

The Gatherer

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Prologue & Ryshel Huntress

Chapter 1 of 2

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Prologue

These are dark times. Hope fades. All live in fear. My fear, my pain, began on my eleventh birthday, when the gifts of my heritage revealed themselves. The day I was cast out of my home and family, for being different.

My duties grow more and more ominous and perilous. I am weary but I dare not rest. Hundreds, perhaps thousands die each day, and I am but one woman. One woman in a steadily dwindling order. I don't know how many of us are left, or if, indeed, I am the last. Nor do I know whether today will be the day that the soldiers come for me. I am the longest surviving of my kind, and I don't know why.

For I am a Gatherer. There are other names for people of my profession: Soul Catcher, Reaper, none of them accurate. I am a servant of death, but I do not take souls. I take the released life force. Gathering it up and dispersing it so dark wizards may not use it or, if there's a great enough concentration, preventing it from animating a nearby object or worse, reanimating it. That is part of my duties also, tracking down the animated or reanimated and putting them to rest. My ability to sense the dying makes it impossible for me to stay in Juene-Haven for any length of time. There are just too many, too much to deal with. Haven has become a prison to the Untalented who live there. I do what I can but I know it isn't enough.

In my twenty-five years I have seen many horrors. I have seen other Gatherers cut down as they worked, people tortured and mutilated to strengthen the life force released. I have seen the aftermath of a troll attack, on humans and Eldritch alike. In death we are all equal. I fear my end and yet I welcome it as a release from my responsibilities. But I will not waver; I will strive to the last for I, Ryshel Huntress, am a Gatherer. And I know nothing else.

Chapter 1: Ryshel Huntress

Huntress was not her real second name. She hardly remembered her family; all that remained was her anger. She had been just eleven years old, but that hadn't mattered to her family. All that had mattered was what she was. Ryshel Huntress, the Gatherer. A name and title to strike fear into the superstitious and stupid which, so far, was everyone she had met.

She bent slightly to duck a low branch and smiled. This was one of those rare occasions when her lack of height was an advantage. It wasn't a large forest; the trees were close but the canopy was sparse, light flooded through large gaps above. Enough to heat the air but not enough to completely evaporate the moisture. The silence and humidity was oppressive.

The deaths she had felt had started an hour ago. She paused at the edge of a clearing, brushing her blazing red hair out of her face, and peered around with a frown. The wildlife had fled from whatever had caused the large loss of life, but that there was still no trace of life nearby worried her. The animals had not just run and hidden; they had fled the area.

She pulled her forest green travelling cloak closer, for comfort, as she started forward again, her mind on what she would find. She did not feel the heat much, which was why on a warm day she wore black riding breeches and boots, and a brown shirt tucked in and hugging close to her skin under her cloak.

She reached a gentle rise and her steps slowed. It was just over this hillock, she could sense it. Her eyes darted around, looking for any sign of movement. She could sense released life, but life still encased in a body was completely hidden from her. She could not know if who or whatever had killed the people over the rise was still nearby. The tree line ended just over the top of the rise. She stood in the trees completely immobile and barely breathing as she surveyed the scene before her.

The lush grass of the clearing was trampled and churned to mulch. The remains of the small village smoked. Some huts were collapsed, pushed over by some strong force, the thatch of the roof scattered over the ground. It was chaos, a battlefield, and as Ryschel watched, a building gave up the last of its strength and fell. Her fears were confirmed. Trolls.

Only they could have caused such destruction. She clenched her fists in anger. They never used to be so bold, but that was long ago when there had been a king on Haven's throne, when she had been but a child unable to fully appreciate the good life she had had. A life that had ended two years before the rise of the self-proclaimed supreme mage.

She looked down, fighting the rage thoughts of the past always brought, down over the rise and saw them. The reason she was there. The men of the village had taken a stand near where Ryschel stood, the dirt on which they lay becoming a mud that would dry into hard clay, soaked as it was with their blood. This wasn't right.

She backed up a few paces, back into the trees for their scant protection and waited. Trolls were carnivores. They wouldn't leave freshly killed prey like this. Nothing moved. Still she waited. Trolls killed for food, they had a preference for humans, and there were no signs of feasting or that they had taken any of the bodies. It wasn't right. Trolls didn't work this way; the men should have managed to bring down at least one. Trolls don't plan or work together well, being solitary by nature. But there was no evidence of a fight, despite the weapons lying around, some still grasped in limp fingers. It was a slaughter. It was unnatural, unless... they were following orders.

She lowered her eyes in thought. It was a trap but she couldn't just leave, not with all that energy lying around. Finally, Ryschel stepped out of the trees and slowly and cautiously walked to the middle of the clearing. Her heart hammered in her chest as she slipped from house to house trying to keep out of sight, not sure if they could see her. She didn't know where the trolls waited.

