

THE SHADOW OF THE HEIR

BY

Michael Jewett

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## PROLOGUE — AN OBSCURE BEGINNING

The rising sun broke over the Tri-crown peaks, bathing Marinsdale in iridescent light. The small hamlet, nestled between the giant folds of the ancient mountain and hemmed in by the redwood Forest of the Twelve, was a testament of the ages. Since time immemorial, generations of town folk were born, fledged, and left for better fortunes in larger cities; All but a small handful that always seemed to remain behind to foster the next generation. Ysande was one such individual. In the past, people had called her Red because of her stark red hair and temper, but these days, they just called her Izzy. The red hair and the temper had faded into the past, leaving behind a fair, average height, grey-haired lady with an unshakable no-nonsense attitude. Her family had run the Cozy Home Inn for as long as anyone could remember and in all the branches of her family tree, she had never known of a member as ill-suited for inn work as Lyra.

She wandered around the small inn, wiping away crumbs of food and the stains of drink from diners of the night before, her thoughts turning inward as she scrubbed, thinking back to the day that she had discovered Lyra. Hunting for elephant ear mushrooms around the Circle of the Twelve, a circular growth of the largest trees in the forest, and from whence the forest got its name. She had just discovered a large growth of them high up on one of the Twelve and had climbed up using the tree's thick bark as foot and handholds. No sooner had she gotten out her

large hunting knife when the bark holding her foot in place suddenly gave way and she fell heavily to the ground, embedding the knife deep into her thigh as she landed on it. Screaming loudly in pain and frustration, she quickly removed the knife and dressed the wound with her handy bandage kit she kept in her pack for just such an occasion.

Leaning against the redwood trunk, she closed her eyes and waited for the pain to subside a bit before the long trek home. -SPLAT- A thick drop of water splashed on her nose and splattered across her face. A peal of thunder echoed throughout the redwood canopy. Twilight had fallen across the forest and the telltale drumming of raindrops signified a storm had moved in while she had her eyes closed. It had only been a moment, hadn't it? Chastising herself for passing out, she pulled herself to her feet. Her wound screamed in pain at the sudden weight placed upon it. A muffled angry cry rang out in the forest. She hadn't screamed because of the pain, had she? The cry echoed again. A baby? Stumbling into the center of the Twelve, she spied a wicker basket lying on the ground, movement from within drawing her closer.

Hazy blue eyes stared up at her from within hungrily, demanding cries compelling her to sweep the small infant out of the basket and into her arms. Her awareness drifted up to the surrounding redwoods and a soft rustle and approving murmur wafted through the high branches of the Twelve, and a feeling of rightness settled over her. The infant's cries brought her back to the situation at hand. "Alright little one, I don't know how you came to be out here, but you are coming home with me to a warm bottle and a warm bed." As if understanding her, the babe quieted and closed its eyes, settling into a sound sleep. Grabbing the basket, Ysande limped away into the coming night, the only sounds remaining at the Twelve were soft rustles of the rain slashing through the grass and brush of the forest floor.

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“Izzy?” A harsh guttural voice, belonging to Hamlin, the only real trader to ever grace Marinsdale, snapped her out of her reverie. “Are you serving lunch yet? I’ve been a week on the road, and I am ready for some of your home-made shepherd’s pie.” Smiling a warm broad smile at him and finishing wiping down the last table, she replied, “It’s in the oven, I’ll have you a plate as soon as it’s done. In the meantime, I’ll have Lyra see to your horses.” Giving the odd grunt that seemed to pass as assent for the grizzled old man, and wandering over to the table he favored, he began to unpack his pack and set up shop for the few odds and ends he sold while he was in town. Many of the townsfolk ate in the inn nightly, so a business arrangement had been made long before Izzy had taken over the proprietorship of the Inn. For a small cut of what the trader sold, he could sell his wares from a table within the inn. As a small bonus, it tended to draw more customers when he was in town, so the benefits were lucrative.

Thinking to herself as she went out the back of the inn to look for Lyra, Izzy wondered just how old the trader was. She had known Hamlin since she was a little girl and he seemed to be just as old and grizzled as he was now. Feeling the aches and pains of just moving shooting through her body, she wondered how the old trader managed. One day she would have to ask his secret. A loud crash sounded from the stables, and an exclamation of surprise or maybe pain echoed throughout the small courtyard between the stables and the inn. All thoughts of the trader flew out of her mind as she rushed to the stables to see what caused the ruckus. Opening the small stable door at the side of the building and taking in the scene before her, she had to restrain her laughter.

A tall stack of straw had somehow fallen over, scattering tack and yard tools across the stable floor. Underneath a bale of straw was a hapless pair of feet and a cursing girl. Trying desperately to hold her laughter in check, Izzy choked out “Lyra? Are you ok?” More cursing and the bale rolled over to reveal the smallish form of Lyra, covered in straw. Turning a blue-eyed baleful glare towards the barely concealed laughter of her mother and spitting stray bits of

straw out of her mouth, “You think this is funny, don’t you? I could have been killed! I told Charles not to stack it so high, but no one listens to me, and I almost die when it tumbles over!”

