UNDER The SHADOW Of DARKNESS

Book 1 of The Apprentice Series

JAMES and ISSA CARDONA

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the apprentice Series

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Praise for
Under The Shadow Of Darkness
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Finalist 2014 — Wishing Shelf Book Awards, Books For Teenagers Category

Laced with signature Cardona humor … hard choices to be made… and a few handy life's lessons … at the sharp end of the bloodthirsty undead hordes' teeth, which certainly keeps his motivation and the overall pace of the book at a rollicking clip. …A most worthwhile read.
—**Marc Secchia, author of** *The Pygmy Dragon* **and** *Shapeshifter Dragons* **series**

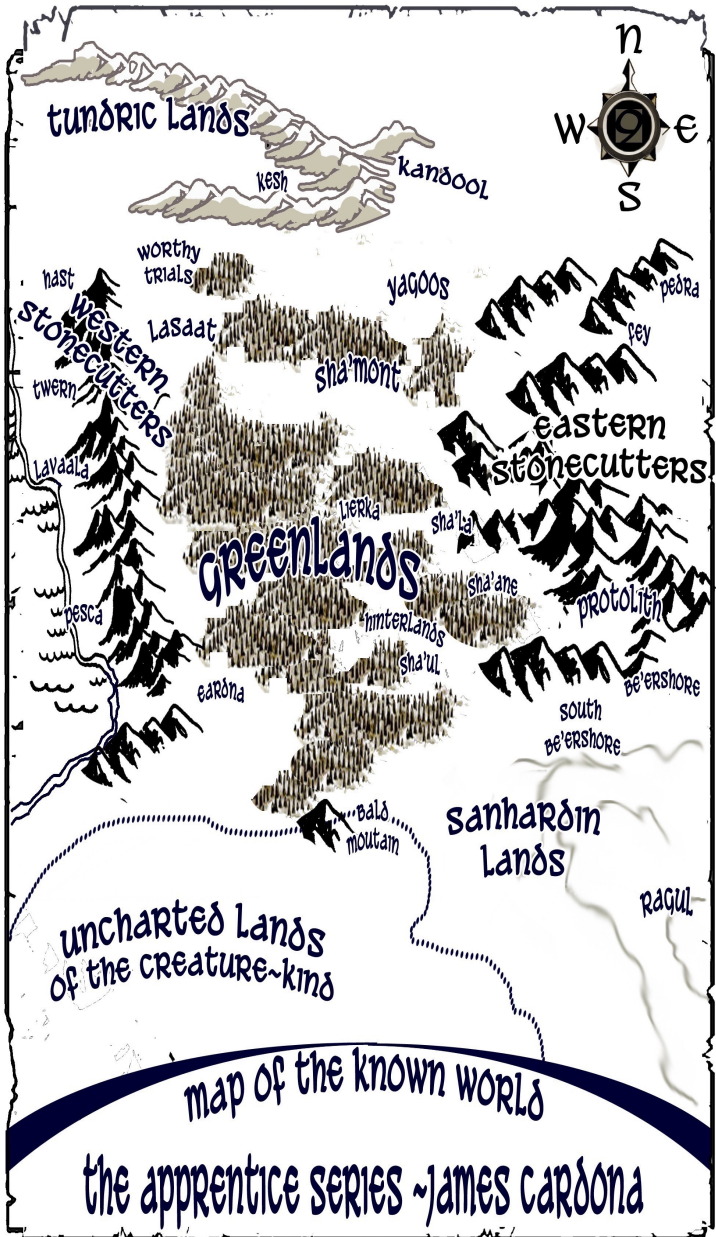A thoroughly entertaining read sure to please middle graders!
—**Kirsten Jany, author of** *Enter To Win*

Fun, interesting, and I really enjoyed the characters
—**Meghan, The Gal In The Blue Mask Book blog**

Light vs dark, Good vs Evil, greed, a quest, adventures, walking dead! This wonderful adventure novel will appeal to all ages.
—**Laura, Dogsmom Visits Book blog**

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be'ershore

south
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bald
moutam

Sanhardin
lands

ragul

uncharted lands
of the creature~kind

map of the known world

the apprentice series ~James Cardona

Chapter One
Home of The Master

Bel's prearranged speeches quickly escaped him so he recited the standard presentation. "Master Nes'egrinon, I am Bel. Graduate of Lasaat and your chosen apprentice. I present myself to you for service and training." He said the words nervously. On the long journey from the University of Arts and Magic he had rehearsed his words and how he would say them many times but he did not expect others to be present when his prepared announcement rolled off of his tongue. And he certainly did not expect to see Kerlith's grinning face in the shadows.

