

JAMIE LITLER



PUFFIN





THE ARCANISTS

What is it to be more than human? To be given unimaginable power? How would you choose to use it?

The five Arcanists of Arkspire are the only people in the world with the power to wield magic, and they choose to use it in the service of others.

When the glorious being known as The Visitor first shared its magic with humans all those centuries ago, it was only the five Arcanists who proved themselves worthy of keeping such a power.

The Arcanists were brave.

They were just.

They were blessed.

They saved us all from the terrible evil of the Betrayers.

Out of the ruins of a world torn apart by misery and war, their ancestors used their gifts to build the great city of Arkspire, a bastion of peace and learning. They

sacrificed their own wants and needs to ensure the people of Arkspire were protected and that the terrible curse of the Betrayers was kept at bay.

They will never abandon us. Not even in death. When an Arcanist's time comes to an end, they choose another to pass their powers on to. A child whose heart is pure enough to accept the gift of magic. A child who proves themselves as worthy as those who came before. A child who swears to defend Arkspire with all that they have until the day comes for them to pass on their powers to another generation.

And so it is, that the legacy of the first Arcanists continues to this day, a legacy of compassion in an uncaring world, of magic in the face of despair. Their names are eternal.

The Tempest.

The Maker.

The Watcher.

The Enigma.

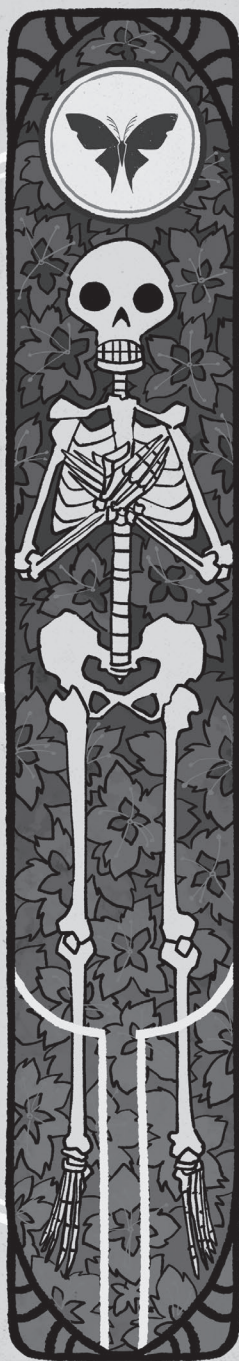
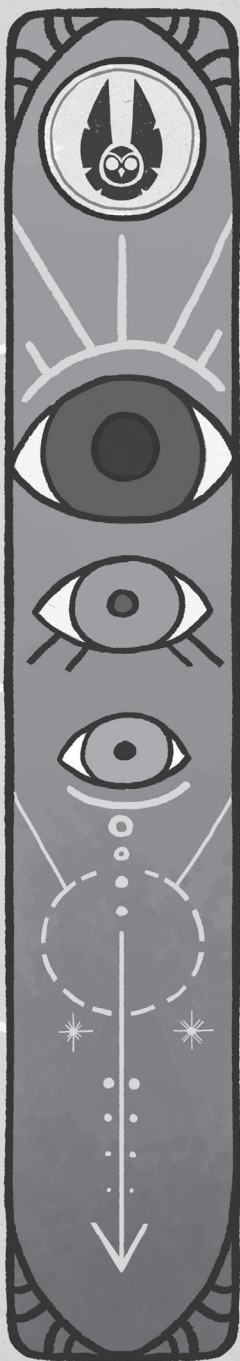
The Shrouded.

Under the eyes of the five great Arcanists and their illustrious Orders, Arkspire will always stand.

Hail to the Arcanists!

Hail to our saviours!





