

A STEP INTO DARKSCAPE

Book 2

SAMPLE

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for emi, always for you.

the old man's yellowed eyes lingered for a moment before turning back to
the game, his dark weathered brow furrowing.

the chequered board was set, the gold and silver pieces in play.

Part One: Darkscape

Chapter One

Ami looked up from the page and out to a sky scored with lines of orange and yellow, where a dying sun danced behind buildings, towers and trees, throwing shadows like warriors against the windows. The gentle *shookedy-shook* of the wheels on the tracks made a sleepy sound through the car, allowing Ami to work in a lucid state beneath a din of crying children and scolding mothers, her pencil sketching her thoughts, dreams and memories into characters and scenes; a rough draft of a graphic novel yet to be born.

Her eyes passed over the page, yet in her head a war was being fought in a darkened wood with swords, light and magic; creatures of the night, men of the day, heroes and villains on each and every side.

Time passed.

Yet as each stop came and went, as passengers took their seats and rose to leave, Ami continued to work, lost in memory and fantasy.

It'd been a lonely trip so far, but if she'd have stayed in the city—alone with her thoughts—there would have been only the one tumbling through them.

Hero. Her beloved Hero.

But then she'd found the advert. It'd been hidden in the back of a magazine she'd found lying on a park bench, squeezed between an article on breast feeding and a jumble of celebrity pictures. She'd almost missed it amongst the garish colours and distasteful comments—but there it was: a small quarter in black and white with an image of an old house off to the side.

Ami had put down her Chai Latte and read the sparse words over.

Need to get away? City getting you down? Need to work on that novel?

CURRINGTON HOUSE

Country Getaway

She'd stared at the advert, envisioning the buildings around her being swept away into the distance, leaving only the green of nature's original plan.

A few days later and Ami was on a train, heading for the deep middle of nowhere, fully aware that she was running away from herself, running away from Hero, running away from life.

It'd been six months since she'd found she had powers that her peers would never have, that she belonged truly to a world a veil beyond her own, and that magic existed, both light and dark.

Ami had experienced them both, and her adventures in Legacy had left her heart and mind troubled, especially when her heart continued to yearn for her hooded, mysterious man.

Hero had been a revelation, an Indian summer when there should've been only fall, an ending to an ordeal that gave her hope and a little light when dealing with the dark. But what future was there for them? She a princess with powers beyond anyone's understanding—especially her own—and he, a Guard of the land of Legacy, with responsibilities to their kingdom? But even more than that, their feelings were a distraction to the normality of life she had to return to.

She couldn't keep living in two worlds. She had to choose.

After leaving him, Ami had wandered alone in the Solanra Forest, the tangled and magical realm of the unicorns, and there sought out the one who'd helped them all so much, who'd sacrificed and lost so much.

As it turned out, Talos found her instead, appearing one night from the shadows as she took respite within a copse of trees. She greeted him with a hug, burying her face into his mane, the stump where his horn had once been pulsing in a gentle white light as he nuzzled against her.

Ami had stayed with him for a few days after that, strolling through the glades with him in conversation, laying down upon the meadow to watch the little ones prance, dance and play beneath the blessed sun; and in those dusky evenings, Talos had taken it upon himself to teach her a little of the power she possessed. Mostly she'd just watched in awe as he showed her secrets and trained her to harness the power. She'd been especially fascinated by the ability to change one's body into a pure ghostly form, to pass easily through walls and trees.

“You can change and you can focus, defy most natural laws,” he’d told her. “You can be all, be anything, be power, be pure.”

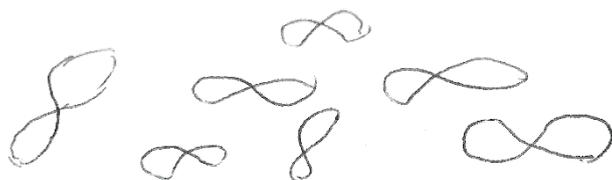
She’d tried to follow his examples, but in the end had not quite gotten the hang of it, and with her heart heavy with Hero, her confidence had failed her.