"Very well. Enter, Fifth Year student of Lasaat," the

old man replied.

Kerlith choked back a laugh and masked it by coughing. Bel tried to ignore it. They had a history but Bel wanted to make a clean break; he wanted to start over fresh.

Fingers of light highlighted old scars on one side of Nes'egrinon's face as he turned and pointed his crooked finger. "Stand there, in that corner, Fifth Year. I have guests and we are attending to business. I will speak with you shortly."

Bel, thin and lithe, not quite a boy and yet not quite a man, went quietly and watched. Nes'egrinon returned to his chair in front of the fireplace and gave his back to the other mage in the room, a stone mage much younger than Bel's new master. Bel had never seen much less heard of a mage giving another of equal stature his back. It would be considered the gravest of insults, but Nes'egrinon did it causally and apparently without malice.

Muolithnon said, "Please consider the facts, Nes'egrinon. If the situation were not so, I would not trouble you." He walked around the room to stand near the fire so that the old wizard might look up at him but his gaze did not leave the flames.

"I believe you, even though I haven't seen it myself." The gray bearded mage paused as if he was suddenly listening to a faint sound. "The wind in the trees... There is death in the air. I don't know what it is. It hides from me."

"Aye. And the stonecutters. It is well known that they speak only truth. Their words are troubling to hear. Even for such a one as you who has seen much, these are worrisome times. Something needs to be done. This is why I am here. This is why I have left my home of stone to ask for your help."

Bel had heard rumors that Nes'egrinon was odd. Standing in the corner and gazing around at the hovel, he realized that none of the stories did any justice to the old wizard or his home and its piles and piles of odd looking, dirt-covered junk stacked to the ceiling. The place was filthy too. A thin twilight shining in from the solitary window paralyzed the heavy dust hanging low in the air. The hearth was the centerpiece of the home and its flames flickered warm light on the moss-filled cracks of the stone floor; it felt much like an animal's burrow to Bel.

"Fifth Year, water." Nes'egrinon's words were hard in Bel's ears but he complied without a look or a word. He did not like being called Fifth Year and did not expect to so quickly be ordered about like a First Year. Of course he knew he was to serve his master; washing, cleaning, cooking, it was all part of the deal. He had just graduated from the University of Art and Magic, one of the most prestigious schools in all the lands, and after graduation he was selected by Nes'egrinon, the great and terrible Nes'egrinon. It made his decision so much more difficult but he did it; he took the vow of celibacy, the vow that all

wizards in training must take, and he left the girl he loved and the dream of a different life behind. Shireen. Her name popped into his head, but he pushed it away. Now he would serve his master and serve him well. In exchange he would learn from one of the greatest wizards in all the lands. If he lived.

Trepidation momentarily tore at him but he quickly choked it back, trepidation at being passed over by every mage during selections, every mage except one. Sure, some students didn't get selected at all so Bel was happy when he found out he was picked but he wondered if not being chosen may have been better than being chosen by someone who everyone thought would get him killed. He had hoped that the rumors were not true and everything might turn out fine but still he lamented being chosen by Nes'egrinon, the great Nes'egrinon, who for all his legendary exploits had only ever taken two apprentices, two apprentices who it was said both died before they completed their training. Bel remembered the rumors. It was said that they died before making it out of their first year under his hand.

Kerlith smirked then returned his attention to his teacher. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy that Bel was being ordered to fetch like one of the untrained. Bel didn't flinch as he filled the cup but his mind quickly returned to that fateful night and how it had happened. His self-loathing for accepting Kerlith's challenge at the University grabbed

him anew, the challenge that resulted in him being held back when his fellow students graduated in their fifth year, at least the ones that made it that far. He hated being the only Sixth Year at the University. But he was out now; everything was different; he was a wizard in training. He had to squeeze Kerlith and what he had done out of his mind.

The old wizard continued, "So you think the stonecutters only speak truth, do you? That hasn't been my experience."

