

PROLOGUE



A WORLD LEFT BEHIND

The wind howled through the passageway and between the stone columns where Quentin stood, staring to the north. Dark clouds gathered, and lightning flashed in the sky. Shadows stretched across the fields in front of him as cattle ambled toward the safety of the west woods. Calves danced back and forth between their mothers, paying no heed to the coming storm.

“Let him get too close this time, old man,” he muttered through his clenched jaw.

The first few drops of rain splattered against the stone paving. Quentin shook his head and turned on his heel and strode through double wooden doors twice his height and into the building. A man a head shorter than Quentin turned and followed.

“Has everyone returned from the field, James?”

The brown-haired man stepped smartly, matching Quentin’s stride as they entered a hallway. “Yes, sir. The last crew came in ten minutes ago.”

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Quentin nodded. *At least we don't have any of the staff out in the open. He won't find easy targets if he comes.* "What about—"

"Still no word on the Rayburns, sir."

Quentin clamped his mouth shut as he passed the end of the hallway and into the rear of the entrance hall. *Agh, I told Aaron not to go tonight.* "Are your men ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, send them out. No groups less than a squad in strength." Quentin stepped into the center of the entrance hall, which extended forty feet in every direction, with columns along the east and west ends. He turned to face the young man. "I want no extended contact. If your men see anything other than scouts, they are to notify the Guard and return here, understood?"

James gave a curt nod. "Yes, sir."

"Carry on then. I will expect a report as soon as you return." Quentin put his fist over his heart, mirroring James' movements.

James turned and walked toward the east entrance as thunder boomed outside.

"And James ..."

The man glanced over his shoulder.

"No heroics."

James gave a half-smile, winked and turned away. Quentin watched him leave the building before turning and walking to the front steps. *Jeremiah was right, he may be young, but this boy is ready. He'll make a fine addition ... if I can keep him alive.* He took another step and froze. The lights dimmed, spreading a black blanket over the walls. Fog stretched across the paned windows. The pendant on Quentin's chest grew warm, almost hot to the touch. He slowed his breathing and listened.

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"I'm surprised at you, Simon. It's unlike you to let me get this close."

Quentin turned to his right, a chill running up his arm. From the heart of the shadows stepped a tan-skinned man with round cheeks. Quentin stared across the stone floor to meet his fiery eyes. The man stood a head and a half shorter, and his hair had not faded as gray as Quentin's.

"You hid yourself and your henchmen well this time," Quentin said, "but you will not succeed, Ishmal."

He turned as the man circled and sneered. A gray-black blade appeared at Ishmal's side.

"That is not my name!" he said. "Bah, it doesn't matter. My men are moving already. After tonight, you will be dead and gone. Then the line will either serve me or be destroyed. You will not stand in the way any longer."

Quentin followed the man's movements with his eyes, balancing on the balls of his feet. A silver blade appeared by Quentin's side, its light chasing back the shadows. A tightening of Ishmal's eye was all the warning Quentin had before the black blade sliced through the air.

Clang!

Quentin pushed the blow aside and stepped to the left, swinging down across his body, but Ishmal was already moving. Quentin feinted and jabbed toward Ishmal's weak side.

Clang!

Blades met again, and Ishmal smiled. He jumped forward and swung down.

Clang!

Quentin staggered under the weight of the blow and danced back a few feet. Ishmal grinned and stepped forward.

"You are getting slow, old man." Ishmal twirled the blade

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in one hand and then the other. "It's amazing what darkness can achieve."

Ishmal swung again and again. Quentin turned and shifted as quickly as he could. The blows rained down as sweat poured from his forehead. Pressing forward, Ishmal forced Quentin toward the front entrance. As Quentin shifted his stance, his foot slipped and he fell to one knee. Ishmal leapt forward, his sword slashing down.

"Nathan! What are you doing?"

Ishmal's blade slowed and he jerked his head around as a man entered the hall from the west wing. Quentin swung across his body and knocked the man's blade loose, which shimmered and vanished.

"Aghhhhh!" Ishmal staggered back with wide eyes, a black line appearing across his chest where Quentin's blade had sliced into his chest.

Quentin surged to his feet. The man from the west wing ran toward them.

"Joe, stay back," Quentin said. "This man isn't who you think he is."

Ishmal stumbled backward, snarling, the gray-black blade in his hand once more. Heat swelled in Quentin's chest and he swung his blade.

Clang!