If she were truly honest with herself, the power scared her, and when she’d eventually left, saying goodbye to the unicorns and the memory of Legacy, and had returned to life as she’d once known it, she found that the simple was now much more complicated; that being *normal* was so very difficult. For now she *knew*. She *knew* she was powerful and could do magical things with her hands and her mind, but she had to resist or else risk being caught—the burden and consequences were severe. So much had happened in such a small amount of time; her world had been ripped apart and remade. She’d killed, had almost been killed, had been used by and infected with the darkest of magic, reborn again to win the day...but at a price.

She looked back out of the window now as the train began to slow, the last of the towns gone, green shadows where there’d once been life. Hills crested and rolled away, bringing memories of the Planrus Lands, of the mountains of Edorus.

A long, low platform appeared, empty and dead, a sign coming too quickly, the second slower, the third stopping at her window. Currington.

She gathered her papers and pushed them into her bag, giving only a casual glance at the scrawl she’d scribbled.



The doors unlocked with a click.

*

The train left the station at an almost hurried pace and Ami was left standing alone, the only passenger to have departed. All was silent. A dog barked once from far away and a breeze lifted across her skin, but there were

no lights but for the misted moon, and no sign of life.

Walking to the end of the platform, Ami descended the concrete steps to the gravel path below.

From memory, she knew roughly where to go—a mile east along a stretch of road that would take her past a single farm, and then, a little further along, down a sloping driveway to the large, old country estate.

Cheap and picturesque, she was to rent one of the cabins at the back of the property. It was perfect and just the isolation she needed. Here she was truly out in the sticks, and with nothing but those sticks she would build a life, a wondrous and *normal* life.

Up above, the black clouds cupped the moon, the silver light weeping onto the fields in tears, running in streams and shadow. Before Legacy she'd have been terrified of a night such as this and would never have made the journey, but she was no longer the same Ami. She was the Assassin Princess, Princess of Legacy. She could take her pencil from her pocket and command it to transform into the sword of her forebears, a magical unicorn horn made steel... She was no longer afraid of the dark.

After a while she reached the farmhouse on her left, set far back from the road. It was surrounded by a multitude of hulking metal machines, silent monsters, skeletons of tractors, diggers—a harvester perhaps—that peered out from the undergrowth; and up ahead, where the land sloped, was a cluster of trees and a gate that barred her entry. A small post was stabbed into the ground a few feet in, leaning over into a nest of brambles. Currington House.

Ami wrapped her hands through the rusted bars and pushed, the gate opening with a screech and a whine. The hinges were old and hardly ever used, and when she pushed it back into place, it gave an old groan that sounded almost grateful and relieved. She walked on, eyeing the shadows and following the sloped driveway round to the right, the house itself coming suddenly into frame. A looming block of black, its many windows looked like closed eyes in a dark face, lifeless and empty, its short wings stumps where perhaps arms were meant to be.

The driveway straightened and narrowed into a grass path that led across the front of the house where an old wooden porch fronted the building. A single lamp hung naked above, rocking soundlessly from side to side.

“Who goes there?” a voice called from behind the lamp. It was shrill and

cracked, and made Ami jump out of her skin.

A long stick rose in silhouette and pointed.

Ami reached for her pencil, but stopped as the stick hit the light and lowered a shade, the glare lessening, revealing the outline of a frail figure, a woman, seated in a rocker. A blanket was pulled over her shoulders against the chill, her face all wrinkles and bristles, her eyes deep empty tunnels.

“I said who goes there?” she snapped.

“Hi,” Ami said, turning fully to the porch. “I’m a little later than expected but—”

“Expected? Who expected you?” The woman shuffled forward, her dress crepe paper thin. “Why are you here?” The stick tapped loud on the wooden floor.

“I’m Ami Rose? I was meant to—”

“Ah,” the old woman sighed and shuffled back into the rocker. “You shouldn’t be out this late, Miss Rose. My brother is asleep now and nothing in heaven or on earth will wake him, so you go on back around the house. Cabin thirteen will be yours and it will be open. You just go back there and he’ll take your details in the morning.” *She’s blind*, Ami thought as she watched her mouth pucker, the wrinkles around her lips stretching and collapsing over her ruined gums. “You can call me Grammy if you want, though we ain’t kin.”

The old woman began to rock then—*shookedy-shook, shookedy-shook*—and raised her stick to knock the shade back up. Ami squinted as the light hit her. The conversation was over. Giving her one last look, feeling more than a little spooked, Ami strode away, rounding the dark house to a path that led her through a cluster of low wooden cabins, each numbered, though in no particular order.