Wiping away tears of no longer concealed laughter, Izzy pointed to a smaller stack of straw off to the side of the stable, “You could have pulled bales from that stack and saved yourself the attempt on your life.” Once again collapsing into yet another fit of laughter. “I didn’t think there were enough bales in that pile for the stalls, so I tried to get a few more!” Lyra fumed. She narrowed her eyes in consternation, “Did you need something?” Izzy sensing the fun had ended, replied casually “Oh, nothing much. Hamlin just arrived and needs—” Lyra was already rushing for the door. “STOP!” Skidding to a halt, almost falling out of the door in the process, Lyra turned a baleful eye towards her mother. Izzy sighed inwardly, “His horses need seen to before you go look at his wares. Wipe them down and see to some warm mash for them. Its been colder lately and they will surely be the better for it.” Seeing the girl’s downcast expression, she followed up with, “It’s still a bit before the lunch crowd gets here and he is the only person in the common room at the moment, so if you hurry, you can still be the first to look his wares over.” Before she could finish her sentence, the girl was gone, headed for the front of the inn.

Izzy turned back towards the inn, closing the stable door behind her with a loud creak. Standing there a moment, gathering her thoughts, she glanced around the diminutive courtyard. There was the tree that she and Lyra had planted on the girl’s fifth nameday. It was an oak tree with broad leaves that were already awash with the colors of autumn. It had grown into a fine tree in the twelve years that had passed since then. Strong, thick branches sweeping out over the courtyard, the branches and leaves protecting the few small tables that passed for an outdoor dining area from the heat of the sun. That’s not a problem right now, she thought to herself as

she shivered in the cold breeze that seemed to gust from out of nowhere. “The seasons are changing.” she said to herself. A stray thought in the back of her mind whispered “change is coming.” as a strong gust of ice-cold wind drove her back into the warmth of the inn and to the business of the coming day.

## CHAPTER 1 — CHANGE

Lyra poured the hot mash into the feed bags, then set about placing them over the head of each of the trader's horses. Having cared for these horses each time he visited since she was little, she knew the tall, even-tempered bay was named Dusk and the cream-colored frisky one was named Star for the obvious four-point white star on his forehead. After securing the bag in place and giving Dusk a gentle pat, listening to him chew happily on the mash, she turned to Star to put his feed bag on him, he had waited for just that moment to nudge the bottom of the feed bag with his nose, as she was lifting it towards his head. Warm mash splashed down the front of her tunic and pants. Star whickered softly, presumably the equine equivalent of an amused snicker. Gritting her teeth in annoyance, she placed the feed bag over his head and into place. "That is that much less you get to eat. You've only hurt yourself because I am not giving you any beyond that until morning." She lectured the mischievous animal. He bounced his head up and down as if acknowledging the error of his ways, but the obvious eye roll revealed his true feelings on the matter.

"Right. No apple for you." she turned to walk out and he gently nudged her shoulder with the feed bag. Turning back to look at him, she saw he had the decency to have hung his head low and look genuinely apologetic. "Fine, I'll think about it, and maybe bring you an apple



when I come back. You think about what you've done, though, and make sure it doesn't happen again." Quickly, she exited the building into the courtyard, her breath stolen away by a blast of icy wind that seemed to cut right through her and enhanced by the wet mash spots on the front of her tunic. Thinking back through the autumns that she remembered, not one could be remembered that got this cold this early in the season.

Glancing up at her favorite oak tree to gauge the current season by its ever-reliable broad leaves, she froze. A shadow was uncoiling itself from a branch in the tree, malevolent grey eyes staring down at her from a lithe almost feline form. Danger radiated from every movement it made. Bracing herself to scream, it suddenly faded away, leaving behind dancing shadows from the leaves moving in the wind. Releasing her breath slowly and casting glances all around her, she realized she was alone again in the courtyard. Shaking her head and feeling silly about the incident, she walked to the inn door and pushed it open into the warm common room. All thoughts of the strange encounter immediately forgotten as she saw Hamlin, with all his wares around him, working hard to devour some of her mother's shepherd pie.