Muolithnon replied, "Master Nes'egrinon, we should not argue about such things. The war is long over. We have a common problem and I would think that we could solve it." The mage stepped a bit closer to the old man and said, "Let us make this grand bargain. We will travel past the Hinterlands, past the Keep of the stonecutters. Let us see what we shall see and if the rumors are true. Let's find out if the stonecutters speak rightly or if it is just madness and drink and shadows. And the trees... let us see if what you, ah, hear is true. Yes, let's see what abomination has caused all of this. If indeed it is the unspeakable then we will send for the others to join us." Muolithnon spoke with a smile as if what he said was easy and common.

Nes'egrinon's eyes remained on the hearth. He replied, "And leave my forest unguarded?"

Bel placed a full cup of water into Nes'egrinon's aged, shaking hand.

"Your western edge has seen no challenge for decades and your eastern edge is guarded by my borders, is it not?" The mage stopped smiling and rubbed the large stone pendant hanging from his neck. "I understand your concern as I am dedicated to my charge as well. I am the mage of the eastern stone lands and I must do what I can to protect my people. That is why I implore you to come with me. Let us journey under the shadow of darkness. Let us find the source of this eternal night."

"Mmmmm. Now that's what a cup of water should taste like."

Muolithnon pursed his lips. "Master archmage? Will you join me?"

Nes'egrinon looked away from the fire and placed his piercing eyes on the mage. He was old; he remembered a time long before the magician who stood before him was even born, a time when their lands were at war, a time when many of his people died at the hands of the stonecutters. "Listen. I think your idea is stupid. I mean, on the surface it seems like the right thing to do. There are some problems over there so, 'Hey let's go investigate,' but listen to me. No one knows when they are making a mistake until after they have already made it and it blows up in their face." The old wizard paused then continued, "Well, maybe that's not entirely true. Everyone knows that poking a dragon in the eye is a mistake. Yes, I should have known better, but in general, we don't know until it's too

late." The old mage turned to Bel and said, "Fifth Year, attend to their horses. Muolithnon, please, you and your apprentice are welcome to stay the night here, but I cannot join you. My place is here at the edge of the Greenlands."

Bel wanted to stay and listen to the discussion but he knew he had to see to the horses so he went outside and called mage-light into his short staff. He had never heard masters disagree openly at Lasaat. He wanted to listen so he went to the horses hurriedly so that he might return and not miss too much.

"Come horse, come." Bel said as he untied the Gidran's reins. He led the horse to the back of the hovel then filled the trough with water. Bel retrieved the pony, Kerlith's horse, and tied it next to the large brown horse and placed some feed in their bags. As he walked back towards the front of the small structure he heard an unsettled neigh. The young boy returned quickly to check the horses, knowing that he was most assuredly missing all the best parts of the conversation inside. That stone mage doesn't look like he is going to take no for an answer. Especially after traveling so far. And my new master, he sure doesn't pull any punches, does he?

He stroked the Gidran's long nose and said, "What is it, boy?" His staff light shone in the horse's face and suddenly Bel felt a shiver of fear. The horse was afraid. "It's alright, horse. You have nothing to fear. We are on the

edge of the forest. No men war here. And no gypsies would dare steal you. No, not with two of the great ones inside. Ha." Bel laughed at the thought.

Suddenly a rustling at the edge of the forest caught Bel's ear. He had been here, at the mage Nes'egrinon's home, for only a short time so he was not yet accustomed to the sounds and noises of this region. He did not know what creature of the night would make such a noise. It was dark. It was night. And Bel was a boy from the city. In the far horizon he could still see the fading sun but here it was the darkest night. Bel stood silent, peering into the forest, looking for the source of the noise.

Probably squirrels, Bel thought. He remembered his forest training at Lasaat. Large animals such as deer or elk tended to be very quiet to avoid detection from predators while very small animals such as squirrels take the opposite approach, making large amounts of noise to scare off animals that would eat them.

Bel stretched forth his mind and became one with all that was living as he often practiced at the University of Arts and Magic, calling the surrounding light to him, slowly coaxing it.

"Ela, ela, ela. Ela, phos, ela" Bel called out the mage-words softly as he caused light-desire to fill his being. Small beams of life streamed in from the surrounding darkness, gathering into increasing larger pinpoints around him. Bel smiled. He asked the lights to join, to

become one, to enter the top of his short wooden staff, forming a ball of soft dancing light. Then he pointed the staff toward the forest.

The horses pulled and bucked.

