

Kingdom of Ink and Paper

THE BETWIXT AND BETWEEN
CHRONICLES: BOOK ONE

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MATTHEW NEWMAN

Sandcrest Publishing

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*For Ryan, MIG, Cameron, Logan, and Dan
Thank you for giving me my Writer's Eye.*

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Prologue

I keep my breathing steady as I walk. It takes everything in me to control my instincts and not sprint. The footsteps are quiet, but something is following me. My ears perk up as I make out subtle squelching against the wet pavement, the raindrops hitting the silhouette of my tracker. As I get closer to my front door, my heartbeat quickens, matching the pace of the thing—human or not—that’s trailing me. I shiver despite the humid summer air.

The lights of my apartment building illuminate the area around me, not another soul in sight. And yet, I walk as fast as I can to the door, jamming the lock in place and collapsing to the ground.

I can feel it. Something is coming.

I focus and cast out my thoughts for help. Part of me knows I won’t get a response. Something is blocking my communication.

The footsteps finally stop at my door. I hear the light brush of fingertips run across the wood that separates us, and I’m almost filled with a newfound confidence. The hand is human. If it’s human, I stand a chance.

A bead of sweat trickles down my face, and I move my hand, silently pressing it off my skin to keep it from hitting the floor. The force outside knocks on the door. I don’t make a sound, willing it to leave. I need time to prepare for the fight that is inevitably coming.

I stay still, barely breathing for a few minutes.

The force moves away.

It’s time.

I stand and tiptoe to my office, glancing at my notes. I turn, flexing my strong fingers, and in a flash my blade appears in my grip. It feels light and familiar, the same as it has for decades.

I'm ready to fight. I'm tired of running.

Looking at the picture on my desk, my throat tightens. It's almost impossible to swallow back the wretched sadness growing in me. My brother crosses my mind—Tam too. Two more people I won't be able to protect. They don't know what's coming. I hadn't written it down out of fear of it being discovered, and now I'm paying the price.

If I win the upcoming fight, all will be well. If I lose, everything I know will turn to ash. The coming force is strong. Probably stronger than me. My only option is to give up the only thing that has made me who I am for decades, and hope that in doing so, I give the world a chance.

I press my hand to my chest and say goodbye.

To everything.

I let go of my sight, of the world I have made my own, and of everything I know. The sword turns to golden dust, gone for good. My powers rise in my chest and rip from my body becoming a beautiful, fine powder hovering in front of me. A sad smile plays on my lips, and I open the window—the dust dissipates into the Boston sky on its way to someone who will take my place.

Something in my mind slips and Tam is lost to me—I will never speak to him again. I choke back a sob, feeling the full pain of what I've done. I'm normal once again. The exchange is finished, and I watch the last shimmer of dust fade into the atmosphere.

“Tell him I'm sorry,” I say, hoping they can hear me. “Be careful. It's coming.” It's vague, but it will have to do. I don't have time to explain.

With these words, I entrust the safety of everything I have ever loved to someone I don't even know.

PROLOGUE

With these words, the stalker is alerted to my presence.

With these words an explosion echoes as my door is blasted to splinters, the sharp wood piercing my skin.

It's here.

I don't even have time to turn ...

1

The Body

William Morgan punched his best friend in the face. “Geez, Will, go ahead and take my eye out while you’re at it.” Peter massaged his nose with fervor.

“Sorry about that,” Will replied, rubbing his eyes as the vision pressed itself onto him in full force, refusing to disappear. “Really weird dream is all.” Will stared, mouth open, trying to register what happened. How could a person articulate that they had just seen a man die?

Peter raised an eyebrow, put his headphones back in his ears, and returned to his music. Knowing other students were staring, Will turned his face to the window. He leaned his suddenly burning forehead against the cool glass.

Through specks of dirt and age, Will’s face was reflected back at him: a fourteen-year-old soon-to-be high school freshman, medium-length brown hair pushed back into an uneven crew cut, and hazel eyes. At five-foot-eight, Will had always considered himself attractive enough, though the girls who complimented him were restricted to his mom and fifth-grade girlfriend. He was thin, not so much that someone would call him scrawny, though certainly not strong enough that he’d be picked to win a fight.

Will's thoughts were interrupted by the static of the bus intercom. One of the teachers, fresh from college with too much enthusiasm and zest, had an announcement to make.

"Students, we have made it to Cambridge and will be at our first stop in ten minutes. Make sure you gather all your stuff and get ready for some fun!"

Peter groaned and Will sighed. As part of a student-learning initiative, their future high school paid for Will's entire class to go to the Boston area for a set of college tours and some historic sightseeing. Though Will was willing to admit how cool it was, he couldn't help feeling irritated that the end of his summer vacation was going to be spent wandering through universities. And now he had this dream on his mind. It felt so real, like he was standing next to the man who was murdered by some ... What was it? Magic? A person? It was definitely powerful.

The bus stopped and the students were ushered off by the same overly-vivacious teacher. As Will's feet hit the asphalt, a force grabbed him from behind. Still trying to shake off the dream, Will jumped, his heart pumping as if he had just finished a long run.

"Woah, don't hit me again!" Peter exclaimed, a devilish grin playing on his lips.

Will forced a slight smile. Peter could see through his pathetic attempt to cover up how shaken he was.

Peter Roitman was taller than Will by a several inches and wore his short brown hair in an uncombed style. His eyes were a sharp green color, and despite his goofy mannerisms and charismatic nature, it was clear that Peter was always thinking about things more deeply than he let on. His clothing choice was predictable: cargo shorts and a t-shirt with an image of a cartoon character waving

comically. It was the same combination he had worn since he was old enough to dress himself.

“So, we’re touring Harvard and MIT, even though God knows most of us are too hopeless to ever get in there.” Peter gestured broadly at the sprawling campus in front of them. “With that in mind, why don’t we spend the day trying to pick up some Ivy League girls?”

“Girls that intelligent are way out of your league,” said a voice from behind them.

“Hey Iris,” Will said.

Iris McAllister was a few inches shorter than Will; however, what she lacked in height was made up for in feistiness and fashion-focused creativity. Today she was sporting a tank top that accentuated her broad shoulders and toned arms, her curly red hair reflecting the sun like wildfire. She had a blotch of sunscreen on her nose, and maps in one hand. She was certainly prepared for the day ahead.

Iris didn’t even *want* to go to the schools they were touring—she was just taking the day in stride for the sake of doing things thoroughly.

She looked at Peter. “Besides, you’re way too immature, and don’t look anything like a college student. A tall sixth grader, maybe, with that baby face.”

“Your doubt only encourages me. Now I won’t be able to leave this tour without getting someone’s number.”

Iris punched Peter’s arm, and his eyes gleamed with mischief. Will’s vision swam, his discomfort from the dream still lingering.

“You okay, Will?” Iris’s stare bore holes into him.

“Yeah,” he replied. Hopefully his gruffness would hide the

uncertainty from his voice. “Just had a really weird dream.” Will then told them all about it while they followed their chatty teacher at a distance: the man whose face was blurry, the fear he had felt because of the person—or monster?—on the other side of the door, and the man’s mysterious words.

“Tell him I’m sorry. Be careful. It’s coming,” Will muttered, biting his thumb. “Obviously it was just a dream, but it felt so real. More real than any dream I’ve ever had, that’s for sure.”

Peter scratched his head. “What’s to come seems like some pretty negative stuff. Although!” He grasped Will’s shoulder, his toothy grin giving Will conflicting feelings of mirth and frustration. “Maybe you’re supposed to solve this guy’s murder, and this vision is your only clue. And if you solve it, you’ll become a famous detective! No more college tours for William Morgan!” Peter rocked Will, and Will returned his enthusiasm the best he could.

There was no point in worrying about something like this, right?



Several hours later, the class made its way into Boston proper and settled in at a small café where the teachers handed out sandwiches and little bags of chips. Will stared at his turkey club, thoughts drifting back to the dream.

“Will.” Peter didn’t blink as he gazed at his friend’s forehead. “I know Harvard has an acceptance rate of, like, six percent, but you can’t let it get you depressed.”

Will jolted himself out of his stupor and forced out a laugh. Peter’s eyes darkened, and Will shook his head.

“I’m okay, promise. I just think the sandwich isn’t sitting well with me. I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Do you want company?”

“No, thank you. I just need some air.”

Will stood and walked out, giving one of the teachers the excuse that he was going to the coffee shop down the road to get a pick-me-up. She nodded absentmindedly, waving Will off, muttering hurriedly into her cellphone about a shortage of hotel rooms. Once outside, Will was greeted by a perfect Boston afternoon, the smell of summer ripe in the air. The streets awash with sunlight, the shops and stalls beginning to pack up for the day, he found the brisk pace relaxed him. Sweat beaded at his brow as his heart began to pump.

He was brought back to reality when he careened into someone. The impact knocked Will to the ground. He skidded in a way that was guaranteed to leave a bruise.