The blades pressed together. Quentin felt Ishmal's hot breath on his face.

"Ugh!" Quentin heaved against the weight and sent Ishmal sprawling.

"Quentin, no!" Joe ran toward Quentin.

"What's going on in here?"

Quentin cringed at the new voice echoing across the floor. *No, no ... not all of them together at once.*

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Joe leapt in front of Quentin, lifting a silver and red blade. Another figure leapt into the fray from behind Quentin. Metal and sparks flew as thunder pealed across the valley. As Ishmal smiled up at Quentin from the floor, inky darkness descended on the room. The black cloud filled the air, muffling the sounds of struggle.

Quentin crouched as a ball of white light expanded above him. "Joe, Landon, hold! Stay down!" Ten feet above his head, the ball exploded, illuminating every corner of the room. The floor in front of Quentin was bare, and he turned in a tight circle. *Nothing. Blast it!* He looked up and his heart sank. He closed his eyes and opened them again, but the scene remained. Twenty feet behind him, Joe struggled to his feet, blood rushing down his face.

Standing above him, confusion crept across the face of the second figure. "Joe, I promise, I didn't hit you," he said. "I stopped as soon as Nathan threw the cloud across the room."

Joe held his hand up and shook his head, his eyes smoldering. He stalked to the entrance and shoved past the silver-haired couple in the doorway. The man left standing in the center of the room turned and looked at the couple, then back at Quentin.

"I promise, I didn't hit him ... Q."

Quentin shook his head and leapt toward the front entrance. "I know, Landon. Just wait here." Quentin jogged toward the couple and dipped his head. He came to a stop as the old man stepped toward the doors. "Mr. Rayburn ..." The man jerked his weathered gaze back at Quentin. "Perhaps I should try to go after him ... alone."

The man clenched his jaw and gave a slight nod.

Quentin dashed out the door. Rain fell in sheets as he hurried down the crushed-rock driveway. A hundred yards beyond, he

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saw a shadowed silhouette marching down the road. Quentin slowed to a walk, his silver blade appearing again at his side.

“Joe!”

The figure stopped and turned, and Quentin stepped forward. The light of Quentin’s blade illuminated rust-red hair matted against skin and a swollen nose. The blade vanished, replaced by a ball of light floating near his shoulder.

“Joe, don’t go out tonight.”

The man frowned. A horn blew in the distance. “I don’t want this anymore. This life, the fighting, any of it.”

Quentin smiled sadly. “I know, Joe, but leaving won’t help. You can’t ignore—”

“I can! I can leave and never think of this family, this place ... or any like it ever again!” His shoulders heaved. “Q, I’m not made for this,” he said, his words barely audible above the pounding of the rain. “I want a life, a family, and I don’t want them to have to deal with this. This war corrupts your mind. It twists your life and takes all the joy out of it. It’s not normal, it’s not fair ... Why should only a few be responsible for so many?”

Quentin stepped closer and put his hand on Joe’s shoulder. “I know ... I know more than you understand right now, but you know what’s at stake. This is your home, your family. They love you.”

Joe shook his head and wrenched his shoulder away. “No ... no. I’m leaving, Q. I won’t have anything else to do with it. This war has been going on for thousands of years—it will go on with or without me. Let someone else deal with it.” He turned and stumbled forward a few steps.

Quentin grasped the pendant resting on his chest. *Perhaps ...* “Joe! Joe!” Quentin jerked the pendant and its chain over his head as he ran to him. “Here, take this.”

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Joe looked down at his hand. "What's this?"

Quentin smiled. "It will give you some protection. Maybe for a while it will hide you from Ish—er, Nathan and his ilk. Because they will come for you, Joe. Make no mistake about that. No matter what you think about Nathan, at some point he will come for you ... and any family you have."

Joe frowned as he studied the pendant.

Come on, kid. That's it. Think about what you're doing.

Joe nodded and placed the chain around his neck. The pendant flared, and without another word, he turned and walked into the driving rain. Quentin's eyes widened and his jaw dropped in disappointment. The gray shadow faded into the night, and the light by Quentin's head vanished. *No, no, it's not supposed to be this way.*

"He will return, Simon."

Quentin jerked at the sound. Beside him stood a man with brilliant green eyes and a gray cowboy hat. Fire burned in Quentin's chest and his throat tightened. "You could have stopped him. You could have told him, talked to him, something!"

The man smiled and put his hand on Quentin's shoulder. "You know as well as I that it would only have forced him further away. Unless I removed the choice, the decision would have been the same. He will have to discover some lessons on his own."

