

# SPELLWRIGHT

by Blake Charlton

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*If one believes that words are acts, as I do, then one must hold writers responsible for what their words do.*

—ursula k. le guin

## Prolog

The grammarian was choking to death on her own words.

And they were long sharp words, written in a magical language and crushed into a small, spiny ball. Her legs faltered. She fell onto her knees.

Cold autumn wind surged across the tower bridge.

The creature standing beside her covered his face with a voluminous white hood. "Censored already?" he rasped. "Disappointing."

The grammarian fought for breath. Her head felt as light as silk; her vision burned with gaudy color. The familiar world became foreign.

She was kneeling on a stone bridge, seven hundred feet above Starhaven's walls. Behind her, the academy's towers stretched into the cold evening sky like a copse of giant trees. At various heights, ribbon-thin bridges spanned the airy gaps between neighboring spires. Before her loomed the dark Pinnacle Mountains.

Dimly, she realized that her confused flight had brought her to the Spindle Bridge.

Her heart began to kick. From here the Spindle Bridge arched a lofty half-mile away from Starhaven to terminate in a mountain's sheer rock face. It led not to a path or a cave, but to blank stone. It was a bridge to nowhere, offering no chance of rescue or escape.

She tried to scream, but gagged on the words caught in her throat.

To the west, above the coastal plain, the setting sun was staining the sky a molten shade of incarnadine.

The creature robed in white sniffed with disgust. "Pitiful what passes for imaginative prose in this age." He lifted a pale arm. Two golden sentences glowed within his wrist.

"You are Magistra Nora Finn, Dean of the Drum Tower," he said. "Do not deny it again, and do not refuse my offer again." He flicked the glowing sentences into Nora's chest. She could do nothing but choke.

"What's this?" he asked with cold amusement. "Seems my attack stopped that curse in your mouth." He paused before laughing, low and breathy. "I could make you eat your words."

Pain ripped down her throat. She tried to gasp.

The creature cocked his head to one side. "But perhaps you've changed your mind?"

With five small cracks, the sentences in her throat deconstructed and spilled into her mouth. She fell onto her hands and spat out the silver words. They shattered on the cobblestones. Cold air flooded into her greedy lungs.

“And do not renew your fight,” the creature warned. “I can censor your every spell with this text.” She looked up and saw that the figure was now holding the golden sentence that ran into her chest. “Which of your students is the one I seek?”

She shook her head.

The creature laughed. “You took our master’s coin, played the spy for him.”

Again, she shook her head.

“Do you need more than gold?” He stepped closer. “I now possess the emerald and so Language Prime. I could tell you the Creator’s first words. You’d find them . . . amusing.”

“No payment could buy me for you,” Nora said between breaths. “It was different with master; he was a man.”

The creature cackled. “Is that what you think? That he was human?”

The monster’s arm whipped back, snapping the golden sentence taut. The force of the action yanked Nora forward onto her face. Again pain flared down her throat. “No, you stupid sow,” he snarled. “Your former master was not human!”

Something pulled up on Nora’s hair, forcing her to look at her tormentor. A breeze was making his hood ruffle and snap. “Which cacographer do I seek?” he asked.

She clenched her fists. “What do you want with him?”

There was a pause. Only the wind dared make noise. Then the creature spoke. “Him?”

Involuntarily, Nora sucked in a breath. “No,” she said, fighting to make her voice calm. “No, I said ‘with them.’ ”

The cloaked figure remained silent.

“I said,” Nora insisted, “ ‘What do you want with them?’ Not him. With them.”

Another pause. “A grammarian does not fault on her pronouns. Let us speak of ‘him.’ ”

“You misheard; I—” The creature disengaged the spell that was holding her head up. She collapsed. “It was different in the dreams,” she murmured into the cobblestones.

The creature growled. "Different because I sent you those dreams. Your students will receive the same: visions of a sunset seen from a tower bridge, dreams of a mountain vista. Eventually they will become curious and investigate."

Nora let out a tremulous breath. The prophecy had come to pass. How could she have been so blind? What grotesque forces had she been serving?

"Perhaps you think Starhaven's metaspells will protect your students," the creature said. "They won't. They might keep me from spellwriting within your walls, but I can lure the whelps into the woods or onto these bridges. It won't be hard to do now that the convocation has begun. If I must, I'll snuff out your students one by one. You could prevent all these deaths by speaking one name."

She did not move.

"Tell me his name," the white figure hissed, "and I will let you die quickly."

Nora glanced at the railing. An idea bled across her mind like an ink stain. It might work if she moved quickly enough.

"No answer?" The creature stepped away. "Then yours will be a slow death."

Nora felt a tug on the magical sentence running through her chest.

"I've just infected you with a canker spell. It forces a portion of a spellwright's body to forge misspelled runes. As we speak, the first canker is forming in your lungs. Soon it will spread into your muscles, compelling you to forge dangerous amounts of text. An hour will see your body convulsing, your arteries bleeding, your stomach ruptured."

Nora pressed her palms against the cold cobblestones.

"But the strongest of your cacographers will survive such an infection," the creature sneered. "That's how I'll find him. He'll survive the cankers; the others will die screaming. I'll spare you this torture if you tell me—"

But Nora did not wait to hear the rest. Soundlessly she pushed herself up and leaped over the railing. For a moment, she feared a swarm of silvery paragraphs would wrap about her ankles and hoist her back up to the bridge.

But the force of her fall snapped the golden sentence running through her chest . . . and she was free.

She closed her eyes and discovered that her fear of death had become strange and distant, more like a memory than an emotion.

The prophecy had come to pass. The knowledge would perish with her, but that was the price she had to pay: her death would keep a small, flickering hope alive.

Still falling, she opened her eyes. In the east, the crimson sky shone above the mountain's dark silhouette. The setting sun had shot the peaks full of red- gold light and, by contrast, stained the alpine forests below a deep, hungry black.

## **Chapter One**

Nicodemus waited for the library to empty before he suggested committing a crime punishable by expulsion.

“If I edit you, we can both be asleep in an hour,” he said to his text in what he hoped was a casual tone.

At twenty-five, Nicodemus Weal was young for a spellwright, old for an apprentice. He stood an inch over six feet and never slouched. His long hair shone jet black, his complexion dark olive—two colors that made his green eyes seem greener.

The text to whom he was speaking was a common library gargoyle. She was a construct, an animated being composed of magical language. And as Starhaven constructs went, she was a very plain spell.