The doors of the houses still standing were splintered and broken. She did not investigate; she knew what she would find inside.

It was a small village and she soon reached its centre. Working quickly now, she stopped and stretched out her arms in front of her, and a scythe appeared in her hands. She spun it to point the blade down, holding the handle horizontal to the ground. She twirled it once in her hand before swinging it up and slamming its staff into the ground.

It began instantly, the power flowing across the ground, up the staff, some into her in preparation, but most up into the blade. She stood that way for five minutes until she was sure she had gathered all the spilled life. She held the handle in one hand letting it swing back to horizontal, turning the blade to point upwards. She raised her arm and let the scythe go, spinning it as she did so.

It rose higher, spinning faster and faster, becoming a white light before exploding with a brilliant flash. The power she kept inside her she would disperse more directly.

The only way a gatherer can use magic, if it could be called that, was by gathering spilled life into themselves and dispelling it as a force, a concussion wave of power like a strong gale.

Movement caught her eye and she turned. The trolls had seen the flash, as was inevitable, and were running towards her. Gathering the energy inside her, she judged her moment and released the power. She didn't wait to see the results but ran for a side street, planning on using her wits to get away. She slammed chest first into a house just short of cover and gasped.

The pain of impact was nothing compared to the pain in her back. Dangerously close to her spine near her left shoulder, her questing hand jarred the arrow shaft, causing an extra wave of pain. She stumbled on; a glance to the right confirmed that there was a second group of trolls. One of them grinned as it lowered its bow. Its face was twisted into a grin, making the battle scars from past tribal wars more prominent.

It left her in no doubt that they weren't acting on their own. There was no way she could avoid them now which left her only one option if she was to survive. In her panic she stumbled again and fell. Her back blazed with a fiery pain, and her mind screamed at her to get up.

The trolls weren't in a hurry to catch up; the smell of her blood would lead them straight to her, but she wasn't going to lie there waiting for them. Gritting her teeth against the pain, after some effort, Ryschel stood. The arrow needed to be pulled; there was a very real possibility it was soaked in saliva. A troll's spit was poisonous; it would kill her whether she got away or not if she could not get to a competent healer.

But she could not pull it out, not without risking causing herself severe damage. The trolls had yet to surround her, but she had little time. She let out a shrill whistle, knowing she could never outrun a troll, even if she hadn't had an arrow sticking out of her back, but she had a chance if Atalya was near.

All too long, seconds passed before Atalya suddenly appeared, a shadow stretching out from the wall of the house opposite, spreading on the ground and rising like a grey mist. A couple of younger trolls, less patient in their hunger, had reached the street and stopped, blinking in confusion at the horse-shaped cloud that solidified in front of their eyes. It would not last; their bloodlust would override their stupidity all too soon. Atalya, now looking like a normal, if very large, grey stallion, knelt, knowing she wouldn't be able to swing herself into the saddle.

She heaved herself onto his back, and he was away almost before she had gotten a grip. All she could manage was to hold on as he weaved through the buildings, fighting the black haze of pain that threatened to engulf her. Praying against all probability that she would not be knocked off by a low-hanging branch once they reached the trees. She noticed the strange numbness spreading from the arrow wound and cursed. She had hoped vainly that the troll had forgotten to suck on it, tainting it with its poisonous saliva. She took off her rope belt, wincing at the flood of pain the movement caused. She frowned at the rope, hoped it was strong enough, and lashed herself to the saddle. In her hurried movements the pain was too much; she just managed to tie the last knot before slipping into unconsciousness.

Thayne Nycknell

Chapter 2 of 2

Introducing the inept young wizard.

Psyhne was an Old Place. The school had been built five hundred years ago right over the Talfry or 'Well of Magic'. Located on an island off the coast of Engola, it was built on the island's mountainous west coast. Surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs, it was highly defensible and only approachable from the east side by sailing upstream on the river. The school itself was a castle built from the local rock and, in some places, built right into the cliffs.

Thayne Nycknell stormed the charms classroom, his mind racing, his jumbling thoughts fuel for his indignation. *I thought he understood; he knows what I'm going through.* Reaching the door, he steeled himself and reached for the handle. He hesitated a moment when the door swung open, giving the man he sought time to say,

"Come in, Thayne."

Frowning, he stepped forward quickly. *'Why must he...'*

"Hurry up and tell me what's on your mind; it's like a little thundercloud."

'That confirms it; he's trying to show off. He can't even read minds, Thayne thought as he slammed the door and strode forward. Professor Globulus turned from the cauldron on his desk and regarded him severely.

