



PROLOGUE

THE SCRIVENIST

THE village, well, it had a lot of secrets. And its secrets need to be kept safe. So, the town's name was like a key—those who knew the name could find the village. Let's call it the Town.

It was early winter, early morning. Snow flurries swirled in the dry, inhospitable air. They made a soft white covering over the Town's crooked angles, thick roofs, and dark buildings cut from porous stone. On the cabby roof deck, a thick mist covered what the snow didn't. The hairies were still glowing in lanterns dangling from lampposts, their little fairy bodies almost hidden under their colorful, illuminated hair. Beneath a particularly bright lantern on a roof deck overlooking the Town, inside of which a curious pair of hairies mashed their noses against cold glass, stood a young man: Derwin Edgar Night. He was small framed, but he held his body rigidly at its full height, chin high and shoulders squared. His pride was well deserved: he was the most promising student anyone in the Town had ever encountered. Even the hairies were curious about him. What adventures in magic lay ahead for Derwin?

Leaning on the iron railing and looking over the enchanted, forbidden town, Derwin wondered what his assigned castle would look like. He was sure he would be a world-renowned scrivener, but would his royal family be kind to him? Which family would it be? Just visible through the cloud that seemed to sit on the ground he could see a dreary street paved with uneven cobblestones. Other scriveners began to assemble around him, mauve umbrellas floating above their owners and protecting them from the flurries. In the warmer season the snow turned to rain for a few moons, but

other than that the snow was as much a resident here as the scrivenists who came to study. The trickle of people grew steadily until a crowd rushed past the tailor, the pie shop, the potion apothecary, and the other stores that lined the street that led to the cabby roof deck. Each wore a crisp, new uniform. These uniforms had been around as long as scrivenists had been writing, exploring the magic of Croswald, and serving the royal class in their cavernous castles.

Derwin was lost in his thoughts and distracted by the crowd that pressed in on the platform, eager for their own adventures. He made his way through the line, his satchel heavy with books. The rooftop deck was just beginning to steam as the warmth of morning broke through. He directed his gaze toward the newspaper he held but had not read. The *Scriven* *This* headline read, “Wandering Family Still Lost!” The article attributed the disappearance of the family to a suspected, at-large dwarf who had cursed them seven generations ago. All these words went perfectly undigested by our young scrivenist. Strangely, since he’d received his Deed of Service, he’d had a problem focusing on anything for very long. This was very uncharacteristic. He’d chalked the haze in his brain up to the excitement of finishing his studies.

It was the Day of Ordination for newly minted scrivenists. Having completed the requisite training and apprenticeship in the Town, these bright scholars were off to ply their trade for the royal families to whom they had been assigned. Standing pressed together on the platform, their energy was palpable. It was no wonder their newly acquired quills were quivering in the special pocket of their plum-colored, tightly buttoned tweed jackets. The air hummed. One small scrivenist

practiced turning snowy slush into a sweet delicacy, looping his quill in tiny circles. Another was reading the stars (through the thick cloud, no less) to determine the ease of their cabby travels.

“I can’t believe it!” A tall, slender scrivener’s face was alight with anticipation. “See you, books and class! I’m off to do real magic.”

Though she had addressed no one in particular, a bearded scrivener responded with a sly smile. “Careful—you may not have to study books now, but you do have to write them!”

She laughed. “Ever since I felt the magic in my bones at eight, I knew I’d be more the doing type of scrivener and less the writing type.” With that she drew her quill from her jacket and swooped a large arc, her many-layered tweed skirt twirling around her knees. Tiny yellow sparks turned into flowers with a lovely fragrance that fell on those around her.

“I can hardly believe that this,” Derwin said, unrolling a vellum scroll, “this small thing holds my future! Embossed letters telling me where I’ll reside and serve the rest of my days.”

“I hope the Royal Family Lichen appreciate flora!” The female scrivener continued to send flowers out over the crowd.

To Derwin’s left stood a scrivener reading her copy of *Creaking Caldrons: A Self Yelp Book for Leaks & Squeaks*. The fellow pressing into his right shoulder was deeply interested in *How to Tame a Scrivenly Beard*. Though young, Derwin was assured of his superior skill—his performance and confidence had surely guided him to a posh position. As was his nature, he noted with a slightly proud smirk that he was by far the brightest person on the platform.

