

Chapter Nineteen

Khaos

“Behniel, where are you!” the summons—an angry shout, was not audible since the *‘speaker’* was located over a mile away and even though he was prone to yelling very loudly his voice couldn’t carry quite that far. Sadly, distance had no dampening effect on the words that blasted their way into Behniel’s head.

With a sigh, he set the thing he’d been studying—a toad—*of sorts*, down and levered himself up from the log he’d been using as a bench to start back the way he’d come only a few minutes before. And though he was not fond of hurrying, he was even less fond of being endlessly berated—or worse, so, hurry is exactly what he did. He reached the house ten minutes later and dashed through the door to bound up the steps of the spiral staircase leading to the old mansion’s most prominent feature, the observation deck. He had guessed right; his master was there—waiting—*for him*. Khaos detested many things, but nothing quite as much as waiting, on anyone or anything, for any reason. After spending the last five years of his life as Khaos’ apprentice, Behniel understood that to the very core of his being. And with that knowledge came the certainty that his never easy life was about to become much harder for the next few days—*hopefully just days*.

Behniel hurried over to drop down to one knee. “I’m sorry, my lord, I didn’t realize you’d have need of me this morning. I hope my failings haven’t *completely* undermined what you were doing.”

The tone of his apology was as ingratiating as you could image; the wording was even more carefully orchestrated. If the two together managed to strike just the right note, just the right chord of obsequiousness while insinuating that someone so insignificant as himself had the *power* to influence the great wizard’s day, *then* there was the slimmest chance the morning might not end up being one the he would never forget. There were already far too many of those haunting his memories.

“I don’t have *need* of you,” Khaos said with disdain. “But if I *want* you to do something I shouldn’t have to go searching over half the continent to find you.”

“No, of course not,” Behniel agreed quickly. “You were up so late last night I didn’t expect you to be up quite yet. Not that it’s any excuse. I should have checked with you before *I* retired to see what you had in store for today. But, now that I’m finally here, what might I do to assist you, Lord Khaos?”

“You can stop simpering and start arranging the lenses so that I’ve got them all at hand should the need arise,” Khaos snapped and Behniel jumped to obey. Not that he’d quit simpering while he worked, he knew better than to follow his master’s direction on *that*. Nor was he under any delusions that Khaos’ lack of handing out an immediate reprisal meant he had escaped punishment. If anything, that just gave the wizard more time to be *creative* with his discipline.

As the name implied, the observation deck itself was a large flat area under the open sky, but all around its edges were various large cabinets and work benches where Khaos’ instruments and the other accoutrements of his trade were kept. By far the most varied and numerous of all the items he used to practice his magical arts were his lenses. So called because they were all made primarily out of glass, though they came in every shape, size and color imaginable. And while Behniel had been amazed when he’d seen what just *one* of them could do—a simple clear

pyramid that turned light into a rainbow, once Khaos started combining them and adding other elements to the mix, reality itself became as fractured and wildly unpredictable as the sunlight had on that first day. Under Khaos' precise instructions and watchful eye, Behniel began pulling items out of the storage cabinets, starting with a number of large metal racks Khaos had commissioned one of the local blacksmiths to build. Those were then joined together to form a nearly ten foot tall framework that Khaos levitated the biggest of the lenses—a monstrous convex thing with a circumference greater than any wagon wheel Behniel had ever seen, up to rest on its top. As soon as that happened the bright sunlight passing through the curved glass became so focused that a pie plate sized spot on the wooden decking below quickly began to darken, and within only a seconds smoke tendrils began to waft upwards. Khaos didn't seem the least bit concerned that he was on the verge of burning his house down, but a moment later, after he'd floated another only slightly smaller lens into place below the first one, the problem rectified itself as the point of light broadened significantly. Khaos took a quick look up at the sky and frowned, making Behniel do the same, and when he did he was surprised by what he saw. As impossible as it seemed, it looked for all the world like someone had taken a large bite out of the sun.

"We have to hurry!" Khaos snapped even though from Behniel's point of view they had been doing anything but dallying. "The full shrouding will be in place within minutes. And I wouldn't keep looking up there if I were you...unless you want your eyes to start smoking too."

