

Prologue

The traveler wiped a weary hand across his eyes. He looked down at his dust-laden boots as his feet touched a much harder surface than the dirt path they had tread upon for the last three days. Stooping, he brushed grit away from the path to reveal ochre stones beneath, and his mind puzzled at the pattern of cobbles spreading out before him. He raised his eyes, straining to define his surroundings in the last tint of twilight. A towering, crumbling edifice of the same ochre stone confronted him but provided no answers. He straightened, weary, achy, and confused.

As he stepped cautiously across what appeared to be an abandoned lane, the cool night breeze dried his damp hair and sent a shiver down his neck. But more than cold wind caused his knees to shake uncontrollably. Uneasiness had plagued him the moment he entered the shambles of what looked like a once-thriving village. He could make out the remains of finely crafted stonework: corniced walls of buildings, corrals for animals, even a nearly intact archway adorning the entrance to a land that must have once boasted a beautiful, wide avenue running the length of its commercial center. In the failing light, he ran his fingers along inlaid scrolling of ebony and oak, polished wood that wrapped doorways in designs of leaf and flower. A sudden breeze from the mountains in the north carried the scent of snow-covered pine forests, and encircled him in a flurry that made him grasp his cloak and wrap it tightly around his neck.

The young man knew he was lost, for this place was not on any map. His jaw clenched in anxiety and his throat felt dry as road gravel; he had hoped to find warm shelter for the night, a hearty meal, and a soft goose-down mattress at an accommodating inn. Instead, he heard eerie, discomfiting sounds carried on the air, flitting around his ears. He stopped, every nerve heightened, and pressed his back against the wooden lintel of a rotted doorway that led to a field

of tumbled stones and a tangle of weeds. He closed his eyes and sifted through the sounds, hoping for familiarity: crickets, nocturnal animals, even wolves, whose howling would at least remind him he was still in his world and not some strange aberrant one.

His heart pounded in expectation but was not consoled. A soft voice, high in pitch and achingly sad, drifted on the suffocating night air. His gut wrenched at the anguish underlying indecipherable words, which tugged at him and made his feet move of their own volition. Confused, he found himself running, his boots clacking against the uneven roadway beneath him.

He passed a broken, waterless fountain at the center of a paved square, saw shadows dart through darkened doorways. On a pedestal stood a robed figure carved from dark malachite rock, missing limbs, and parts of its face had been chipped away. A weak voice, deep within his mind, yelled at him to run, but both the words and the urgency fragmented before he could recognize them as his own.

His feet took him down one constricting lane after another. He lost track of time, of his exhaustion, of his fear. More voices, muddled and pressing, swelled around him like a tide, attacking and receding, entangling him like a carp in a fisher's net. He stopped abruptly at the remains of a wrought-iron gate that swung loosely from a wooden post. Beyond the gate the cobbled street ended, and perhaps the very world itself came to naught, for the young man trembled at the sight unfolding before him.

An impenetrable darkness, much darker than night, gathered around him, expectantly watching. Shadows like dreams skittered across the ground at his feet. He heard the rustle of branches and took a hesitant step, pushing aside the creaking gate. Wisps of pitch blackness reached out to him, swirled around him, coaxing, urging. A child's voice startled him by calling

his name. He thought he saw a flash of a tiny hand reaching out of the gloom, but the surge of blackness shifting and oozing before him quickly devoured it.

Now, his mind raced with a dozen warnings, but they came too late. For he was a stranger to this part of the world. He had never heard of the tales whispered in dark corners over mugs of ale, or told in harsh threats to badly behaved children. He had set out, as many do, to find his fortune. But now he would find only misfortune, for fate or carelessness or stupidity—it didn't matter which—had led him to the Land of Darkness.

Shepherds from the surrounding hills knew not to venture near the ruins of Antolae, the ancient name given to the once-thriving region. *Shamma* was the common name spoken under bated breath, meaning “city of destruction” in a long-forgotten tongue. If one of their flock strayed near, they surrendered it to a certain fate. They did not worry their herding dogs would follow, for venturing within one league of Antolae, the curs would whine and whimper and slink back to their owners to cower beneath their legs. It was unfortunate that this young traveler had no dog to warn him, and that the shepherders had only last month moved their flocks farther south to warmer winter climes. The entire week that he had journeyed across a windswept, barren land, following a rutted cart road, he saw no one who could have given him warning. It was too bad indeed, for all the reassuring promises he had given to his aging mother of his safe return would not be kept. She, along with his younger brothers and sisters, would forever wonder in misery what tragedy had befallen him.

All emotion emptied from the traveler's mind and heart, leaving nothing but a dim curiosity that nudged him forward. Now, close, he heard bells jingling and sheep baaing, footsteps clacking briskly across stone, a pail sloshing with water, a giggle, chickens cackling.

His heart warmed at the sounds of everyday life, sounds that removed any last vestige of hesitancy.

He stepped into the maw of blackness as if he had been swallowed whole; he left no footprint behind, nor any trace that he had crossed an invisible line. Yet, even if there had remained any sign of his passage, what good would it have done him? No one who entered that bewitched land ever came back out.