

CHAPTER ONE

Temptertime Cemetery and the Spryth



There a boy was—in the midst of aged stone and sacred soil—shuffling his feet between rows of eternal rest beds. Clouds of silk veiled the moon and a small breeze chilled his frail body. No matter how many times his mother told him to wear his cloak at night, he always rushed off without it—one too many details for a determined child to concern himself with. His trousers and shirt revealed the wisdom of his age. He could not

have cared less about the hair on his arms dancing to the beat of the evening's briskness. Too preoccupied to even buckle a loose shoe, he walked on.

The range of hills on which Tempertime Cemetery rested was vast—stretching far and wide, dipping down and up. Patches of grass alleviated the expanse of dusty, chalk-like surface. Identical tombstones engraved with the antique styrenei language marked every grave, forming rows and rows of captured death that lined the terrain symmetrically and equidistantly, forming eerie patterns. Punctuating these patterns, intermittent placements of larger and much more intricate stones and sculptures protruded from the cemetery's repetitive arrangement.

The sculptures were masterfully constructed and darkly beautiful. Most of these monuments were carved in the form of styrenei that reached towards the stars—garments full with the look of blowing wind hanging from their long, slender bodies. Hands of magic, ready to be used, were held in their signals of ancient power. Featherless, webbed wings tucked against their backs waited for flight. Despite the fierce looks of calling upon their three-eyed faces, they were stuck, comatose in stone.

On other larger, more elaborate stones, the symbol of the styrenei—the concentric—stood high with its six circle-rings of decreasing circumference, one within the other—a forgotten sign to travelers concerning the overlapping of worlds. They rose like beacons that cried out for attention, but only the boy's deep, hazel eyes gave them any notice.

This was Amory Demshen's first time at this magnificent

place—a place forbidden to his entrance for at least another several years. He had snuck here, compelled by the uncontrollable curiosity and wonder that toiled the dreamscapes of his mind. It was forbidden that anyone lay a foot on Tempertime Cemetery grounds without first knowing the histories and languages of these monuments and passing a rigorous test. Immense danger and sanctity were intertwined here, and so laws were enforced to protect children from exposure to either. Lessons of such things came in stages, and Amory was not close to completing even one of the advanced segments.

What the boy did know was that within every one of the tombstones before him was trapped the spirit of a life passed—trapped not beneath the soil, but in the stone itself, mysteriously imbedded. It was these spirits that gave essence to the workings of this cemetery's purpose. Tempertime Cemetery was the link to the isles beyond the boy's home; it was a network of portals formed through the imprisonment of spirits. Through these portals, umyns—like Amory, but of the proper wisdom—traveled to distant lands and kingdoms where cemeteries like Tempertime resided. It took an understanding of the styrenei language upon the stones' surfaces to summon the portals and be sent to their connecting destinations—a language that the boy had only just begun to learn. He was enamored with the idea of being transported to a different place, breathing a different air, and seeing a different land. Because of his anxiousness, it felt like there would never be a time when he would be of the proper stature and aptitude. He clung tightly to hopes of being an endil merchant or a flate guard and exploring every isle

known to umynkind; but these were only distant dreams. For the time being, he only wished to open these portals in his own way, through imagination. It was because of this insatiable longing that he went to the cemetery, even against the laws that prohibited it.

Amory stopped in front of one of the tombstones to gaze intently upon the script written there. He pretended to understand what he saw and spoke aloud a concoction of gibberish, imagining the portal opening before him and whisking him away to another place.

Nothing happened. Only the gentle breeze answered his words.

With excited steps, the boy continued forward and gazed around him at the thousands of stones. Tempertime Cemetery was like an army of lifelessness stretching beyond what the eye could see, longing to cross an old frontier and relive a life lost. Forced to be completely frozen in time, the army—the graves—were restless; he could feel it in his own spirit. These spirit placeholders held unsettled endings—endings that were never allowed to reach their fruition. The dirt itself felt tense beneath his every step.

