

RUINOUS ENDS



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1

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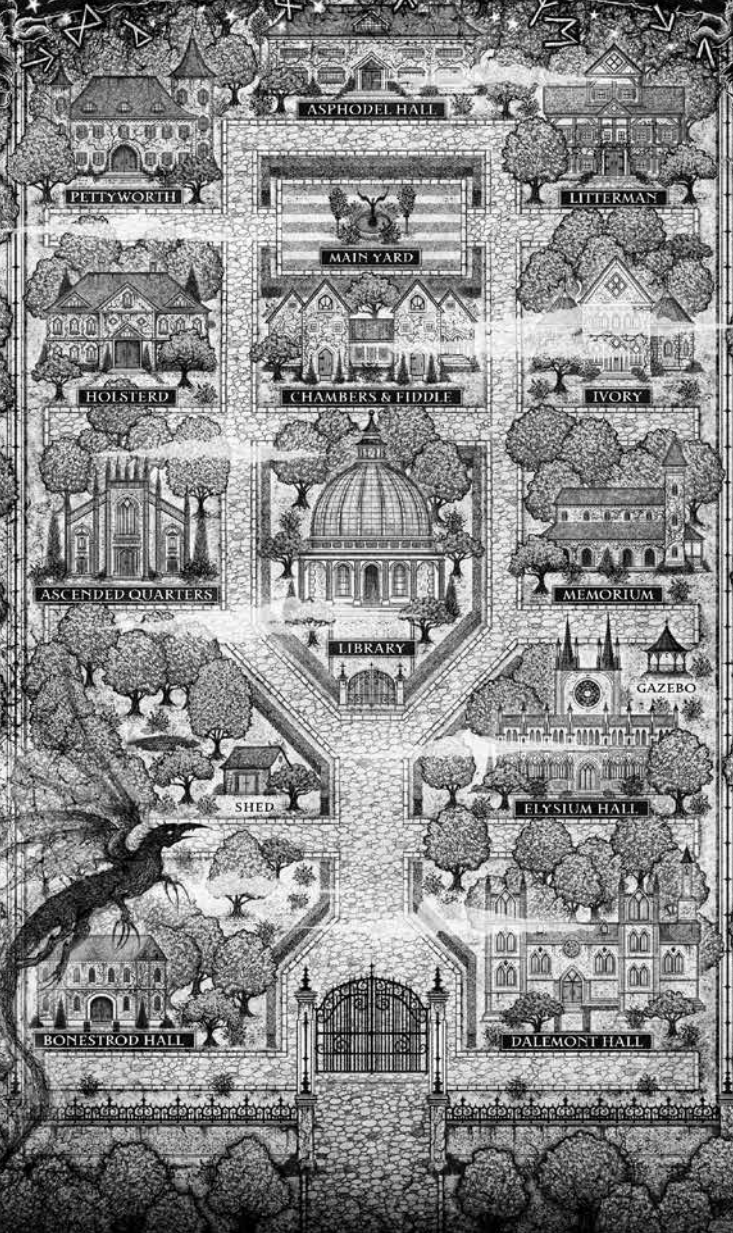




*For Camila,
Super sibs forever*

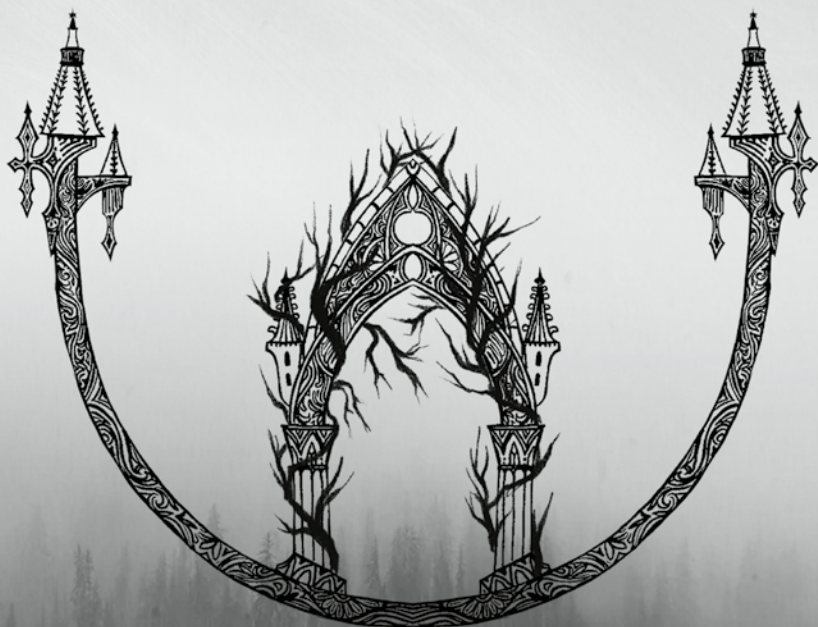


BLACKWOOD ACADEMY





PART I
IT IS WRITTEN



BETWEEN WORLDS

In the shadows of night, slithering between the folds of time, he waited. Starved for retribution. A hollow ache blossoming in the empty cavern where his soul had once resided. He had waited centuries for her. For the one who could unlock the usurper's heart. The one branded by his hatred, marked by the hands of the reaper.