“Oh... Oh gosh, I’m so sorry,” he stuttered in a panic. Will found himself face to face with an unassuming woman. She had sharp eyes that pierced through him like needles. Her wavy raven-black hair matched her dress—so dark it had to be darker than black. A dull silver necklace bounced off of her throat, almost as if it were crawling toward Will. She couldn’t have been taller than him, and though she had an athletic build, she looked wiry, like she hadn’t eaten properly in weeks. She certainly wasn’t strong enough to blow Will to the ground with that level of impact.

“It’s fine. Watch where you’re going next time.” Her voice whipped past him as she rushed on her way.

Will shuddered as a strange cold washed over him, like he had been doused with a bucket of ice water.

“That’s not normal,” he murmured, staring at her retreating figure.

“Are you okay, bud? That looked like a nasty fall.” A man in a suit held his hand toward Will.

With the man’s assistance, Will stood and dusted himself off.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks. Guess I should watch where I’m going next time.”

“Not your fault, kid,” the man said. “We all trip on loose cobblestones. You should report that to the police department or something.”

Will’s gaze narrowed. “I didn’t trip. I ran into someone. She’s okay though.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. The ground is uneven—people trip all the time.” The man gave Will a suspicious look and walked away.

Will was left staring at him, feeling way worse than he had all day. Deciding he must be getting sick, he started his walk back to the class. Maybe he should ask a chaperone if he could check into the hotel early and take a nap.

“Move back! There’s nothing to see here.”

Will looked around to see a group forming nearby. There was a stressed-out policeman calling out to people, though he was having no impact on the gathering crowd. Will snaked his way through the rapidly growing throng of bodies, trying to get a better view of the scene. When he eventually broke through the forest of onlookers, he was greeted by an ambulance, several police cars, and many angry adults talking near the entrance to an apartment building.

“They’re coming back out! They must have found a body!”

“I wonder what happened?”

“Move back!” the officer tried again.

Three EMTs pushed a gurney toward the ambulance. There was definitely a body under the white sheet. Will’s spine went rigid, his breath catching in his throat. It was his first time seeing a dead person, and even though he couldn’t see their face, something about the moment hit Will hard.

Walking alongside the gurney was a man Will vaguely recognized. The man had the familiarity of a B-list celebrity Will had seen on the cover of a tabloid at a supermarket. Will racked his brain. Where had he seen him before?

The man looked to be in his late thirties to early forties, standing at about six feet with jet black hair and a dark, attractive face matched by an intense grimace. He stared at the sheet-covered body with a pained expression, his hand twitching as if he yearned to touch it, though was desperately resisting. He wore a rugged black overcoat, with sharp boots that looked like they’d be better served for running than investigating a crime scene. To top it all off, he had a long sword attached to his hip, the blade swaying back and forth as if it were part of his usual get-up.

No one, besides Will, seemed to notice him.

The man with the sword glanced up from the gurney to the crowd, scanning it. When he made eye-contact with Will, his eyes widened. Will looked away, embarrassed to be caught staring.

“William Morgan.”

Will whipped around, expecting to see someone he knew calling for him. He broke out in a cold sweat—there were only strangers in the crowd. When he looked back to the gurney, the man was gone. He watched the doors of the ambulance shut, and he rushed to return to his classmates. As he walked, Will couldn’t shake off the

entire situation; the dream, the dark-haired lady who knocked him down like a professional athlete, the body on the gurney accompanied by the odd man with a sword, a voice calling him by name ... this had been an abnormal day indeed.

Will caught up with the group and successfully slipped back in amongst the chattering teenagers. Nobody seemed to notice his return. He made eye contact with Peter, who rushed over.

“Dude, you look worse than you did when you left. You okay?”

“I’m fine. I think I just need a nap. The heat must be getting to me.”

“Fair enough.” Peter didn’t look convinced. Nevertheless, he let it go, his eyes darting back to Will from time to time, bright with concern.

The pair traipsed along in silence, looking at the city as the rest of the class talked around them.

“How do you think that guy got away with carrying a sword around those cops? Especially right after a murder?”

Will’s neck almost cracked from speed of turning, the movement making him dizzy. His eyes settled on a figure standing a few feet away in the shade of an alley, darkness obscuring her features. Will couldn’t see more than a cascade of raven hair falling around her shoulders. He recognized the voice. It was the woman from before.

“You’re Will Morgan, right?”

“Who are you?” Will asked, his voice shaking more than he would have liked.

“Dude, Will! Don’t mess with me like this. It’s not funny,” Peter shot at him.

“I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to her.”

“Hey Will ... drink this.” Peter put a bottle of water under Will’s nose, his words oozing caution.

“Really?” Will asked, annoyance creeping into his voice. “That’s what you’re going to do after that? Offer me water?”

“After what?” Peter had grown still, his voice low.

Will’s mouth opened in protest, then shut, eyes narrowing. “That woman. She knew my name!” He didn’t even try to hide his annoyance this time. “You don’t think that’s at least a little bit creepy?”

“Ahaha,” Peter laughed, though there was no enthusiasm. “I think you’re trying way too hard to pick up girls. You’re hallucinating them now. Please, drink some water.”

Will could feel his face turning red. Hallucinating? The woman was standing in the alley. At least, he thought she was. He didn’t want Peter thinking he was crazy. Or maybe he was crazy? Or maybe it was just something fueled by the shock of having seen a dead body. Will begrudgingly took the liquid.

“As I said ... I need a nap,” Will grumbled, not responding to the rest of Peter’s protests.

Will ignored Peter the rest of the way to the hotel and went straight to bed.

2

The Package From No One

The next few days passed by uneventfully. The most exciting dream Will had was one featuring his non-existent dog eating his homework. The cliché nature of the dream didn't stop Will from waking up in a mild panic and jumping out of bed to make sure he hadn't missed out on some assignment. Relieved to find he indeed did not have a forty-five-page English paper due on the first day of school, Will was unable to go back to sleep. He went downstairs to grab something to eat. There he found his father, Emery, preparing to leave for work.

Emery Morgan was a tall and wiry man with thin dark hair, and a five-o'clock shadow that never went away. He talked very loudly, and always tried to cover up the fact he was going bald.

"You're up early," Emery commented. "I thought school was the only thing that could get you out of bed before ten?"

"Couldn't sleep." Will fixed himself a bowl of cereal, school on his mind. "Did you know there are 500 kids in my graduating class at Morrison? That's absurd!"

Emery took a bite of his toast. "My high school class was about 700 people. That's pretty normal. You nervous?"

Will chewed his cereal thoughtfully. “Nah. Everyone I know is going to be there. You know what I mean? And there will be a million people I don’t know!”

Emery ruffled Will’s hair. “I do. Still, you have a week to not worry about it. You doing anything fun today?”

“I might meet up with Peter. See a movie or something. Nothing too exciting.” Will shrugged and took another bite.

“Sounds great. Have a good time.” Will’s father shoved the last bit of toast in his mouth, picked up his briefcase, and made his way to the door. “Have a good day. Summer’s almost over!”

A minute or so later he heard his father’s car start up and drive away.

Will picked up the newspaper and flipped through the pages. Once he had exhausted his reading material, he became annoyed by the silence in the room. After another hour or so of aimlessly flipping through television channels, Will was grabbed by a wave of restlessness. He needed *something* to get his mind off school. He set his long-empty bowl in the sink and went upstairs to get dressed. Peter was always good for a distraction.

While tying his shoes, Will’s pocket buzzed.

Bored. Come over. Iris is coming too.

OMW, he texted back.

Will also texted his mother, letting her know where he was going before running outside. He grabbed his bike and pedaled the few blocks to Peter’s house. When he reached Peter’s driveway, he was shortly joined by Iris, who hopped off of her bike with gusto.

“Hey Will,” she said, pulling off her helmet.

“Yo.” Peter waved at the two friends from the open front door.

Will and Iris waved back as Peter ran over to his bike, parked

leisurely in the driveway. "I'm feeling the mall," he commented. "Or going into town at least. The stores are open by now. Either of you too tired to go the extra mile?"

Unable to think of anything better to do, Will got back on his bike. Not wanting to be shown up by the two boys, Iris was already pedaling, speeding toward the large metropolitan area.

As the trio biked through the streets of Alexandria, North Carolina, Will was reminded of how much of a college town it really was; there was a reasonably large university in the area, and as a result a lot of the retailers catered to the students. There were soda shops, huge electronics stores, and for the daring, antique bookstores in dilapidated old buildings.

One of Will's favorite stores was called Gustafson and Whiteside, a tiny bookshop in a rickety building on Main Street. It stayed in business because it offered the newest releases; however, Will loved it because it was full of older books. He'd sometimes find signed copies or first editions lurking among the shelves, waiting to be purchased by the occasional student who scoured the depths of the stock.

Will had cleared Gustafson and Whiteside when he had an intense urge to stop. He turned his bike around and screeched to a halt in front of the store.

"Peter!" Iris yelled. "He stopped."

"Figures," Peter called back.

Peter and Iris pedaled back to join Will in front of the large store windows. They understood his obsession with books. Peter and Will had become friends over a favorite book they found at the store years ago: *The Redstone Keep* by Arthur O'Neill. One day at school the two boys saw Iris reading the same novel. The duo became an instant trio.