Behniel jerked his eyes away and blinked a few times just to make sure they were still working. Other than a bright spot that was hopefully only temporarily burned into his vision, everything seemed fine, but he didn't have time to worry about it either because Khaos began barking out orders like he'd been made the captain of the palace guard. Another lens got added to the framework—a flat one with a bluish tint. Then Behniel was sent back to the cabinets to retrieve a rolled up rug—or so he thought. It actually turned out to be the heaviest weave of canvass he'd ever seen. Once unrolled on the ground below the apparatus they'd built, it proved to be about three foot by three foot square. While Behniel was still wondering what its purpose might be, Khaos opened one of a pair of glass vials he'd been holding for some time and upended it over the canvass. The liquid that came pouring out was dark and thicker than molasses, but a twitch of one of Khaos' fingers holding the other vial changed that, turning the gelatinous substance into a fine mist that settled over the material below, instantly dying the white fabric black.

Behniel watched with amazement as the scene he couldn't look at above him played out on the rooftop beneath his feet. The '*shrouding*' of the sun as the moon slowly kept across its face was so perfectly displayed through the lenses that Behniel might as well have been looking at the actual event. He was so transfixed that at first he didn't even notice the darkness that was suddenly surrounding him. Once he did, he looked up at Khaos with fear.

"Is this the rendering?" he asked, hearing the tremor in his own voice.

"No!" the wizard glanced away from the image he'd so carefully orchestrated to give him a disdainful look, but then he laughed and said. "But who knows... this may very well be where it starts."

How his master could find such a thought amusing was as incomprehensible to Behniel as what was happening around him. While he stood there wondering about the sanity of the man who he'd indentured himself to for life, and whether or not he'd ever see daylight again, the sun and moon concluded their bonding until the latter completely blotted out the former and midnight reigned at high noon. That's when Khaos unstopped his second vile and misted the

canvass at their feet a second time. This time Behniel felt a flash of heat though there was no visible effect to the black cloth that he could see. In fact, there was, but it took several more minutes—until the moon released its grip on the sun and daylight returned for him to realize it. The second potion had frozen in place the image that had been projected onto it. The blank canvass had become a chart—a star chart, displaying not only the shrouded sun with its fiery border showing past the edges of the moon, but also a number of other bright pinpoints of light surrounding it.

“Are those stars?” Behniel posed the question with confusion, pointing down at the canvass. When Khaos only nodded absently he was forced to ask, “Why are there so few of them.”

“Only the brightest...the most important ones shine through during the shrouding,” the old wizard explained. “But not *the* most important one...it’s not up there anymore.”

“What happened to it?” Behniel was starting to wonder if anything would ever make sense to him again.

“It was cast down,” Khaos tapped a finger against the side of his nose as he studied his new chart. “And before you bother to ask me where, I can tell you that I don’t know...*yet*.”

That actually *hadn’t* been Behniel’s next question, but after a bit of reflection it occurred to him that maybe it should have been. Unfortunately, the time for questions came to an end as Khaos seemed to come to some conclusion about whatever it was that he’d been pondering.

“You’ll find a red scroll case inside that cabinet,” the elder wizard used a bony finger to point the way. “Fetch it here to me, and there should be a wooden box right beside it...bring that too.”

The box contained a sextant. They were leagues away from the nearest seashore, but Behniel still knew enough to recognize the bizarrely intricate contraption, even if he had no idea how to use it. The scroll case did indeed house a scroll. One that turned out to be a miniaturized, and somewhat crudely hand drawn version of the recently created chart, only with some annotations written on it. The writing wasn’t the only difference, but Behniel didn’t realize that until after he’d been dispatched to bring a desk and chair up to the rooftop.

“Do you see what’s missing?” Khaos asked after settling himself at his newly acquired workstation while tapping the scroll he’d spread out on the desk before him.

It was rare for his master to be so communicative, or congenial, so Behniel was anxious to please lest his failure to rise to the occasion returned things to their normal, *uncongenial* ways. Even so, after long seconds had ticked by while his eyes darted back and forth between the two charts, all he could do was shake his head dejectedly.

Khaos, who seemed to have anticipated that, reached out and tapped a spot on the smaller chart. “Look again.”

Behniel did, and in doing so he noticed for the first time how precisely the two charts matched each other, including the number and arrangement of the stars surrounding the shrouded sun—with *one not so glaring exception*. Khaos’ skeletal fingertip was poised above a mark on the scroll chart that represented a point of light that *was not* depicted on its larger, newly created cousin.

“That’s the star that was cast down!” Behniel said as understanding flooded over him, bringing with it a whole new realization and leading him to point down at the hand drawn chart. “So, that means this one was made during a shrouding *before* the star was cast down.”