Ami found thirteen hiding in the far corner, the windows dark and the door ajar, and once inside she wasted no time in looking around her new digs.

The living space was cosy, with a small kitchen off in one corner, a separate bathroom and bedroom, all fully stocked for her needs. The bed looked warm, and putting her bag upon the floor, Ami decided that perhaps she would try it out first before anything else.

She pulled off her clothes and slipped beneath the duvet, falling asleep within minutes.

She dreamed of Legacy, of stepping into the castle and standing at the foot of a table. Seated at the head of it was her Hero. He beckoned her over, smiling as he did. She came, her steps slow, graceful, her white dress billowing freely around her.

“Another one!” Hero shouted.

“Benjamin, calm down.”

“Another one—another two!”

“Benjamin, you know I can’t keep up with you when you behave so.”

Ami opened her eyes and stared at the blank wooden wall. The voices were close and unknown, and for a moment she couldn’t possibly imagine what was going on, or where she was. These were not the walls of her bedroom, or voices she knew.

“We can’t go on like this. We just can’t,” the man’s voice broke.

“I know, I know, but what can we do?”

Ami shuffled across the bed and dropped to her feet, grabbing her bag and fumbling around for a fresh set of clothes. Listening still, she made her way into the bathroom and soon emerged dressed and curious.

The voices were coming from just outside, and slipping her pencil into her jeans, Ami opened the door.

It was early morning and the world outside seemed too bright and fresh, the lush green grass bearing the weight of a misty dew, while in the skies and the nearby wood, birds trilled and chirped, heralding in the miracle of a new day.

An old couple stood but a few yards away examining a cabin close to her own. She recognised Grammy from the night before, skinny and sharp in grey, her stick gripped tight. Her blind eyes seemed to locate her easily, and placing her hand on the old man, she turned him to face her.

“We have one guest left,” Grammy crooned. “I forgot to say.”

The man turned to her, a salesman’s smile brightening his features from coronary to only weather-worn. He sauntered over, his hand held out.

“Hello. I’m sorry, we must have woken you. I’m Ben Manning, owner of Currington House.”

Ami stepped from the doorway with a smile. “Ami Rose.” She shook his

hand, firm and sure. *A man's grip*, her father would have said, *never leave it sloppy. Untrustworthy.* "Everything okay?"

"Oh, sure, just some wayward guests, a moonlight flit or some other darn thing. Left their dog though, poor thing."

"It'll be okay," Grammy said from far away.

"It's okay for you," he snapped, looking back at her. "You can't see a damned thing!" He turned back to Ami, his smile returning. "I hope you enjoy your stay here, and please, do pay up before you leave. It would be appreciated."

She could think of nothing else to say, and so nodded, leaving the man to walk away, leading the old woman by the arm.

Shaking her head, Ami took a moment to look around, seeing the place for the first time in daylight.

It was so very beautiful.

The old house stood a silent sentry to her left—handsome, if not a little ragged—while opposite, up a slight slope, was a thick wood where trees swayed gently, leaves rustling in the breeze. Someway beyond the cabins there were green and yellow fields stretching for many miles without a grey building in sight.

She took a deep breath, inhaling each flowering scent and earthy smell, before ducking back inside and closing the door.

*

Ami cleared the bureau, smoothing her hands over the wood, and lay her papers down. With her sketchbook open she sat back in the chair to draw, and within no time at all had created two new characters, both elderly and one blind; she would give them powers to see through time, or... something. She'd work it out later.

Soon sketched lines became faces in graphite strokes and scenes were taking shape before her, but as time went on she found herself looking out of the window and into the thick woodland more and more. It was a muse for her creativity and a temptation she was finding hard to fight, the lure of adventure tick-tocking away with the wane of the day, the sun of early morning already too low in the sky. *Had she been working for that long?* The

dark greens of the clustered leaves shimmered gold as if on fire, moving constantly above shadowed trunks. Power tingled at the back of her neck.

Dangerous.

Is something out there?

She ignored the feeling as best she could, but her eyes strayed back to the window regardless, only to see—framed perfectly by the centre pane—a small dog upon the grass, apparently looking directly at her. Its pink tongue was stuck out and lolled up and down, its brown and white patched body heaving with each pant.

“Cute doggy,” she murmured. It barked at her, its eyes never leaving her. Sighing, she finally gave in.