A bell chimed as the three entered the shop.

“Will! Peter! Iris! How are you today?” Carol, the elderly shopkeeper asked.

Will had known Carol since he was ten years old and began biking to school on his own. There had been more than one occasion when his parents would get a call from the school saying Will was absent only to find he had been reading in the store for the entire day, hiding amongst the old volumes and tattered pages.

“Doing great, Carol. How are you?” Will responded.

Iris and Peter greeted her as they walked past the cash register to the *YA Fantasy* section.

“Will, something interesting happened this morning.” The shopkeeper beckoned to him. Looking around the room like she expected someone to be eavesdropping, Carol dropped her voice to a whisper. “I came in to work today and found this in the mailbox. The package is addressed to you.”

Will took the box and scanned it. Finding only his name on the packaging, he tore the cardboard open.

Inside was a copy of *The Redstone Keep*, the book that had brought him and his friends together. The art on the cover was different from the copy he owned, and the novel and dust jacket were both in pristine condition.

Will’s eyes lit up with gratitude and excitement. “This is a first edition! That’s awesome! It’s older than I am.”

Opening the cover, Will took his first look inside.

“It’s signed,” he breathed out, his voice catching in his throat.

He brought the book to his eyes and held it up against the light at an angle. If he squinted, he could see the slight rise of the ink above the page, showing the signature was genuine, and not just a printed

fake. Carol clapped, eyes giddy with excitement, the sound snapping through the quiet shop like a noisemaker.

“That it is!” she exclaimed, smiling ear to ear at Will’s shocked expression.

Will hugged Carol and took out his wallet. “How much?” He hoped the \$20 he carried with him for emergencies was enough.

“You don’t owe me anything, dear. It’s a gift. I’m merely the messenger. As I said, it was here when I got to work.”

“Where did it come from?” A shiver ran through him as his mind flashed to the dead man and the stranger with the sword.

“I don’t know. It was just here. I didn’t see anyone and it didn’t have a note or anything.”

“So you mean there wasn’t anything to say who sent it? No return address? Just this box with my name on it?”

She nodded. “Afraid so. It was rather peculiar, in my opinion. I guess you just never know what surprises are in store for you every day. Whoever it’s from must know you pretty well.”

“Yeah,” Will replied. “If you find out who sent it, let me know.”

“Of course.”

“Hey, Will, you ready to go?” Iris asked, emerging with empty hands, Peter close behind.

“Yeah,” Will said.

Waving goodbye to Carol, the trio walked out the door and back to their bikes. As happy as Will was, the strangeness of the situation bothered him more than he cared to let on. The man from his dream nudged at his brain; Will ignored him.

“What did you buy?” Iris asked.

Peter stared at the book in Will’s hands. Iris noticed too and clapped her hands to her mouth.

“Oh, Will! That’s a first edition,” she said. “That’s incredible! Did you find it somewhere in the back?”

Will felt like his brain was on autopilot as he stared down at the novel. “No. Carol gave it to me. She said she found it when she got to work, addressed to me. It’s even signed!” He looked at his friends. “It’s odd. Was it one of you?”

“You think we could afford something like that?” Peter asked, rolling his eyes.

“Do you guys mind if I don’t go to the mall? I kind of want to go home and read this.”

“Really?” Peter commented, taken aback. “Now? Instead of hanging out with us?”

“Unfortunately, yeah,” Will replied, trying to put on a fake grin that masked his uneasiness. “Seeing it makes me want to read it again. Besides. I don’t want this bouncing around in my pack and getting damaged.”

“Want to meet up for lunch later?” Iris asked, annoyance creeping into her voice; she didn’t like it when plans changed suddenly.

“Maybe,” Will quipped, his mouth twisting into something he hoped was an apologetic smile. “This is just ... really cool. And I might end up inside reading all day. You know how I am.”

“To the mall, my lady.” Peter firmly ignored him.

“To the mall!”

“See ya, Will. Have fun reading.”

Iris and Peter continued their bike ride. Will turned in the opposite direction. He was lucky to have friends like them.

He sped home with the book wrapped in a sweater inside his backpack. The bike ride had Will feeling nostalgic. He had been given his first copy of *The Redstone Keep* as a birthday present from

his parents when he turned ten and tore through the thick novel within three days. It was the first novel in a series called *Byrrus*.

Byrrus was a sprawling city built around a large castle. The people who resided in Byrrus lived in peace and prosperity—the ideal town. The entries in the series all read as individual stories—different tales from different time periods, all focusing on the same castle that always stood strong. The first book in the series, *The Redstone Keep*, focused on an evil tyrant, Daegan, who sought to overtake Byrrus and claim it for his own. As the book progressed, the people came together under the leadership of a warrior named Tam Desmond who defeated the tyrant and saved their home.

Will jumped off his bike and skittered into the house, nearly tripping in the process. He rounded the corner, excited to tell his mother about the events of the morning. Their eyes met and Will stopped. Something was wrong.

It was always very easy for Will to read his mother's emotions, whether it was from the look in her gentle blue eyes, to the way she articulated certain words. Ruth Morgan had a soft face, but the sharpness of her personality was always found in her gaze more than anything else. Today, Ruth looked happy as usual, apart from her cloudy stare.

“How are you, honey?” Her tone was placating.

“Good,” he replied, narrowing his eyes and scanning his mother's face.

“How was Peter's?” Ruth had never been a good actor, and the sympathy creeping into her tone proved just as much.

Will's smile dropped, and he walked forward. “What's wrong, Mom?”

“Will,” she started, “come sit with me in the living room for a minute.”

“What happened? Is it Dad?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “Not that serious. Just sad. I was looking through old newspapers as I was cleaning up and found an article I think you need to read.”

Will’s heart caught in his throat. Somehow, he knew what was coming.

“It’s Arthur O’Neill. He passed away while you were in Boston visiting schools. I think he was from Boston too. Give it a read.” She gently placed the paper next to Will, mouth curved sympathetically, eyes watering. “I really am sorry. I know you liked him.”

“It’s okay. Life happens,” Will replied, doing his best to mask the panic taking hold of his body.

She frowned but nonetheless retreated to the kitchen. Will took a deep breath and glanced at the article.

Arthur O’Neill, author of the popular Byrrus series, dies of unknown causes.

Popular young-adult fiction author Arthur O’Neill, 60, was found dead yesterday morning in his Boston apartment. The apartment had no signs of a break-in, and O’Neill’s body had no visible signs of foul play. A police investigation is underway. Still, investigators are unofficially attributing the death to a heart attack.

“It’s always sad to see someone go like this,” one officer said. “The man wasn’t even that old. We’ll know more after the autopsy.”

Will put the paper down, staring blankly at the wall in front of him, brain pounding at a mile a minute. He thought back to just a few days ago when he witnessed a body being hauled out of a brownstone. He thought of the mysterious figure with the sword and the

woman in the alleyway. He looked at his backpack and thought of the book that had found its way inside, just a few days after its author died.

Putting his hand to his head, Will rested against the arm of the couch. He was physically shaking. Something was going on here. It couldn't have just been a coincidence; the book, the mysterious cloaked figure, the dream, the voice. It felt as if he were in a horror film, in the scene right before the main character met the killer for the first time.

He shook his head. "This is ridiculous," he muttered, looking back at the newspaper and blinking away the tears. The pain tearing through his body was akin to an emotional tragedy. He never met Arthur O'Neill. Sure, he loved the author's books, but it wasn't like the guy was his grandfather or anything.

"Well," Will said to himself, "I suppose the first thing to do is to read this book." *Maybe there's a code or something*, he thought silently. *Maybe it will give me answers.*

He pulled the book from his pack and opened it to the prologue. By the time his eyes reached the third line, the world went blurry. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision. He fell forward, cracking his head hard on the coffee table as the world around him reduced to darkness.

3

The World of the Written

Will opened his eyes to a ray of sunshine, and his temple wasn't throbbing like he expected. After all, his last memory was him hitting his head on a coffee table. Even so, he wasn't in pain. In fact, he was extremely content. His hands gripped soft sheets, and the pillow under him felt like a cloud. Will settled deeper into the comfort of the bed.

My bed isn't this comfortable.

He shot up like a bullet, flailing and trying to untangle himself from the satiny blankets. Finally released from the folds of fabric, Will stood on a bare stone floor in a strange room.

"You'd think someone waking up in a nice bed would be a little bit less panicked, right?"

Will spun around, getting tangled in the blankets all over again before tripping and falling over himself. Looking up from the ground, he was met with a spiky haired boy with a rowdy grin standing near a large wooden desk. He was about the same age as Will, maybe a little older, but there was something about him that made him seem ageless. His eyes were a puzzling aqua color that

undulated like the ocean, shifting from one shade of blue or green to another.

There were a million things Will should've asked him: *what are your eyes doing? Why are you looking at me like I'm food? Where am I? Where can I get sheets this soft?*

The only thing he could produce from his mouth was, "I'm not panicked."