"Calm down. Calm down." Bel held his hand to the side of the Gidran's neck and pushed peace into it. The horse shook his head in disagreement and blew air out of its mouth across its lips. The young pony pulled and shook also but Bel was less worried about it since it was not strong enough to break its reins.

Red eyes appeared at the edge of the forest, low to the ground. Then another pair appeared, then another.

"Hello, what's this then?" Bel questioned out loud.

The horses yanked again and again and Bel knew that they were pulling too hard for him to move them back to the front. He had to calm them down first.

Bel pointed his staff straight and called out words in the mage-language. The ball of bouncing light sheltered in the curved end of his staff grew suddenly brighter then plodded out. As the flare slowly arced out of the staff and sailed across the small grassy opening and into the woods, it revealing about ten gray faces, their bodies crouching down at the edge of the woods, their crooked teeth exposed in snarls then the light quickly went out. Bel and the horses were enveloped in darkness.

The horses buckled harder and the Gidran's reins snapped. The large horse galloped away before Bel could

grab at it. Gurgling noises surrounded Bel as the creatures emerged from the edge of the forest. Bel couldn't see them. He suppressed his fear and blindly tried to untie the heaving pony.

The mage-words flowed out of him quickly, "Phos. Phos. Phos," each time more desperately but the light did not come. His hands found the pony's reins, stretched hard and taut, and he tugged on them, trying to create slack so he could free the small horse. It yanked and tugged, attempting to break free, squealing and wheezing fiercely. As Bel struggled with the reins in the dark he could feel an increasing presence around him. They were surrounding him.

"Phos. Phos. Phos!" No light came. It was as if all the life had been squeezed from the world.

The pony bucked and heaved, neighing loudly, desperate to escape, yanking on the reins, trying to break them. Bel felt hands on his shoulders and arms and legs. Cold, probing hands touched his face and ran fingers in his hair. A wheezing dank breath was in his ears. They were all around him. Coldness surround Bel. He shivered hard and uncontrollably.

"Phos! Phos! Parakalo! Phos!" Far off a tiny glimmer twinkled into the space, a dim flame, less than that of a single candle, but enough, just enough to see the gray faces of the creatures mounted on the pony, crawling all over it and standing around it, placing their gray hands in

it. They were people, at least they looked like people, but their skin appeared gray and dead. An earthy, moldy, repugnant smell hung in the air; Bel snorted trying to escape the rancid odor. Then one of the gray creatures opened its mouth wide revealing rows of black teeth, looked at Bel, smiled gruesomely and slowly sunk his fangs into the young pony's flesh.

Bel howled, "Ghouls!" and sent power into his staff.

"Apokrothos!" A burst of energy sent a few of the close ghoul-kind flying high in the air and off into the woods. Bel loosed the pony but before he could get control of its reins it pulled away and ran. He scampered back toward the front trying to convince himself that he actually saw what he thought he just saw. He had never seen a ghoul in person but the descriptions in the ancient histories at Lasaat were accurate enough. Ghouls! I can't believe it! As he feverishly pushed to the front more ghoul-kind reached out toward him. He plowed through a pile of ice-cold hands and arms reaching out toward him, trying to slow him down and pull him away. He repelled them and ran in the dark around the edge of the hovel, trace echoes of what he just saw burnt into his vision. He rounded the front corner, flung open the door, leapt inside, slammed the door hard behind him and pressed his back against it. Wide eyed, he returned three questioning gazes.

"There's—there's—there's ghouls! Out there! In the

forest! Ghouls. I saw them. In the forest."

Chapter Two
Ghoul-Kind

Nes'egrinon looked up at Muolithnon, puzzled. "Ghouls? Here? Is that possible?"

"Aye," Muolithnon replied somberly.

"Why didn't you tell me that ghoul-kind were about?"

"I didn't think you would believe me. I can barely believe it myself."

"Ghouls. Here." Nes'egrinon shook his head. "It is hard to believe."

Muolithnon calmly explained, "The stonecutters first reported seeing one a few months ago. We investigated, thinking it nothing more than a child's story or the rantings of those that sit too long at the inn, trying to frighten the barmaids."

"And?"

Muolithnon added, "And we found nothing. No sign of ghouls, but for one thing. Stonecutters were disappearing from the quarries. Their master's complained. Wanted us to track them, bring back their workers. We didn't think they were related. Then we found the blood."

"How much?"