Well, all work and no play, and all that.

Closing her sketchbook, she got up and left the cabin.

The air had grown so very warm, and the sky had turned a beautiful deep blue with only the smallest puffs of white cloud hanging magically above her like funny shaped ornaments, heavenly decorations. Gone were the cars and horns of the cities and towns; no chattering, tightly squeezed, busy people. Ami breathed it all in.

The dog watched her.

“Here boy,” she called, looking around to see if the old couple were about, but she saw no one. “Come here, here boy.” She put her hand out, but still no takers.

She took a few steps toward the animal.

He took a couple of steps back.

Ami took a few more steps, and the dog countered again.

“Oh, we’re playing a game are we?” Ami looked around again, but she was alone. “I know a little thing that might get you moving.” Lowering herself slowly to the ground she got on all fours and threw her arms out in front of her, the universal gesture of play. But it didn’t work. Instead the patchwork pup turned tail and trotted off toward the wood. It stopped at the edge of a pathway that cut through the trees, barely seen except for a small green sign.

Public Footpath.

Curious, Ami followed, first starting on all fours and then rising slowly to her feet. The dog looked back.

Is he wanting me to follow?

Dangerous.

She felt for the pencil she'd slipped into her pocket, gripping it.

The dog waited patiently until she'd caught up, the path before them a narrow dirt track that cut between the trees.

Memories of the Mortrus Lands filled her with an exhilarating fear, the deep, dark and mystical forest where both her natural and hidden powers had been put to the test, her very claim to her individuality challenged—but here at least, they were only trees, only woods.

The dog moved on, his small head swinging back constantly to check on her.

"It's okay," she said, "I'm coming, Pepper." She didn't know his name, but it seemed to fit, and he seemed happy with it, trotting a little faster.

A feeling of unease grew inside her though as they continued on, close knit trees becoming less dense, shadowed spaces becoming larger. It was a familiar feeling, all mixed up inside. She thought of her brother Adam's tainted voice touching her name as if a fractured crystal, precious but sharp...

Dangerous.

But Adam was gone.

Sunlight broke behind branches and became a white fire behind shadow. It shifted and moved across the path, touching her booted feet with flickering fingers. Flowers bloomed here and there, and all the beauty she'd seen, heard and smelt intensified.

Butterflies swooped low, high, circled and darted; insects hovered and then disappeared above and below; all the while the small dog trotted on.

Ami's senses sharpened as he came to a dead stop in the middle of the track, as still and immovable as a stone.

She almost tripped over him.

Perhaps she'd been lured into the woods as a ruse so that an army of Jack Russells could pounce on her, attacking from each side of the track? Amusing, but unlikely. Suppressing the thought, she gripped the pencil and stepped past the small dog.

Immediately on her left, the woodland thinned to reveal a broken wooden shack. Desolate and clearly abandoned, it sat bleached and battered in the embrace of the many limbs that held it.

The dog growled and Ami followed his stare to the empty doorway that

rose above a rickety porch, lifting and breathing with the breeze. There was a whisper in her mind that sharpened its tongue, and quite suddenly she knew that whatever this place was, it'd known *power*.

“What is it, boy, what do you sense?” But he wasn't talking. Ami bent down to him again, but he growled at her touch and urinated where he stood.

“This is too weird,” she whispered, withdrawing the pencil and looking around. Alone. “I'm going in, Pep, you coming?” The dog stood immobile. The pencil shimmered a violet-jade and lengthened in her hand. The hilt and blade took shape, marbled and licked in green flame.

She brought it up to her face, looking at her reflection in the polished surface, the symbol for infinity clearly etched into the hilt.

The breeze lifted her hair and Ami listened for a time to the creaking of the branches, to the old wood of the shack lifting in their grasp. It sounded like voices, though light and far away.

Dangerous. Again.

Her palms filled with a fire that seeped beneath her skin as quickly as it'd arrived. It felt good.

Stepping forward into the long grass, Ami placed one foot upon the step and stared into the dark doorway.

Her second step creaked, the old wood beneath bending a little too far for comfort. She looked down to it, and from the corner of her eye caught the figure of a man on the porch, his arm raised—but when she looked up there was no one. The dog whimpered, yet had joined her, reluctantly recruited, and followed her as she climbed the remaining steps onto the porch.