As he made his way up through the line, Derwin rocked on his heels, his Deed of Service clutched at his side. The anticipation, the urge to cast spells and invent, was almost too much to bear. Derwin patted his pocket. *Ahhh*. His quill—a scrivener’s most prized possession—was exceptional. Gold feathered and silver nibbed, it fit his grip perfectly and practically spat out ink in excitement. Its academic vigor matched his own; it represented the perfect cap to his completion of scrivener studies and a marker of his voyage into service.

The crowd may have looked like a bunched-up jumble, but it actually formed a snaking line toward an ornate ticket window. Winnowed from a solid piece of brass, the whole booth was polished to a golden sheen, including the delicate bars that ran up and down the window that occupied its top half. The ticket booth was almost entirely filled with a corpulent woman, the ticketing agent.

Finally, the line snaked far enough along that it was Derwin’s turn. Bright, gold bars were about the only thing that stood between him and his dreams. Finishing a wide-mouthed yawn, the ticketing agent hollered, “Next in line, please! Let’s keep it moving!” He handed her his deed and she unrolled the document. She saw the family crest inside and stopped abruptly. Noting his confidence, she said, “Not much for reading the news, are you? Or history? Makes every bit of sense that you’d be headed back there, doesn’t it?” She smirked, her lips curling too easily. Derwin could smell her breath, sickly sweet from too much pie.

“It does, doesn’t it? I’ve been promised one of the most prestigious families in all of Crowwald—cousins to the Queen,

let's hope. I'm sure their library is quite extensive, needs a lot of magical management—and the acreage! So much to explore!" Derwin's eyes glowed. It *was* strange that he couldn't hold the family's name in his mind, but he was sure it was a good one.

She removed her quill from her walnut inkwell and jabbed at Derwin's Deed of Service in a forcible fashion, inscribing something practically illegible across its entire width. The second she stamped his deed, the writing began to fade as if the letters were disappearing in mist.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get lost on your way to the cabby? Don't wander off now," she teased. But Derwin was already lost in his thoughts, wielding his quill and casting spells and creating magical beasts—all to great applause—in his mind. Even now, just directing his thoughts to his quill made it leap to life. He patted the quill pocket, conscious of its detection of magic beyond the town's cloud cover. It was scanning for potion ingredients in the dark forest, itching and twitching to write.

Derwin was so preoccupied that he missed the cabby's approach, but the usual crash landing and the snorting of the giant, rhino-like beast jolted him from his reverie. The cabby station's deck bore many deep scars in its wood from rambunctious, barely-made-it landings. The drivers and beasts fairly careened in and out of the sky. Distractedly, he stepped into one of the three house-like carriages that the beast towed through the air. Like all wheel-less cabby carriages, its small wooden door opened to what appeared to be a tiny, eccentrically decorated living room. Mismatched chairs and wicker benches were jammed inside, leaving little

in the way of legroom. By now, with several seasons of scrivenist training under his belt and cabbies being the only way in and out of the Town, he was quite familiar with the rocking and jolting of cabby air travel. The takeoff was always the roughest part—or was it the landing? Both were highly uncomfortable.

Derwin was careful to get a spot on a bench near a porthole window, not that there would be much of a view. As dozens of scrivenists crammed inside, Derwin looked out on the hindquarters of the five-thousand-pound beast that towed the carriage. Soon enough, even that vista would be obscured.

The flowery scrivenist had managed to wedge herself next to Derwin and was looking out the porthole as well. “Oh, I wish that I could see my castle from the sky. You know, before we land. What fun! This blasted cabby storm. I nearly always need Stomach Bestill potion from Quinton’s Brews & Hodgepodge after each ride! So terribly cold, and one just can’t see anything!”

Derwin was a little annoyed to be taken away from the richness of his daydreams. “Don’t you know, the cabby storm is the only sort of disguise that—”

“I know, I know,” she sighed.

To protect the coordinates of the Town and the riders, all cabbies created their own mobile weather systems to conceal their journey. Derwin didn’t bother telling her about the intricacies of the cabby storm spell and the peculiarities of the beasts. Even now he could feel the storm whipping itself into freezing existence. He took comfort knowing that all anyone on the ground would see was the roiling,

cabby-created squall. With a jolt and a snort from the beast, they took off.

I have surely landed one of the choicest positions in all of Croswald.

Derwin sighed happily in his daze.

“What’s that?” a young man asked him.