"Not much. But it wasn't hard to find. The death trails were open."

"I see," Nes'egrinon said pensively.

"But Nes'egrinon, honestly, I did not expect them here. I wonder if they followed us."

"Huh."

Muolithnon stood and pulled his vest tight then addressed his apprentice, "Kerlith. Come. Let us see how your training holds up."

Kerlith grinned at Bel and rolled the stone medallion hanging from his neck with his thumb and index finger as small red flames danced around it. Bel stepped out of their path and placed questioning eyes on Nes'egrinon.

The aged mage struggled from his chair, retrieved his tall staff and hobbled to the door. "Ghouls, huh? And in my forest no less. Let's have a look see, I suppose." Stepping through the single entry to his one room shack, he turned to Bel and said, "Now you stay put. I haven't even had a chance to talk to you yet. Don't want you getting killed before I've had a chance to tell you how this is all going to go."

Bel closed the door behind them and thought about latching it but then reconsidered. He went to the lone window and peered out into the blackness as Kerlith stepped out from behind the spell of protection and walked out into the clearing.

Kerlith stood in the middle of the front yard of the hovel, Muolithnon and Nes'egrinon a few paces behind him but they could barely see each other. It was too dark.

Rustling and movement was all around Kerlith. He removed the stone from his neck and gripping it firmly in his hand, held it far above his head and cried out, "Elampo!" The ground rumbled softly as small objects pushed up out of the earth. The ground was covered with them, small jagged crystals beaming a variety of different colored lights: blues, pinks and purples. The glowing ground exposed the ghouls, more than ten of them, maybe more than twenty, and momentarily disoriented them. Then they advanced on Kerlith from all angles.

The old wizard said, "Well now look at that. Ghouls. And right here, off my front doorstep."

Muolithnon held the side of his head and Kerlith heard, "Remember your training. Don't panic."

Kerlith allowed several of the ghouls to approach. They smiled as they placed their hands on him. One of them shallowly whispered, "Blood. We need blood."

Some ghouls pushed and pulled, yanking each other out of the way, trying to be the first to taste blood. Kerlith

extended his arms, his eyes clenched down tight, him mumbling words, pushing out from deep in his belly, reaching deep down within himself and pushing outward. A few ghouls touched Kerlith then immediately withdrew their burnt and blackened hands and retreated a few paces.

One cried out as his hand withered, "Why? Why do you hurt us?" He tucked the mottled appendage into the folds of his clothing.

Kerlith proclaimed, "Leave this place. Return to your home."

Many of the ghouls murmured to each other, contemplating whether they should heed the words of the single young man when they numbered so many. A group of them began walking toward the apprentice en masse. Kerlith looked back at Muolithnon who nodded then turned to Nes'egrinon and said, "Obstinate, aren't they? Shall we teach them a lesson?"

"Maybe," the wizard grunted. "You first. I'll stay here and watch for now."

The young-looking mage stepped off the front porch and as his foot struck the grass, stepping out from behind the spell of protection on the hovel, the heads of many ghouls suddenly snapped toward him. Other ghouls erupted from the surrounding woods. Then a larger one, shirtless and scarred, ripped through the pack of them and screamed, "Mage!" The cheering ghouls stampeded towards Kerlith and his master while Bel nervously stroked

his short staff on the other side of the window.

Muolithnon joined his apprentice as the ghouls enveloped them. The shirtless one howled, "MAGE BLOOD!" and launched himself in the air at Muolithnon, swinging a thick tree branch, striking the wizard on the head. The wizard collapsed to the ground in a heap. The other ghouls fell upon them, mouths open, teeth glistening, ready to bite, ready for blood.

Bel knew his new master told him to stay inside but surely he would forgive him for coming to their aid. He was a graduate of the finest wizardry school in all the lands after all. He wasn't a First Year. He knew how to do some things. He could help them. Bel grabbed his staff in his hand firmly, placed his hand on the doorknob, turned it and stepped outside into the darkness.

Ghouls were trying to pull Muolithnon's fallen body away so Nes'egrinon slammed the tip of his staff into the ground, sending out a tremor, an earthquake, toppling many of the ghouls, then stepped off the front stoop and joined them. Bel shook and fell but quickly scrambled to his feet and ran to Muolithnon's collapsed frame.