A chill swept her body as if a winter wind beneath her clothes. It caressed her neck as she raised the sword higher, looking to her left where she'd seen the man. Nothing.

Eyes forward, she ventured on.

Inside, the shadows swallowed her and there was a musty smell like a neglected tree house, a place children played long ago, but not in a long, long while. The rooms to her left and right weren't fit for people, big or small; an animal, much like a squirrel, scurried across the floorboards and jumped to climb the branch of a protruding tree, disappearing.

The whole place creaked, almost swayed, anchored precariously as if in danger at any moment of launching into the sky. *Dorothy's house*, she thought.

Follow the yellow brick road. An eerie chill solidified in her mind, and she knew beyond doubt then, that she wasn't alone...

Pepper had gone quiet, and turning to look for him she saw the man again, as before, *definite* and *there*. He was old, very old, dark skinned with white hair just covering his scalp; perched on a chair that hadn't been there, he was bent over a small table on the porch. His arm was outstretched, his fingers clutching a small, golden chess piece.

Ami shook her head, but the man remained. He'd stopped in mid-move, his head cocked as if listening for something. Listening for her.

He knew she was there, too.

Dangerous.

Ami raised her sword, pivoting slowly on the spot to face the door once more—but then he was gone. Simply wasn't there, as if he'd never been.

A growl of uncertainty came from the pup and he ran from the house and back out into the sunlight. Wary but curious, Ami turned back into the shack, feeling *Dangerous*. *Dangerous*, yes, her Shadow Princess left deep within the Mortrus Lands. Forever there, forever with her.

Her sword burst into coloured light, chasing the shadows.

Ahead of her was a staircase, stunted and broken, and from the light of her blade she could see the fallen balusters, coloured a pale blue, preserved in the gloom. But there was something else, something reflecting within the rotted dust that would otherwise have been lost to darkness.

Checking the rooms to her left and right, Ami moved down toward it, keeping the blade raised, tilted toward the object. It was buried side on, and as her fingers stroked downward, brushing the debris aside, it revealed a shape she'd seen only moments ago. The gold glinted, looking gothic and sinister, flickering purple and green and gold.

Pepper barked, but Ami ignored him, her eyes fixed upon the chess piece, a rook, the tiny battlements of the castle clear.

She touched it and the world suddenly spun out of control.

Tornado, she thought. *Auntie Em?*

But it wasn't a tornado, and in that fraction of a second she lost all sense of time and place—and then hit the floor, her sword falling from her hand.

Pepper barked furiously behind her, the noise thumping through her head.

“Pepper,” she managed, “be quiet will you?”

The dog relented, resorting to an unsettled growl instead.

Ami pulled herself up and grabbed the sword, pointing it down at the piece; it hadn't moved, but it *had* moved *her*.

“What *are* you?” she whispered, studying it without touching it. She felt the presence again, the sense of another on the decrepit porch behind her, but she ignored it, pointing the sharp tip of her sword at the golden rook. They touched.

A flash of white light spun her, spun the shack, spun the world, landing her back on the floor in a daze.

“Shit,” she murmured, stunned and sluggish. “What *is* that?”

She wasted no more time in getting to her feet, but instead held her sword tightly in one hand and snatched the rook up in the other.

The white light struck again behind her eyes, and the world spun as the cool metal dug into her palm, her blade bursting into green and white flame. She felt sick, but was determined to hold on until the change fluttered to a steady roar, then a hum, a thrum that danced to the rhythm of the world around it; *but which world?* she wondered.

She opened her eyes to walls that were no longer wooden but stone, cold and grey with masoned steps rising up to the second floor, complete and solid. Her sword was still within her grasp as was the totem, and though it all looked *almost* the same, she was definitely somewhere else.

Through the narrow doorway Ami saw a slice of the outside world, where great rounded stones littered a grassy plot that was filled with flowers of reds and blues and purples and yellows, some winding up the trunk of a nearby tree, others shooting wild, drooping and hanging over a cliff edge. *The sea. I can smell it, hear it.* Beyond and to the ends of the earth was the blue-grey ocean, bringing to mind memories of lazy days at the beach, adventures at the coast, of fun and happiness... Someone was coming.

Ami pulled herself to her feet as faint voices floated over the crash of waves from somewhere nearby. She couldn't be found here, but the rooms that lay open to each side of the hall were empty and held no place to hide.