"Now, was that entirely necessary? You almost upset my work." He gestured to the bubbling cauldron in front of him. Professor Arthur Globulus was the most mild-tempered teacher at Psyhne, the School of Magic. He had gone to school with Thayne's grandfather, they were both Aquamancers, and as members of Florean House had become and remained very close. They shared many things, including a love of rich foods. Globulus's long hair was steel grey, and hidden under his tall, pointed hat was his shining bald pate. Seeing Thayne's gaze on his hat, he lifted a hand to make sure it was sitting properly. His brown eyes glimmered merrily at Thayne, but Thayne narrowed his own in response.

"You told him," Thayne growled, his hands clenching into fists.

The professor did not notice, his attention once again on the cauldron. "Indeed I did," he replied distractedly without looking up, stroking his long beard as he examined the bubbling contents.

"Why? You know it just gave him more ammunition." Thayne threw himself dejectedly onto a nearby chair. "Not that he needs any more," he muttered, turning to look up at the professor hopefully.

"Why? Because I don't need the bother of fixing whatever he decided to do to you in his temper. You never think things through do you, Thayne? Has Patrick ever expelled a student?" Globulus turned, placing his hands on his hips, entirely unsympathetic.

Opening his mouth to answer, Thayne's mind went blank. While Globulus waited, the hint of a smile on his lips, Thayne thought hard. Professor Patrick 'Old Cob' Cobronus was the complete opposite to Globulus. His fuse was not short; it was non-existent. But still he had to admit, to himself at least, that Globulus was right. He had caught Gregory 'Porky' Trent with food in class once. It had taken a week before the professor was calmed down enough to change him back into a human. Porky still snorted when he laughed sometimes. With nothing else coming to mind and the professor's grin growing increasingly irritating by the second, he replied carefully, "There was Peter..."

"Peter *Yientz*? Being thrown out of a window doesn't count, Thayne," Globulus cut him off and stared hard at him, making Thayne feel uncomfortable.

"At least it got him out of this hellhole," Thayne muttered darkly and frowned. Even he knew that was a lame excuse.

"Yes, and into the infirmary for three months."

But he had to do something. He hated Psyhne. He should be in his fourth year by now, but... he felt pathetic, so pathetic. No one had ever repeated their first year at Psyhne, ever, until Thayne. For four years he had been a first year, stuck in Varian House. He could do magic but it didn't always work, and never the same way. He didn't even know which path he was on, whether he was a higher or lower magician. Everyone knew what path they took; the path was after all the conduit to your magic. Whether you could draw and shape raw magic, the higher or elemental path, or whether you used spells, incantations and charms, the lesser or summons and words path. He did not know what was wrong with him. Even being Ghee would be better; then his lack of Talent could not be denied.

Thayne turned his back on the professor and wiped his eyes, trying to stop the tears of frustration. Without knowing his path, it was impossible for him to know the nature of his magic. He sometimes thought that he was an Aquamancer like his grandfather, sometimes he felt like a Geomancer, but those times were rare since it needed emotional and physical calm and strength. He even felt like a Pyromancer at times, particularly when he was angry. But none of them really felt right, it was like there was a wall inside him holding back the magic that he just couldn't break through. He was the butt of every joke, every prank, even the teachers used him for sport. His parents were so desperate that he not embarrass them that they wouldn't let him come home. Expulsion was his only option. He had been the first to repeat his first year, and so he was determined to be the first to be expelled as well.

"Cob-face said you wanted something," Thayne stated rudely, the using best derogatory name he could come up with in his anger.

"Cob-face, Thayne? That's a new one." Globulus wiped his hands on the front of his already filthy robes and put out the fire under the cauldron. He turned and regarded Thayne a moment then nodded. "Yes, I need you to do something for me."

Beckoning him to follow, he left the classroom, leaving Thayne to follow reluctantly behind. They walked a short distance and Thayne guessed he was being taken to Globulus's office. He was proven right as they reached the end of the corridor and turned left.

"You betrayed me. What makes you think I'll do what you ask?" Thayne asked, not ready to let go of his anger.

"Believe me, Thayne. You'll like this errand."

Ignoring his bitter muttering, the professor continued to lead the way to his study.

"Bloody errand," Thayne muttered loudly. "What am I, a... bloody... errand boy? Oh here, Thayne take this to the Charms classroom, now don't you feel useful? Oh yes, why thank you, you have brought meaning back to my life..."

Globulus stopped at the door and pulled a large ring of keys out of his robes and fumbled around looking for the right one. Already not in the best of moods, Thayne started tapping his foot impatiently, his eyes darting around nervously. He didn't like to stay still for too long; you never knew who might be sneaking up on you to test out some new spell on a helpless victim, and none were more pathetic than he. Finally, the professor found the right key, unlocked the door, and they entered.