Quentin shook his head and glanced back down the road. "He won't last outside. They'll find him."

The man's smile faded. "No, I think not. I'll watch over him, as will others. And you gave him a huge advantage just now. He will survive to return, but so will Ishmal, and you must be ready, Simon"—he turned and stared through the rain, the light of his eyes pushing the darkness away—"because the

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light is soon to rise and they will not quit fighting for him. If they take him, he will be lost forever. If they kill the line, others will be lost, and if the gate is opened, darkness will flood this world."

ONE



FIRST ENCOUNTER

Twenty Years Later

Linwood Avenue was a narrow street that ran east to west for a few blocks. Like so many other streets in Houston, its name had changed often and no one living on it remembered what the original name had been or why it had been renamed Linwood other than to satisfy the whim of a city councilman. The buildings on Linwood were a motley combination of apartment buildings and commercial stores, with the occasional dilapidated house thrown in for good measure. At the far west end of Linwood, across from a deserted lot-turned-park, there stood a row of townhomes, and in the middle of them sat 1744 Linwood Avenue. The building was three stories tall, with half the first floor below street level and chipped concrete steps leading up to the red-painted front door on the second floor. Inside lived the Rayburns, who appeared to be an ordinary family. Mr. Rayburn had earned a college degree, joined the military, and, after some vacations supported by Uncle Sam, returned home to work.

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Mrs. Rayburn, after working as an interior designer for a few years, had decided to stay home with their five children, the youngest now only a year old. By sheer force of will, she managed the household: balancing books, laundering clothes, cooking, chauffeuring children, washing dishes, shopping for groceries, and scheduling appointments, not to mention the monumental task of keeping their gaggle of children alive through the end of each day and loving her husband. As far as her husband and children were concerned, her only true fault was that she wouldn't allow pets, but with seven people occupying less than fifteen hundred square feet, who could blame her?

As for the children, they tended to take after either their father's rust-brown hair and hazel eyes or their mother's raven-black hair and green eyes. The youngest was Jodi, who had not quite decided which parent she favored and for the most part was amiable to everyone. Her favorite game was peek-a-boo, and she hadn't met a food she didn't like. Next in line were the twins, Amy and Jon. Both claimed the black hair and striking green eyes of their mother, but unlike her, both were quiet. You would rarely find them without a book or a puzzle nearby, and you would never find one without the other. The title of second oldest belonged to Trent, and though his facial features tended toward his father, he'd inherited his temper from his mother. The voices that the random passerby on the street heard almost always belonged to one or the other. Luke was the eldest at ten and seemed a piecemeal combination of the lot, father's hair and eyes, mother's laughter, with interests split between sports, reading, and food—lots of food. The home on Linwood was the only he had ever known.

Luke's life was like that of many his age. He attended the local middle school, T.R. Hailey, down the street. He loved

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baseball in the summer. When it came to his favorite superhero, he was torn between Batman and Superman. And he liked to read as long as it wasn't a book from the school reading list and no one was watching. His only problem was that Luke had never felt as if he quite fit in. It wasn't the fact that the school bully, Danny Preston, always seemed to pay him a little special attention, though that didn't help. It wasn't the fact that his only real friend was Rafi Hernandez; a short Mexican boy from down the street who spoke English about as well as Luke's little sister Jodi and who disappeared for months at a time. It wasn't the fact that every time he tried to talk to Ashley Burns, his tongue doubled in size and she wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes. It wasn't even the fact that Luke was picked last or next to last every year for summer baseball teams. He just always had the sense that something was going on behind the scenes that he couldn't quite see. Most of the time, he just shrugged and tried to forget about it, but lately that was becoming harder and harder.

Danny seemed to have LoJacked his clothes or backpack somehow, because Luke's favorite hiding spots at school didn't seem to hide him well anymore. A couple of new boys had shown up on Linwood in the past few months, and one of their favorite pastimes seemed to be using Luke as target practice with their slingshots or random pieces of trash along the sidewalk. Rafi had vanished for the whole spring semester, and when Luke went to knock on his parents' door, a strange man had answered. The man had been polite enough, but he seemed creepy. And he became very agitated when he said he didn't know anything about Rafi's family. When Luke asked his parents about it, they just said something about work and visas that Luke didn't understand.