“A good deduction, and in a way you’re right,” Khaos nodded. “But I actually drew this when I was about your age, and there was no actual shrouding, just one I dreamed about...” he paused to shrug. “Or at least I thought it was a dream. But it was so vivid and real seeming that after I woke up I immediately wrote down what I could remember of it.”

Behniel silently considered what he'd just heard. To his way of understanding wizards and seers were as far apart as night and day—except he'd just seen with his own eyes how flawed that analogy could be. After a bit he asked the one question that came to mind that he thought he could voice without risking offense. “What was the dream about?”

“It was about tonight,” Khaos replied, making Behniel think the wizard was getting confused about the time, which was understandable given that the stars had just been out. But that turned out not to be the case. “I was standing up here watching as the tip of Drahmond's Spear passed over the pinnacle of Mount Vehneral...”

Both men looked off to the horizon where the snowcapped mountain that had just been named jutted into the sky. The constellation Khaos had listed wasn't visible yet, but that was just a matter of time.

“...as it did, I took out my sextant and shot an azimuth off of the three brightest stars, the brightest of all being the one that's missing...except when I did that I wasn't on the rooftop anymore. I was standing...” Khaos' voice became very distant as he became caught up in his narrative, almost as if he was reliving the moment. “...*someplace else*...far from here...far from anywhere or anyone. It was a completely desolate place. I don't know if it was always that way or became so after the star struck.”

Behniel found his eyes darting around, looking from chart to chart and also taking in the sextant in between. As little as he knew about navigation, he was pretty certain that he understood exactly what Khaos had just revealed to him meant.

“You think you can use the azimuth numbers from your dream to figure out where the star landed?” Behniel asked, but it was really more of a statement than a question.

“I'm confident I can,” the aged wizard nodded.

“But then what,” he couldn't see how that would matter and voiced the what he believed to be the obvious gap in his master's plan. “If it landing in place so remote...how would you ever make your way there?”

That brought a sharp return of the Khaos Behniel was accustomed to. The ancient eyes locked onto him with scorn as the wizard shook his head. “After all I've taught you about how doors and mirrors can open wherever you need them to, you ask me *that*? Besides which, I don't have any intention of going *to* the star...I'm going to bring it to me. But at the moment I've got more important things to do than waste my time talking to you...away with you, your services are no longer needed here...go play with your frogs or something and leave me to my work.”

So, Behniel left the wizard and the rooftop behind as he made his way back to his favorite little pond and the *toad* he'd left on the log laying nearby. As they always did, the sting of Khaos' words trailed along with him. And as always, the reason they hurt so much was because Behniel knew them to be true—harshly delivered, but unavoidably true. Khaos *had* taught him how to use doors and mirrors to open onto other places. *Places he knew!* But how could you open them to a place you'd never been before? That seemed as impossible as trying to draw a picture of someone else's imaginary friend. The whole situation was so depressing that Behniel turned to the one thing in his life that he didn't feel like a total failure doing.

Dropping back down on the log he'd been sitting on only a few hours before, he reached out and picked up the thing he'd left behind when his master had summoned him. As usual, even though he'd experienced it many times, it struck him as odd that the toad, which was larger than a grown man's fist, weighed almost nothing, and stranger still, seemed to have no temperature of its own either. On the hottest day of summer or the coldest night of winter, pick it up and you'd swear you'd just touched another part of your own skin. Behniel had gone so far as to bury it at

the center of a raging fire for over an hour only to find after fishing it out that it was as devoid of heat—or cold for that matter, as always. As mysterious as the lack of weight and temperature was, that was only the beginning of the myriad of puzzles surround his mysterious toads. Yes, plural; he had three of them. Or, at least he'd had three of them at one point—until he'd solved part of the mystery and watched one of the creatures he'd once supposed were akin to petrified wood hop away. And *that* was the thing he had to hold onto—not just the toad in his hand, or the one that had hopped away, but the fact that *he* was the one who had figured out how to make that happen. Him, not Khaos—though there was nothing to say that the master wizard couldn't have figured it out, but *he* hadn't, Behniel *had*, and it wasn't because of anything Khaos had taught him, he'd done it on his own. Well...other than the fact that it was Khaos' lenses that had given him a hint of what was really going on with the petrified toads.