Kerlith held his stone in front of him while the elder mage lifted his long staff high, both shining forth blinding light and power. The ghouls circled them crying out with increasing ferocity, "Mage blood! Give us some mage blood! Just a drop. Just a little. It is all we ask!" but they cowered from the bright mage-light.

Kerlith pushed a flash of light into his stone to get their attention then announced, "You will have no blood this evening! Mage or otherwise! Now return to your home and rest. Anapauomai. Pao. Anapauomai."

Somehow, when the young apprentice said "rest" in the mage-language the ghouls calmed. Some reluctantly turned their backs and began walking back toward the forest. Others slouched and looked down at the ground as if they were reminded of who they were and where they belonged.

Nes'egrinon suddenly noticed Bel in the fray and looked on in horror as Bel held out his staff at a pack of ghouls and hissed, "Salatario!"

The group began to hop and dance ecstatically, crying out, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The old mage moved quickly to Bel's side and caught him as he fell back unconscious. He laid Bel's body next to Muolithnon's then held his staff high and pushed hard. A bright light erupted from his staff and pierced the darkness. The ghouls sheltered their eyes as the gray mage exclaimed, "Pao! Be gone! Be gone before I become angry!"

The ghouls paused, looking up at the old wizard, feeling the shine of his power, then slowly, one by one, wandered back into the woods. After the last of the ghouls left, the old mage lowered his staff, allowed its light to extinguish and said, "Kerlith, come. Carry your master

inside."

Kerlith bent down, threw his master's arm over his neck and dragged him into the hovel. The old mage reached down and wrapped Bel's pant legs in his hands and dragged him by his feet, Bel's head bouncing and bobbing on stones, steps, the porch edge and threshold. Then Nes'egrinon closed the door.

The gray bearded mage laid his staff on Bel's crumpled body and said, "Baru." The staff sunk into Bel's clothing and pinned him to the floor. The old wizard placed his foot upon Bel's cheek and pushed, rolling his head over. He crinkled his face and called for the poison to flow out from his body in the old language. Bel coughed lightly as a black liquid slowly leaked from his mouth. Nes'egrinon walked away mumbling, "Fool boy. Why did I take on another? Why?"

Kerlith said, "Good master? Where shall I place my teacher?"

Nes'egrinon pointed back at his bed without turning around. "There. In my bed. Lay him on my bed." The old man poured himself a cup of water from a pitcher and added a pinch of dust from a jar. He addressed Kerlith as he drank, "Is this what they teach you now in that school?" pointing at Bel's body.

"No. I don't know. I don't know why he didn't stay inside." Kerlith wiped the blood from his master's forehead then added, "I don't know why he didn't listen. I would

have."

Nes'egrinon walked across the small one room structure and examined the gash on Muolithnon's head then placed his hand upon it. After a few moments he removed his hand and the wound was noticeably smaller. He said, "It will heal. It will heal." He cleared his throat and rested his weight on the bed frame, then continued, "I must rest. Leave your master there to sleep in my bed. In the morning we will discuss this further."

"And Bel? Do we leave him there?"

The old wizard slumped into his chair in front of the fire, slowly closed his eyes and exhaled. "It's as good a place as any."

Chapter Three
Ulysses or Odysseus

Bel's eyes peeled open and his vision slowly cleared. Looking around at the hovel he didn't immediately know where he was. And then it came to him. He was in Nes'egrinon home. Bel tried to stand up but couldn't move.

Seeing Kerlith sitting at the table, playing with pebbles, dancing them in the air, he called out, "Hey. A little help here?"

Kerlith looked over at him and said, "You have to wait for your master. He pinned you down."

"I can see that. I can't move."

Kerlith smiled. "You really screwed up last night. Typical. What'd you do?"

"Poison."

"Hahaha. They're dead. What'd you think that would do?"

"I don't know. I saw your master lying on the floor unconscious. There were too many of them. I just thought I should do something. I wanted to help."

Nes'egrinon bellowed from across the room, "You *wanted?* You *wanted?* Here you do not do what you *want!*"

Kerlith looked down. "Bel, I think your master is awake."

Bel tried to twist his head toward the direction of the old wizard's voice, but from his position he couldn't see him. "Master, I'm sorry. I have only been here a short while and I've already gotten you upset with me. It will not happen again."

Nes'egrinon rose from his chair, walked across the room and stood over Bel, his eyes barreling down into him. "You have yet to see me angry. Just don't do something stupid like that again." He reached down and placed his hand on his staff and said, "Eukalos," then removed the wooden stick from Bel's body.