"Hamlin!" The note of joy in her voice was obvious to all present. The old trader had been like a favored uncle to her throughout the years of her life. Hamlin's face lit up, the shepherd's pie all but forgotten as he stood up to sweep her into a bearhug. Laughingly he separated himself from her, "I've brought something for you. If you let me go long enough, I'll see if I can find it." Nodding eagerly, she watched as he rummaged through his personal bags and pulled something out wrapped in fine silk. Turning to her, he handed it to her reverently. Feeling the cool, smooth material in her hands, she gently unfolded it. Nestled within was a fine silver chain with a blue crystal held in place by silver filigree designed to look like branches with tiny leaves. Gasping with wonder, she immediately tried to hand it back. "I love it but I can't

accept this, it's much too valuable!" An intense look of longing on her face, but wondering how many kings or queens could be ransomed with such a bauble. Kind eyes drew her gaze as he took the necklace from her, "Keep it, lass, it was given to me as a reward for returning the pouch of a very rich man that carelessly left it at my table. Besides, it doesn't suit me and my custom can't generally afford to buy something like this. It will, however, look very fetching on you." He placed his hands on her shoulder, gently turning her around, lifting her long blonde hair, and draped the necklace around her neck and clasped it. It settled snugly between her breasts and it filled her with a sense of 'rightness' as if it belonged there.

"Thank you, Hamlin!" Throwing her arms around him once again and hugging him tightly. Smiling broadly at her pleasure, he disengaged from her and sat back down, digging heartily back into the shepherd's pie in front of him. Lyra sat down opposite him and started rummaging through his wares. "How much for this coin purse?", holding up a soft leather pouch with an intricate pattern displaying a mountain flower done in blue and silver beads, and added, "It complements the necklace, I think." Glancing up at her, his eyes catching on the necklace he had just given her, was it softly glowing? He watched her briefly as she shrewdly examined the purse. Were her blue eyes also softly glowing? Shaking his head, dismissing it as a trick of the afternoon light, and doing a mental calculation, "I'll give you my favored customer discount for it and sell it to you for five small rounds." Smiling broadly, she quickly got up exclaiming, "I'll go get it from my room!" She hurried off to fetch the small sum. Watching her rush towards the rooms at the side of the inn opposite the courtyard. "Change is coming." He intoned softly, wondering where the stray thought came from.

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Lyra finished scrubbing the last greasy dish of the day and put it in its place with the rest of them in the wooden cupboards and closed the ornate wooden door that protected them, sighing in relief. The evening had brought a lot of customers, all anxious to see what the trader had brought to sell them this visit. Smiling happily, she patted the purse on her belt, happy that she had the first choice of his wares. Her tables had all been uncommonly generous with tips tonight and had filled the small purse almost to bursting. Thinking back, she couldn't remember another time when people had been so giving.

"Lyra? Are you still back here?" her mom inquired, strolling into the kitchen. "Yes, mom, I just finished the night's dishes." She turned to face her mom. Small strands of hair were out of place and sticking up at odd angles in the older woman's greying hair and the tired expression on her face showed just what a hectic night it had been. "After tonight, I think we can finally afford to hire a stable boy and maybe some additional help for the common room. I've never seen a crowd more ready to spend rounds than tonight. It must have been an excellent harvest this year." Even through the weariness on her face, she could tell her mom was very pleased. "I believe I am going to go and turn in for the night. These old bones are telling me that it is time for a well-deserved rest." Lyra smiled laughingly, "I know what those old bones are capable of and I'd bet you can still run circles around those of us with younger bones." She quipped. Laughing at the thought, "I'll not want to try that any time soon. Goodnight." She smiled and wandered back out of the kitchen and towards her humble room.

Lingering a moment longer, she peered out the kitchen window, into the darkness that had fallen as she worked. Thoughts of the shadowy creature in the oak tree came to her mind, the smooth way it seemed to unfold itself from the branch and the feeling of dread that seemed to

infuse itself into her very bones. That couldn't be an actual creature, could it? Sighing heavily at the thought, she turned and made her way slowly to her room, weighing her sanity. Reasoning further, against her deep preference to just forget the experience, "If it were real," she said to herself, out loud, "what would that mean? What would its purpose be?"

A door to one of the inn rooms suddenly opened next to her with a creak and she startled, wheeling towards the unexpected sound. "Woah, lass. Calm down. It's only me, Hamlin." the old trader had his hands out, palms down, gesturing that he meant no harm. Sagging in relief, Lyra leaned against the wall behind her feeling the smooth, cool wood under her fingers. "Who were you talking to?" He glanced around looking for another person. She glanced down in embarrassment, "I was just talking to myself. I do that sometimes to work out things." Giving her a kind, reassuring smile, "Don't you worry about it. I talk to myself far more than I should." He chuckled under his breath, "If I may ask, what were you trying to work out? Maybe I can help."

Hesitantly, she told him the story of the afternoon and he listened to her intently. "I can tell you that you aren't crazy." He began. "Every place I have traveled to has a tale of someone who has seen one. What their purpose may be, I cannot begin to fathom." Pausing to stroke his scraggly beard, "It does not bode well and fills me with a sense of ill-ease that they are also here on the outskirts of the known lands." Frowning a bit, "Have you talked to any of these people yourself?" She cast him an unreadable look. Sighing deeply but answering the question he thought she might ask, "No. I was unable to track down a one to learn more. I was dismissing it as a tale being spread by a wayward storyteller that was trying to scare people and that it was so fanciful, that people were spreading it. However, that was until I talked to you. You have a sensible head on your shoulders and not prone to flights of fancy."