His sweet catalyst. His fated destroyer.

And he would have waited an eternity for her. He would have slumbered in the shadows, patient and willing.

But Wren Loughy had arrived.

And now . . . now the time for waiting was over.

1

AUGUST

Augustine Hughes was losing his mind. Time had become a fickle and unstable thing; it drifted through his fingers like the remnants of a bad dream. There were moments of clarity—breaths of hope among the rot filling his lungs—but it was never enough to drag him back to reality. The darkness was too hungry. The poison too thick.

It was almost comical, the absurdity of it all. Losing his mind in the afterlife. He would have thought the worst of his troubles were behind him once he had died. Yet there he was, wandering the outskirts of purgatory, mind fragmented, whispering to the darkness like a madman.

He *was* mad, wasn't he?

August laughed and the sound grated against his skin. He was fairly certain he was lying on the dirt floor, though it was impossible to tell. The only thing he was truly certain of was the agony. It filled every crevice of his soul. Every ligament and bone. Every atom of his being.

How long had he been like this?

The last thing he could remember was Wren's voice dripping into his mind, warm and inviting, and then . . . *fury*. An anger he had never known possible. Everything blurred after that, twisting together until all semblance of reality had lost its meaning. And now all he knew was this torture . . . this suffering.

Old memories flickered through his vision like a sun-damaged film reel, vignettes of a life that was no longer his.

August watched as a group of strangers slowly lowered his mother's body into the ground. Next to him, his sister sobbed. She gripped

August's wrist as though she might float away if she let go. As if he were the only thing tethering her to the earth. Behind them, their father remained silent. He had not wept for his wife, and August was certain he never would.

Why would he?

He was the one who'd killed her, after all.

The memory fluttered away, drifting like morning fog, replaced by another.

"We must do something," Edith pleaded, red-rimmed eyes brimming with desperation. They were standing in the garden, hidden beneath the shadows of night. Above them, their father's study window glowed amber.

"What are you suggesting?" August asked, fearing her answer.

Edith's gaze drifted to the window, her face torn between sorrow and rage.

"We can make it look like an accident."

"Edith," August whispered. "You mustn't say things like that—" But his sister interjected, cutting him off.

"Her death was no accident, Augustine. We both know this." Edith stepped closer, her dark eyes blazing beneath the light of her lantern. "Do you truly believe she simply fell down the stairs? After everything we've seen? Everything we've heard?"

"How will we be any different if we do to him what he did to her?" August challenged.

"What he did was murder." The word spoken out loud, with such candor, sent a chill down August's spine. "This . . . this is vengeance."

"But . . . what if something happens?" he asked, voice shaking. "What about your soul?"

"My soul?" Edith chuckled, though her smile dropped when she saw the sincerity in her brother's eyes. "Oh, Augustine. Do not fear for my soul. It is in nobody's hands but mine." When August didn't budge, Edith let out a long and weighted sigh. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't say these things out loud. I just need some rest."

August stepped closer, carefully inspecting his sister. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, little brother." Clearly sensing August's apprehension, Edith reached out and wrapped him in an embrace, whispering the next words into his ear. "I promise."

But when she hugged August, he felt her heart hammering in her chest, her pulse beating like the frenetic wings of a hummingbird. And though he could not see his sister's face . . . he knew exactly what she was staring at.

He knew her eyes were locked on that study window.

August tried desperately to cling to the memory, but it faded before he could watch what happened next, drifting within the invisible current. A new one took its place from one breath to the next.

The one he had tried so desperately to forget.

The door to the kitchen was ajar. August took a step inside, peering around the corner. His sister didn't notice him at first, her lips lifted into a serene and placid smile as she poured a cup of tea. When he stepped forward, the old wood creaked beneath his weight and his sister's head snapped up in surprise.

"Augustine. I thought you were asleep."

"I was." He approached the counter, rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes. "But I heard you down here."

"Go back to bed." Edith set the teacup on a tray, stirring the liquid inside with a silver spoon. "Father is in one of his moods. It is best you stay in your room and out of his way."

"Is that for him?"