Death became a strange subject when one's spirit could be used beyond the bounds of its body's life. There were many things the boy did not know at his age, but he did know that death was not the end.

As brittle gravel crunched beneath each of Amory's footsteps, he began to see only with the eyes of his mind, pondering upon what he knew of the cemetery's story and creating the rest. He imagined that all of the incomplete adventures of the world—Awyra—were named and found here. He imagined that he could comprehend and pronounce these names—names of different lives, different ages,

and different legacies—so that he could share them and implore others to fulfill their never-reached conclusions.

The clouds had moved east and were now allowing the night's stars to glitter all about when there was a sudden break in the terrain. Before him, Amory saw something beyond remarkable. Down in a miniature valley, sunken between the hills, an enormous tree waited as if it had been predestined to him. It stood tall and broad, stretching outwards in all directions, reaching out to him with its black, crisp arms, and he returned to it like a long-lost friend. The bark that was its skin was a charcoal deeper than any midnight's sky. Light from the moons was just enough to cast a pearly glimmer upon its darkest surfaces.

Awe seeped from Amory's spirit. The tree's presence overwhelmed his heart. Matter seemed to twist and shatter as the tree towered like a huge black hole devouring space, and he gladly let it devour everything that he was. To a boy, it was a whole city of mystery to be explored in and out.

The boy's pace became a sprint. Blood raced through his veins, and his lungs gulped for air. Everything in him felt ready to embrace the tree's darkness. Like fire to air, he was attracted without consciousness or will. He did not have to think; he just ran as fast as he could. His first steps onto its bark were the most exhilarating. As he ran, anticipation and anxiousness built up within him and when the soles of his shoes touched its skin, he became like lightning. He flew up high within its grasp. His hands became strong and his legs became nimble. It seemed like the tree helped him climb.

Once Amory had made it as high as he could in the tree's arms,

he decided to relax and lie down in its hold. He let the tree grasp him above reality and cradle his existence into a lull. By this time, his activity had brought him to a comfortable warmth in the cool night air, and his breathing slowly eased.

The boy was soon hypnotized by some magic of the tree. His mind became a void; the only images filling it were the night sky and the branches that framed it. The stars grew faint once more beneath another thin stream of clouds, and staring at them made him sleepy. Blurs of moments passed before him. The air was crisp and clean as it entered his lungs. Before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

A peculiar dream imposed itself upon Amory in which his spirit was being extracted from his body by a hooded figure below with a jar. Claws extending from ethereal fingers that stretched the distance from jar to chest pressed and punctured flesh without the hindrance of matter. These claws latched upon his spirit, but before it could be stolen, a voice of song broke out not far away that startled the hooded figure and caused it to summon back its deplorable extremities of thievery. It was this same song that awoke the boy completely from his hazy apparition.

*RAGDADDLE, RAGDADDLE, RING OUT THY TUNE;
FEED ME YOUR LAUGHTER WITH A WOODEN SPOON.
MOONCHELLY, MOONCHELLY—WORDS OF THE WISE—
CROWN ME THE KING OF A SPLENDID SURPRISE.*

STARTLE THE DEAD AND WAKE THE LIVING,

TEMPERTIME CEMETERY AND THE SPRYTH

*THERE'S NO BETTER TIME TO START THE GIVING.
TELL THEM OF JOY, OF SPORT, OF FUN;
FINISH IT THROUGH AS IF JUST BEGUN.*

As well as he could, Amory pushed himself tightly against the branch beneath him; he did not wish to be seen. His breaths seemed to scream out with an uncontrollable audibility as the singing came closer.

The singing soon stopped, replaced by spoken words. "Hark there, child! I see you by color not of tree! You had better hide yourself evermore or show yourself at once, but it truly isn't a time to fear."