More advanced gargoyles were animalistic mishmashes: the head of a snake on the body of a pig, limbs profuse with talons and tentacles or fangs and feathers. That sort of thing.

But the gargoyle squatting on the table before Nicodemus took the shape of only one animal: an adult snow monkey. Her slender stone torso and limbs were covered with stylized carvings representing fur. Her bare face presented heavy cheeks and weary eyes.

Her author had given her only one augmentation: a short tail from which protruded three hooked paragraphs of silvery prose. As Nicodemus watched the spell, she picked up three books and, using their clasps, hung them on her tail paragraphs.

“You edit me? Not likely,” she retorted and then slowly climbed onto a bookshelf. “Besides, I was written so that I can’t fall asleep until daylight.”

“But you have better things to do than reshelve books all night,” Nicodemus countered, smoothing out his black apprentice’s robes.

“I might,” the spell admitted, now climbing laterally along the shelf.

Nicodemus cradled a large codex in his left arm. “And you’ve let apprentices edit you before.”

“Rarely,” she grunted, climbing up two shelves. “And certainly never a cacographer.” She pulled a book from her tail and slipped it onto the shelf.

“You are a cacographer, aren’t you? You misspell magical texts simply by touching them?” She looked back at him with narrowed stone eyes.

Nicodemus had anticipated such a question; still, it felt like a kick in the stomach. “I am,” he said flatly.

The gargoyle climbed another shelf. “Then it’s against library rules: constructs aren’t to let cacographers touch them. Besides, the wizards might expel you for editing me.”



Nicodemus took a slow breath.

To either side of them stretched rows of bookshelves and scrollracks. They were on the tenth and top floor of the library known as the Stacks—a square building that housed many of Starhaven’s manuscripts.

Presently the building was empty save for Nicodemus and the gargoyle. Some light came from moonbeams falling on the paper window screens, more from the incandescent flamefly paragraphs flitting about above Nicodemus.

He stepped closer to the gargoyle. “We’ve been reshelving so long that you’ve slowed down. So it’s only your energetic prose that needs rewriting. I don’t have to touch you to do that. All the other apprentices edited their constructs; that’s why they and their gargoyles finished hours ago.”

“All the other apprentices weren’t cacographers,” the spell replied, reshelving another book. “Don’t cacographers always have to stay this late for Stacks duty?”

Trying not to scowl, Nicodemus laid his books back down on the table. “No, usually we don’t need to rejuvenate our gargoyles. It’s this damn convocation; the wizards are pulling every manuscript they can think of to impress their guests.”

The gargoyle grimaced at their pile of unshelved books. “So that’s why we’ve four times as much work to night.”

Nicodemus gave the construct his most haggard look. “It’s worse than you know. I’ve still got an anatomy text to review and two spelling drills to complete before morning class.”

The gargoyle laughed. “You want empathy from a primary construct? Ha! You might be a cacographer, but you can still think freely.”

Nicodemus closed his eyes and realized that they stung from lack of sleep. Half an hour had already passed since midnight, and he had to wake with the dawn bell.

He looked at the gargoyle. “If you let me rejuvenate your energetic prose to night, I’ll find you a modification scroll tomorrow. Then you can change yourself however you like— wings, claws, whatever.”

The textual construct began to climb back toward the table. “Wonderful, wings from a cacographer. What good would a scroll written by a retarded—”

“No, you pile of clichéd prose!” Nicodemus snapped. “I didn’t say ‘write.’ I said ‘find,’ which means ‘steal.’ ”

“Ho ho, the boy has some spirit after all.” The gargoyle chuckled. She stopped climbing to look back at him. “Steal a scroll from whom?”

Nicodemus pulled a lock of black hair away from his face. Bribing constructs was an illegal but common practice in Starhaven. He disliked it, but he disliked the idea of another sleepless night even more. "I am Magister Shannon's apprentice," he said.

"Magister Agwu Shannon, the famous linguist?" the gargoyle asked excitedly. "The expert on textual intelligence?"

"The same."

A slow stone smile spread across the gargoyle's face. "Then you're the boy who failed to live up to prophecy? The one they thought was the Halcyon until he turned out to be retarded?"

"Do we have a deal or not?" Nicodemus retorted hotly, his hands clenched.

Still smiling, the gargoyle climbed onto the table. "Are the rumors about Shannon true?"

"I wouldn't know; I don't listen to hearsay," Nicodemus growled. "And if you speak one word against Magister, heaven help me but I'll knock you into sentence fragments."

The gargoyle snickered. "Such a loyal apprentice, considering you're offering to steal one of Shannon's scrolls."

Nicodemus clenched his jaw and reminded himself that, at some point, virtually all apprentices bribed constructs with their mentor's work. "Gargoyle, what do you want?"

She answered instantly: "Two stone more weight, so the medium-weight gargoyles can't push me off my sleeping perch. And quaternary cognition."

Nicodemus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Don't be ignorant; most humans can't reach quaternary cognition."

The gargoyle frowned and attached a book to her tail. "Tertiary, then."

Nicodemus shook his head. "With your executive text, we can't do better than secondary cognition."

She crossed her arms. "Tertiary."

"You might as well bargain for the white moon. You're asking for something I can't give."

"And you're asking me to be edited by a cacographer. Aren't cacographers incapable of concentrating long enough to finish a spell?"

"No," he said curtly. "Some of us have that problem, but I don't. The only thing that defines a cacographer is a tendency to misspell a complex text when touching it. And I wouldn't have to touch you."

The stone monkey folded her arms. "But you're asking me to deliberately violate library rules."

This time Nicodemus did roll his eyes. “You can’t violate library rules, gargoyle; you’ve only got primary cognition. Your rules only forbid my touching you. All I need do to night is add more energetic language to your body. I can do that without touching you. I’ve done this before and the gargoyle didn’t lose a single rune.”

The spell leaned forward and searched his face with blank stone eyes. “Two stone more weight and secondary cognition.”

“Deal,” Nicodemus grunted. “Now turn around.”

The gargoyle’s tail was still attached to a large spellbook. But rather than unfasten it, she stepped on top of the codex and turned to present her back.

Nicodemus’s black apprentice robes had slits sewn into the top of the sleeves, near the shoulder. He slipped his arms out of these and looked down at his right elbow.

Magical runes were made not with pen and paper, but within muscle. Nicodemus, like all spellwrights, had been born with the ability to transform his physical strength into runes made of pure magical energy.