Creating the star chart wasn't the only one of Khaos' activities that involved viscous substances or other odd materials, and it wasn't uncommon for his equipment—especially his lenses to end up splattered with, or even coated in, whatever concoction he was using at the moment. Of course it always fell to Behniel to clean up the mess, and one day while doing so *he* ended up doing some splattering of his own, dousing one of his toads with the solvent he was using to remove some hardened tar from a multifaceted diamond lens. It should be noted that all three of Behniel's toads were a uniform dingy brown color. For reference, think of the mineral stains that happen over time any place that water drips or runs regularly—which is exactly what had happened to the toads, except the regularly part of the equation had actually taken place intermittently over a very long period of time. Seeing what he'd done, Behniel was quick to use a dry rag to wipe away the solvent. But when he did he took several centuries worth of mineral deposits with it, turning a large spot on the toad's back absolute black. In case you've never stopped to think about it, you've never seen absolute black before because even the world's blackest of objects reflect some amount of light. Ten minutes later, after Behniel had scrubbed the toad completely clean—*it did not!* What was left for the eye to see was a completely featureless black blob that seemed to ungulate as you looked at it. This apparent movement of the toad was really just Behniel moving his head around trying to get his eyes to focus on something they had no hope of locking onto; but in the process he was altering which parts of the toad were hiding what lay behind it, making it seem as though it was the toad that was moving. The next thing that happened was in some ways even more astonishing. Behniel looked from the black blob in front of him around the room to all the shelves with Khaos' lenses stacked upon them and had massive flash of insight. While each of the lenses did one thing or another to light *passing through it*, the only reason he could think of for the toad being the blackest of blacks had to be because no light could even get to it.

One of the first things an apprentice wizard learns is how to create an illusion, which in one form or another revolves around the bending of light. Behniel had been working with bent light for the entire three years of his apprenticeship. So, while he wasn't a master at that point, he knew plenty enough to start working out what type of bending would be required to keep light from even reaching something. The answer was simple enough, but not something you would ever think to do if you wanted to *use* light to create something. But if Behniel was correct, then at some point in time, someone had folded the light contacting the toad back upon itself. With that concept in mind, he reached out for the light weaves that even though he couldn't sense them, he was sure had to be there, and *unfolded* them. The moment he did, the black blob became a living toad again, and proved that by starting to hop across the table.

The memory was a pleasant one and he let it wash away some of the bitterness that had welled up inside of him at his master's latest chastising. The petrified toad was still resting on the palm of his left hand so he used the other to touch the light weave encasing it and set it free. Immediately the toad took on color and weight and heat—oddly it *was* warmer than Behniel's hand. The two of them, human and amphibian, sat regarded each other for a moment, then the toad began to shift around, no doubt looking for someplace to go more suitable to his liking. Before the disgruntled creature could get too ambitious, Behniel wagged his finger again and refolded the light, sealing the toad back into his time tomb. Because that was what had really happened, he was sure of it. Time had ceased to exist for the toad. But, what light and time had to do with each other, Behniel hadn't a clue; not that he didn't want to understand. In fact he spent every waking moment that he wasn't acting like a toad himself, hopping to and fro in acquiescence to Khaos' every whim, trying to figure it out. Because, it just stood to reason that if you could stop time, then you should be able to make it go *backwards* or *forwards* too! The possibilities *that* might open up kept Behniel up at night, with equal measures of hope and dread. In his young life he'd already see so much pain and suffering, and the thought of being able to go back and correct some of those wrongs, it was just so appealing, but at the same time he lived each day under someone who wielded absolute authority over him, and the thought of Khaos, or someone even more heartless, having the power to control time itself, *that* left him in a cold sweat.

He spent the rest of the afternoon working with his light weaves; this was nothing new and, frustratingly, he achieved nothing new. As the sun set and the stars made their appearance—for the second time that day, he made his way back to the house to prepare dinner for his master and to see to his other duties. Since Khaos was the ultimate night owl, Behniel ate first then saw to all his other tasks while keeping his master's meal warm with a wave of his hand, folding the lamplight shining upon it over itself—oddly, any form of light worked just as well as another. Finally, having run out of anything else to distract him, he forced himself to climb the staircase to the rooftop. As expected he found Khaos there—and *so much more!*

The ancient wizard had his back to him, looking at...*something*. Whatever it was, it was moving, waving and pulsating at the same time. Behniel was sure of that even though the thing was almost as black as a timeless toad. It was big too. Taking up most of one end of the rooftop in a roughly circular pattern and rising up almost to Khaos' shoulders. A sense of wrongness seized Behniel the instant he looked at it, and that only deepened a moment later when he noticed that his master had something in his hand, something alive. As the wizard raised his arm, Behniel saw that it was a rabbit. Where the animal had come from he had no idea, but a moment later Khaos tossed it casually toward the undulating black mass before him, and even though the poor rabbit fell a foot short of actually landing inside the monstrosity, a smoky charcoal tendril reached out and lapped at it. In a heartbeat—the *rabbit's last*, the poor creature and the wooden decking beneath it turned ashen white and the animal shriveled into a shrunken hulk of itself, drawing an involuntary gasp from Behniel.