He untangled himself again and stood. The room was certainly none he had ever seen. The walls were paneled in a light wood, giving them an aged look. The sunlight bounced around the room, coming from several arched windows on the farthest wall. Throughout the room were twin-sized beds holding the same comfortable white sheets Will had just escaped.

This wasn't real. How could this be real? He was obviously in some sort of fever dream.

"You're not dreaming, Will," the boy said.

Will turned to him, finally taking in the rest of the teenager. His clothes looked medieval, a peculiar combination of armor and robe accompanied by a long sword, locked away in a scabbard. Despite the strangeness of the outfit, Will suspected that at some point in time this look had been extremely fashionable.

"Okay," Will scoffed. "I know I can't *not* be dreaming. I'm in some random room that looks like it's from medieval England. I'm from twenty-first century American suburbia. This doesn't exist where I'm from. So, either this is a huge prank, or I'm dreaming. The latter seems more likely."

The boy shook his head, laughing. "Okay. If you're dreaming, then this should wake you up, right?"

Before Will could respond, the boy whipped out his sword, and

in a flash, dove the tip of it into the wall directly next to Will's head. Will screamed and scrambled away, tripping over himself and falling into a heap next to the bed, groaning in pain as his knee rammed into something hard. He rubbed his leg and turned back to the boy, who pulled the sword out of the wall and placed it back into its scabbard. He put his hand out toward Will, who took it hesitantly.

"Ignoring the fact that you could have killed me just now," Will started, "that's certainly something that would have woken me up from a dream. Point taken." Will looked around. "If that's the case, then where am I? And who are you?"

The boy's face lit up. "Those questions have complicated answers. I think the easiest thing to do would be for you to look outside."

Hesitantly, Will opened the nearest window, the sun making him blink as his eyes adjusted to the brightness. He covered his mouth in disbelief.

"Welcome to Byrrus Castle, William Morgan."

Directly out the window were the battlements of a large castle, made of light red sandstone, extending in all directions toward large, artistic turrets and towers. Below the castle was the city of Byrrus, a small metropolis that stretched for a mile or two in front of him. Will could see spots of blue where there were ponds and estuaries and fields of green that marked the apple orchards and parks that littered the city. Past the city borders were rolling green hills and forests as far as the eye could see.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the unmarked blue expanse above him was what likely encouraged the distant, gleeful shouts of children in the town below, running around and playing while their parents thoughtfully watched on. Will turned back to the boy.

“This has to be a joke.” Will’s eyes wandered the room desperately. “That can’t be Byrrus. *This* can’t be Byrrus. Byrrus is a ...”

“A story? Fictional?” the boy responded, raising one eyebrow. “You’re correct. *The Redstone Keep* is a book. And you’ve been transported to its world. Byrrus is a real place.”

“How?”

“You’re not dreaming. You’re a person from the human world, the world where stories are written. And now you’re here.” He sighed. “In this world, there’s a man named Tam. He’s the one who is going to explain what’s going on. He’ll be here in about two minutes, actually.”

Will gulped. “So, when you say Tam, do you mean Tam Desmond? The protagonist of *The Redstone Keep*?” He stopped for a moment, nervous the boy wouldn’t understand what the word “protagonist” meant, or he’d be offended by it.

“Don’t worry, protagonist isn’t a dirty word,” the boy chortled. “I’m glad you get it. This world is part of a story that’s considered fiction in your world. Well, that’s half the battle I suppose.”

“You say ‘this world’ like you’re not a part of it. Who are you anyways?”

“I’ve gone by many names. If I’m being honest, I’m not sure which one is the right one.” The boy flashed a toothy grin, the youth returning to his face and tone. “You can call me Simon.”

“Okay, Simon. Nice name. That still doesn’t really answer my question. Who are you?”

Approaching footsteps interrupted their conversation.

“That’ll be Tam, I suppose,” Simon commented. “I’ll be seeing you soon, Will. I’ll explain more then.” He put a hand to his chin thoughtfully. “By the way, for now, don’t mention me to

Tam. Or to anyone, frankly. You're the only person who is able to see me."

"What?" Will turned to look at the door, but as he looked back to Simon for answers, he found the boy had disappeared.

"Creepy," Will whispered.

There was a solid knock on the door before it opened slowly. The man who entered wore a long black coat and armor on his hands and legs as if he were prepared for battle at a moment's notice. A sword hung from his belt, a long hand-and-a-half blade that seemed to radiate power. Faced with a man who embodied every detail of a character from a novel solidified Simon's words.

Somehow, miraculously, Will had been transported to the pages of his favorite book.

Then it struck Will: Tam was the man he saw accompanying Arthur O'Neill's body in Boston. It made sense. If Arthur O'Neill wrote *The Redstone Keep*, and therefore created Tam, it only made sense for Tam to be there when he died. Right?

Tam's face was that of a man in his late thirties, about four inches taller than Will. He had short, black hair, and a goatee curving all the way around his mouth. He looked tired, his eyes sad. Even so, he smiled.

"Will Morgan." Tam extended a hand. "It's a pleasure."

Will shook Tam's hand hesitantly, staring at the warrior in awe.

"So ... um ... what's going on, exactly?"

"Yes." Tam looked around the room. "That's the question of the day, now isn't it? Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything? A drink, perhaps."

"No. I'm okay." Will sat on the closest bed. Tam jumped into an explanation of how Will was actually in the world of Byrrus, the

same as Simon had. Will nodded calmly, though the information wasn't any less unbelievable the second time around.

"How many books have you read in your life, Will?"

"I don't really know. Probably a couple hundred or so."

Tam tilted his head forward slightly. "And how many stories do you think have ever been written? Books, movies, plays, or the like? How many?"

"Millions," Will replied, hazarding a guess. "Maybe more."

"Well, they all exist. Not just on paper or on a stage but here."

"They all exist in Byrrus?" Tam's face was unreadable, so Will continued. "*The Redstone Keep* is just a single story. In the long run it means nothing. Sure, it's a good book, but it isn't like it's the best-selling novel of all time. So why, of all novels, is *The Redstone Keep* the chosen one?"

Tam chuckled.

"That was tactless." Will put up his hands in apology. "I just meant, you know, there are way more popular novels, and ... um ..."

Tam's chuckle evolved into a full-blown howl. "It's okay. I know what you meant." His eyes grew soft. "This, Will," he said, "is Byrrus. This is the world Arthur O'Neill created. This is the fictional castle from your novels. It's all real. You understand this, which is good; however, there is so much more. And no, all the other stories don't exist in Byrrus. They have their own place. Let me show you around. That might help a little."

Tam opened the door and encouraged Will to follow. Will obliged and tailed him through a series of hallways, twisting and turning in every direction. The two eventually made their way to a battlement—a long stretch of pavement on the edge of the castle—that allowed them to see in every direction.

“Byrrus,” Tam motioned around him, “is part of a massive universe, parallel to your own. Everything that’s ever been published and read by humans, whether it be movie scripts, books, poetry ... everything exists in this world. Whenever an author, or artist, or poet, writes a work, completes it, and has it bound, published, and read by an audience,” Tam patted his chest dramatically, “it comes to life. It’s been called many things over the years by Writers of different generations. Nibiru. Cockaigne. Eden—I’m sure that one was an ego boost for the Characters of the time.” Tam snickered at his own joke. “Now we’re merely the World of the Written. The Written, for short. It’s easier and, frankly, more accurate.”

“How is that possible? Is it like an alternate dimension? Is it underground? Are there others, like for dreams or ideas that are written down and not published?”

Tam scratched his head. “Well, I don’t know how to explain it. I guess it *is* an alternate universe, in a way. However, it’s one most people only fantasize about. Very few people know of its existence.” He pointed to the horizon, a never-ending stretch of shining blue sky. “There are only two universes I know of. The first is The Written. The second is The World of the Writers, your world. If there are more, they haven’t been revealed to me.”

“If there are so many worlds that exist in the Written, why did I come to Byrrus? Why is this world in particular so special? Is it the most important book or something?”

Tam let out a booming laugh and slapped Will lightly on the shoulder. *Tam’s hand was solid.* This man couldn’t be a hallucination. Sure, Will might have an overly-imaginative mind, but never in his wildest dreams had he felt physically touched by an image. This was one-hundred percent real.

Tam's jovial voice broke Will's train of thought. "You seem to be getting the hang of this quickly! Although, I'm sad to say Byrrus isn't the most important book, as you put it. We're not that important."

"Then where are the other worlds?"

Tam grinned. "Let me show you."

With a dramatic flourish, Tam put his palm out in front of him, as if putting his hand against an invisible wall. An archway appeared, outlining itself in white-gold light. Once the archway was fully formed, Tam beckoned to Will, encouraging him to follow through the brightness.

Will stepped into an empty hallway with white walls and a single wooden door at the other end, about one hundred feet away. Something clicked in Will's brain.

"So this hallway, or whatever it is, connects the different stories? Does it also lead to the Writer's world? Is this how I get home?"

"You got it. This hallway connects to both the other stories as well as the World of the Writers."