“...waking him, I'm sure. But why?”

“It is not ours to question why. You know this.”

Ami looked to the golden chess piece in her palm, and then back to the

doorway where shadows now approached and overlapped, footsteps grinding dry mud and gravel. She turned and touched the rock instinctively down upon the first stone step, and in a sickening spin and a white flash of power, the walls around her morphed back into wood, the air becoming dry and hot, scented with green and growth. She fell to the ground, her empty stomach wanting to heave.

The dog barked out a warning and Ami jumped up, pivoting up on to her toes, stopping short of the blade trained on her heart.

Chapter Two

The sun had risen over the eastern hills, a sight that Hero had seen many times before, from the city walls, from turrets and towers, and now from the high up windows of Legacy's castle keep, the ancestral home of the Lord of Legacy that was now—temporarily—under his stewardship.

He brooded on the sight, thinking of all that his city had suffered over the years without a ruler, and how despite these woes, he'd seen true strength in his people as they rebuilt their homes and lives in the wake of disaster; each and every person held Princess Ami as a guiding light in their hearts.

But Ami had returned to her own layer, leaving the survivors of Adam's wrath ultimately on their own, and although it'd been agreed upon and accepted, Hero regretted letting her go so easily.

And now this.

A fear passed once more like a shiver through the land, plucking the skin of the weary, the war-torn, the ones who'd once fought each nightly riot and claimed to know death by sight, by smell. This tremor had travelled far across the mountains and through the Commune Valley, where traders and traffickers had brought warnings from the East. Then others had whispered of the stirrings up river, the strange happenings at the mouth of the Mortrus Lands, the mystical forest revealed as the origins of power.

What the disturbance was, was unclear. Some spoke of a fog that hung from the dense and blackened trees; others whispered of dark beasts, red eyes, and hidden rasping breaths. The ground was said to shake, to crack.

Hero meditated on these things long and hard, for rumour could damage, yet deliberate inaction could destroy. It was time for the Guard to find out the truth.

He turned his back on the view and eyed his lieutenants, Raven and Florence. They had fought beside him now in peace and war, each proving themselves capable and vital. They would be Legacy's envoys.

"We hold this land together on the promise that Ami will return as

princess when she is needed, on the hope that with her we will always be strong. In her absence, we must find out all we can to keep us safe. Any disturbance from the Mortrus Lands is of concern, and so I ask that you, Florence, ride to the spring of the river and report back what you find. Your power and swift gallop shall come into its own should you need to flee quickly.”

“Of course, Hero, I shall leave immediately.” The girl gave a half bow and left the room.

“Raven, I have a special task for you.” He stepped forward and placed his hand on his shoulder. “Set a fire and seek conference with the Shadow Princess. I believe the *stranger-girl* will answer our call should we need her. Perhaps she will know of these things. If Ami is needed, she will be able to call to her.”

“But Hero, it would be better if you—”

“I’d like you to do it in my stead, Raven.”

“Okay, anything.” Raven nodded, turned and headed out of the room in Florence’s wake.

It was of personal shame that Hero himself shunned this task, for who better to visit the Shadow Princess of Ami than he? Yet it felt necessary. With Lady Grace gone, the lands were his responsibility in Ami’s absence; it would do no good to endanger his people should he be distracted... but that of course was a truth wrapped in a lie, for the real reason was that his heart ached for Ami, but no matter how long he’d waited, and no matter her last words to him, she’d not returned. He was bruised, pure and simple.

“Oh, Ami,” he breathed, and turned back to the window to watch the morning come.

*

Raven stepped out of the stairwell onto the roof of the keep, his thoughts on Hero. For the life of him he couldn’t understand why he avoided Ami, or even the shadow of her. There’d been affection there by the end, from both sides, but now he found that Hero mentioned Ami less and less, and his captain’s mood had certainly darkened—not least due to the rumours of trouble to come that had unsettled them all.

Reaching out to Ami was the right thing to do. Raven could only hope that her double was substitute enough.

Pushing his thoughts aside, he strode to the edge of the castle walls, the battlements of grey rock and flint rough beneath his palms, and looked out over the landscape of the world. It was a breath-taking view, and he was now the highest point in all the lands. His eyes passed over each of them, far away yet easily definable. Planrus, the rolling green hills of the horizon, leading to the unicorn valley of Solancra; the mountains of Edorus; the sea beyond the southern Madorus Lands, and finally to the north, the Mortrus Lands.