“*Grumph*. He’s just thinking about how magnificent he is,” said another in a less charitable tone.

Derwin only smiled.

They traveled for hours. Just as the sun set, a strange treetop in the forest appeared through a momentary clearing in the cabby storm. This tree rose above the rest, its foliage darker and somehow metallic-blue and angular. Derwin caught glimpses of its eerie outline cutting through the haze like glass, twinkling as lightning ricocheted in the sky. His quill now practically burst from his jacket. The cabby continued its descent, tumbling closer to the tree’s spire until brush scraped the sides of the carriage and jolted the riders even more than the stormy ride. Finally, in a tumble of wicker benches and plum-colored pillows, they stopped.

“Derwin Edgar Niiiiight!” trilled the cabby driver.

He straightened his jacket, gathered his satchel, lifted his trunk, and ignored the hushed whispers of the other scrivenists. Lastly, he double checked his quill and set out.

The tree, of course, was the tallest spire on what had to be the grandest structure Derwin had ever seen. He felt his knees tremble from the jolting ride—or was it nerves? Derwin approached his new family’s castle and his new home. Suddenly the castle shimmered as if it were neither solid nor real. Derwin felt a wave of recognition roll over him. He knew this place! He had spent many hours here! He tried with all

his might to remember the name of the family on his deed. But not only could he not recall the name, his feeling of recognition had disappeared as well.

He came to what must have once been a clearing, perhaps a garden. An enormous wrought iron gate stood at the end of a winding path lined with lavender oranstra trees in full bloom. The gate twisted in a floral pattern and rose to at least four times Derwin's height. Behind the castle was a large gray mountain—the castle was built up against the rock face of a cliff. Standing in front of it, in awe, he felt impossibly small. The shadowy form rose up, equal parts beckoning and foreboding.

Derwin paused. Grand though it was, the castle seemed unkempt. Looking closer, he realized it was in a shocking state of disrepair. As he approached, the ivy that hung all about the castle seemed to grow before his eyes, creeping along as he walked. Rust corroded the blue metal roof of the turrets, and ivy enshrouded the dark stones at the same rate. As Derwin reached the door, he saw the final swath of beautiful sapphire metal was encased in a layer of rust. In contrast to every other castle he had ever seen, this one was perfectly unlit.

Derwin stepped through the doors, left ajar, into a massive entry. As he did, billowing clouds of dust rose up from the castle's marble floor.

"Hello?" he called out tentatively, his voice echoing in every direction. Cobwebs spun and spiraled from the foyer's enormous chandelier. The creaking door closed behind him, leaving Derwin alone in sheer darkness. The room was empty. More than that, it appeared entirely deserted and forgotten.

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He stepped into the center of the grand entryway, over a gray-and-white family crest. From the circular inlay that surrounded the emblem, a dark fog began to swirl around Derwin, plunging the room further into darkness. The image of the castle around him began to waver like a mirage.

“What the—”

But in a puff of marigold, Derwin was gone and the room and abandoned castle disappeared into the twilight.



The strange fog dumped Derwin onto a path that clung to the side of a cliff. His cartwheeling came to an abrupt halt as his rump bumped into the wheel of a decrepit carriage. For a moment, all Derwin could see was the night sky and the trees overhead. Shaking his head, he sat up to gauge his surroundings. The carriage was totaled: it had veered off the path and crashed into a tree several yards down the slope. He surveyed the scene. The carriage was empty and the wood was quiet. If anyone had survived that crash—which seemed impossible—they were gone without a trace. Derwin gulped as he looked down beyond the carriage.

Suddenly he felt a tickle in his pocket. It was his quill, twitching in response to some magic inside the carriage’s splintered frame. Cautiously Derwin inched closer to the opening. He murmured a spell and the small bits of debris at the bottom of the carriage hovered with a sparkle and moved away. Just beneath was a finely crafted box, unharmed by the crash. Its dark wood was well oiled. As Derwin lifted the box with his quill, bringing it out of the wreckage and into his

sweating palms, a pulsing white light seeped from its edges. With the box in his left hand, Derwin made a swirling swoop with his quill, organizing the light into a halo. The illumination shone on a slip of folded parchment attached to the box's lid with a wax seal. It was a letter. The only things Derwin could focus on were the first and final lines: they were written in a hurried hand and read, *To the One to Whom This Box is Entrusted*. It was signed, *The Hand That Left Her*.