"And through that door is another story. Which story is it?"

Tam's grin was now revealing his teeth. "Which one do you want it to be?"

"I choose which story I want to go to, and that door at the end of the hall will open to that world, based on my choice?"

Tam dipped his head formally. "Something along those lines. This hallway is actually part of an even bigger entity, called *Betwixt and Between*. Think about the Earth. A lot of it is water, right?"

"Yeah. Most of it, actually."

"That's exactly it. Except instead of Earth's continents, think of millions and billions of small islands, all separated by ocean. The ocean is *Betwixt and Between*, while the islands are the different stories. Therefore, you don't have to go through multiple worlds just

to get to a specific one. You can kind of skip around. I guess the best way to put it is that there's no such thing as a connecting flight in the World of the Written. You understand?"

"Kind of," Will said. He paused, blushing and backtracking. "Sorry, no. Not really."

Tam beckoned to the door. Will walked through it, finding himself on a beach; however, instead of the sun shining down on him, there were three multicolored moons—certainly not a feature of Byrrus. He stared in awe, and Tam grasped his shoulder again.

"*Moons of Mars* by Trevor Andres. One of the greatest science fiction novels of all time. Definitely not part of the world I'm from. And I don't think your Earth has three moons." He smirked at Will. "Do you understand now?"

"Yeah, I think so," Will said, still in shock. "So, I can use Betwixt and Between to go to the worlds of every story ever published?"

"Essentially," Tam replied. "Your only limitation is you can't enter worlds whose story you've never read. Or watched, I guess, as it relates to movies or plays." He sighed. "Or if the story has been forgotten, but that's for another day."

Will took a few steps forward, kicking the sand of the beach until he made his way to the water, where he contemplated the waves for a few moments. He could feel Tam's gaze on his back. "Makes sense, but what does this have to do with me? Why is any of this important?"

"You've been given a gift, Will. A gift called the Writer's Eye. Which means you're now a Writer. Writer with a capital W. Writers have the ability to see both worlds and Betwixt and Between, as well as all the Characters in the stories. That's what we're called, by the way—Characters, with a capital C." Tam's voice took a solemn tone, speaking from the back of his throat.

Will turned around, looking Tam in the eyes. “I’ve been given a gift? How? You mean the book from the book store?” Will noticed the sadness in Tam’s eyes and swiftly apologized. Tam waved him off.

“The truth is,” Tam said, tone dipping lower than it had all afternoon, “I have no idea. Writers are very rare. Occasionally, there are people born with a gift, a certain *Potential*, if you will. Even then, having *Potential* isn’t enough. Most Writers gain their powers from having some sort of triggering event, like being in imminent danger from something in the World of the Written. For better or worse, most of the people in your world are what we call Readers—those who are regular, non-magical, mortal human beings who think the World of the Written is just that: written.”

“So how did I get my powers? Nothing happened to me. I haven’t been in danger or anything. Someone just gave me a book.”

“I think somehow Arthur’s powers,” he became quiet for a moment, “got transferred to you before he died.” He then looked at Will sympathetically. “For whatever reason, Arthur released his powers and you happened to catch them. I think that’s why you ended up here. I know it’s a lot to take in and I’ll be able to explain it to you at a later time. For now, I think you should be getting home. I know coming here today was a bit of a shock.”

“You could say that,” Will replied, smiling in spite of his confusion. “Is there a way for me to get back here?”

“Yes,” Tam said. “However, it’s complicated, and we don’t have enough time right now. I have a lot to teach you, Will. I can start training you tomorrow night. I just have some personal things to attend to first.”

An unpleasant bubbling erupted in the pit of Will’s stomach as he remembered the day Arthur had died. “When I was in Boston,

there was a woman who knew my name, but other people couldn't seem to see her. I thought she was a hallucination, though now I don't think she was. Could she have been a Character?"

"I can't say I know who that woman is," Tam said slowly. "Just be careful. Now that you can see Characters, you have to be on your guard. I'll explain more tomorrow. Just know you and I are connected. If you're ever in any danger, I'll be there to help you. Then you and I can figure out why we were brought together."

Will let out a nervous sound that he hoped would be taken as agreement.

"Now let's get you home." Tam put his hands in front of him as he did before, summoning a passageway to Betwixt and Between. They walked through, and at the other end of the hallway was a door that looked like the one to Will's house.

"Once you walk through here, you'll be back in your living room, right where you passed out. And, as a side note," Tam's voice was bubbly and light, "you won't have to pass out next time. I'll come get you."

"Thanks, I guess."

Will took one last look at Tam before walking into his living room.

4

The Familiar

The instant Will woke up, his ears picked up the sound of his mother in the next room, doing dishes. He called out to her and she walked in, surprised.

“Hey honey,” she commented, a bowl in her hand. “I didn’t even hear you come back in.”

“I never left.” Will tried to keep a straight face. Ruth squinted at him.

“I was here a minute ago and you weren’t on the couch. I figured you went upstairs.”

Will glanced at her, nonplussed, then looked at the clock. It had been about an hour since he passed out, meaning his body should have been there, comatose. If it hadn’t been, did that mean he disappeared completely when he entered the Written?

“Oh, yeah, duh.” Will tried to sound casual. “I forgot. It’s just been a really off day, you know?”

Ruth’s gaze softened and she touched his arm. “Do you want to talk about it? I know you really loved his books.”

“I’m fine,” Will lied, rubbing his face. “I’m just really drained. I think I might go back to Peter’s.” Ruth squeezed his hand and left the room, leaving Will with his own thoughts. He absentmindedly

fiddled with his phone until a text from Peter appeared, declaring he and Iris had returned home, and Will should join them. Knowing Iris, Will figured there would be school prep going on, so he grabbed his backpack as a preemptive measure. He walked through the front door, running his hands through his hair, thinking about the events of the morning as he got onto his bike.

Sure, it was a cool, crazy idea. Every book character lived in a magical parallel universe, and he, Will Morgan, had the power to see and interact with them. It was incredible, and also incredibly ridiculous. Maybe too ridiculous. What if he was just losing his mind?

Even more terrifying, what if he *wasn't* losing his mind?

And if all of the heroes are alive, Will's breaths got quicker as the thought formed, *then all of the villains are too*. The thought of encountering some of the *Byrrus* series's less-pleasant characters was enough to make him shiver despite the heat.

Along with the World of the Written, there was the entire situation in Boston. That woman was important. She had to be. Why else would he be the only person who saw her? The fact Tam didn't know who she was made Will more nervous.

Will hesitantly touched his hand to his face, trying to feel for some difference, some scar that wasn't there before. He felt nothing. Whatever had changed about him wasn't visible to the eye.

If it turned out he was losing his mind, Will didn't want anyone to know about it. If it turned out he wasn't ... well, that was a bridge he'd cross only if necessary. Regardless, he'd know by tomorrow. If Tam returned, and Will was able to be trained in this Writer's Eye, then he'd know it was real.



Peter sat amongst a pile of school supplies, binder in hand, when his friend walked through the front door. Will's skin was paler than usual, his lips a little blue; however, the last thing Peter wanted to do was embarrass Will. Instead, he pretended not to notice. Maybe he would ask him later in private.

"A week, Will! A freaking week!" Peter shouted dramatically, putting his face in his hands. "I barely got to do anything! Between tennis practice and my parents making me do work around the house, I only got two weeks' worth of actual summer vacation!"

"Well, you've got a free day right now. Might as well get organized," Iris quipped.

"Since when are you such a huge nerd?" Will joked, sitting next to them.

"Since the first day you met me. Besides, it's our first day of high school!" she exclaimed. "We need to be prepared! I, or we, need to look good, know what we're doing, and show we're not dorky freshman like the movies say we are!"

She went back to looking at her schedule and a map of the new school, cross-referencing them. Will smirked and leaned back against a chair.

"Those cliché high school movies aren't the real thing. You know that, right? There really isn't any such thing as Freshman Friday. Or rigged homecoming courts. It's just a normal place for normal kids to hate the establishment and wish for their senior year."

"Well, I'd like to make a good impression anyway. Let me see your schedule." She held out her hand expectantly and Will removed the paper from his bag and handed it over, the corners of his mouth twitching. She grabbed Peter's schedule and studied the three side by side.

She muttered to herself before speaking up. “Not much overlap, at least between us and you, Will.”

“It must be band screwing it up,” Peter said.

Will had been a musician since elementary school. Though Peter and Iris both made fun of him for his nerdy extracurricular when they became friends, they had grown to appreciate it. Will wasn’t just committed—he was also extremely talented, though he tried not to admit it.

“So, nothing overlaps?” Will questioned, shoulders drooping.

Iris shrugged. “You and I have biology together first semester,” she offered, tracing her finger down the paper. “That’s it. Peter and I have English and Geometry together, but you two don’t have anything.”

Peter groaned again, still lying on the ground.

“What, are two classes with me not enough?” Iris kicked Peter’s foot jokingly.

“Not if you talk to me like that all year!”