THE GREAT CITY OF
ARKSPIRE



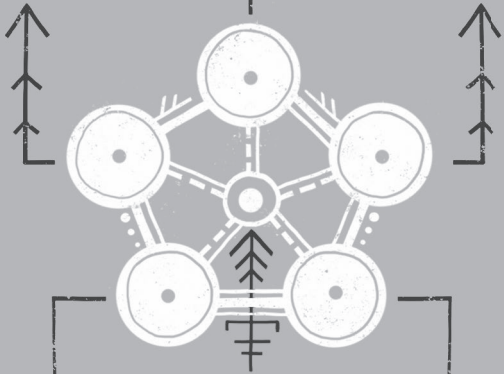
INVENTION DISTRICT
Home of The Maker,
leader of
the Order of Invention



RADIANT DISTRICT
Home of The Tempest,
leader of
the Order of Radiance



IRIS DISTRICT
Home of The Watcher,
leader of
the Order of Iris



THE CRUX

GATEWAY DISTRICT
Home of The Enigma,
leader of
the Order of Gateways



MIDNIGHT DISTRICT
Home of The Shrouded,
leader of
the Order of Midnight





PROLOGUE

The alleyway didn't stand a chance. Juniper Bell cleared it with one giant leap, breaking into a roll as she landed.

Her mama smiled with pride. 'Ain't no question you're a daughter of mine.'

Grinning, Juniper turned back, hoping to see her twin sister following close behind. Instead she saw Elodie stranded on the rooftop on the other side of the alley, knees trembling as she peered over the edge.

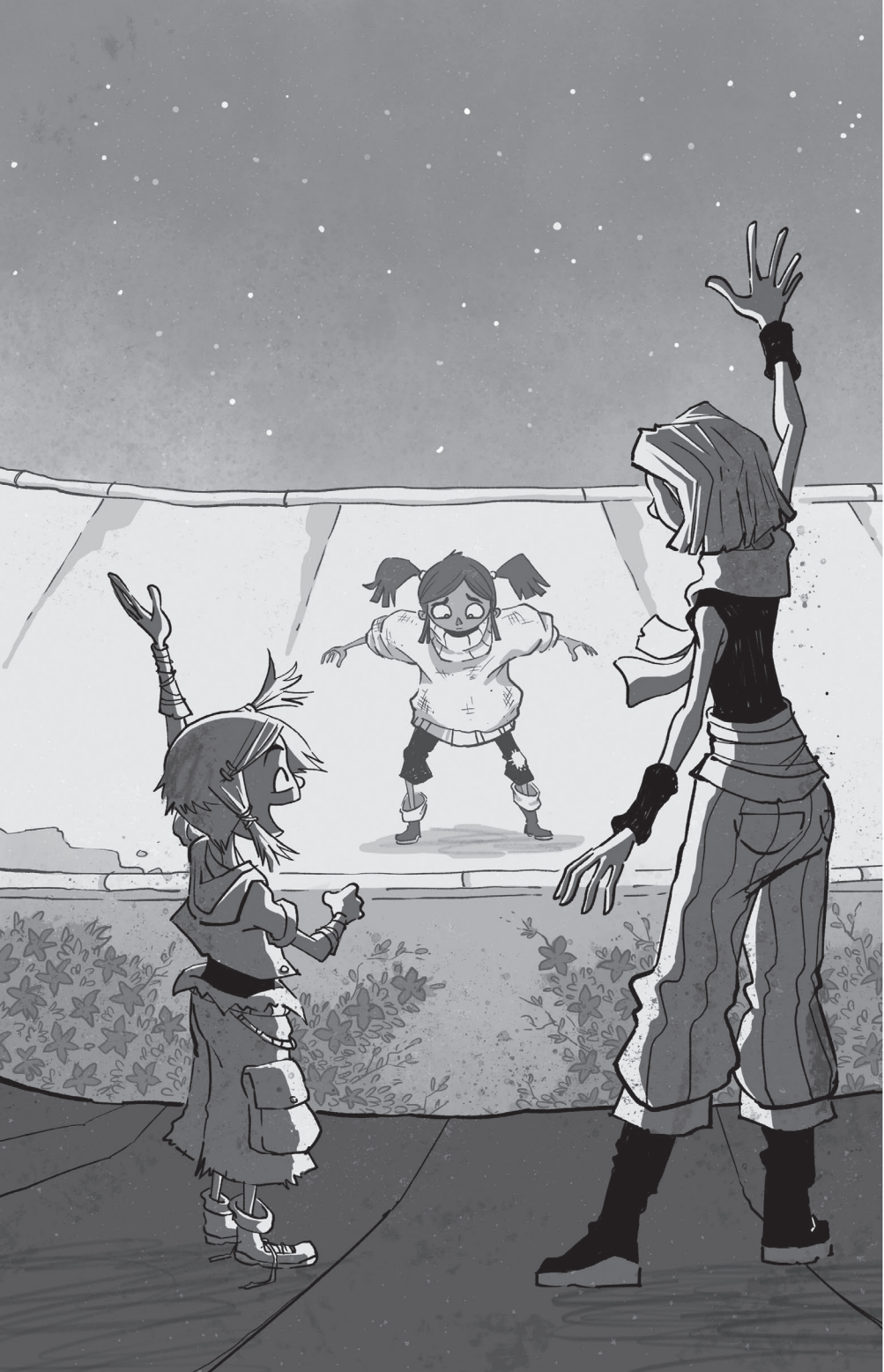
Juniper had been afraid this would happen.