“Tell mom that.” giggling with little mirth in her voice. “Do you think they are dead for having seen the creatures?” His face frowned in thought, “The thought had occurred to me, but I see no reason to jump to conclusions. Not all the people that have seen them are as wholesome as you and there are many reasons they might have disappeared. Wait here a moment.” He turned and plodded back into his room. She could hear him shuffling around in his packs and he returned a moment later holding a wicked looking sword. The grip was wrapped in soft blackened leather and the hilt was skillfully crafted to form wings of some feathery beast. Long steel plumes stretched out to either side and then smaller plumes curved back down to the hilt. The blade of the sword was slightly curved with sharp, jagged edges running down the outer curve. A large sphere of transparent blue stone, wrapped in silver spirals served as the sword’s pommel. “This belonged to a nobleman’s son, and he no longer had need for it, so his father traded it for other supplies. It shouldn’t be too heavy for you, as it was made for a young boy.” he said gruffly. Seeing her stricken expression, he quickly rambled out, “Just in case.”

“But I don’t even know how to use a sword!” her eyes wide with disbelief. “Just make sure the sharp bits end up in whatever is attacking you and keep doing it until it isn’t moving anymore.” he quipped back. Gingerly, she reached for the sword as if expecting it to come to life and attack her. The necklace around her neck flared with incandescent blue light and without even realizing it, she was whirling, sword in hand, striking out at the partially formless shadowy creature that had crept silently and patiently through the darkness of the hallway ceiling. The sword bit true and the odd creature was deflected to the side, hitting the wall and then the floor with a pair of loud thuds. Attempting to stand on unsteady shadowy legs, the smallish creature collapsed onto its side on the worn wooden floor and evaporated noiselessly

into a dark mist that dissipated as rapidly as it was produced, leaving just the uncertain memory of what had been there only moments before.

“Is everything ok?!” Izzy’s voice rang out from her room further down the hallway. Not comprehending what just happened, Lyra let go of the sword as if it was a poisonous snake and it loudly clattered onto the stout wooden floor. “What are you doing to my daughter?!” Izzy’s voice was shrill, taking in the terrified look on Lyra’s face and the poleaxed look on Hamlin’s, and then resting her gaze on the sword laying on the floor of the hallway. “I, I, umm...” the old trader stuttered and looked to Lyra helplessly.

Sensing it was up to her to form an explanation, she opted for the truth, “I was attacked by something from the ceiling. I was explaining to Hamlin about an odd creature I saw earlier today and he decided I may need some form of protection.” She paused to pick up the sword, hefting it more confidently than she felt. “Something dropped from the ceiling, attacked me, and I killed it with this. It hit the floor and evaporated.” she finished as if it was an everyday thing. “Is this true?” Izzy demanded, focusing her ire on Hamlin who could only nod dumbly. Taking control of the situation, “Both of you to your rooms and bed. Lock your doors and shutter your windows. We will discuss this further in the morning.” She watched with satisfaction as the two scrambled to do as they were told, Lyra holding the sword in front of her as if she was a soldier heading into battle as she walked past. “Be careful with that thing, you may have gotten a lucky swing in tonight, but you are more likely to hurt yourself than anything else.” The younger girl nodded and grimaced as she disappeared through the door of her room. A moment later, there was the sound of the lock being thrown and then shutters being closed. Turning back to the trader, she smiled in satisfaction that he had already retired back to his room. Tomorrow was

going to be a trying day and she would need rest to face it. Entering her room, she locked the door and crossed over to the window and shuttered it, following her own orders as well.

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“Do you think we will see anymore?” Izzy inquired between bites of scrambled eggs and hashed potatoes. Sitting at one of the Inn common tables, they had breakfast as they discussed the prior night. Hamlin finished the last few remaining pieces of egg on his plate, furrowing his brow and gazing absently out the inn’s large picture window at the road and forest beyond. He slowly responded in a low gruff voice, “It’s not an easy thing to say. Without knowing the purpose of these creatures. The one Lyra killed was seen by her earlier in the day and it waited until the night to try to attack her. I believe I can say, with some logic, that if she is a target, another one and maybe more than one, will be after her soon.” he sighed deeply. Lyra, silently listening, looked up sharply as the trader finished, but it was Izzy’s shrill voice that continued, “Well, what are we going to do? The town only has a constable and a few armsmen. They aren’t going to watch an innkeeper’s daughter night and day.” Hamlin could only nod in agreement. Unless you were a person of means, the local peacekeepers were fairly unconcerned about your well-being. “Well, I know a man that may have an idea what these creatures are. However, he is a week’s ride to the Northeast through some very rough country. Loaded as I am, it will probably take three weeks for me to get back.” he finished frowning in thought.