By tensing his bicep, he forged several runes within his arm. He could see the silvery language shine through skin and sinew. Tensing his bicep again, he joined the letters into a sentence, which he let spill into his forearm.

With a wrist flick, he cast the simple spell into the air, where it twisted like a tendril of glittering smoke. He extended his arm and cast the sentence onto the nape of the monkey’s neck.

The spell contained a disassemble command; therefore, where it touched the construct, she began to shine with a silver glow. Nicodemus wrote a second sentence with his left arm and cast it next to his first. A seam of light ran down to the gargoyle’s tail, and the two sides of her back swung open as if on hinges.

A coiling profusion of incandescent prose shone before him.

Different magical languages had different properties, and this gargoyle was made of two: Magnus, a robust silvery language that affected the physical world, and Numinous, an elegant golden language that altered light and other magical text. The gargoyle thought with her Numinous passages, moved with her Magnus.

Nicodemus’s task was to add more energetic Magnus sentences. Fortunately, the structure of these energetic sentences was so simple that even a cacographer could compose them without error.

Careful not to touch the gargoyle, Nicodemus began to forge runes in his biceps and cast them into the gargoyle. Soon the Magnus sentences appeared as a thick rope of silvery light that coursed from his arms into the construct.

Though Nicodemus was a horrible speller, he could write faster than many grand wizards. Therefore he decided to provide the gargoyle with extra energetic text now; she might not submit to another edit later.

After moving his hands closer, Nicodemus tensed every muscle in his arms, from the tiny lumbricals between his hand bones to the rounded deltoid atop his shoulder. Within moments, he produced a dazzling flood of spells that flowed into the gargoyle's back.

The blaze grew so bright that he began to worry about bringing unwanted attention to the library. He was standing yards away from the nearest window, but a wizard working late might walk past the Stacks and see the glow. If caught, he would be expelled, perhaps even censored permanently.

Just then a loud thud sounded to Nicodemus's left. Terrified, he stopped writing and turned, expecting to find an enraged librarian bearing down on him.

But he saw only darkened bookshelves and scrollracks. Beyond those was a row of narrow, moonlit windows.

A second thud made Nicodemus jump. It sounded as if it were coming from the library's roof.

He looked up but saw only ceiling. Then the darkness was filled by a repetitive clomping, as if someone were running. The footsteps passed directly over him and then sped away to the opposite side of the library.

Nicodemus turned to follow the sound with his eyes. When the footsteps reached the roof's edge, they ceased. A moon-shadow flickered across two of the paper screens.

Then came a low muttering beside him: "Ba, ball, balloon, ballistic." Something snickered. "Symbolic ballistics. Ha! Symbolic, diabolic. Diabolic, symbolic. Sym . . . bolic is the opposite of dia . . . bolic. Ha ha."

Nicodemus looked down and, to his horror, saw his hand enmeshed in the silver and gold coils of the gargoyle's text. His cacographic touch was causing the once stable sentences to misspell. He must have accidentally laid his hand on the construct when startled by the footsteps.

"Oh, hell!" he whispered, pulling his hand back.

When his fingers left the gargoyle, the two sides of her back snapped shut. Instantly, she was on her feet and staring at him with one eye that blazed golden and another that throbbed with silver light. "Vertex, vortex, university," she muttered and laughed in a way that showed her sharp primate teeth. "Invert, extravert. Ha ha! Aversion, aveeeeersion."

"Ohhhhh hell," a wide-eyed Nicodemus whispered, too shocked and frightened to move.

A sudden nauseating wave of guilt washed through him. He might have irreversibly damaged the gargoyle's executive text.

Then the construct was off, dashing down the aisle. A spellbook was still hooked to her tail. Now, dragging behind her, the book opened and began to lose paragraphs written in several magical languages. Falling from the tortured pages, the paragraphs squirmed as if alive. Two exploded into small clouds of white runes; others slowly deconstructed into nothing.

“Wait!” Nicodemus yelled, sprinting after the misspelled gargoyle. “Gargoyle, stop!”

The construct either did not hear or did not care. She leaped up at a window and exploded through its paper screen.

Nicodemus reached the sill in time to watch her fall down ten stories into a dark courtyard filled with elm trees, grass, and ivy.

As the gargoyle dropped, stray paragraphs continued to fall from the spellbook attached to her tail. Radiant words of gold, green, silver, and white fluttered downward and in so doing formed a comet’s tail of radiant language.

“Please, heaven, please don’t let Magister Shannon find out about this,” Nicodemus prayed. “Please!”

The gargoyle hit the ground and scampered away, but the still-falling coruscation of paragraphs began to illuminate the stone spires, arches, and arcades of the surrounding buildings. Nicodemus turned to sprint after his mistake.

But as he did so, something caught his eye. What exactly, he couldn’t say. For when he looked back, it had disappeared, leaving only the vague impression that he had seen— standing atop an ornate stone buttress— a hooded figure cloaked entirely in white.

## Chapter Two

The creature, now crouching beside a stone chimney, watched the gargoyle scamper through the courtyard.

The construct's speed implied excessive energetic language; its erratic course, a misspelled executive text. Only a powerful cacographer was likely to produce such a construct.

"Meaning my boy is in that library this very instant," the creature muttered while glaring at the Stacks. He had glimpsed his quarry in the library window, but the rain of paragraphs loosed by the gargoyle had obscured everything but the boy's silhouette.

Suddenly the night resounded with a sharp crack.

The creature turned and saw a silver spell shoot out from behind a stone spire. The spherical text was written in Magnus and so would have a powerful effect on the physical world. Indeed, its blazing sentences seemed designed to blast a human body into a cloud of bone fragments and vaporized blood.

More important, the spell was flying straight for the creature's head.

He dove right, rolling down the slate roof. There was a crash and needles of pain flew down his back. No doubt the Magnus spell had shattered the chimney into stone splinters.

At the roof's edge, the creature came out of its roll and crouched. A flying buttress to another building stood roughly ten feet away. He looked back but there was no sign of the guardian spell that must have cast the Magnus attack.

His body was not in danger; guardian spells were slow on rooftops. But they were lightning quick in courtyards and hallways and so could prevent him from retrieving the boy.

"So the guardians must be removed," he grunted.