Somewhere in the last was the Shadow Princess, the dark version of Ami, ripped from her within the deathly woods, forever to reside there, young and powerful, and seemingly all knowing. An oracle of sorts, the Shadow Princess knew everything Ami had ever known, had ever done, and everything she would soon do—her past, present and future. To reach her, he would kindle the fire that Hero would not.

He gathered the wood together—old crates, discarded pallets, all left to weather and rot—and built a pyre, a beacon he hoped she'd see from her lost realm in that magical place.

Tinderbox in hand, he set the wood alight.

It took only a few moments for the pile to blaze, and Raven sunk to his knees in front of it, closing his eyes, feeling the immense heat that threatened the hair upon his chin.

“Shadow Ami, from deep within the Mortrus Lands, I call to you,” Raven whispered. He waited, hearing the wood crackle and burn behind closed lids. He welcomed the calm, lapsing into a gentle meditation that each Guard learned, keeping them rational, clear of head and pure of heart. He pictured the blue sky above him, the clouds sailing past too fast, the flames before him heating stone and twisting high in rings of infinite orange and red. Soon the world began to change and the flames flew high and wide, scorching him and pushing him backward. Burnt embers shot into darkness while above him shadowed trees swayed uneasy in their sentry duty. The fire spat and sputtered as it lowered, sealing him within a tight, warm circle of light.

The girl sat beyond the flames, her dark hair full and dripping with pearls of violet, her eyes jewels of malevolent green; and then settling, the colours waned to their natural tones, each flecked with fire.

“Greetings, Raven of the Guard. It has been too long already.” There was a tune to her voice, a song behind her words, so soft. He wanted to join the melody.

“This is the place that you’d meet Hero?”

“It is. It is an in-between place, neither truly here nor there, but a creation to bond the two. I know why you have come, for I feel a change in the land, a shift in the power.”

“Do you know what it is, what is happening?”

“I do not, though I see much. I see Ami and what she has discovered. You should go to her. She needs your help.”

“I shall report back to Hero at once—”

“Not Hero’s help, but yours, Raven of the Guard.”

A sudden wind tugged at his robes, and the flames reached for him, bending and coiling.

“Go to her now. Trust in her judgement, her curiosity and instinct. With Ami, you will find the cause.” Raven dodged the curling flame but was soon caught and lashed by another that wrapped an arm of golden white around his wrist. It burned, yet gave no true pain, and began slowly pulling him into the fire.

His screams were silent and without breath, his fall an endless tunnel of hell’s tongues that licked and flayed, eventually cooling and leaving him shivering and weak in the dark.

The smell of earth, wood and moss flushed the smoke and char from his nose, for now there was no longer a fire, nor a mountain peak wind, but instead a peace that Raven had only ever found in the Planrus Lands with the orchards and streams and rolling sweet meadows.

His hand grasped for his sword.

Trees, to the left, to the right, behind and in front, a wood so green and the sun so low, giving deep dying tones to a strange and unknown place.

His face was smattered with cold, wet earth, and wiping at it idly he moved forward, squinting to see.

In a perpetual gloom, hidden from colour, stood a wooden shack, and sounding from within he heard a thump and a scuffle.

Sword in hand Raven moved to face it.

The figure spun, a shadow unfolding and unfolding until a blade was revealed, flicking and cutting his hand. The shadow's hair framed a beautiful face and deep brown eyes, glittering a galaxy of green-purple stars.

He dropped his guard and his sword, stepping back from her with his hands raised. "I surrender."

"Raven?" Ami lowered her blade and grabbed his hand, dragging him from the shack and down the steps to the grass. She glanced all around, frantic for a moment. "It's good to see you, Raven." She smiled and gave him a small hug. "But what are you doing here?"

Licking his small wound, Raven looked back to the shack. "My sword—"

"No, don't," she said, stopping him. "There's something wrong here."

"That's why I've come, Princess." He frowned, feeling torn from his blade. "There are some strange goings on in Legacy. The land is unsettled, and it needs its princess. Rumours of dark things... The Shadow Princess—the other you—sent me to find you." He filled her in on the last few moments with her counterpart. Ami stared at the porch as he spoke, her gaze far away.