“I’m going too.” Lyra declared in a determined voice. “You most certainly are not! I need your help in the inn, not traipsing all over--” Izzy began. “Mom, stop!” she interrupted, “If I just sit here and they have some way of knowing where I am, I am a sitting duck. Besides, just

last night you were telling me you could afford some additional help for the inn. Jade's daughter is about my age and she was telling me last week how business was slow at the tailor and she was hoping that she could get some work to help her mom pay the tax bill. Rob, the blacksmith's son, is still too young to fully help out around the forge, but he is great with horses. He would make a perfect stable boy." she paused, seeing her mom's stricken look. "I understand you want me to be safe, and I want you to be safe. If I stay here, I may be putting you and everyone around me in danger, and I can't be responsible for that." Tears streamed down her mother's face as she chokingly spoke, "I always knew this day would come. Ever since I found you in that basket, watched over by the Twelve." Lyra shedding tears of her own nodded. Her mom had told her the story of how she came to live here long ago and while a part of her was curious how she had come to be there in the forest, Izzy and this small town was all she had ever known. "Hamlin," her mom turned a harsh eye to the trader, "You watch over her and make sure no harm comes to her." Turning back to Lyra, "And you do everything Hamlin asks you to and try to watch over him as well." Getting up out of her seat, she held her index finger up, motioning to them that she would be back and hurried down the hallway in the direction of her room.

Lyra wiping away tears sighed and looked over at the trader, "Are you ok with me going with you?" He nodded silently, seemingly deep in thought. "Your reasoning is sound. I was thinking much the same. However, we are only going over the road a short while, then we will be going through the woods and into very rough country beyond. We will need to reach the Pass of the Tengeris soon if we don't want to be caught in one of the storms that pass through there often." Nodding her head in agreement, though she had no idea where or what he was referencing. The furthest she had ever traveled was Mackerell's Ford, a small town to the south,



about a half a day's ride. It was the sole crossing point of the mighty Barramundi River that had gotten its name from the fish they pulled out of it and marked the border of the inhabited lands in the West. Beyond were the wildlands, vastly unexplored due to tales of strange creatures that made it their home.

Mackerell's Ford had a festival every year to celebrate the new year's planting in the Spring. There were baked sweets, fine trinkets, music, and dancing in the square of the town. Her mom had insisted they go every year, though her mom would just sit and watch her dance with the young men who attended. A sudden pang of homesickness brought her thoughts back to the present and she realized Hamlin was still talking. "...and then after that, we will be there. Hopefully, he is home when we get there. He often goes searching for odds and ends in the ruins of lost peoples." Nodding as if she had heard everything he said, "Yes, that would be best. What do we do if he isn't there?" He made an ironic grin, "We wait."

Hearing footsteps from the hall, Lyra turned her attention to her mother as she walked back into the room. "It's not much, but I'm not sending a daughter of mine out into the world with only the clothes on her back." her mother began in a soft, subdued voice as she sat a burlap bag that seemed to be bursting at the seams in front of her. "There is a warm sheep's wool blanket in there, as well as some of the venison we dried this summer. I also put a half wheel of the white spice cheese you like so much, as well as a couple other things you may find usefu-" her voice broke, spurring a fresh round of tears from both of them. Standing, Lyra wrapped her mom in a tight hug and the two clung together softly talking to each other between bouts of tears. Hamlin stood, politely excused himself, and left the Inn. "Watch out for Hamlin, I really don't know how old he is, but he has to be much older than he lets on. Don't let him strain himself too much if you can help it." Izzy paused in thought. "Learn what you can from him too, the man is

a shrewd businessman and you would do well to pick up any skills you can.” Nodding tearfully, Lyra hugged her mom tighter. “I will, mom. Please go hire the ones I mentioned so you don’t have to do everything by yourself. I couldn’t bear it if something happened to you because of my absence.” Dissolving back into tears the two stood there hugging until Hamlin returned. “A storm is fast approaching on the horizon; we should get moving as soon as we can. I’ve saddled the horses and stowed my supplies so we can leave as soon as you are ready.” The two separated reluctantly, Izzy finding it hard to let go of the only daughter she had ever known.

Lyra slowly began walking back towards the old familiar hallway that led to her room, “Let me go pack some clothes and get the sword.” Not awaiting a response, she turned down the hallway thinking it strange that it now felt like some other person’s place and no longer hers. Running fingers along the wooden walls, feeling their smooth wooden fibers, she wondered if she would ever return to wander this hallway again. Opening the door to her room, she walked in and marveled that even so personal of space could suddenly feel like just another room in a handful of moments. Quickly, she grabbed the small brown leather backpack that she used when they went to the festival and stuffed it with extra tunics, breeches, and small clothes. Throwing the backpack over her shoulder and grabbing her new coin purse and hanging it around her neck by the strap, she grabbed the sword leaning against the small wooden stool her mom would sit on while telling her bedtime stories or singing her to sleep. Feeling the tears well up once again, she rushed back out to where her mom and Hamlin waited.