With a powerful leap the creature flew into the air, white robes billowing, and landed neatly on the arc of the flying buttress. With care, he ran up the arc to another roof; this one abutted one of the aqueducts that crisscrossed Starhaven. He scaled the aqueduct, and finding it dry, ran eastward.

All three moons were out, gibbous, and gloriously bright. They illuminated Starhaven's many towers and bridges from three different angles, transforming the lower levels into a maze of overlapping shadows.

The wizards, in their arrogance, referred to Starhaven as one of their "academies." In truth, the place was an ancient city, built by the Chthonic people long before any human had laid eyes on this continent. Though the wizards claimed the entirety of Starhaven, they occupied only the westernmost third of the city.

The creature's course led him away from the inhabited buildings. Here stood dark towers, cracked domes, and cobbled streets pocked by weeds.

He waited until the abandoned building echoed with the heavy footfalls of the guardians. Then he raced up a tower's spiral staircase and sprinted north on an upper-level walkway.

Once certain the guardians were far behind, the creature turned westward and focused his every bloody thought on hunting down the cacographic boy.

\* \* \*

Nicodemus pushed the door latch with his elbow, the door itself with his backside. When it swung open, he stepped backward into Magister Shannon's study and fell over sideways.

His arms encircled a tapestry wrapped into a ball and bound by twine. It writhed continuously and in a muffled voice blathered: "Corpulent, encouragement, incorporeal. Ha! Incorporeal encoooooouragment!"

Nicodemus rolled away from the tapestry. "Celeste, goddess of the sky, please make her shut up. I'll light a candle for you every night if you just make her shut up."

Unimpressed, Celeste declined to intervene.

"Empathy, apathy, sympathy, hoo hoo!" said the bundled tapestry.

"Two candles?" Nicodemus offered the unseen sky.

"Euphony, cacophony, hoo hoo! Calligraphy, cacography, ha ha!" said the bundle.

Groaning, Nicodemus got to his feet. The study was dark, but both the blue and white moons shone through the open arched windows.

It was a rectangular room lined with oak bookshelves. A broad writing desk sat at one end, a huddle of chairs in the middle.

Nicodemus went to the nearest bookshelf and pulled out a large codex on gargoyle repair and maintenance. The needed spell was on the tenth page. He laid the open book on the desk, slipped his arms from his sleeves, and wrote a short Numinous spell in his right hand. Bending the golden sentence into a hook, he dipped it into the page and peeled off a tangle of Numinous paragraphs that folded into a rectangular crystalline lattice. Careful not to touch the text, he walked back to the squirming bundle and, with a sharp word, cut the twine cords.

The gargoyle sprang free with a joyful cry.

Nicodemus struck her over the head with the Numinous lattice. The crystalline spell locked around the gargoyle's mind, causing her to freeze in an unlikely pose— one knee and one foot on the floor, both hands reaching skyward. She began to fall forward.

Uttering an oath, Nicodemus extemporized a simple Magnus sentence to catch her. With a few more sentences, he lifted her up and then leaned her against the bookshelf.

As far as he knew, no one had seen him chasing the gargoyle around the courtyard with a tapestry. For that, he said a prayer of thanks to the Creator.

Then he looked at the gargoyle and said in a voice that was soft and sincere, "You stupid, suffering construct. What have I done to you?"

"Fused her Numinous cortices," a rumbling voice replied.

Nicodemus's blood froze. "Magister!" he whispered as a figure moved out of a dark corner.

Grand Wizard Agwu Shannon stepped into a bar of blue moonlight. The glow illuminated white dreadlocks, a short beard and mustache, tawny skin. His nose was large and hooked, his thin lips pressed flat in disapproval.

However, Shannon's eyes commanded the most attention. They presented neither iris nor pupil but were everywhere pure white. These were eyes blind to the mundane world but extraordinarily perceptive of magical text.

Nicodemus sputtered. "Magister, I didn't think you'd be working so late. I was just going—"

The grand wizard stopped him by nodding to the gargoyle. "Who else knows?"

"No one. I was reshelving in the Stacks alone. I was just going to edit her."

Shannon grunted and then looked in Nicodemus's direction. "She shouldn't have let you touch her. What was your bribe?"

Nicodemus felt as if he were breathing through a reed. "Two stone more weight and secondary cognition."

The grand wizard walked to the gargoyle and squatted beside her. "She already has secondary cognition."

"But that's impossible; I never used a modification scroll on her."

"Look at this frontal cortex." The grand wizard pointed.

Nicodemus went to Shannon's side, but lacking his teacher's vision, he saw only the monkey's stone forehead.

"There's some inappropriate fusion, but . . ." Shannon muttered. Using only the muscles in his right hand, the grand wizard produced a tiny storm of golden sentences. Faster than Nicodemus could follow, the spell split the gargoyle's head and began to rearrange her executive subspells.

Nicodemus pursed his lips. "She said she was primary, and the librarians assigned her to reshelving; they only use primary gargoyles for that."



Shannon brought his left hand up to assist his manipulation of the gargoyle's Numinous passages. "How long did you touch her?"

"No more than a few moments," Nicodemus insisted. He was about to say more when Shannon clapped the monkey's head together and pulled the Numinous lattice from her head as if it were a tablecloth.

The gargoyle sank to all fours and looked up at Shannon. Her blank stone eyes searched his face. "I could have a name now," she said in a quick, childlike voice.

Shannon's nod sent his white dreadlocks swaying. "But I wouldn't pick one just yet. Get used to your new thoughts first."

She smiled and then, dreamily, nodded.

Shannon stood and looked toward Nicodemus. "What was it you wrapped her in?"

"A tapestry," Nicodemus said weakly. "From the Stacks."

Shannon sighed and turned back to the gargoyle. "Please re- hang that tapestry and finish reshelving. Use the rest of the night to name yourself."

The energized gargoyle nodded eagerly then scooped up the tapestry and scampered out the door.

"Magister, I—" Nicodemus stopped as Shannon turned to face him.

The old man was dressed in the billowing black robes of a grand wizard. Even in the dim moonlight, the lining of his large hood shone white, indicating that he was a linguist. Silver and gold buttons ran down his sleeves, signifying his fluency in Numinous and Magnus.

Shannon's blind gaze was turned slightly away, but when he spoke, Nicodemus felt as if the old man was staring through his body to his soul.

"My boy, you surprise me. As a younger spellwright, I bribed a few constructs, even got into hot water with overly ambitious texts. But your disability places a special burden on us both. I keenly want you to earn a lesser hood, but if another wizard had seen that misspelled gargoyle . . . well, it would have ended your hopes of escaping apprenticeship and made life harder for the other cacographers."