Khaos' head snapped around as the wizard locked his dark eyes upon him and laughed as he proclaimed, "*Behold the power of the fallen star!*"

Behniel didn't know what Khaos wanted him to say to that, but he knew what he thought, and that's what came out of his mouth. "*This is wrong...you've set free something evil...we have to stop it!*"

"You simple fool," Khaos gave another laugh even as he sneered at his apprentice. "There is no such thing as right or wrong, or good and evil. It's only idiots like you who have to have

everything neat and orderly, regimented and controlled at all times. *That* is what's wrong with the world, simplistic fools running around try to put a stop to any *real* progress."

The old wizard paused for a moment and got a thoughtful look, much as he had earlier that day when he been so chatty about his dream. "I wasn't always Khaos you know. My given name was Lehmet and I was supposed to grow up to be bookkeeper like my father and his father before him...counting this and quantifying that. Always with the goal of making sure everything balanced out perfectly, without variance or deviation. Then one day it dawned on me...variance and deviation are the only true ways to achieve perfection. That's the day I changed my name and my purpose for living." Growing a wicked smile, he waved a hand in the direction of the seething thing he'd calling into existence. "And *today*, after so many years of striving, I am finally able to present to you true perfection...or it will be...*once I finish feeding it.*"

With that, Khaos raised a hand and pointed a long bony finger at Behniel. "Starting with *you!* As I told you earlier...*your services* are no longer needed here."

Fear seized him, and Behniel tried to turn and run, but he found his feet glued to the rooftop. He knew it was a just an air weave Khaos had used on him, but unraveling another wizard's spell isn't something that can be done automatically—if it can be done at all, it usually took hours, sometimes days. Behniel saw the blackness give a hungry surge in his direction and knew that *he* had only moments to react before suffering the same fate as the rabbit, and what he did next came without any real thought or planning. Khaos' air weave didn't reach above his knees, leaving his arms free. Behniel raised both of his hands and grabbed more light than he'd ever held before. It was only moon and star light, but he pulled in every bit of it that he could handle, and with a quick twist, folded it over upon itself. As he did, the blackness of the fallen star and the one who'd set it free were enveloped in an unyielding casement of true blackness as time on most of the rooftop came to a sudden stop.

The next day, after a short journey, a lengthy wait, and having handed out a fair number of bribes, Behniel was finally introduced at the Royal Court, where he marched down the intricately woven purple and gold carpet to the throne where he bowed before the king. After telling him rise, King Honhor, who was dandling an infant on his knee in a somewhat unkingly manner, gave him a dubious look. "I'm told you're a wizard, but I have one of those. He lives in the forest not far from here, so I'm not sure what you're doing here other than interrupting my time with my grandson."

Behniel hadn't worked out exactly what he was going to say *if* he got to see the king, but he decided informing the monarch of a few simple facts might be a good place to start. "Your Majesty, I'm sorry to inform you that your wizard is no longer...*available*. I'm afraid he fell victim to one of his own...*experiments.*"

"And you know this how?" the king inquired astutely.

"I know because I was there," Behniel explained without hesitation. "I was his apprentice."

"I see," King Honhor said, looking suddenly worried. "And this...*experiment*...is it a danger to anyone else?"

"No," Behniel responded firmly. "I've contained it. Though measures should be taken to keep anyone from muddling about the premises. There are many other things there which could prove to be dangerous. That's the main reason I've come here, to get your assistance in sealing it off."

The king nodded thoughtfully. "And the...*other reasons* you've come to court?"

“To offer my services, sire...” Behniel answered. “...to you and the kingdom, if you would have me.”

“Well, it seems we *are* in need of a new wizard,” the king noted, but he was looking at the babe on knee. “What do you say Pryhde...? Shall we take this young fellow on?”

For answer, the child made a sour face—the first of many that would cross his countenance during his lifetime, but his grandfather still somehow took that as agreement. “Very well then, it seems that Ehlsewhere has a new Royal Wizard. Welcome...”

The king hesitated, realizing he’d yet to be given the newcomer’s name, but Behniel was ready to come to his aid, then and for many years to follow. “You can call me Ohrder, Your Majesty.”