Seeing her walk into the room, her mom rushed up to her and pulled her into a bearhug, almost dislodging her pack from her shoulder. “Keep yourself safe, I’ll be right here when you return. This is always your home.” Lyra nodding tearfully, barely managed to choke out, “I will, you too. I love you, mom.” Hamlin, clearing his throat and walking up to them, “I hate to

interrupt, but we have to be going quickly if we are going to get some travel time in before the storm.” Her mom, giving her one last tight squeeze and nodding, “Hamlin’s right. You need to get moving. I love you and I’ll be praying for your safe journey. Now go, before I change my mind and lock you in your room.” Lyra giggling through her tears, “You would, wouldn’t you?” pausing and looking around the common room one last time with her mom standing there, committing the image as a memory to be treasured. Hearing Hamlin walk out the door behind her, she put on a brave face and smiled at her mother before quickly following him out the door.

Outside, Hamlin was already sitting easily in Star’s saddle and the big horse was nodding his head in an obvious gesture that he was ready to be on the way. Dusk glanced over at her as she walked out, sighing heavily as he quickly ascertained what was to come. Quickly climbing up into his saddle, he waited patiently for her to be settled, then he slowly started walking forward when she took hold of his reins. Lyra glanced back towards the inn which now looked much smaller than she remembered growing up. Through the inn’s large picture window, she saw her mom waving at her tearfully. Waving back as Dusk slowly picked his way forward, easing into a light trot, her mom was quickly lost to view as they slowly followed the lightly traveled dirt road. Passing a handful of small farms and small hovels that bordered the redwood forest, various townsfolk watched them curiously, some waving as they recognized Lyra.

None stopped to question them as they passed, young people leaving Marinsdale was a fact of life, and none blamed any that did leave. There were far better opportunities in the larger cities than a small backwater hamlet like Marinsdale could provide. Passing into the tall redwoods, Lyra glanced over her shoulder for one last look at the only home she had ever known. Sighing softly, she faced the path ahead wondering to herself where it was going to end.

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A great flash of light lit up the canopy of leaves above them and a moment after, the crackling of thunder rolled through the redwoods washing over the two travelers, ending in a series of loud booms. Star danced nervously at the sound, while Hamlin talked softly to calm the big horse, patting him on the neck. Dusk sighed heavily underneath Lyra and twitched his ears from side to side, listening for the next peal of thunder. She shifted her hips a bit, feeling sore in places she didn't know she possessed from the long ride. Glancing around she realized the shadows were beginning to gather heavily in pools beneath the towering redwoods in the rapidly failing light; Night was falling.

They had left the lightly traveled dirt road in the late afternoon, plunging between the trunks of the towering trees, away from any sign of civilization. Picking their way slowly uphill, Dusk stumbled heavily on the shadowed ground, pitching Lyra roughly to the side. Grabbing the pommel of the saddle, she managed to keep herself from sliding off the side of the tall bay. Trying to yell over the howling of the frigid wind to get Hamlin's attention, "The horses are having a hard time finding their way, we need to stop." Hamlin pulled back on Star's reins, slowing the big horse even as he fought to keep moving forward.

As Dusk trotted closer to Star, the old trader turned to face Lyra. "We have to get to the top of the rise before it gets completely dark. I smell snow in the wind and this will be the worst place to be, come morning." Deferring to the older man's experience, she urged Dusk to a faster trot to match Star. They rode silently through the biting wind, she felt Dusk straining beneath her as they slowly climbed higher into the falling darkness. The redwoods slowly faded into the

night becoming a hazy treeline far below her, distant flashes of jagged lightning illuminating the sky above.

Cresting the rise, she was able to just make out Hamlin pointing a way off to her right. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated a lone wooden building with a ramshackle overhang that bobbed and sagged in the turbulent wind. Tiny, feather light sensations began crawling across her cheek like a light touch. Another began on her forehead, ending on her temple in a curious burning sensation. Lifting her finger to gently feel the spot, her finger encountered moisture. Realization came quickly, the snow had begun.

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Before the pair had the horses settled beneath the rickety wooden overhang that would shelter them from the snow and wind for the night, snow had already begun coating the rocky ground, broken only by the scattered yellowed brush that permeated the landscape. Hamlin, opening the old wooden door, quickly crossed to a stack of wood next to the fireplace, the worn wooden floor creaking under his feet, and began preparing a fire. Shaking the snow off her cloak and stomping the snow off her feet, Lyra stepped into the one room cabin that housed a cot and an old wooden table with two old wooden stools, one with a broken spindle hanging mournfully from one of the legs. The smell of old wood and dust wafted across the stale air, causing her to sneeze lightly.