"Yes, Magister."

Shannon sighed. "I will continue fighting for your hood, but only if there won't be a repetition of such . . . carelessness."

Nicodemus looked at his boots. "There won't be, Magister."

The old man began to walk back to his desk. "And why in the Creator's name did you touch the gargoyle?"

"I didn't mean to. I was editing text into her when there was a crash. Then it sounded like someone was running on the roof. It made me accidentally touch the gargoyle."

Shannon stopped. "When was this?"

"Maybe half an hour ago."

The grand wizard turned to face him. "Tell me everything."

As Nicodemus described the strange sounds, Shannon's lips again pressed into a thin line. "Magister, is something wrong?"

Shannon went to his desk. "Light two of my candles; leave one here, take one yourself. Then run up to Magister Smallwood's study. He always works late. Ask him to join me."

Nicodemus started for the candle drawer.

"Then you're to go straight back to the Drum Tower— no detours, no dillydally." Shannon sat down behind his desk. "I will send Azure to your quarters with a message. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Magister." Nicodemus set up and lit the candles.

Shannon began sorting through the manuscripts on his desk. "You'll spend tomorrow with me. I've received permission to begin casting a primary research spell and will need your assistance. And then there's my new composition class to teach. I'll have you excused from apprentice duty."

"Truly?" Nicodemus smiled in surprise. "Might I teach? I've practiced the introductory lecture."

"Perhaps," Shannon said without looking up from the manuscript he was reading. "Now run up to Magister Smallwood and then straight to the Drum Tower, nowhere else."

"Yes, Magister." Nicodemus eagerly picked up a candle and made his way to the door.

But when he put his hand on the latch, an idea stopped him. "Magister," he asked slowly, "did that gargoyle have secondary cognition all along?"

Shannon paused and then put down his manuscript. "My boy, I don't want to raise false expectations again."

Nicodemus frowned. "Expectations about what?"

"The gargoyle had primary cognition until you misspelled her."

"But how is that possible?"

"It shouldn't be," Shannon said before rubbing his eyes. "Nicodemus, for this convocation we are hosting delegates from the North: Astrophell wizards, some of my former colleagues. Some of them belong to the counter-prophecy faction and so will distrust cacographers even more than other

Northerners do. It would be exceedingly dangerous if they learned that your touch both misspelled a gargoyle and elevated her freedom of thought.”

“Dangerous because they would want me censored?”

Shannon shook his head. “Dangerous because they would want you killed.”

### **Chapter Three**

On the way to Magister Smallwood's study, Nicodemus looked at his candle. It was quivering in time to his hand's fine tremble.

He had never known Shannon to betray even a hint of anxiety. But when the old man had mentioned the Astrophell delegates, his tone had been strained, his words clipped. The danger the Northerners posed must be real indeed.

Worse had been Shannon's statement about not raising "false expectations." Nicodemus shivered; the old man could only have been referring to Nicodemus's lost hope of fulfilling the Erasmine Prophecy.

"Fiery heaven, don't think on it," Nicodemus muttered to himself, as he had done countless times before.

A row of arched windows, all filled with ornate tracery, ran along the hallway. Nicodemus stopped to peer between the flowing stone beams to the starry sky beyond. He slowed his breathing and tried to soothe his frayed nerves.

But his hands still trembled, and it wasn't Northern delegates or unfulfilled prophecies that made them do so.

It was the memory of Shannon's face when the old man had stepped into the moonlight— his white eyebrows knitting together in disapproval, his lips narrowing in disappointment.

The memory made Nicodemus feel as if something were tightening around his heart. "I'll make it up to the old man," he whispered. "I will."

He turned from the window and hurried down the hall to an open door spilling candlelight into the hallway. "Magister Smallwood?" He knocked on the doorjamb. The grand wizard looked up from his desk.

Smallwood was a thin, pale spellwright with a tousled wreath of gray hair. His eyes, though beginning to cloud over, still held black pupils within brown irises.

Nicodemus cleared his throat. "Magister Shannon sends his compliments and asks that you join him in his study."

"Ah, good, good, always happy to see Shannon," Smallwood said with an absent smile. He closed his book. "And who are you?"

"Nicodemus Weal, Magister Shannon's apprentice."

Smallwood leaned forward and squinted. "Ah, Shannon's next cacographic project?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't remember the last boy's name. And I've never seen you before."

In fact, Nicodemus had been bringing Smallwood written messages for nearly two years. However, this was the first time Nicodemus had spoken directly to him. "I'm sorry, Magister, but I don't understand about the cacographic project."

Smallwood stretched his arms and adjusted his hood, which like Shannon's was lined with white. "Oh, you know, Shannon takes his work with the Drum Tower boys so seriously. And he's always got a pet cacographer. It's ridiculous the rumors that go round about him; he's so proud when one of you earns a lesser hood."

"Yes, Magister," Nicodemus said, trying not to frown. He had heard rumors about Shannon's former career in Astrophell but never a rumor about the old man's current position as Master of the Drum Tower.

"So, what exactly does Shannon have you doing to earn that hood?" Smallwood asked.

"He's written a spell that allows him to pull my runes into his body. It helps him spellwrite longer texts. We're hoping that if enough linguists feel I'm helpful, they'll give me a lesser hood lined with white."

"Ah, yes, and I'm to be the first who finds you useful." Smallwood's smile seemed genuine. "I believe you'll be assisting Shannon and me tomorrow. Very exciting, very promising research spell we'll be attempting."

"I'm honored to be part of it, Magister."

"And are you teaching yet?"

Nicodemus tried to sound confident. "Anatomy dissections, but not a spellwriting class yet. I'm very much looking forward to it."

"Yes, well, keep pestering Shannon about that; the academy will keep a hood away from you until you're fifty unless you teach composition." The linguist's gaze wandered to the books on his desk. "Did Shannon want me right away?"

"I believe so, Magister."

Smallwood stood. "Very well, very well. Thank you, Nicolas; it is good to meet you. You may go."

"Nicodemus, Magister."

"Yes, yes, Nicodemus, of course." He paused. "Pardon me, but did you say Nicodemus Weal?"

"Yes, Magister."

Smallwood studied Nicodemus with a focused intensity. "Of course," the grand wizard said at last, suddenly earnest. "Foolish of me to forget you, Nicodemus. Thank you for the message. You may go."