Bel stood up dizzily, placing his hand on the door frame for support. "Master? What happened to me?"

"You did something stupid. You had no clue what you were dealing with and you threw yourself into the middle of it, waving your stick around like you were an idiot trying to save the world. All you Fifth Years are alike. Running around waving your sticks like you know

something when you don't have a clue. A good way to get yourself killed. And worse yet, a good way to get me killed. Now that's something that I don't want to think about. Some idiot kid running into a fight and getting me killed. I certainly don't need that right now." The mage walked back to his chair and sat. "Of course, most people are stupid so you got that going for you. At least around here anyway. Maybe it's me. Do I attract stupid people or something?" The mage looked at the fire and continued rambling, "Anyway, Fifth Year, don't let it get you down. You didn't kill yourself and you didn't get me killed. You just did something stupid. We'll leave it at that for now."

Bel coughed up mucus, swirled his finger in his mouth and looked at the black goo mixed in with his saliva.

Nes'egrinon exhaled in frustration then said, "Apprentice? Err, what's your name? Kerlith, right? Tell the Fifth Year what you know about ghoul-kind. I'm tired of talking."

Kerlith looked at Bel and for once in his life felt sorry for him. They had competed in everything at Lasaat and he loved to see Bel fail but for once Kerlith decided to defend him. "Bel, I know they didn't teach us much about the dead at Lasaat. I learned everything I know about them quite recently. Even my master has little experience with them. We are defenders of the mountains, the land of the stonecutters. Our magic is of crystals and minerals, not

ghouls and the dead." Kerlith paused and glanced at Nes'egrinon to see if he was listening but his gaze never stirred from the hearth.

He continued, "Bel, do you remember anything about the dead, any of the stories from the University?"

Bel coughed then sat down on the floor. "I remember one."

"The one about Ulysses?"

"Odysseus. I rather call him Odysseus. It was in our History of Magic class, I think."

"That's the one I was thinking of," Kerlith replied.

"I remember it going kind of like this. So, Odysseus, a great wizard, visits the underworld—I don't remember how he got there—and he sees the dead. I seem to remember them being described as ghosts? Or shadows of their former selves?" Bel said.

"That's what I thought too."

"Then Odysseus gives them blood to drink. As they drink the blood they become more substantial. More... human. They can speak to Odysseus like any human would. Since a bunch of them died in different parts of the world, including Odysseus' home town, they were able to give him information on what was going on there before they died. Some of them died recently so the information ends up being valuable." Kerlith turned in his chair. "That's about all I remember. Except one other thing."

Bel looked up at him and questioned, "What's that?"

"There was one of the dead that Odysseus spoke to who was a seer."

"Oh yeah."

"And the seer could still see in the underworld. He still had his gift of sight. Even though he was one of the dead, he could still see into the future. He just needed some blood to do it."

"Right. I remember that now. They were people, all kinds of different people, with all their human knowledge and their abilities. They were just dead."

"But they never taught us how to fight them at the University." Kerlith looked at the old mage again but he was still staring at the fire.

"How did you learn?" Bel asked.

"Much like you. We tried some things that didn't work, but luckily it was only on singles. We never tried anything on a group like last night."

"And what worked?"

Kerlith snickered. "Well, poison certainly doesn't. That only makes them stronger."

"I know that now. What else? How were you burning them?"

"Healing," Kerlith stated plainly.

"Healing?"

"The same way you can help someone heal, digging deep within yourself, grabbing hold of your spirit, your

life-force, and giving it up, pushing it into them. The same way. You give the ghouls all the goodness, all the life you have inside of you. For some reason that hurts them, burns them. They don't like it. It is one thing that will make them go away, that's for sure." Kerlith explained.

"I see. Anything else?"

"Nothing so far. Nothing else we have tried works. In fact most things we tried somehow bounced back at us. Poison, for example. If you try to well up poison into them, it will only make you sick. But you already know that."

Bel rubbed his temple. "My head is still ringing."

Muolithnon stirred so Kerlith leapt from his chair and went to his side. "I'm here, master."

"Is it still night?" the mage asked groggily.

Kerlith looked out the window and replied. "It's morning, but it grows darker. The eternal night spreads its fingers here now."