Pressing an eye against a slim gap between branches, the boy peered down at his spectator. *He* was not of anything Amory had ever seen, and especially not of umynkind. A pale yellow face ended in an obtuse chin of whiskers and his eyes glowed with a soft red shimmer. On his body as well as over his arms and hands, an assortment of cloths covered with brightly colored geometric patches hung rigidly to the ground; small and large cubes of fabric protruded outwardly from the garments, holding their shape perfectly as if concealed framework lay beneath. The most reassuring aspect of his appearance was the delight written on his face in the form of a wild smile baring teeth scattered carelessly about his mouth.

"Whenever will you see who I am?" he declared. "I am nothing like the coarseness of your lifeless companion there. I am quite opposite to that, really. Not that I would ask you to get so close to me without a further exchange of self. Come closer so you may hear

my voice better.”

Amory slowly stood, blinking scantily.

“Ah, that was not so dreadful as at first it seemed,” the onlooker said.

“Might I know your name at least before I come down?”

“It’s nothing much, but it makes for good song. The name is Ragdaddle Moonchelly. Use any of it or all of it to address me as you will. What is yours, in return?”

“Amory Demshen.”

“Excellent! Well, do come down, young Amory.”

Amory took a last breath at his glorious height and started making his way to the ground. In climbing down, he felt his strength draining from him. Every step was reluctant and sluggish. The texture of the tree’s bark hurt as the weight of his body surged through his arms and down into his hands. Before he had made it all the way down, he took a careless step and slipped. The side of his left leg was slashed by the sharp skin of the tree, as were his hands, which he used to regain his stability. He finished the climb with the sting of pain.

“The netherdan does not so much like to let go of its prey,” Ragdaddle said. “It’s rather selfish, even in releasing what is not its own to possess. I hope that fall gave you more sense than pain! I say that not in cruelty, but for the better of your happy furtherings. Nice to see you in full, young Amory.”

“I have never heard of you before,” Amory said, poring through his mind on all he had learned so far about the cemetery and that which lay beyond it to find knowledge of a creature resembling the

one before him. “What are you?”

“Perhaps such questions ooze from your lips because you are not supposed to be here... at least not until you are yea high.” Ragdaddle motioned with an arm to indicate the height Amory should be if he were of the proper age and knowledge to travel in Tempertime Cemetery. “I am quite respected and known about the Isle of Winder, if you should know; I am the sole spryth bound to watch this vexed soil—especially for those like you, who come that should not. And now, what more do you quickly have to ask before I lead you home to the safe-keeper of your wild heart?”

While Ragdaddle led the boy to the boundaries of the cemetery he told him of many things, things that he and Amory both knew were not supposed to be taught to him yet. The boy grew an instant liking for the spryth and only more eagerly longed to learn of the world about him that was such a mystery.

“May I come here again, Ragmoon?” Amory quickly chose the combination he best liked of Ragdaddle Moonchelly’s name while fishing for special permission to return to the cemetery.

“I can hardly allow it if I spot you in the light of my eyes or hear you as a jingle in mine ears. But I am not the maker of your laws; I only enforce them. You are the judge of your own decisions. If to be like a weathered stump with distorted rings, yes, dare to come; if to be like a youth of smooth skin, no, do not come. Never do I make decisions for others, for I only guide, but know that if you do come, I will know it, and I cannot be as much a gentle-fellow on repeat infringements. Take peace with you this evening, young Amory, and watch that wayward mind.”

“But how would you know if I came again?”

“I would find you. I am very good at seeking; it’s why I am here. Now go on. Nightwell.”

“Nightwell.”

Amory broke off reluctantly from his newly made acquaintance. The spryth raised the boy’s spirit even as he sang off into the night, venturing back into the cemetery. The song echoed in Amory’s mind.

While the boy walked home he decided to imagine a story for the cuts on his legs and hands. Thinking of such things was how he thought time should wisely be spent. A broad smile reached across his cheeks.