Worst of all, though, two of his favorite people in the world,

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Grandpa and Grandma Rayburn, had not come to visit in almost a year. Luke wrote them letters constantly and they always answered quickly, but every time he asked them when they were coming next, they made some comment about the weather or work needing to be done on their place or how it was just too difficult to get out lately. Luke had never been to his grandparents' home, never known exactly where they lived, but he didn't quite believe their excuses about not being able to come, because they used to visit a few times a year. That and the fact that his father grimaced every time he received a letter from them. Luke hoped he would get to go visit them someday. Little did he know that his wish would soon be granted.

In addition to all this, another problem had been piled on. For as long as Luke had known what a job was, his father had worked at the tire plant on the interstate. Late last year, though, the plant had announced that it would close, and a month or so later his father had been laid off. For the first few months, nothing seemed to change, other than that his father was home more often, and Luke liked that. Lately, though, his father had been gone from home more and more, and even though they tried to hide it, Luke could tell his parents were upset. His father grew quiet and withdrawn, and when he thought no one was around or he was talking to Luke's mother, he made bitter comments about something called "the economy" and some group of "dimwits" up at the capitol. At one point, Luke even saw his father take his framed diploma off the wall and throw it into the trash. When Luke asked him why he was throwing it away, his father frowned and said, "It's just a fancy piece of paper now. It's not worth anything to anyone anymore."

One of the only places where Luke found he could relax was the improvised park across the street. Mr. Branson, the

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owner of the barbershop beside the park, kept most riffraff away, so the new street boys didn't come around while his store was open and even Danny Preston couldn't follow Luke this far from school. Occasionally Luke's father would see him through the living-room window and come out to sit with him. He seemed to laugh and smile more at the park, and when he didn't come out, Luke could lean against the oak tree and lose himself in the pages of a book. Everything seemed calmer under the tree; even the sound of the passing cars seemed quieter. Luke walked across the street and sat against the tree often enough to have worn a bare patch in the grass, and after an afternoon of heart-racing hide-and-seek with Danny and with his father engrossed in the want-ad section of the paper, this is where he found himself one day a couple of weeks before school let out for summer. Orange light filtered down on him through the branches of the oak tree. He untucked his red polo shirt from his jeans and leaned back, resting his head on the grass. Sunlight faded above the brick building next to the park, and lights appeared in the windows of buildings across the street. Sweat plastered his rust-brown hair to his forehead. The honk of horns and the rumble of engines melted into the background, and streetlamps flickered to life as darkness descended on the empty lot.

It's gotta be some cruel joke to still be in school on the first day of summer. Luke glanced across the street at lights shining from sliding windows of his living room. Shadows walked back and forth behind the drapes. He sighed and glanced up at the few twinkling lights overhead. *I wish Dad would come outside.* They hadn't looked at stars since his father lost his job last winter, not that you could see many in the city anyway. A hot breeze swirled through the lot, rustling the leaves and the grass.

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Luke's eyes scanned the sky and picked out three stars lined up side by side.

Orion. He smiled and his eyes darted to other parts of the sky with brighter stars. A wren flitted through the air and disappeared in the leaves of the oak tree. *Chirp ... chirp ...*

A chorus of chirps and flapping wings greeted the bird behind the leaves. Visible just above his townhome building, a red light twinkled to the north.

Airplane ... Luke looked to the east. *Now, where is Taurus?* He glanced back to the north. The red light brightened and dimmed, but it didn't move. *That's not an airplane.* Luke propped himself on his elbows. A gust of wind made him shiver, and he swallowed and sat up, pulling his knees to his chest. His breath fogged in front of his face. Goose bumps raced up his arms, and he rose to his feet. The red light appeared as twice the size of anything around it.

"Luuukkkke."

A voice that sounded like air escaping from a tire hissed around him, and he whirled around. The back of the lot was empty save for the swing set and the stone arch in front of the crumbling brick wall.

"Luuukkkke."

Luke's teeth chattered. A black mist drifted across the entrance to the lot like clouds slipping in front of the moon. He stepped back as the darkness blotted out the building lights across the street, then the streetlights, then the stars overhead. The sounds of birds and cars became muted, as if he had cotton balls in his ears, then vanished altogether. All around him the mist slithered over objects, swallowing a bench and a trash can. A pair of red circles glowed to life in the center of the darkness. A head formed around the orbs, then a neck and a body below it. The form of a man took shape before him, a

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black suit hanging over his frame, tan hands protruding from the sleeves and crossed at the waist. He gazed down at Luke with ember-red eyes and flashed a smile from under the brim of a black *cordobes*.