'You've got this, El!' Mama called. 'It's not as far as it looks!'

'I – I don't know if I can . . .' Elodie's eyes watered with frustration.

'You could totally clear that with one leap,' Juniper said encouragingly, 'and you'd need to as well, otherwise you'd fall and die.'

'Juni!' Elodie squealed.



‘C’mon! What’s the worst that can happen?’

‘Erm . . . That I fall and die?! We’re not even supposed to be up here! We’ll be in so much trouble if we’re caught.’

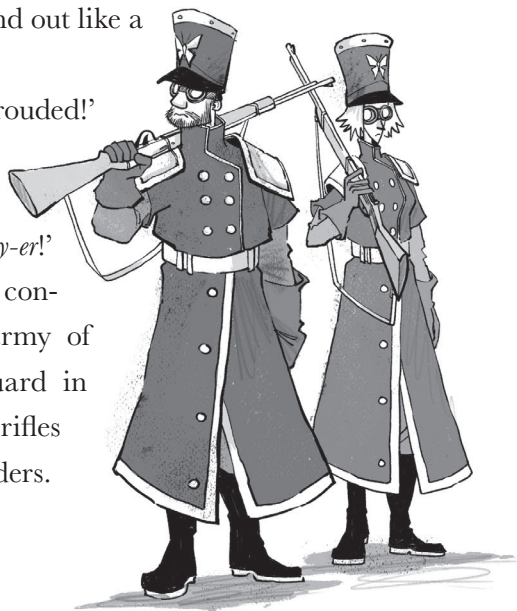
The Bell family were from the Iris District, ruled by the Arcanist known as The Watcher. But they were currently in the neighbouring Midnight District, home to The Shrouded and her Order of Midnight. It wasn’t against the rules to cross districts . . . but, on a special night like this, there was no way lower-city Dreggers like them would be welcome to scurry about the Uppers. So what other choice did they have but to sneak across the rooftops? The chance to see an Arcanist in action was worth the risk.

‘No one’s catchin’ us tonight,’ Mama reassured Elodie. ‘We’ll be in and out like a shadow!’

‘Just like The Shrouded!’
Juniper said.

Mama laughed.
‘But even more *shadowy-er!*’

Elodie still wasn’t convinced, eyeing the army of wardens standing guard in the streets below, rifles resting on their shoulders.



‘I should go back for her . . .’ Juniper muttered to her mama.

Juniper had been born a whole fifteen minutes before her twin and took her job as older sister very seriously. The girls shared the same brown skin and dark-coloured hair as their mother. But whereas Juniper’s hairstyle looked like it’d been hacked short with blunt scissors (because it had), Elodie’s was tidy and neat. Still, Elodie had tried to put her hair into scruffy bunches to look the same as Juniper’s. She always wanted to be just like her twin. It could sometimes be a bit much having a copycat follow your every step, but, though she would never admit it, it made Juniper as proud as pie.

‘No. She can do this; I know she can,’ Mama insisted.

Juniper nodded, deciding to try a different tactic. She wanted to help Elodie, but nothing would change unless Elodie stopped worrying about what might go wrong all the time.

‘Look, maybe this was a bad idea,’ Juniper called. ‘You wait there. We’ll go watch the amazin’, marvellawesome Arcanist an’ we’ll tell you *aaaaall* about it when we get back. Shame you’ll miss it, though – you’ll probably be older ’n Mama next time there’s an Inheritance . . .’

‘So not *that* old,’ Mama added.

Elodie’s large eyes grew even wider at the very idea.

‘No, please don’t leave me! You were right – I can do this!’

Juniper smiled, triumphant. If there was one way to get Elodie to break the rules or make a death-defying leap between rooftops, it was by tempting her with the Arcanists. She was obsessed with them.