Nicodemus bobbed his head and retreated. He hurried to the hallway's end and then ducked into a narrow spiral staircase. Shannon had instructed him to go straight back to the Drum Tower, so he

jogged down to the ground level and out into a torch-lit hallway. Walking eastward, he passed Lornish tapestries and gilded stone arcades.

But he was blind to their beauty.

His thoughts were troubled by what Smallwood had said about Shannon. All the apprentices knew that Shannon had suffered some kind of fall from grace back in Astrophell, but Smallwood had implied there were more recent rumors involving Shannon and cacographers.

Nicodemus bit his lip. Smallwood was famously absentminded; it was possible that he was mistaking old rumors for new.

But if that was the case, what exactly had Smallwood been misremembering when he mentioned Shannon's "next cacographic project" and his new "pet cacographer"?

Nicodemus turned to mount a narrow staircase.

Shannon had begun teaching cacographers only fifty years ago, when he arrived at Starhaven. So the source of Smallwood's rumor must have occurred since then.

Reaching the oak doors at the top of the stairs, Nicodemus pushed them open and looked out on the gray slate tiles that paved the yard of the Stone Court.

Centuries ago, the Neosolar Empire had renovated the courtyard after taking Starhaven from the Chthonic people. However, none of the succeeding occupying kingdoms had built over this aspect of the stronghold.

Consequently, the Stone Court demonstrated the classical architecture so common to Starhaven's Imperial Quarter: walls decorated by molded white plaster, arched doorways, wide windows. Each entryway was flanked by a pair of stone obelisks.

However, because of the Stone Court's remote location, the wizards had filled it with several objects too unsightly to reside in Starhaven's more populous quarters.

A forest of Dralish standing stones stood in the courtyard's center. On its eastern edge loitered two marble statues of Erasmus and one of Uriel Bolide. And everywhere— curled up, sprawled out, or lying on any available stone ledge— were sleeping janitorial gargoyles.

Nicodemus started for the Drum Tower, which abutted the court's eastern limit. But as he went, he saw something move within the stone forest.

He stopped.

The movement had been too quick to be that of a janitorial gargoyle. And no neophyte should be awake so late. Perhaps it was a feral cat?

It came again: a pale blur between two standing stones. Apprehension gripped Nicodemus. Wizards wore only black. Cloth of any other color signified an outsider . . . or an intruder.

Starhaven's many towers hid the blue and black moons, but the gibbous white moon hung directly overhead and flooded the court with milky light. As Nicodemus snuck among the standing stones, a crocodile-like gargoyle sleeping on the ground rolled over to regard him with a half-opened eye.

Someone was whispering behind the megalith to Nicodemus's left. "Who's there?" he asked in his boldest voice and stepped around the megalith. Before him stood a short figure robed in white cloth. It spun around with inhuman speed.

## **Chapter Four**

Magister Shannon, sitting behind his desk, looked in the direction of Smallwood's voice. "Thank you for coming so late, Timothy."

"Quite all right; I'm always up," Smallwood said with his usual warmth. Shannon could not see the other wizard, but judging by his voice, he was standing by the bookshelves.

"But I'm surprised you're awake," Smallwood added. "I didn't think you were a night owl."

Shannon grunted. "I'm not. Two hours ago, I was in bed. A relay text from one of my research projects woke me with a report of unusual guardian activity around the Drum Tower. Seems they've been chasing something around on the roofs."

"Guardian spells," Smallwood said with a disdainful sniff. "Sloppy prose, if you ask me, written with too much sensitivity. Likely they were chasing a feral cat that wandered in from the uninhabited quarters."

"That was my first thought. I came here to look up a few things about editing the guardians' sensitivity. But then my apprentice appeared; seems he heard someone running across the roof of the Stacks."

When Shannon looked at his bookshelf, his eyes saw through the leather bindings to the radiant paragraphs contained within the books. As he watched, a rectangle of green text separated from the rest and unfolded into two smaller rectangles. Smallwood had pulled a book and was browsing through it. "Timothy, are you listening?"

"What? Yes, yes, of course," Smallwood replied and clapped the green rectangles together. "So you think one of the delegates might be sneaking about the roofs?"

Shannon shrugged. "Could be a foreign spellwright. Could be a wizard."

"But spying on the Drum Tower? I know the cacographers are close to your heart, but shouldn't intrigue focus elsewhere? The Main Library, say, or the provost's quarters?"

"Precisely what worries me."

Smallwood coughed. "Agwu, might you be overreacting? I know you were more . . . involved in Astrophell, but this is Starhaven."

Shannon rubbed his mustache to hide his frown.

Smallwood continued. "Perhaps the Astrophell delegates have put you on edge? Brought back the old instincts?"

"Perhaps but unlikely," Shannon insisted. "I've two guardian spells in the linguistics library. I'd like them cast to patrol around the Stone Court. But first I need you to rewrite their protocols to communicate with the gargoyles sleeping there."

It sounded as if Smallwood were shuffling his feet. "To night?"



Shannon crossed his arms and looked where he thought his colleague's face might be. "It would help me focus on our research spell tomorrow."

"To night it is, then. I am grateful you've included me in this research."

Shannon let out a breath he had not known he was holding.

The rectangle of green prose floated back up to its proper place: Smallwood was reshelving the book. "Is Azure about?"

Shannon shook his head. "She's delivering a message for me." He did not mention that she was also flying about the rooftops searching for anything unusual.

"Pity," Smallwood said, his voice heading for the door. "I wanted to see her Numinous dialect again. Agwu, before I go . . . do I remember correctly that your apprentice was thought to be the Halcyon?"

"You do."

Smallwood continued hesitantly. "Your fear that . . . I mean, perhaps you're jumping to conclusions." He paused. "Let me ask it this way: Do you think Nicodemus is the one of prophecy?"

"Absolutely not."

"Good, good, of course." The door latch clicked. "I'll have the guardian spells cast within an hour. I'll see you tomorrow after midday?"

"Indeed," Shannon said and then waited for the door hinges to creak before adding, "Timothy, truly, thank you."

"Quite welcome, Agwu. Quite welcome." The door clicked shut.

Puffing out his cheeks, Shannon retrieved his research journal from his desk. It was a leather-bound codex about two hands tall. Its spine and face were each embossed with three asterisks, allowing him to identify the book by touch. He opened it and began to write a few notes about the day. He worked for a quarter hour before an unexpected light made him look up.