“Ah, Luke, I have waited so long to speak with you.”

Luke swallowed and slipped a foot toward the rear wall of the lot. “Who ... who are you?” His eyes darted left and right. Blackness engulfed everything but the bubble surrounding him and the man standing opposite.

“I have quite a few names. I think *Saul* should fit nicely here.”

Gotta find a way out of here!

Saul chuckled. “I am not holding you here, Luke. You may leave whenever you wish.” The man waved his hand and a window appeared in the mist, showing the streetlights and apartments across the road. He dropped his arm and the opening faded away. “This”—he gestured toward the mist—“is merely to give us some privacy.”

Luke swallowed and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. “I kinda like seeing the rest of the world.”

The corner of Saul’s mouth twitched. “I will take only a minute more of your time, Luke. I don’t have long tonight as it is. Events are fast approaching that you will not understand, but soon you must make a choice.”

Luke squinted at him warily. “A choice.”

The man nodded. “Yes, you must pick between two paths. It is a decision that millions have made before you, but yours is, shall we say, unique.” His smile fading, he leaned forward.

Luke’s heartbeat pounded in his ears.

“For your decision will affect not only yourself but the fate of the world.”

“The world? ... How?”

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The man glanced over Luke's shoulder and frowned. "I do not have time tonight to answer all your questions, Luke." Smiling sadly, he fixed his gaze back on Luke. "I would save you from this choice if I could. I have tried. But it is a choice you must make on your own. No one else can do it for you. I will help you as much as you will allow and guide you as time passes, but the choice is still yours alone."

Luke blinked. "Why? Why me, and why is this so important?"

The man scowled. "Because, Luke Rayburn, unlike any mortal before you, your choice will decide for the world between slavery and war, or freedom and peace. I must go, but I will leave you with two things. First, help. You will soon travel to a place that contains something, something that will help you make your choice, and that may help save this world."

"Go? Go where? Why?"

"Where is unimportant. The object is what you must focus on. It is a book, a very ancient book. It contains information that has been hidden for ages, hidden from all others, but not to you."

Luke frowned.

"I know this is overwhelming," Saul said, "but you must trust me for now. Luke, there are many others who want this book and what it contains ... and you because of it." His eyes narrowed. "You must not let them get it, or you. I—*we* need this book."

Luke opened his mouth, but the man grimaced and spoke first.

"Luke, I must go. If you will allow, I will leave you with a glimpse of your choice to come." He stretched out an arm.

"No!" Luke said, backing away.

The figure flickered as it stepped forward, dissipating into

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mist and then materializing again. The face of the man contorted and he doubled over. "Just one touch, Luuuukkke."

Luke stepped back. "Hel—umfh!" His foot caught on a root and he fell backward. His back hit the ground and air rushed from his lungs. Gasping for air, he rolled onto his hands and knees. Unimaginable blackness surrounded him, and moisture froze on his skin.

"Helllllp!!!!"

Luke crawled blindly forward, searching in front of him with his hands.

"Luuukkkke."

"Help!!!"

I'm here, Luke.

Warmth flooded over him as his hand slapped down onto something soft and malleable. He coughed as the air cleared and saw that his hand rested on the toe of a pair of brown boots inches from his face. He glanced up and saw a green glow as tendrils of darkness snaked back around his face.

"Help!!!"

I'm here, Luke. Trust me, I will protect you.

The voice sounded in his head again as white light exploded around him. He covered his eyes with his hands and buried his face in the grass. He cringed as a hot breeze blew up his shirtsleeves. The rumble of engines sounded from the street, and voices carried around the corner from the barbershop. Luke opened one eye, then the other. He stood and turned in a circle. The lot was empty. He whipped his head behind him and back again. *Nothing*. Just the brick wall to the rear and the open street to the front.

The leaves of the oak tree rustled in the wind.

"Hello?" *What was that? I know there was someone here.*

Luke ran around the trunk of the oak tree. The green bench

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sat against the east wall. Fluorescent light filtered down from above as the wind pushed a crumpled piece of paper along the sidewalk. He was alone.

Do you really want to find anyone anyway? He shook his head and stepped onto the sidewalk. Why can't I just have a normal, calm life? Something is going on around here. Something's wrong, and I bet Mom and Dad and Grandpa and Grandma know about it.

As he crossed the street, he looked at the night sky. The red star glared down at him, unmoving.