Elodie peered over the roof edge only to recoil. ‘But what – what if I fall?’

‘You won’t!’ Juniper and Mama insisted in unison.

‘You don’t know that!’

Juniper perched on the side of the roof and held out her hand. ‘I’m here to catch you.’

‘And you won’t let go?’

‘Never.’

Elodie studied her twin for any sign of a lie. ‘You promise?’

‘Promise.’

Elodie gulped, then stuck her tongue out with concentration. That’s how Juniper knew things were about to get serious. Elodie readied her stance. Narrowed her eyes. With a deep breath, she took a run-up . . . and jumped! She cleared the alleyway below – *just* – and Juniper caught hold of her flailing arms and pulled her to safety.

Elodie looked back at the jump she’d just made, almost unable to believe it. ‘I . . . I did it? I did it! I did

it! She bounced up and down, Juniper holding her hands tight.

‘Ain’t nothin’ Jelliper can’t do when they’re workin’ together,’ Mama said fondly, using the nickname the twins had given themselves. She pulled them into a hug.

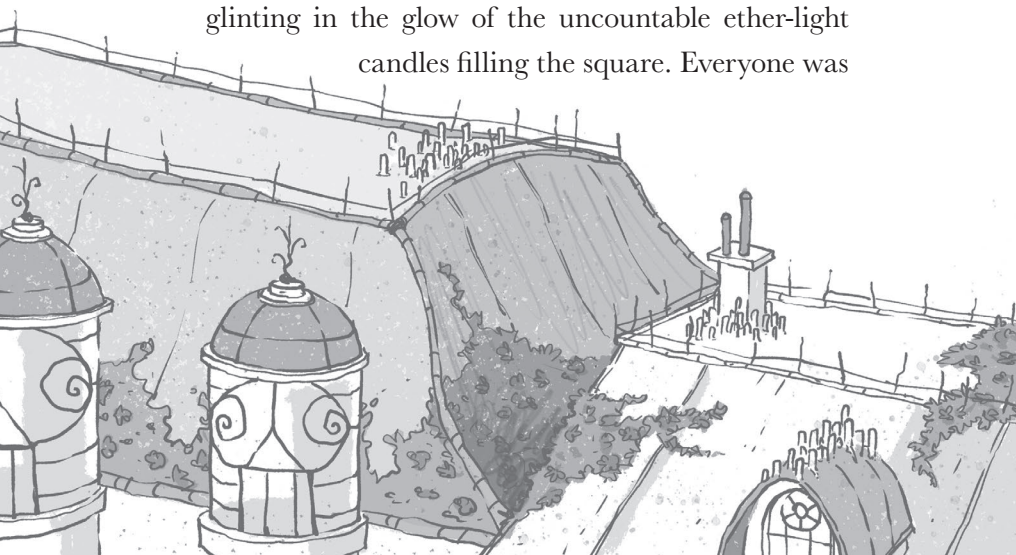
‘Well, we can’t turn back time,’ Juniper said.

Elodie pulled a face. ‘Why’d we need to do that?’

‘Cos at this rate I reckon we might miss the Inheritance.’

Elodie’s mouth fell open. ‘Visitor beyond, we need to move, move, move!’

The large town square in the Midnight District was fit to bursting. The massive crowd bustled in the sticky evening air. Fancy folk, the lot of them, each wearing more snazzy threads than the last. The men, with their sharp coats and oiled hair, preened themselves; the ladies posed in the most fashionable dresses, their jewels glinting in the glow of the uncountable ether-light candles filling the square. Everyone was



enraptured by the haunting song played by an orchestra on the large outdoor stage in the square's centre.