The three of them laughed, and though Will had a look of joy on his face, Peter could see through it. They made eye contact, and Will flashed his teeth, obviously attempting to eliminate Peter’s doubts. Peter shifted his eyes away, though his concern didn’t change. Ever since Boston he had been worried about Will. However, Will wouldn’t admit what was wrong. If he wanted to talk, he would have said something before now. So, Peter merely went back to shifting paper into one of the large binders sitting next to him.

“So, Will, what do you think the odds of us getting a couple of seniors are?”

“You’re disgusting,” Iris remarked.

Peter pushed her arm in sarcastic reproach, and Will laughed again.

Iris looked at Will haughtily. “Seriously, if you two ruin this for me, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Yeah, okay Ms. I-need-to-be-the-queen-of-Morrison,” Will mocked, his eyes betraying mirth. “Since when have you been so concerned about popularity? Everyone loves you!”

Her frown cracked. “That’s nice of you, Will.”

“So suave,” Peter observed, rolling his eyes lazily.

Will leaned back and stared out the large picture window to the front yard. Peter watched him. Will sat up slowly, grabbing for Peter while not taking his eyes off the window.

“Do you see that?” he asked, pointing to the yard. Peter looked out the window and didn’t see anything where Will was pointing. He glanced back at Will, doing a double take at his friend’s face, now ashen; his arm was quivering, his shoulders tight.

“What is it? You okay?”

Will turned away from the window. “Yeah. I don’t know. I guess I saw a bird or something. It’s nothing.” He smiled and gave Peter and Iris a thumbs up.

Iris made eye contact with Peter, and it was clear she felt uneasy too. She sighed and slammed a stack of freshly stocked binders onto a pile, wiping her hands.

“Well that’s it! We’re officially ready to be high schoolers! One week to go!”

Peter moaned again and slammed his head against a notebook.



The rest of the day passed in a blur. Eventually, the group went back to their respective homes, with Peter having promised to help his

dad with housework, and Iris deciding to go to bed early for the rest of the summer.

Though Will tried to relax, he couldn't help reflecting on what he had seen in Peter's yard: a mysterious figure, cloaked in black, face covered. The figure was definitely there, obvious as day, but his friend couldn't see anything. He hadn't been able to see the figure's face, though given how many mysterious cloaked people he had seen recently, Will could only assume it was the woman from Boston. It made him more desperate to understand the Writer's Eye.

That night and the following day he read his new copy of *The Redstone Keep*, this time searching it for clues about the World of the Written, Arthur O'Neill, *anything*. The fact the book was autographed, was a first edition, and had been the portal into the Written had to mean something. Despite how hard he searched or how many margins he scanned, Will was forced to conclude it was just a plain old novel. Other than the scrawl signature on the title page, there wasn't anything that could be used to solve the mystery of what had been happening.

Maybe Arthur O'Neill sent it to me, he mused. That seemed unlikely. Regardless of how much Will idolized him, Arthur was a best-selling author; there was no way he would have ever heard of Will. Will hadn't even entered the essay contest Arthur hosted a few years ago, out of a combination of laziness and embarrassment.

That night, while sitting on his bed finishing *The Redstone Keep*, Will's father knocked on the door and walked in.

"Hey bud." Emery sat on Will's bed. "How was your day?"

"Fine," Will replied, continuing to flip through the pages of *The Redstone Keep*.

"Ah, *The Redstone Keep*. Nice. How many times have you read that one?" Emery asked, smirking at Will playfully.

Will folded the book onto his chest. “A bunch,” he muttered. “I just wanted to read it again before school starts. Who knows when I’ll have time to read for pleasure again.”

His dad ruffled Will’s hair. “Fair enough. Do you need anything for school?”

“Nope. Mom bought everything I needed last weekend and we got it ready at Peter’s house. I’m all prepped.” Will gestured to his backpack, now stuffed with new school supplies.

“Nice work! Nothing wrong with being prepared. Now, get some sleep. Five days left!”

When Emery shut the door, Will sat up against his wall and looked at the clock—11:00 p.m. Will looked back at *The Redstone Keep* and found he couldn’t focus. Tam told him yesterday he would return and teach Will more about the World of the Written. Where was he? Did he get attacked? Did he forget? Or was this proof the entire experience was just some psychotic break from stress?

As the clock ticked closer to midnight, Will jumped out of bed. He had to do something. He wasn’t going crazy. It had to be real!

He glanced at his door, praying his parents wouldn’t walk in unannounced, and reached out his hands. Will focused all of his energy on imagining Byrrus—the texture of brick, the sound of children playing, and the distant chatter of market-goers. For five minutes, straining as hard as he could, Will focused. Each time he opened his eyes, he was greeted by his bedroom wall.

Will let off a muted sound of frustration and kicked at his backpack before slumping on his bed. He wanted it to be real. He wanted to have a magical power. Taking a deep breath, he stood up, ready to try again.

Will closed his eyes and thought about Betwixt and Between,

the daunting emptiness that preceded all the stories the world had ever know. The white walls and the long hallway that ended in whatever story he wanted.

He felt a slight shift in the air around him. Will opened his eyes; a white gold passage had appeared before him, a clear archway leading into a long passageway. Will pumped the air with his fist and resisted shouting with excitement.

He plumped up his blankets and pillows, hoping it would look like he was in bed just in case his parents came in to check. Turning his desk lamp off, Will walked into the portal, leaving his bedroom behind.

A long white expanse unfolded before him. A large wooden door stood alone at the end of the hallway, a hopeful beacon that Will had been successful in summoning the portal. Crossing the tunnel, he tugged the door open. He emerged into a dense forest, the portal disappearing behind him.

Crap, he thought to himself. *What if I ended up in Little Red Riding Hood or something like that?* Will caught a glimpse of a light through a small gap in the trees, and relief flooded his body. Though he wasn't completely certain, Will was willing to bet the light was from the main lookout tower at the edge of Byrrus.

Will set off with a confidence that wasn't appropriate for the situation. Though he managed to get to the World of the Written without Tam's help, navigating the woods was very difficult. There wasn't a clear path and at one point he sank ankle-deep into a large pool of water. His slippers were caked in mud. He shouldn't have come in pajamas.

He strained his eyes as best he could but still stepped in a few more puddles as he walked. The woods were so dark that Will could

barely make out the outlines of the trees. He went for his cellphone so he could have some form of light, and realized he made another great error—he left his phone in his room.

“Seriously, Will. You need to be more prepared,” he muttered to himself.

After a few minutes of walking, the moonlight revealed a small clearing and Will took a moment to try and scrape some of the mud from his slippers. Something rustled in the trees to his left.

“Hey!” he shouted into the darkness. “Over here! Traveler in need of assistance!”

The sound stopped for a moment, but then came toward Will, faster than before. Shapes burst from the tree line, carrying torches.

On first glance it was apparent they were at least humanoid. They had distinct faces, bodies, and were standing on two legs. They varied in height, the shortest being only two feet tall and the largest being as tall as Will. Perhaps their most bizarre feature was what they were made of. It was a shadowy substance, a murky gel that seemed to be shifting as they moved. It formed their bodies and gave them an ethereal stature. They weren’t denizens of Byrrus. Will didn’t know what they were. They definitely didn’t belong to this story.

Will took a step back, and one of the creatures let out a beastly shriek, the screech’s pitch hurting his ears. The creature ran at Will, two knives appearing in its hands, and Will didn’t even have time to put his arms up before the monster thrust the blades at his chest.

A burst of light erupted and a column of white fire shot from the ground, searing the beast where it stood. The other monsters stopped in their tracks. As the fire faded, a figure appeared: Simon.

“What’s going on?” Will demanded.

Simon’s face was calm and understanding. He pulled his sword

from its scabbard. It flashed a gorgeous yet deadly arc over his head. He held it out to Will.

“Take it.”

It was an ornate piece with a pommel of red stone, the grip a standard black leather. The hilt was a simple cross-guard, sparkling silver in the light of Simon’s presence. A trail of gold curved along the rut and faded out slightly before the tip. It was an impressive weapon.

“Take it, Will,” he insisted. “You have to fight. You have to defend yourself.”

Will took the sword from him. It felt familiar, as if he had held it before, though Will wasn’t sure why. His experience with medieval weaponry was fairly limited.

“Good. Now, you know what to do.” Simon’s voice had a conclusive ring to it.

The mysterious boy disappeared, and the golden light faded away. The World of the Written had given Will a gift. He twirled the sword around, finding it was balanced in a way that made it seem like it was made for him, though he doubted it would help him in battle—he had never even held a sword. As he reared the weapon back over his head, the monsters began their charge once again, the distraction now gone. Will put his weapon up to block the nearest beast, and as its knives clanged against his blade, something strange happened.

The world slowed.

The monster lunged at him again, except the strike was sluggish, like everything other than Will was moving through a block of gelatin. When the monster pulled its arm back, Will was able to sidestep the strike with ease, thrusting his sword through its inky silhouette.

As soon as the tip of the blade passed through the monster, its body fizzled out like a fire being doused with water.