He could not see his door physically, but he knew exactly where it was. It usually formed a dark rectangle amid the glow of his bookshelves. Where the darkness should have been, there now shone a cloud of golden paragraphs.

Experience told Shannon that he was looking through the door to an incandescent flamefly spell being cast in the hallway.

His first thought was that Smallwood had returned. But Timothy knew the hallways; he rarely cast a single flamefly paragraph, much less a swarm. The author of this spell wanted a good deal of light when navigating Starhaven's hallways.

Most likely a foreigner.

Shannon squinted at the text. It was written with bold words and complex sentences. The author favored compound appositives, an unusual structure.

Shannon grimaced in recognition. It had been a long time since he had seen this spellwright. "Creator save me, what else is going to happen tonight?" he muttered, waiting for the author to knock.

But she did not knock. He closed his research journal. Moments passed. He could see her prose but not her body. Strangely, she let the flamefly paragraphs deconstruct into heatless cinders that snowed down to the floor. What was she waiting for?

Affecting his warmest tone, he called out, "You may come in, Amadi."

Slowly the door hinges squeaked. A woman's calm voice said, "I see that old Magister Shannon isn't as blind as rumor claims." The door clicked shut.

Shannon smiled as he stood. "Old? I'm not so antique as to forget your sharp tongue. Come and embrace your ancient teacher."

Memory guided him around the desk. Amadi's approaching footsteps were light, hesitant. But her embrace was strong and quick. He had forgotten how tall she was. "But the rumors are true," he said while stepping back: "I'm as blind as a cave fish."

She paused. "You don't look old enough to have lost sight."

He chuckled dryly. "Then it's your eyes we should worry about. I'm nearly done with my second century."

"Magister, I'll be sorely disappointed if it's only age that stole your vision," Amadi said in the same teasing tone she had used as a girl. "I've heard stories, legends even, about how you blinded yourself by reading forbidden texts in the Spirish Civil War or by combating twenty mercenary authors while your beard was on fire."

Shannon had been counterfeiting good humor, but now a genuine laugh escaped his lips. "The truth is nothing so scintillating."

"But you don't seem that old."

"You always were a stubborn one." He laughed again and shook his head.

In Astrophell, Shannon had made several powerful enemies who might have planted an agent in the Northern delegation. For this reason, any Astrophell wizard was a potential threat; and yet, despite the danger, he enjoyed talking to his former student and remembering a past life.

"Amadi, I plan to begin ghostwriting in five years," he said in a more playful tone. "So don't bother with flattery about how young I might seem; it only reminds me of your advantage. My familiar is not about to look at you for me. And I'm curious to see you after . . . how long has it been? Fifty years?"

Amadi's leather soles whispered against the floor. "Your fingers may look," she said, suddenly closer.

This was unexpected. "That . . ." His voice died as she took his hands and placed them on her brow.

An uncomfortable pause.

Then his fingertips flowed onto her brief eyebrow ridge; down over her deep-set eyes; up the sharp nasal promontory; softly over the two pursed lips; along the delicate chin.

His memory provided color: ivory for her skin, sable for her hair, watery blue for her eyes. Imagination mixed touch with recollection to produce the image of a pale wizard with fine dreadlocks and an impassive expression.

Shannon swallowed. He hadn't thought seeing an old student would be like this. "Your hair must show a little white by now," he said more quickly than he would have liked.

"More than a little," she said, stepping away. "Will you tell me how you recognized me through your door?"

"With my natural sight gone, my spellwright's vision now pierces the mundane world to see magical text. Through the door, I recognized your compound appositives."

"You still remember my prose style?"

He shrugged. "I also heard your name among the Astrophell delegates; I was expecting to run into you sooner or later. This turns out to be sooner indeed."

"Magister, I want to talk about—"

"Please, call me Agwu," he interrupted. "Or Shannon— it's what my friends use when they have trouble with a Northern first name."

"I don't think I can," she said and then giggled. "Do you remember catching me and the other acolytes out of bed? How can I call you Shannon remembering that?"

He joined his laugh to hers and walked back to his chair. "I had nearly forgotten. What were you little monsters sneaking into the academy? A pair of muddy pigs? Please, take a seat."

"Pigs? In Astrophell?" she asked. Her chair creaked. "It was only one, very clean, goat."

"Whatever it was, you certainly can call me Shannon now that you may carry a grand wizard's staff." He settled into his chair.

"Well then, Shannon, I bring word of your granddaughter."

Shannon's stomach tightened. Her tone was still playful, but her words marked the end of pleasantries, the beginning of politics.

“You do?” he said, forcing his smile to neither broaden nor wilt.

Amadi cleared her throat. “She married a wealthy Ixonian merchant last year.”

“Wonderful,” he heard himself say. “What else can you tell me?”

“Little more, I’m afraid. I’ve the merchant’s name written down somewhere.” She paused. “Forgive me. It must be difficult discussing the life exile took away.”

Shannon waved away her comment. “Bah, it was no exile; I accepted this position. Besides, wizards swear off family for a reason. In the beginning, it was difficult getting only fragmented news of my son. But now I’ve promising research and dedicated students. We are discovering such fascinating things. Just this morning I received permission to begin casting my primary research spell.”

Amadi’s chair creaked. “And you’re content with such a . . . calm life?”

Shannon raised his eyebrows. So she suspected that he still harbored political ambitions? That might be dangerous, especially if she were reporting back to Astrophell.

“Amadi, sometimes it feels as if another author lived that bustling career in the North. Starhaven is a smaller academy, and we’re so very far from civilization. But here . . .” He made a show of running his gaze across his books. “Here I enjoy a slower life.”

When she did not reply, he changed the subject. “I just moved into new quarters above the Bolide Garden. Janitorial is renovating the gardens; it’s not much now, heaps of dirt and clay, but it will be beautiful. I could show you.”

Amadi’s chair creaked again. “Some Astrophell wizards have been quoting your ‘Complaint to the Long Council.’ ”

His grin faded. “It was my best speech.”

“Many still find it inspiring.”

“I am glad to hear it, but that life is over. There’s no use baiting my appetite for it. I stay clear of Starhaven’s intrigue. As a researcher, I can’t be completely apolitical. But because of my past, the provost and his officers are happy to leave me out of most entanglements.”