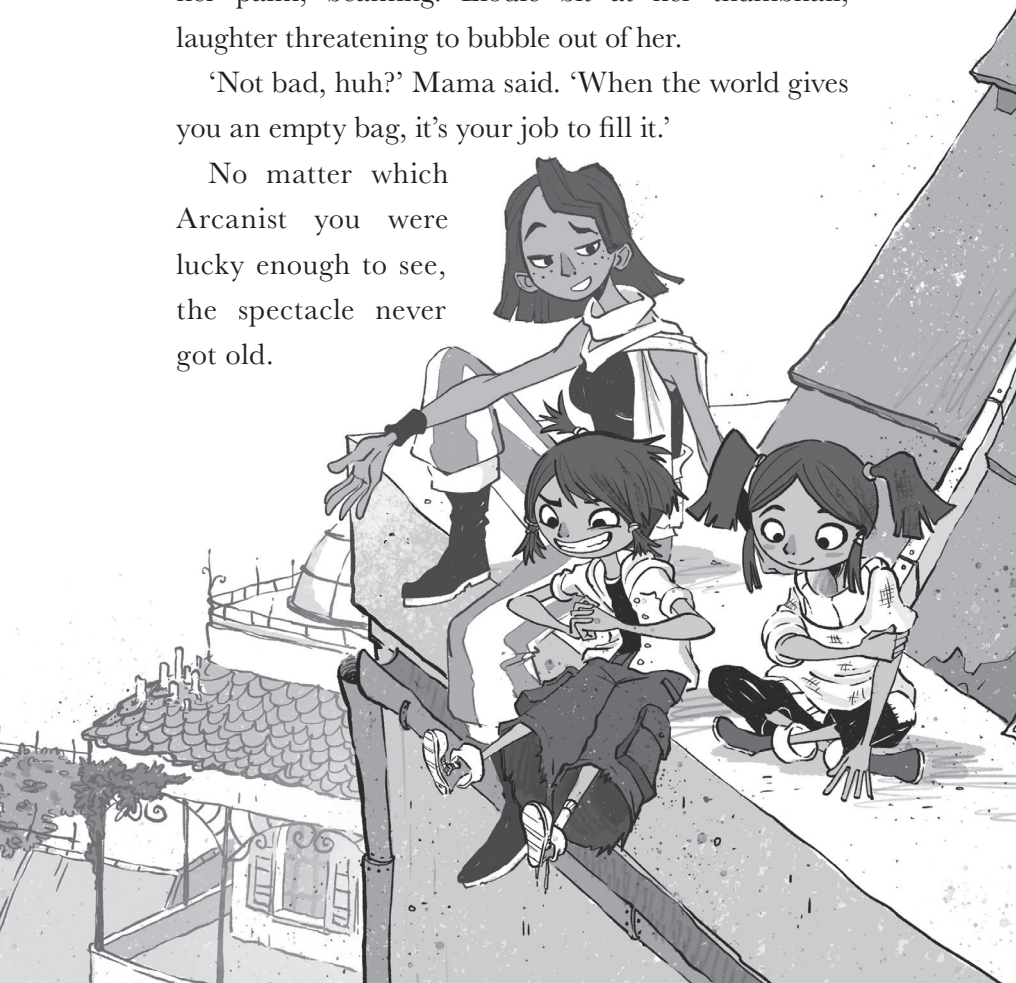
The twins gasped. 'Whoooooooooo!'

'Best seats in the house, or your money back!' Mama grinned, sitting down on a rooftop edge that overlooked the festivities. The twins sat beside her, Juniper's legs swinging over the edge, Elodie a little further back.

'This is amazing!' Juniper said, punching a fist into her palm, beaming. Elodie bit at her thumbnail, laughter threatening to bubble out of her.

'Not bad, huh?' Mama said. 'When the world gives you an empty bag, it's your job to fill it.'

No matter which Arcanist you were lucky enough to see, the spectacle never got old.



Witnessing the impossible happen right before your eyes was not something you ever forgot or ever got used to.

But tonight was extra special. It was the first time there'd been an Inheritance in the twins' lifetime. The moment an Arcanist's powers were passed on to their chosen Inheritor, a gift every child in Arkspire dreamed might one day be given to them.

Mama had said she'd take the twins to see the ritual a week ago (so long as they didn't tell Papa), and they'd been buzzing ever since, lying awake in bed every night, squirming in anticipation. Elodie had even put on her nicest jumper for the occasion. Sure, it was way too big for her, like all her clothes, but at least this one had no holes in it.

The orchestra suddenly piped down and an expectant silence fell over the square. The air was so electric that it was a wonder nobody was being shocked. You could almost taste it on the warm evening breeze, fizzling on the tongue, and the sweet scent of the black flowers the Midnight District was so famous for tingling the nose.