He turned to see another creature swinging at him with long, razor-sharp claws, and he pulled his sword up, blocking the strike. As its claws hit the blade, the vibrations shot through Will's arm. Pushing the monster away with his sword, he swung the blade through its head. It faded away, as the first one did, and a wave of relief briefly washed over Will.

To your right! Duck, then thrust the sword straight up!

Words crackled to life in his head, as if they were being spoken through an old intercom. Without hesitating, Will threw his body to the ground, arching his sword into the air. He caught a creature in the chest. Feeling himself begin to lose energy, Will swung his weapon at one more being as hard as he could, the blade shooting through its body. It was knocked into the air, like a demonic balloon, before bursting into purple and black-colored dust. With all the shadow creatures gone, Will lowered his sword, the world going back to its normal speed.

A blur of color launched itself in front of him, grabbing Will's shoulders. He instinctively flailed out, his non-sword hand connecting haphazardly with a body.

"Will!" Tam shouted, voice spiking. "What are you doing? Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I thought you weren't coming," Will replied, out of breath. "It was late, so I figured I'd come here. I just overshot Byrrus by a little bit."

"How did you get actually get here?"

"I opened a portal." There was no reason to lie—how else would he have gotten to the forest?

Tam shook his head. “That’s not possible. You’re telling me you just summoned a portal and waltzed into the World of the Written by yourself?”

The disbelief in Tam’s voice worried Will. “Yeah. Why? Am I not supposed to do that? I’m sorry if I messed something up.”

“No, you’re okay. I just didn’t think you’d be able to do that so quickly without anyone helping you,” Tam mused. “It usually takes time to learn that kind of control. I’m really impressed, frankly.”

“Great,” Will commented, gripping his sword more firmly.

“And the sword?” Tam asked.

“I just summoned it.” Something inside him told him to lie about Simon. “I realized I was in danger, and I thought as hard as I could about a weapon. Then boom—this thing appeared in my hand.”

Tam dipped his head in earnest. “That makes sense. Your gaining a weapon is the norm for Writers. The only difference is that you unlocked your Writer’s Eye because of Arthur’s powers. Usually, the Writer’s Eye is gained when someone is in danger directly from the Written. They immediately have the ability to defend themselves. A similar thing happened to Arthur. The first time he ever fought in the World of the Written he summoned a sword, and could fight with it to a certain degree, same as you. The Written made that weapon for you. If the pattern stays true, this sword should be perfectly suited to your body type and combat preferences.”

“Huh.” Will exhaled to release the tension in his chest, keeping his voice level. “Who knows?”

Truth be told, the weapon *was* perfect for him, even though it originally belonged to Simon. Will instinctively let the sword fall from his hands, it disappearing in a flash of light. Tam nodded with

recognition and didn't press further. Will gazed at the spot where the sword faded away, a few sparks of light lingering on the air.

"So, now that we've cleared that up, can you tell me what exactly just happened? What were those things? Why did they attack me?" Will glanced at one of the dying torches, the only remains of a fallen foe.

"Well," Tam started, beckoning for Will to follow him as he began walking toward Byrrus, "in the World of the Written, there are beings that are the embodiment of the negativity within literature. They come from *Betwixt* and *Between*, and gain power from the darkness and conflict surrounding all stories. They're called Shades—the creatures you just fought."

"Okay, so they're just this world's version of pests? But if they're made of darkness ... does that mean I can't kill them? Or did I?" Will stopped, his mind wandering back to their humanoid shape. "They're not people, right?"

Tam gave him an understanding smile. "I'm glad to see you've got some humanity in you." He put a hand on Will's shoulder. "Shades aren't like people. They don't have souls. They're not like Characters either. If you ran me through with your sword, I would die, same as you. However, Shades—they can't die. They all come from the darkness within literature, and that's where they go when they're defeated, only to be reborn again. They are all part of the same entity. That entity is evil." Tam grimaced. "You can't kill evil."

Will was suddenly very grateful for the light from Tam's torch.

"Okay," Will continued eagerly. "What about main villains? Are they Shades? And what about anti-heroes? Are they like, half-Shade, half-Character?"

Tam chuckled. "The only villains who live as Shades within the

World of the Written are those who don't have names. Named villains take the forms they were written with. Does that make sense?"

"I think so," Will replied. "Shades are the grunts of the World of the Written. Then villains are Characters, but that doesn't make them good. Morality isn't based on if you're a Shade or a Character. Great.

"Now that we've got the villains out of the way, can you tell me what happened in that fight? It felt like time slowed down."

They were now at the edge of the city, the light of the entrance shining down on them. Will could see the focus on Tam's face.

"Okay, Will," he started. "You're clearly intent on learning everything at once so I'm not going to hold back. Absorb as much as you can. Don't worry, I'll clarify anything you don't understand." Tam took a deep breath.

"First of all, the thing that allows you to be in this world—the Writer's Eye—also affords you certain abilities, mostly related to combat. It slows time and gives you more power to counter an enemy's movements. It also allows you to telepathically communicate with certain Characters, such as myself. I'm what's called a Pontifex—every world within the World of the Written has one. Simply put, I'm the first point of contact for every Writer who comes through the world of Byrrus.

"The reason I can read your thoughts is that the energy of every Writer is tied to a specific world. It's your home base, in a way. Your home base is Byrrus, and as a result, I, the Pontifex," he gestured to himself, "am able to communicate with you telepathically, advise you in battle, and teach you how to navigate other worlds and make use of your powers."

"Yours was the voice I heard while I was fighting? And that's because you're Byrrus's Pontifex?"

“Indeed, I was,” Tam replied.

“Okay,” Will continued, “let me make sure I get this. You’re saying Writers who happen to have a strong tie to Byrrus are immediately able to communicate with you? And you’re supposed to teach them how to understand their abilities?”

“Essentially, yes,” Tam replied. “Are you still with me?”

“I’m okay for now,” Will stated, feeling mostly certain.

Tam nodded. “In essence, our communication works like a walkie-talkie. You can talk to me—and I you—at any time, and we’ll hear each other. However, I can only read your mind if you want me to, and vice-versa. Privacy is the default of that ability, so I won’t be invading your personal thoughts.”

“That’s good,” Will said, relieved.

“Along with being a Pontifex, I also have an ability called Sensorship,” Tam continued. “I am able to sense movements and energy, both good and bad. So, when you’re in combat—”

“You can tell me what enemies are going to do,” Will finished for him.

“Bingo!” Tam cried, maybe a little too enthusiastically. “Look at this kid—he knows Written lore *and* he can summon a portal and weapon on his own.”

“That’s me,” Will replied, embracing Tam’s praise. “Now, speaking of this weapon ... can you tell me more about it?” Will summoned the sword and attempted to twirl it before fumbling, the blade clattering to the ground. He blushed and picked it up hurriedly. “What happens if I pull this out in front of a Reader? Does it look like a sword? Or does it just not show up?”

“A Reader won’t be able to see your weapon, or anything that originated from the Written,” Tam replied. “However, being a Writer,

you have the unique ability to impact both the World of the Writers and the World of the Written. If you summon your sword when you're in the World of the Writers, you can use it to fight humans. They just won't be able to see it." Tam gave Will an accusatory look. "There's a lot of power that comes with that sword. Use it wisely. Use it for good."

"Of course," Will sputtered, taken aback. "I'd never use it for the wrong reasons." He paused. "What about Characters? And Shades? How are they able to interact with the World of the Writers?"

Tam looked impressed with Will's questions. "Characters can't interact with the World of the Writers. Readers can't see us, and if we try to touch a Reader or anything in your world, we'll pass through it like ghosts. Shades, on the other hand ..." Tam's face got serious. "Because their energy is so negative and chaotic, they're able to interact with the World of the Writers in a much more concrete way than Characters can. Even though they're invisible to Readers, they can still harm them. They can cause explosions, destroy buildings ... you name it."

Will was shocked. "That's really dangerous! How come Characters aren't constantly in the World of the Writers, fighting Shades? How come the world isn't always on fire?"

Tam chuckled. "I'm glad you appreciate the potential ramifications. Where Shades can have more impact on the World of the Writers, Characters have more freedom. Shades can't come into the World of the Writers unless they're led there by a Writer. Even Characters who are villains can't bring them in. So, as a result, there have been very few instances of Shades being in a position to hurt Readers."

"That's good to know," Will mused. He was mulling over the information, Tam watching him calculatingly.

"I'm sorry I was late tonight," Tam muttered. "I got caught up in some stuff here. Patrolling. Research. That type of thing. Boring, really."

"It's fine. Just forced me to learn a little bit more about my new powers. Plus, I got to test out my fighting skills. That's good, right?"

"Speaking of which," Tam commented, interrupting Will's train of thought, "did you get hurt? Even a scratch?"

"No. Why?" Tam's tone made Will's stomach feel uneasy.

"Have you considered what happens to your body when you enter the World of the Written?"

Will paused, mouth slightly ajar. "Not really. I know I disappeared from my living room when I came here the first time. I figured my body just comes with me. Is that wrong?"