"Chamomile tea with a splash of rye and valerian." She winked, stepping around the counter. "I am hopeful it will be enough to calm his nerves and send him to sleep."

"Let me come with you—"

"No," Edith interjected, pausing beneath the doorway. "If he lashes out, I'd rather it be me than you." She offered him an apologetic smile.

"Please, Augustine. Just go to bed."

August conceded with a nod and watched as Edith made her way upstairs, her footsteps receding. He was moments away from walking back to his bedroom when he noticed the empty glass vial on the counter.

He picked it up, lifting it toward one of the iron sconces lining the walls. The label had been partially scratched off, but he could just make out the writing. Squinting, he read what was written upon the vial.

Arsenic.

And Edith had poured the entire bottle into their father's tea.

August scrambled out of the kitchen, running up the stairs so fast he nearly slipped, barely catching himself on the railing. He gasped, picking up his pace, panic clouding his judgment. And before he could stop himself, before he could even decipher what he was about to do, he stumbled into his father's study.

Edith stood next to their father, a hand on his shoulder. He had lifted the teacup to his lips and begun to take a sip when August first stepped into the room. Upon seeing August, their father froze, the edge of the teacup pressed against his mouth.

"Augustine . . ." Edith's face contorted in confusion. "I thought I said to—" Her voice caught in her throat when she noticed the glass vial in her brother's hand. She tried to hide her reaction, quickly averting her gaze, but it was too late.

Their father had noticed.

"Come here," he instructed, motioning August forward. "Hand me that."

What happened next, August couldn't quite remember. The memory sped up and slowed down, warping like a fun-house mirror. The scene jolted, staccato, each moment flashing from one heartbeat to the next.

His father realizing what had been poured into his tea.

His hands gripping Edith's neck.

August slamming his fists against their father's back.

The unfathomable pain as his father threw him to the floor and snapped his leg in half.

Edith removing the knife in her waistcoat and plunging it into their father's back.

Their father screaming like a wild animal as he ripped the knife out.

The look on Edith's face when her own father brought the same knife down upon her.

In that moment, the memory came rushing back in with unwavering clarity. The knife had sliced clean through Edith's abdomen. She fell to the floor, hands clutching her stomach, blood seeping through her fingers. August's reaction was instinctual. Primal. He tackled his father, pushing him onto his desk, sending a candle tumbling to the floor.

The curtain closest to the desk caught fire. The flames ate away at the fabric, inch by inch. Beneath August, his father had hardened into stone. Mouth agape. Eyes wide.

August pushed himself away from his father, collapsing as the pain from his leg took hold. Next to him on the floor, Edith lay motionless, her vacant eyes staring up at the ceiling, the ghost of a smile on her lips. August dragged himself toward her, screaming out in agony as his broken leg arched unnaturally behind him. Around him, the fire grew. It devoured everything in its path—the bookcases, the piles of notebooks, the old wallpaper.

Black smoke rushed into August's lungs. He coughed, sputtering, choking helplessly.

There were two options. Two conclusions to his story. He could attempt to pull himself out of the study, to somehow drag himself down the stairs and out of the house. Or . . . he could stay there. He could end their story, once and for all, and burn.

The decision, however, was never truly his to make.

It was in that moment that a dizziness came over him. Whether it was from shock or his wound, he didn't know. All he knew was that he was unable to move. His head slammed against the floorboards, as

though he had been knocked to the floor by an invisible weight.

Smoke clouded his vision. Through the haze, he swore he saw someone standing on the other side of the room . . . watching. But before he could properly understand what he was looking at, the flames swallowed him whole.

And then . . . darkness.

*

August opened his eyes and found he was lying in a cave. He blinked, attempting to make sense of where he was. Beneath him, streaks of blood glistened against the rocky floor. It wasn't until he glanced down at his hands, the raw blisters scattered across his palms healing at a rapid speed, that he understood the blood must be his own. That he must have dragged himself into the cave, crawling on his hands and knees in the throes of delirium, until he found a place to rest his eyes. But now that he had clawed his way back to reality, the weight of his situation fell upon him like a guillotine.

"My humanity . . ." August croaked, his voice rough from days spent screaming, drowning under memories.

Now he remembered.

He had carved out his humanity. He had opened the locked door and invited the shadows inside, sealing his fate. The tidal wave of memories made sense now—he could remember hearing about this happening to others within the Order . . . a sort of purging. Days spent writhing in pain, subjected to horrifying hallucinations after removing their humanity. But just to be certain, August reached a trembling hand toward his chest, slowly unbuttoning his shirt until his bare torso was visible. Even shrouded in the darkness of the cave, there was no avoiding what now swam through his veins like venom.

Shadows.

August cursed and pressed his head back against the cave