Noticing an old lantern sitting on the wooden table, she rummaged around in her pack, finding the small flint and steel she used on the few occasions she had camped overnight in the Redwoods with her mother. Removing the glass chimney from the lantern, she found the wick saturated with oil and drew the steel across the flint, sparking the old lantern to life. Returning the glass chimney to its place, she began pulling bread, the partial wheel of cheese, and some

dried venison out of her pack and began placing it on the old table. Completing that task, Lyra glanced curiously over at Hamlin as he sent a shower of sparks across the kindling he had meticulously set beneath an oaken log with a large flint and steel. The kindling began smoking and with a few light breaths from the trader, a tendril of flame began licking across the log and spreading through the rest of the kindling. A few moments passed and soon a blazing fire was burning cheerfully in the fireplace, bathing the room in warmth, alleviating the drafts that permeated the small shack.

Sounding particularly accomplished, Hamlin turned to look back at her. “That should keep the shadows at bay for a while.” She smiled wearily, nodding in agreement. “Come have some food, mother packed quite a bit for us.” Her eyes misted a little bit as she thought of her mom, but she pushed back the feeling and busied herself eating, thinking ahead to what this journey might reveal. No matter how much she tried, she could not imagine what made her so unique as to warrant sending creatures after her. Mistaking her silence for worry, he swallowed the small bite of sandwich, tasting of musky meat and spiced cheese and started softly speaking. “It’ll be alright. You’ll see. I’m sure old Tom will have some sort of charm or something that will hide you from them.” He took another bite and quietly contemplated his next choice of words.

After assembling her small sandwich of venison, cheese, and a slice of bread, Lyra’s eyes met his and she flashed a small smile at his kind words. “I just don’t understand why they are after me. I’m no one special.” Considering carefully his choice of words, his head shaking slowly from side to side, “I wish that were true for your sake, but something happened when that creature attacked you in the hallway that cannot be easily explained. That was not luck, that was fate.” Frowning, she saw the sense of his words, but couldn’t accept them. “I don’t believe in

that. Fate is a word people use to explain things that they don't understand. I won't pretend to understand what happened back there, but I refuse to believe I am predestined for anything other than eventually running an Inn."

Chuckling softly, Hamlin sighed. "Like it or not, there are events in motion that seem to be holding you as a focus. Until we find out why, fate or not, you have a part to play."

Unwilling to continue the discussion, Lyra continued nibbling on her sandwich and watched the flames dancing across the log in the blackened fireplace. "Where are you from, Hamlin? I mean, it seems I've known you all my life, but I don't actually know anything about you except you have always been kind to my mom and I and you are a trader." Feigning indifference, Hamlin softly began speaking. "I was raised near an old fishing village named Amhela. It was a quiet place and nothing much of note ever happened there. I learned to read, write, and do figures there. The elders, seeing my proficiency with numbers, decided I should learn to trade and here I am." Taking a large bite of his sandwich, he lapsed into silence. Sensing his reticence to speak further, Lyra pondered a moment. "What can you tell me about the person we are travelling to see?"

The old trader sighed and swallowed the mouthful he had been chewing on. "Not much really. I know he is a historian of sorts and has a house full of old books and ancient scrolls. I'm sure if anyone knows anything about what could possibly be going on, it is him." Shoving the last bite of sandwich into his mouth, he stood up, grabbed his bedroll and laid it out on the floor. "You take the cot; I'll sleep right here near the fire." Lyra frowned, so many questions bubbling in her mind that had yet to be answered and she could sense that Hamlin was holding a lot of information back from her but couldn't guess what that may entail. She finished the last couple bites of her sandwich, took a long pull of water from her water pouch, and laid out her bedroll on

the cot. The old cot groaned and squeaked as she sank onto it, but it held her light weight. Glancing over to where the old trader lay, she whispered, “Good night, Hamlin.” A long drawn out snore was her only answer.

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Far above, on an isolated mountain peak, surrounded in a torrent of snow and the harshest winter winds, a lone shadowy figure gazes down at the old cabin. It begins tracing lines and shapes into the air in broad graceful sweeps, each line etched into the air itself staying suspended where it is placed, unaffected by the force of the wind. Completing the pattern, it intones a guttural word which is lost in the howl of the wind. The night briefly lights up in eerie red light as the tracings flare with incandescent ruby colored light. The figure feels the alien presence of the Master fill its mind.

*The girl has been found.*

*\*Terminate her\**

*She travels with an old one.*

*\*Terminate it\**

*It will be as you command.*

The shadowy figure slumps for a moment as the master’s presence leaves its mind. Slowly standing, it again begins tracing lines into the air, its will penetrating into the mountain peak itself. Soon the master’s will shall be fulfilled in a cascade of rock and ice.

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“Lyra wake up!” Hamlin, in his urgency, roughly shook the sleeping girl. Lyra groggily opened her eyes, quickly coming fully awake at the sound of the loud rumble that seemed to be all around her, vibrating the old cabin violently. “What is happening, Hamlin?” Without pausing, stuffing their packs with their bedding and food, “Avalanche! Hurry and help me! We need to get out of here now!” He tossed her pack to her and hefted his over his shoulder and quickly stormed out the door into the black night. Following in his wake, she shivered at the cold wind that seemed to bite into her body, still warm from the sleep she had been rudely awakened from.