A lone lady stepped out from the orchestra. She began to sing. The song was beautiful but also sad, the kind that got under your skin and gave you goosebumps. It was a song of mourning. Two pillars of white ether-light flared silently behind her, illuminating something

on the stage that, until now, had been hidden in shadow. It was an open coffin resting on a pedestal. Inside lay the body of an incredibly old woman, her eyes closed, her wrinkly white hands crossed over her black funerary robes.

Behind the coffin stood a young girl not much older than the twins. Her brown hair had been pulled back into two buns, a headdress placed above her forehead, gleaming in the ghostly light. Dozens of coins dangled from it – payment for the ferryman to take the souls of the dead to the Beyond. Her pale oval face could barely hold back a smile. Couldn't blame her, really, considering what was about to happen. Juniper would've broken into a jig if she'd been chosen to become an Inheritor.

A tall, gaunt-looking man from the Order of Midnight stood beside her. Both looked solemnly down at the coffin.

Once the song had come to an end, the man stepped forward.

'People of the Midnight District!' he declared in a dusty old voice. 'It is with great sorrow that we say farewell to our beloved leader, twenty-third of their name. But, as is custom, we have mourned this terrible loss during the searing light of day. Now, in the soothing darkness of night, we shall rejoice – for her

legacy will live on! The Shrouded has chosen a child worthy to Inherit her gifts and become the next in their great line, as is the way! Chosen Inheritor of The Shrouded, please come forward and embrace your destiny.'

The girl nodded, stepping up to the casket. She seemed confident. Ready. She'd spent the last few years doing nothing but training for this moment, after all.

Elodie gasped as The Shrouded opened her eyes. She'd been so still, so peaceful, you would've been forgiven for thinking she was dead. That and the fact she was lying in her own coffin. Her misted eyes focused on the girl standing above her. She raised a withered hand that the girl took gently but with conviction.

'I, Nyx Neverbright, give myself to the power of The Shrouded. May my name be forgotten as I am born anew,' said the girl, before closing her eyes.

The crowd held its breath.

Juniper took Elodie's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Here we *goooooo* . . .'

The shadows that danced in the flickering ether-light suddenly . . . *changed*. They moved with purpose, wisps of darkness leaking out of the woman in the coffin before coiling their way up Nyx's outstretched arm. They threaded over her shoulder; they cocooned her torso and reached for the place where her heart was. A

sigil inscribed on her hand began to glow.

That's when the ether-lights disappeared. Candles flickered out, every one of them. The glow of every streetlamp and every window vanished. The entire Midnight District went dark.

Elodie squeezed Juniper's hand even tighter.

The only light came from Nyx herself on the stage. More sigils had grown from the one already on her hand, spiralling up both her arms, strange symbols glowing bright white in the pitch-darkness. Her eyes shone as bright as flame. She raised her arms, weaving her hands as though she were dancing, the sigils blurring with the movement. Then she clapped her hands together.

And, just like that, the pillars of ether-light flared back to life, every candle reignited, and the streetlamps buzzed as though they'd never even considered going dark, not once.

Light returned to the district.

The ancient lady in the coffin had fallen still.

'The girl standing before you all is no longer Nyx Neverbright!' the girl shouted. 'I am now The Shrouded, twenty-fourth of their name, leader of the Order of Midnight and the Midnight District. And I swear, with the power gifted to me, to lead us to even greater heights than ever before!'



In eerie silence every person in the audience raised a candle, the square transforming into a sea of swaying stars. Bells rang out across the district.

The twins watched, spellbound. Beside them Mama's grin widened. Where they came from, down in the Dregs, wonder was in short supply. What they'd seen tonight would go some way to make up for that. But something niggled at the back of Juniper's mind. Despite all the celebrating, something felt off. Like a sudden chill on a summer's day.

Her breath puffed out in a cloud, despite the time of year.

It wasn't until someone screamed that it suddenly clicked. The bells weren't ringing out in celebration. They were ringing out in warning.

Almost immediately figures began rising up from the cobblestones, glowing as though lit by an unseen sun. They materialized out of thin air like a morning mist. They passed through walls as though they weren't there. Five of them. Unnatural twisted things, almost human, but with hideously stretched limbs and too-long fingers, their ethereal bodies transparent and coiling like smoke on a breeze. But worst of all was their faces – bottomless voids of nothingness except for the two bright eyes that burned with hateful fire. The things reached out towards the

people around them, pointing to the new Shrouded on the stage.

