PROLOGUE

EVERY eye in the city was on Sebastian.

Or so he imagined.

The Astromancer slunk down the narrow side street as stealthily as possible, which wasn't much, considering the paunch at his belly and his general lack of coordination, especially for a feline. Sand crunched loudly between his feet and pavestone. Silhouettes watched from lighted windows. If there was a piece of street debris within ten paces, his feet found it and kicked it of their own accord. The harder he tried, the louder and clumsier he became.

The sun had long since gone dark. Muted starlight shone down from above, mixing with the filtered illumination from windows fronting the street, but this served only to deepen the shadows. Pyrezoar lamps were few and far between here in the Lower City. It was a place Sebastian generally avoided during the daytime, to say nothing of the night. Far too many people causing far too much trouble under cover of dark.

Eyes darting nervously, he hiked the hem of his robe, and stepped over a sewer grate. Pebbles clattered loudly into the dry viaducts below. He knelt and checked the engraved print on the grate. Unlike the Upper City, there were precious few street signs here, but one could always navigate by the sewer layout.

Sebastian glanced over his shoulder and gulped. Was that a silhouette moving through the street above him?

Two- and three-story buildings fronted the streets in this part of town, often leaning at such angles that they seemed to form a tunnel. Sebastian quickened his pace, trying to avoid the temptation to run. Running had never been his strong suit.

He reached a long, squat structure on one side of the street, disappearing into the distance and shadows. He knew it by description only – the Tanner's Guild. A short flight of steps led into an alley even tighter than the narrow street. He gripped the flimsy rail and moved down toward a halo of ochre light against the side of the building.

This was it. The designated meeting place.

"Sebastian," came a voice. The Astromancer jumped, sucking in his breath.

A hooded figure moved into the fringes of the light from the pyrezoar lamp. He didn't need to see green eyes or copper curls to know who it was.

He cleared his throat, mouth suddenly as dry as the desert.

"Do you have it? Is it ready?" she asked him.

Sebastian nodded. From under the plain cloak he wore, he pulled out a small, carapace-shell box. He held out the box, and lifted the lid, revealing a mechanical scarab within.

The human woman removed it gently, turning it in her hands, admiring his handiwork. Despite the circumstances of their meeting, he couldn't help a smile of satisfaction. There wasn't a half-dozen people in Tanth that could do in a year what he had accomplished in one day. Tinkering like this was precise and difficult engineering. Every gear on the tiny mechanical creature just so, every spring, every coil wound properly. The magical Dust that gave life to the scarab had to be applied in exactitude, the operating instructions without a single flaw.

"It's perfect," she said.

He cast a worried glance back the way he came. "I think I was followed," he whispered.

There was a sudden shimmering of light next to the lamppost, a mix of shadow and motes of reflected illumination, like the sun off a pool of water, and a man materialized as he pulled away the hood of his cloak. Beneath it, he wore a leather mask attached to elaborate brass goggles, concealing all but his mouth, chin, and a mop of wavy brown hair.

With a yelp, Sebastian jumped back.

"This is your idea of meeting *incognito*?" asked the man, waving a hand at Sebastian's attire. The threadbare cloak over his shoulders didn't really cover Sebastian's indigo Astromancer's robe, nor did it have a hood to conceal his matching turban or the wire-rim glasses that sat on his nose. "No wonder you were followed."

The woman glanced toward the street. The pyrezoar lamp hummed faintly.

"Laith, go check it out," she said. "He might not just be paranoid."

Laith pulled the hood over his head and flickered out of sight.

"It's not like I had one of those to use," Sebastian said defensively. "Not everyone is... a..." His whiskers twitched, and he cleared his throat.

"Now, now, Sebastian," said the woman, the corner of her smile showing in the lamplight. "He's a *former* Tassir. He left them years ago."

"That doesn't mean you should just trust him."

She gently replaced the scarab in the box and gave it back to him. "Your concern is touching, but I'll be fine. Is everything ready, then? Are *you* ready?"

"I think so."