Hamlin put a bridle on each horse, disregarding the saddles in his haste. “We will have to ride bareback, there just isn’t time for the saddles!” Lyra nodded, most of her riding as a child had been bareback, so she had little concern about the prospect. Interlacing his fingers and bending down, she quickly put a foot in his hands, and he helped her onto Dusk, the old horse’s ears nervously swiveling towards the steadily growing roar. The trader quickly mounted Star and dug his heels into the horse’s flank and the horse bolted into the night with a squeal of indignant rage.

Dusk followed at a heavy gallop across the fresh snow, Lyra’s freezing hands clinging to the reins and mane of the horse, her head bent low to hide her face from the stinging flakes of the still falling snow. The rumble, now almost deafening, seemed to encourage the horses to a faster pace. She could no longer see Hamlin ahead of her through the dark and snow. Trusting Dusk to keep up she patted him on the neck, gave him the lead, and in a soft whisper lost to the wind, “Keep us safe.”

An eternity seemed to pass as they flew across the snow covered hill, seemingly making their way higher the further they went. Through the storm and dark, she idly began making out shapes in the darkness, high above her. Realizing they weren’t just shapes, but rocky outcrops of

the white stone of a steep cliff high above her, she began to hope. “Almost safe, just a bit further.” the thought repeating in her mind. A sharp pain blossomed on her left side and she felt herself falling. As her head struck the unforgiving surface of a snow covered stone, she knew no more.

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Soft light filtered through the low grey clouds, still shedding snow over the landscape. An occasional tongue of wind drove the light flakes into the overhang that Hamlin had found to shelter Star and himself. Cursing himself for a fool, but not knowing what he could have done differently, he continued scanning the snowy landscape, searching for any sign of Lyra. Movement in the distance caught his eye, and he focused on it. A few moments later, it resolved itself into the shape of a horse.

Rushing forward, feeling a sense of intense relief, he ran out to greet her. Dusk, seeing Hamlin and Star, broke into a fast trot. As Dusk trotted closer, Hamlin felt his heart fall. Lyra wasn't on the horse. Looking intently in the direction the horse had approached from, he watched for any sign of movement until Dusk reached him, head now hung low. Checking the big bay over, a sense of dread filled him as he saw the blood matted in the horse's hair. “Where is she Dusk? Where is Lyra?” speaking while looking the horse over for any wounds. Dusk looked over his shoulder at the direction he walked in from.

“Back that way, eh?” The trader was still speaking softly as he gently handled the horse's legs, noting the gashes and scratches on the left side of the animal. Reaching the conclusion that they hadn't escaped the avalanche as he pulled out pieces of sharp rock from the horse's injured

legs, he resolved to follow the horse's tracks and try his best to find her, even if it was just her body. Izzy would skin him alive if he didn't. Besides, he hoped someone would search for him if he were in a similar situation. Pulling some salve from his pouch, he coated Dusk's wounds to prevent infection, and led the Bay back to where Star waited.

## CHAPTER 2 — MEMORIES

Light streamed through the dilapidated ancient window onto Hamlin's sleeping form. Breathing deeply and smelling the thick ocean air, he rubbed his eyes and sat up, contemplating the day's upcoming event. Unsure if his stature as a junior clerk qualified him to act in any official capacity, regardless if his Master was ill and potentially on his deathbed. Still, he donned his official robes, draped the master's medal of office around his neck, and placed the wig of a full Magister on his head. Surveying himself in the mirror, he had to suppress a nervous chuckle; he looked ridiculous. His young face gave the impression of a young child trying to wear his father's much too large clothing.

"It will have to do," he thought to himself. "It is the proper outfit for the position I am filling, regardless of how unlikely I look in it." Placing the seal of the office and the accompanying wax into its soft leather pouch designed for such occasions and hanging it from a corded belt he tied around his waist. Looking around the small room he called his within the master's home, he verified that all was in order and that he had all that he needed for the ceremony. There wasn't much to view. A small straw mattress against the old stone wall closest to the fireplace, which he had already extinguished for the day. There was a small writing desk and stool on the opposite side of the room, closest to the large open window where he performed

most of his duties while the daylight was adequate, and an old dusty bureau opposite the entry door that housed what few clothing articles he called his.

The cool, smooth stone of the floor reminded him that he was still a couple of articles of clothing short. “Shoes!” Searching around the room, he finally found them underneath the bureau where he had unwittingly kicked them off the night before. Finally, fully dressed, he made his way into the stone hallway beyond his room, pulling the heavy wooden door closed behind him. Voices at the end of the hall caught his attention and he watched as a priest, escorted by the estate’s Majordomo, entered the master’s room.

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