"Aye. We must return. See if you can find the horses while I ready myself. Take your stone and be watchful. The ghouls shouldn't return during the day but just the same, don't venture too deep into the forest."

Kerlith retrieved his stone from the table, placed it around his neck and exited the room.

Bel shakily stood, walked across the room and placed himself in front of Nes'egrinon. "Master, I'm truly sorry. Please accept my apology."

"Fifth Year, don't apologize. It makes you look weak and wormy. Maybe like you are, but just the same, don't do it around me. It gives me nausea just thinking about it."

"Yes, master."

"I'm going to tell you two things here. First, I am a mage—"

Bel interrupted him, "I know that. You are one of the great—"

The old man sliced his words in the air with a glare. "I don't care what you think you *know* and who told you what. *I'm* talking here and I'm telling you that I am a mage. Now, along with that comes a certain expectation. People in this uneducated world expect me to know everything about everything. A frog farts in the woods and people around here expect me to know why. But guess what? I don't know why. Maybe the little frog had gas. I don't know. It could have been for any number of reasons. Frogs fart. Get it?"

"Yes, master."

"Don't give me that 'yes, master' line. I'm talking here. What it comes down to is I don't know everything and don't think that you ever will either. Now I was getting to a point but I lost it somewhere. Oh, yeah. Learn this. There is sometimes much more power in inaction than in action."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. We saw that last night. Tell me, what did I do last night to scare them off?"

"You held your staff high and filled it with light. You showed them that you could have destroyed them."

"Did I? Could I have destroyed them?"

"Of course. You are one the greatest mages yet living. They told us at Lasaat—"

"Stop right there because I am starting to think that you really are an idiot. They told you at Lasaat, did they? So that's the garbage Rylith is spreading now. You need to flush all that stuff out of your brain right now."

Bel did not know how to respond so he stood in silence. Rylith, the headmaster at Lasaat—no one there would dare address Rylithnon so, leaving off the last syllable of honor.

The old mage continued, "Listen to me and learn. What I did was a parlor trick. Understand? Psychology. I tricked them. A bright light can no more hurt them than you or I. My bellowing made them think I could so they left. Thank El, they left."

"But..."

"But what?"

"But in the story—it's coming back to me now—in the story of Odysseus, the dead charged at him and his men. The ghouls were desperate for blood but he held them off with his sword."

Muolithnon stumbled from the bed and into the

conversation. "Aye. He did. That sounds about right. A sword of power. A sword full of magic. But it is as your master has said. He speaks truth and you should heed his words. Odysseus could no more hurt the dead with a sword than any of us could last night with mage-light or mage-fire or mage-rain. He tricked them into thinking he could though. Tricking people into thinking that we have more power than we do is one of our best tools. This is why we must not tell anyone how our magic works or what we have the ability to do. They must always think that we have more than we do, that we are merely holding back. There is much power in secrets, young Bel. To destroy the dead? It is not possible. They are dead already."

"Then we are undone," Bel said in defeat.

Nes'egrinon looked at Bel then at Muolithnon and whispered, "No, not yet. There is yet still a way."

Kerlith entered. "Master, I called to your horse using my stone and he came. He looks a little ragged. I think he may have been running to and fro most of the night. If we are to leave today, I don't think we can ride him."

"And your pony?"

Bel interrupted, "He is gone."

"Where?" asked Kerlith.

"The ghoul-kind. Last night. They tore his flesh. I saw it. I don't think he survived."

Kerlith shook then quickly turned his back to them. Muolithnon said, "So the young pony joins the world of

the dead. Do not be upset, Kerlith. Perhaps you will see him sooner than you think. But for now we walk. Nes'egrinon, thank you for your hospitality. If the ghouls followed us then I am sorry that I have brought that problem to you. My apprentice and I will go to see what we find. We will send you word, to you and the others, when we find the source of this abomination."

The gray bearded mage looked down at his aged feet, his old hands showing brown spots and his dirty cloak that had already seen too many battles. He peered over at Bel's soft face and frowned. Nes'egrinon looked around his home at his meager possessions and stood slowly. His bones cracked. He turned his head and gazed at Kerlith, standing away from them, still shuddering at the thought of what the ghouls had done to his pony. The old mage stretched out slowly, grabbed his hat from the table, knocked the dust off of it and said with a cracking voice, "Fifth Year, ready yourself. We are walking to the Hinterlands."

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