Amadi said nothing. The parchment on the table began to crinkle, likely from a breeze coming through the window.

“But never mind me,” Shannon said. “How have you spent the past four decades? Studying diplomacy perhaps? Is that where this talk of my past comes from?”

“My hood has a purple lining.”

“A sentinel? Yes, you must be wonderful.”

She cleared her throat importantly. “I command Astrophell’s lead sentinel expeditions. In fact, I led the delegation down here. I even have a personal secretary: a young Ixonian named Kale— only a lesser wizard, but bright and capable.”

“Pardon the observation, but it seems odd that Astrophell should send sentinels to our convocation.”

“The journey from the North was long. And heaven only knows why our order ever occupied this gargantuan stronghold out in the middle of nowhere. Granted, it makes a fine sight from the Westernmost Road— the highest tower spiring up from the mountainside to dwarf the peaks behind.”

Shannon rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. “But Amadi, why should Astrophell send sentinels with its delegation?”

“The diplomats needed protection.”

“I see.”

“Shannon, is this room safe from prying ears?”

He nodded. “Quite safe. Do you bring news from abroad?”

“News from within.”

Shannon leaned forward. “Go on.”

Amadi shifted in her seat and half- whispered: “Murder in Starhaven.”

Shannon’s heart began to strike. “Who?”

“This is a sensitive issue, one that must be hidden until the convocation is over. The delegates must renew the treaties.”

“I’m aware of that. Now will you tell me who has been killed?”

“Bear with me, Magister. Five hours ago a janitorial gargoyle working beneath the Spindle Bridge discovered what he thought to be a dying woman.”

“What he thought was a dying woman?”

“She was already dead, but her body was still filling itself with a virulent Numinous misspell. The gargoyle, having secondary cognition, assumed she was still alive and took her to the deputy provost of libraries. She, in turn, reported to the provost, who related the information to me.”

Shannon paused. “You said this woman fell from the Spindle?”

“So it seems. What can you tell me of the bridge?”

Shannon wondered how much information he should share. Amadi had leaped to the top of the sentinel ranks, and such a feat would be impossible without the support of several factions that despised Shannon. He decided to share only common knowledge until he knew more.

“You seem troubled,” Amadi said. “Is it odd that this woman was on the Spindle?”

“Surpassingly odd,” he said at last. “According to the historians, the Chthonic people built the bridge not long after they finished Starhaven. But it leads nowhere. Spans nearly a mile of air only to run into a cliff. The Chthonics did cut beautiful designs into the rock. Just north of the bridge’s end is a foliate pattern— ivy leaves, I believe— and south is a hexagonal pattern.”

“Any explanation for the carvings? Or the bridge itself?”

Shannon shrugged. “Folktales about the Chthonics building a road to a paradise called Heaven Tree Valley. Supposedly when the Neosolar Empire began to massacre the Chthonics, their goddess led them to the Heaven Tree and dropped a mountain on the road. Some say the Spindle once led to that road.”

“Any evidence to support such a tale?”

“None. But every so often, the historians probe the mountainside with text, trying to open the way to the Heaven Tree. They’ve found only rock.” He paused. “Do you think the murder is connected to any of this?”

The soft swish of moving cloth told Shannon that Amadi was shifting in her seat again. “Not that I can see,” she said and then sighed.

Shannon paused before he spoke again. “Amadi, I am shocked and grieved by this tragedy. And yet . . . please don’t think me heartless, but I don’t want to become involved. I must think of my research and my students. Helping you might drag me into political situations. As I said, I am a different man than I was in the North. But if you refrain from mentioning my name, I’ll give whatever advice I can. But I’d still need to know the victim’s name.”

A long pause. She spoke: “Nora Finn, the grammarian.”

“Sweet heaven!” Shannon whispered in shock. Nora had been the Drum Tower’s dean and his fiercest academic rival.

Instantly his mind spun with the possible implications of the murder. It might be an indirect attack by old enemies. It might also be connected to the restless guardian spells and Nicodemus’s prowler on top of the Stacks. That would make the Drum Tower the focus of the intrigue.

Shannon fingered the asterisks on the spine of his journal. His enemies might hope to exact revenge by harming his students. His thoughts jumped to Nicodemus. The boy’s cacography had proven he was not the Halcyon, but Shannon’s enemies in Astrophell might have heard his name and so marked him as their target.

Or, far less likely but more frightening, the boy might have some unknown connection to the Erasmine Prophecy. If that were so, then the fate of all human language would be in jeopardy.

“Did you know Magistra Finn?” Amadi asked.

Shannon started. “I’m sorry?”

“Did you know Finn?” Amadi repeated patiently.

Shannon nodded. “Nora and I both took care of the Drum Tower’s students. As the Drum Tower’s master, I see to our students’ residential matters. As the dean, Nora governed their academics. But these students don’t often study. I end up counseling the few who do advance to lesser wizards. Nora had little contact with them. Nora and I were both being considered for the same Chair. Rivals for it, I suppose.”

“Go on.”

Shannon paused. He dared not share more information with Amadi until he was certain of her allegiances.

So he did what academics do best: he threw his hands in the air and began to whine. “This couldn’t come at a worse time, what with the convocation. How can the murderer be caught when everything’s in chaos? And my poor research! I can’t stop it now; I just sent a message to my apprentice.”

Amadi exhaled slowly. “As I said, we hope the investigation will not disrupt the convocation.”

“We? Amadi, shouldn’t the provost’s officers be conducting this investigation?”

She cleared her throat. “Provost Montserrat himself instructed me to lead this investigation.”

Shannon fingered the buttons on his sleeves. “Why should the provost appoint an Astrophell wizard to lead a Starhaven investigation?”

“I carry a letter of recommendation from the arch- chancellor.”

“I don’t doubt your qualification,” he said, though he did doubt her intentions.

Amadi continued, “We must conceal this investigation from the delegates. They won’t be inclined to renew the treaties if they think a murderer is—”

“Yes, Amadi, as you said. But why come to me? No doubt the provost’s officers could have told you about the Spindle Bridge.”

A creaking came from Amadi’s chair once more. “Do you have a familiar?”

“I already told you that I do.”

“I would like to see the creature.”

Shannon nodded. "Certainly. She'll soon return from delivering a message to my apprentice. But Amadi, you're investigating a murder; why do you want to see my familiar?"

A long silence stretched out between them. At last the sentinel spoke in a low, controlled tone: "Because you are our primary suspect."