"Ami?" Raven touched her shoulder. "What is it?"

"In there," she said, pointing into the shack. "There is a portal of sorts, a gateway. I found another place. What is wrong in Legacy? Tell me."

"We hear tell of smoke rising from the ground at the river, cracked and scorched earth where the Mortrus Lands lay. Some have told of animals or creatures...the land has shaken."

"An earthquake?"

"A quake of the earth, yes—small and never lasting—Legacy has never experienced any such thing before. What is this place you found?"

"I don't know." She took Raven's hand, inspecting the scratch. Giving small pressure from her thumb, the wound soon healed with not a mark left.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry. Reflexes, you know?" She let go of his hand. "But you did take me by surprise."

"I was hoping to find you—your Shadow Princess sent me here, after all—but I could not be sure that it was you scurrying within that old musty shed."

Ami laughed, and looked back at the porch. “A musty old shed that holds secrets. What did my other self say exactly?”

“That I was to help you.” Raven stepped one foot upon the wooden step, the creak from it a stranger within a world of creaks. Somehow it didn’t sound right. “That I was to trust you and your curiosity, and that together we would find the cause.”

“Is only Legacy affected? Something from the Mortrus Lands?”

“Perhaps.” He climbed the rest of the steps up to the porch, reaching inside for his blade. As he did, a chill crept his spine. “Perhaps there is more to it.”

“Strange things have been happening here, though no beasts, cracks or smoke. There was an old man on the porch...” She pointed but Raven saw no one. “I then found a piece within, a golden rook from a chess set. When I grasped it—I somehow entered another place.”

“If only Hero were here,” Raven muttered. “He would know what to do.”

“Where is he? He didn’t come with you?”

There was a hurt beneath her words he chose to ignore. “He is overseeing Legacy, awaiting word from Florence who’s scouting the validity of the rumours. He may yet join us, if there is anything to join.”

“There is something to join. There is a power here, a portal to another layer. Could it be one the Sentries left? Could this be another place like the Mortrus Lands?” She started once more up the steps, her sword held before her. Reaching the doorway, Ami stepped inside with Raven behind her.

“Are you sure we want to go wherever it takes us?”

“Is a Guard of Legacy scared of the unknown?”

“No, Princess,” Raven said, affronted, “of course not.”

They stopped at the fallen stairs, and Ami pointed to the shining, golden rook. It looked harmless, yet very much out of place. Raven felt a cold hand slink around the base of his neck. He pivoted and pointed his sword back out of the door.

“What is it?”

“I—I see a man...”

Ami took his hand in hers and reached down with her sword hand to snag the golden totem. She grasped it tight, and the world slipped from beneath them. Raven gagged as reality moved and he was thrown to the ground, his

hands and face meeting cold stone that spun to a sudden sickening stop.

There, towering over them, were three robed figures.

“What have we here?” asked one, his voice high and cracked. “Visitors? Plunderers? Heretics?”

A black cloth descended over Raven’s eyes and all went dark.

*

Florina had galloped hard and fast, determined to find answers to Hero’s cause. She was a member of Legacy now, as both Florence the woman, and Florina the unicorn. She had the best of both worlds, enjoying the pleasures of banquets with her fellow Guards, and of running free and swift across the many far away hills. Even her mate, Talos, could never truly appreciate the change within her. She’d gained a new sense of duty to those she’d fought with, but still treasured the power and freedom of her birthright, and it was with this unity of loyalty that she now entered the Planrus Forest, slowing to a canter to investigate rumour and fear.

What manner of beasts she’d heard tell of... Black, shapeless menaces, shadow-shifters with red eyes crawling from the ground. Fear held people like smoke, drifting above the city on a breeze; it was the smog they waded through to reach the end of each and every day. Oppressive and suffocating.

She broke through the last of the trees and stopped, hiding her crystal horn beneath drooping branches.

In the fast flowing ebbs of the river was a beast, wading to the other side. Its fur was as black as onyx, matted with dead leaves and twigs. She watched its hide sway in step and was sure that no such creature hailed from these lands.

It crawled up the bank and moved into the Solanra Forest, now hidden from view. She listened for a moment as the trunks bent, allowing its passage, branches tearing as it went, its black back a mountain in shadow.

This is not right. What if there are more? She headed north to the flow, and toward the Mortrus Lands.