"*Think?* This is critical, Sebastian. You're either ready or you're not. And you'd better be ready."

Sebastian cleared his throat and tried to remove a little of the stoop from his posture. "I'm ready," he said, not nearly as firmly as he'd hoped.

"Good," said the woman. She pulled out a palm-sized bit of parchment and handed it to him.

Sebastian took the parchment, trying to calm his suddenly shaky hands. He licked his lips, whispering to himself as he read what was written. He lifted his wide eyes to her. "This is it? These are real?"

The woman chuckled. "Yes, Master Astromancer, they're real. I couldn't very well ask you to do the summons otherwise, could I?"

"And you got these from...?"

"The Ledger, as I told you. I keep it safe in the citadel."

"And my payment?"

"As agreed," she assured him, "You come with us to Great Makesh. To the machine room. You get to be the first Astromancer in almost a century to use the real *Antikythera Magnus*. I wouldn't have it any other way." She put her hand on his shoulder comfortingly. "You know how important this is. We need you, Sebastian."

A commotion stirred out on the street, the noise startling Sebastian almost to the point of dropping the scarab box. Scuffling footsteps and grunts preceded the appearance of two silhouetted figures atop the flight of stone steps. Laith half-pushed, half-dragged another figure into the alley. His features were obscured, but Sebastian could see a gag in his mouth. The staggering, stooped gait, with one arm dangling uselessly, while the other tightly bound in Laith's grasp, suggested the poor fellow had just received quite a beating.

"Looks like he was being followed after all," said Laith. "He wasn't just being paranoid."

The woman regarded the prisoner impassively for a moment, and then made a slight motion with her head. "Kill him."

Laith frowned, and then let out a sigh. He pushed his captive against the Tanner's Guild wall with his left hand, while his right revealed a purple Amythine handblade. The man couldn't even raise his arm to protect himself as Laith thrust his weapon into the man's heart and twisted the blade with a sudden jerk. The man let out a hiss of air and sunk into the shadows on the ground.

Sebastian gasped loudly, then swallowed hard, fighting down bile. "You said no more killing!" he whispered in a small voice, turning away from the grisly scene. "You said no more..."

The woman's voice took on a hard edge. "I told you, Sebastian. Nothing is more important than this. Nothing! It's critical that the summons works. We can't have anyone screwing this up. Once we get the Atheel Stone, we'll be finished here. Until then..." She glanced in the direction of the slain man, and let her words hang in the air.

Sebastian's shoulders slumped.

The woman put her hands on his face, lifting his eyes to meet her gaze. "Once we're done with the *Intrepid*, we'll leave for Great Makesh. You'll have the machine all to yourself. I promise."

"You said no more killing..." he trailed off meekly.

She nodded her head. "I promise. We can do it without hurting anyone, and then we'll be gone. You just need to do your part."

Sebastian sniffled, gazing nervously at the fallen man, but then straightened up. "Okay," he said with a deep breath. "Okay. I can do it. I'm ready."

The woman nodded, and murmured a few more words of encouragement, before ushering him toward the stairs to the alley. She watched him trudge back up the street for a minute, before returning to her companion.

"That wasn't necessary," Laith said, switching to English. Considering there probably weren't half a dozen people in Tanth who spoke it, English was their preferred language to avoid being overheard.

"He needed a bit of extra motivation." The woman chuckled. "Did you see the look on his face? Priceless."

Laith frowned. He walked over to the body still slumped against the wall. Reaching down, he grasped the man's limp hand and pulled him to standing. "Sorry," he mumbled. He tugged the

gag out of the man's mouth, using it to dab at the hole in his linen shirt, which now showed the smallest of blood stains. The man blinked at him but did not reply.

"Scaring him isn't going to help," Laith insisted. "Sebastian doesn't work well under pressure."

"Well he damn well better," she said, all mirth gone. "You know what's at stake, Laithan. We can't do this without her. It doesn't matter who we have to scare, who we have to hurt, or who we have to kill. If the Simhadrin finish their little project before we can stop them, none of this will matter. Nothing will ever matter again."