Watching the professor lock the door and begin to place silencing charms, Thayne's interest perked up. What could be so important that the professor feared being overheard? The room was small, a cheap pine desk and an uncomfortable looking matching chair stood in front of a tiny window. There were small curiosities, both antique and cheap fakes, arranged haphazardly on the desk with scrolls scattered in between. The desk was pushed against one wall, and there was barely enough room between the desk and the bookshelf to squeeze past to the chair. A twin to the desk chair stood in front of the desk for visitors. What could anyone with such an office possibly say that someone would want to overhear? And why would he be telling *him* something so important? Shifting from foot to foot, Thayne started to feel apprehensive. Maybe Globulus was angry with him and didn't want anyone to hear? Thayne's eyes strayed to the door. Globulus was standing in front of it ignoring him, his attention on his spell-casting.

So with no way to escape, Thayne resigned himself to his fate and sank into the visitor's chair, finding it as uncomfortable as it looked.

"I need someone I trust to return this book to an acquaintance of mine," Globulus said abruptly behind Thayne, making him jump. The professor didn't notice Thayne's nerves as he squeezed past to his desk and sat in his chair, placing an old volume in front of him. "It is vitally important that no one learns of your purpose or what you carry."

Questions buzzed through his mind as Thayne reached for the book. The professor slammed a hand down on it and met his eye. "I mean no one."

"Right, I understand," Thayne replied, now insufferably curious. He carefully took the book; it seemed heavier than it looked. The cover was old and frayed. The leather binding was cracked and almost split in a couple of places. There was no title, just a strange symbol, a circle that didn't quite meet at the top, the right curve turning into a tail that ran through the middle. "Where am I going? Down the hall?" Thayne half-joked.

"This is not a joke, Thayne. I will give you directions. You will take it to Kailim Halliwen."

"Halliwen... wasn't he the High Druid of Msytax? I remember Father talking about him... He said...wait, isn't he *dedead*?" Despite his misgivings Thayne's heart leapt. It meant leaving Psyhne. He'd finally escape.

"Yes, he is," Globulus said firmly, giving him a significant look. "Take great care, Thayne. Kailim has many enemies."

Thayne nodded soberly a couple of times before blurting out, "Well of course he does! He stood up to that..."

"Thayne! Do not. It is dangerous to voice or even think ill of the Supreme Mage. The world has become a very dark place. And this is a very great secret I have given you."

With a frown Thayne pursed his lips and nodded. What was so secret about a book? He suddenly had the feeling there was a joke there somewhere that he was not getting. "You're just trying to get rid of me, aren't you?" he asked, bowing his head.

The professor's chair scraped back, and moments later, Thayne felt the warmth of his hand on his shoulder. "No, Thayne. Never that. This is truly dangerous. I do not want to send you, but Professor Tolhan..."

"The Astrology professor?" Thayne asked incredulously, raising his head to look into Globulus's eyes.

He nodded, taking the book out of Thayne's hands and placing it back on the desk. "Yes, the Astrology professor. He had a True Dream. He did not know what or to whom, but from the details it was clear to me. All he knew is that it must be returned, and it must be you that takes it."

"But he hates me!" Thayne burst out, standing and striding the three paces to the door.

"He knows better than anyone that True Dreams are not to be taken lightly," the professor replied softly.

Thayne turned back to him, his hands raised helplessly. "I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, Thayne," Professor Globulus said with a weak smile. His gaze on his feet, Thayne missed the concern and doubt that passed briefly across the professor's face. "You must leave as soon as possible."

"Oh, right." Thayne was confused. He should be excited to leave Psyhne and the hell he went through everyday, but the professor's mood really worried him. "I'd better go pack," he said, gesturing to the door.

Professor Globulus's gaze shifted to the floor for a second, before giving Thayne a decisive nod and muttering the short incantation to unlock the door, not bothering with the Silencing Charms for the moment.

Walking to his dormitory, despite his earlier misgivings, the excitement Thayne had expected to feel began to surface. He was finally getting out of there. Leaving the embarrassment and ridicule behind. Besides Globulus had not said anything about having to return, at least, not yet. Maybe he could get a job and live as the Untalented do? The thought made him sigh. He wasn't particularly fond of the idea, but he was sure he'd never be a wizard and what else was there?

He reached the dormitory and entered. It was empty. The other students were in class. His footsteps echoed as he walked the rows to his bed. There was no other sound and it felt eerie. He managed to shake off the feeling as he reached the foot of his bed, though he glanced around a few times before opening his trunk. After a bit of rifling, he located a bag and started filling it, packing enough clothes for a few days then, after a pause, adding a few more changes of clothing, just in case. He moved to pack his bedding as well, and his eyes fell on a large lump, under the covers, near the middle of his bed. He tugged at the blanket experimentally, and the lump moved towards him. With a resigned nod, he turned his back on the bed, picked up his bag and left, heading back to Globulus's office.