brother, was planning to follow in their father's footsteps and become the next High Luman. Chloe wasn't allowed to be a Luman but she would be expected to marry into an old Luman family and have lots of sons, just as their mother Elise had. Only Auntie Jo had broken with tradition in not marrying and living with her brother Nathanial.

It was hard for Adam to explain why he was so awful at being a Luman. He knew Nathanial thought he would grow out of

it and get better but Adam wasn't so sure. He wasn't scared of death or the souls or the Hinterland – most of the souls were quite happy to step into their Lights once they knew their life in the physical world had ended. He just couldn't shake the feeling that his own life should be about more than death.

It didn't help that Adam had an extra talent – one he was careful to hide from his family. In the Luman world someone like him was called a Seer. All Lumen had a death sense, a sense that told them when a soul had died and whether it was a predicted death or unexpected. The Mortsons specialised in sudden deaths, when souls could get frightened and lost unless they were guided into their Lights quickly. But a Seer had an extra sense – what Adam thought of as his doom sense. He could sometimes feel when a soul was about to die, *before* it had actually happened – which gave him the chance to do something about it.

This meant breaking Luman law – and cheating the Fates out of souls. So far Adam had intervened in death scenes three times, most recently depriving the suicide bomber of his intended victims. So far no one suspected that *he* was involved – but if he got caught he would be put on trial by the Luman authorities and face the death penalty himself.

Adam slumped back in his chair. He was pretty sure most people his age weren't having to worry about being executed just for trying to help people. In fact, when he listened to his friends whingeing about their homework or not getting a new computer game he felt like telling them to get a grip. If that was the biggest thing they had to fret over they were doing well!