Tam shrugged non-committedly. "It's half wrong. When you step into *Betwixt and Between*, your human body is stored in limbo, not in the World of the Written, but not in the World of the Writers either. No one knows where it goes. Even so, it's safe, and your spirit, or whatever you are now, returns to your body when you re-enter the human world. Any injury you sustain in the World of the Writers—your world—will be reflected here in the Written. So, you can't come to this world to escape pain in the other one."

"Oh," Will said, blinking a few times. "Weird."

Tam relaxed a little bit, his shoulders falling. "I suppose it is a bit odd. With that being said, injuries you sustain here will only affect this body. All the same, keep in mind that if you hurt yourself while here, you'll have that injury every time you enter the World of the Written. The plus side is, even if you're not in the Written, your body will heal. So, if you don't come here for a few weeks, your body will get better on its own, barring anything too serious."

"Good to know," Will muttered. Everything made as much

sense as it could at this point. “Is there anything else I need to know tonight?”

“Not really,” Tam replied, eyes bright. “I think you getting here on your own, ending up in the middle of the woods, and fighting Shades by yourself covered everything I wanted to.”

“Alright,” Will started. “So, what now? Can we spar a little bit?” He jumped into a fighting stance but couldn’t suppress the massive yawn that escaped him.

Tam gently lowered Will’s fist, face cracking into a smirk. “I don’t think you’re in any state to spar. I totally forgot that it’s almost two in the morning. You need to sleep.”

Will wanted to protest despite the fatigue swiftly taking over his body. “I guess our fated match will have to wait.” Will winked. “And now that I can get here by myself, you can’t avoid me.”

Tam chuckled, and Will held out his hand to summon a portal.

“Wait! Will,” Tam called out, his voice tense. “One more thing. I know I’ve said it before, but be careful. From what you’ve told me about that mysterious woman and your dream, the strange things that are happening seem to be targeting you. You need to be on your guard constantly.”

“Oh. That reminds me.”

Will rushed into an explanation of the mysterious being standing outside Peter’s house. Tam’s lips dipped into a scowl.

“The whole point of the Writer’s Eye is to give you the power to act as a guardian for the World of the Written and the World of the Writers. As a Writer, you need to be able to protect yourself and others. We can’t put off training too long.” Tam sighed. “These occurrences. This mysterious figure. Your dream. They all mean something. We need to figure out what.”

“What happens if I get in trouble? What if I’m attacked before I’m ready?”

Tam eyed him seriously. “You fight. You fight as hard as you can. Use your brain. Because I’m your Pontifex, if you call out to me, I’ll be able to hear you—so long as you want me to.” He smiled. “I’ve got your back.”

“I appreciate that,” Will replied. He turned to summon a portal once more before he was struck with another question. “I just realized ... the *Byrrus* books take place over different centuries. You’re from the first book Arthur wrote, but I know he wrote prequels. Do Characters from all different time periods exist in the World of the Written? Like each book has its own? Or is it only one world for the whole series?”

Tam snorted. “Your brain is all over the place, isn’t it? Well, ordinarily the most recent work of an author determines which world exists in the Written. Furthermore, the world will be created in the state that the book ended. So, for example: if you have a five-book series, each time the author finishes and publishes an entry, that book’s world will exist as it did at the end of the story; however, that state changes each time another book in the series is finished. So, if an author finishes a series, that book’s world will exist as it did at the end of it all. In our case, however, Arthur was a Writer, so he couldn’t stand the idea of us fading away when he wrote another *Byrrus* book that took place a generation later. Because of that, he decided to use his powers to keep our world alive.”

“So, the world just kind of dies off when a new sequel is written? That’s morbid.”

“Only if the sequel has a significant time skip,” Tam countered. “Either way, the World of the Written is the product of humans. We

see it as the circle of life. The same way humans see aging and dying. It's natural."

"Fair enough. Goodnight, Tam." Will wasn't sure if he agreed, though he didn't want to press further. He let out another long yawn.

"Get some sleep."

Will created the portal and walked through. When he exited, he was on his front lawn. A terrified yelp came from behind him.

One of his neighbors, an older woman with frizzy hair, was staring at him, open mouthed. Her dog growled at Will.

"Hi. Hope you're having a good evening." His voice was weak.

"Don't jump out at people like that!" she scolded. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

Will looked down, pretending to be filled with shame. "I'm sorry ma'am." He bowed lower.

Will raised his head to see the woman already walking away, talking to herself in anger. The dog craned its neck back at him, still growling. Will let off a sigh of relief—he could never let that happen again. He needed to concentrate harder when he summoned portals. No distractions.

He ducked back into the shadows and summoned a portal directly to his bedroom, just to see if he could. This time, it worked. His clock indicated three hours had passed. He put on clean pajamas and threw his muddy ones into the laundry hamper. His slippers were a lost cause.

"Bad luck with the portal. It happens to everyone at least once—just be glad it wasn't during the day."

Will yelped before turning around.

"Simon! You scared me."

Simon sat on Will's windowsill, twiddling his thumbs, wearing

a gray peacoat and black pants. He looked wide awake despite the time.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just came to say hi. See how your day was. You know, the usual,” Simon remarked.

“Why have I never seen you with other Characters? Why do I have to keep you a secret?” Will asked, genuinely curious.

“Maybe I’m not a Character.” Simon jumped off the windowsill.

Will jumped up and instinctively summoned his new sword, the weapon appearing in a burst of white light.

Simon put his hands up in mock distress. “You scoundrel!” he cried out. “Turning a man’s own weapon against him! The horror!”

“What do you want, Simon? How do I know you aren’t here to hurt me? Frankly, I was going to give the sword back. Now I’m not so sure.” Will crossed his arms, ignoring Simon’s quips. “I really should tell Tam about you. I should let him know there’s some ominous figure following me around, giving me weapons and sneaking into my room.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “I would hardly call me ominous. I literally saved your life. Plus, Tam wouldn’t be able to do anything. Need I remind you, you’re the only person in the universe who can see me.”

“So, I’m hallucinating. Great.”

“You know I’m not a hallucination, Will,” Simon stated flatly, rolling his eyes even harder, if that were possible. “Don’t be dramatic. That’s why I came here.” He put one of his hands on his hips and gave an overly-enthusiastic thumbs-up. “I’m more of a spiritual guide to your journey within the World of the Written. I was born when you were and was awakened when you received the Writer’s Eye.”

“According to Tam, I got my powers when Arthur O’Neill died.” Will’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know anything about his death?”

Simon's expression darkened. "I wish I did, Will, but I don't. I can only offer you two truths. One: I feel as if I was linked to him in a past life. His name is familiar in my mouth and I feel an unquestionable sense of connection to him. And two: I can't help but feel his death and your new powers are inexplicably linked. Your Eye was awakened when he died. There must be a reason."

"Does that make you another part of Arthur's powers?" Will asked.

Simon shook his head. "My existence has nothing to do with Arthur O'Neill. I'm here because of you. I'm your Familiar."

Will raised his eyebrows.

"Have you never read or watched anything about witches?"

"Not really," Will replied.

"Well, in folklore a Familiar is a sort of supernatural being who aids witches in their magic. In your world, that's crap. There's no such thing as witches. In the World of the Written, however ..." His eyes flashed dangerously. "Anything is possible."

"Are you implying I'm somehow a witch?" Will shot, feeling himself becoming warier of this conversation by the moment.

Simon's pupils were on the verge of being completely hidden. "No, but I am to you what a witch's Familiar is to a witch. I'm a part of you, and I'm here to help you in your Writer's journey. In folklore, witches are the only ones who can communicate with their Familiars. Similarly, you are the only Writer who can communicate with me. The main difference," Simon said, waving his finger, "is that not all Writers gain Familiars. You're special, Will. You're powerful."

"How do I know you're not lying? How do I know you're not some Shade or evil Character trying to kill me in my sleep?"

"Two reasons," Simon said, leaning against Will's bedroom wall.

“The first is that the sword you used today is the same one I had on me the day we met. That sword was born from your psyche, the same place I came from. I can’t use it against you, and I have no other weapons. Secondly ...” Simon held out an outstretched palm firmly.

Will grasped it, figuring he had nothing to lose. Warmth filled his chest. There was a sense of completeness coursing through his body, and he knew Simon wasn’t lying. The two were connected.

He stared at Simon blankly, not sure of what else to say. Simon ignored the silence and put his other hand on top of Will’s.

“See?” Simon grinned. “Now, Will, I do have a favor to ask of you. Help Tam find out as much about Arthur O’Neill as you possibly can. The more in tune you become with your powers as a Writer, the more I’ll remember about who I am. I can feel it. I know I’m here for something; I just can’t remember what.”

“Do I have to do this without telling Tam about you? If having you here makes me more powerful, why can’t he know?”

“If you feel like you need to tell him, you can.” Simon’s tone was warm. He poked Will in the forehead rather sharply.

“Hey! That hurt! Why did you do that?”

Simon flashed his teeth mischievously. “You’ll know soon enough. Only good things.”

The Familiar then walked toward the wall and disappeared in a flurry of colors, leaving Will with nothing but confusion and an aching face.