‘Shades!’ Mama whispered in horror.

The Betrayers’ curse.

The audience became a panicked rush of chaos. The crowd fled in terror, pushing and tumbling over each other in their eagerness to get away. And who could blame them – Shades leeches the life force out of anyone they came into contact with, leaving only lifeless husks behind. Wardens directed the crowd to a line of sigils etched into the cobblestone ground. The Shades stalked after them, but before they could snatch at any unfortunate soul, the sigils flared to life with a searing light. The Shades recoiled in agony – if such things could even feel pain.

‘We’ve gotta go *now!*’ Mama said, pulling the girls away from the square.

The family ran. Juniper leaped after Mama over the gap between rooftops, but Elodie skidded to a halt.

‘El, you have to jump!’ Mama cried.

‘I can’t!’ Elodie whimpered.

‘You can! I’ll catch you!’

A glow began to radiate from the roof tiles below Elodie. She screamed, stumbling back as a Shade rose out of the roof in front of her, its pitiless eyes burning enviously at the life she had.

Juniper's insides froze. 'Elodie, *run!*'

But Elodie could only gawp. The flowers on the rooftop, once in vibrant bloom, withered and died in the thing's presence. It moaned low and desperate, its unnaturally long fingers twitching, ready to strike. If that thing so much as touched Elodie, it would steal the life from her in an instant.

'Elodie!' Mama screamed, leaping back over the gap. Juniper could only watch as her mama tried to reach her sister, but the Shade lashed out with frightening speed, Mama ducking out of its grasp by a hair's breadth. She tried again, but the thing was too fast.

Then, out of nowhere, something snatched at the Shade's wrist. It looked like some kind of rope, except it was made entirely out of twisting shadow. The Shade resisted, trying to pull itself free, but another shadow-tendrill snatched its other arm, wrenching it back.

Nyx, or The Shrouded as she was now called, rose out of the shadows on the rooftop. The Shade screeched and struggled, but The Shrouded's magic held it tight. She rushed up towards it, drawing sigils in the air in front of its screeching, featureless face, the symbols hanging in the air, glowing bright. They grew bigger, joining together and spinning round the Shade like a lasso, before suddenly tightening together in a flash.

Then the fading wails of the Shade were all that remained of it, the thing itself banished back beyond the Veil.

‘Baby!’ Mama rushed to Elodie, cradling her tight. ‘I’m sorry – I’m so sorry – I couldn’t get to you! I tried, but I –’

But Elodie wasn’t listening. Her eyes were wide and glistening. But it wasn’t with fear, not any more. She was staring up at The Shrouded in complete and utter awe.

‘Are you OK?’ The Shrouded asked, her voice full of concern.

Elodie nodded.



‘Thank you!’ Mama whispered, tears streaming down her face. ‘Thank you so much!’

The Shrouded breathed out in relief, then disappeared back into the shadows, off to deal with the remaining Shades in the square.

Juniper leaped to the roof, falling to her knees to hug her trembling sister.

‘El! Are you OK?’

‘That . . . was the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen,’ Elodie said, her voice little more than a whisper. ‘The Shrouded . . . Can . . . can you imagine having the power to protect people like that?’

‘Come on – it’s not safe,’ Mama said, trying to lift Elodie – but her daughter resisted, unable to take her eyes off The Shrouded, now back down in the square.

‘I want to help people like that,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I want to make a difference like they do. I want to become an Arcanist!’

Juniper made to speak, but her mama shot her a look of warning. They needed to get out of here.

‘If anyone can become an Inheritor, it’s you, El,’ Mama said cajolingly. ‘But we really have to go.’

Juniper swallowed hard. There wasn’t a kid in Arkspire who didn’t dream that they could become an Arcanist. All you needed to do was prove you had what it took: that you had the grit, determination and a pure

soul. Anybody in Arkspire could become a *somebody*.

But Juniper knew the truth. Only kids from the Uppers were chosen, those from families with power and money. Dregger girls like the Bell sisters didn't stand a chance; even at her age, Juniper knew that. She knew their place, and it wasn't up in the towers of the Arcanists.

Even so, she couldn't bear to tell Elodie, not tonight. The Shrouded had filled her sister's heart with hope and inspiration, and Juniper refused to be the one who stole that from her.

She'd come to remember this moment in the years to follow.