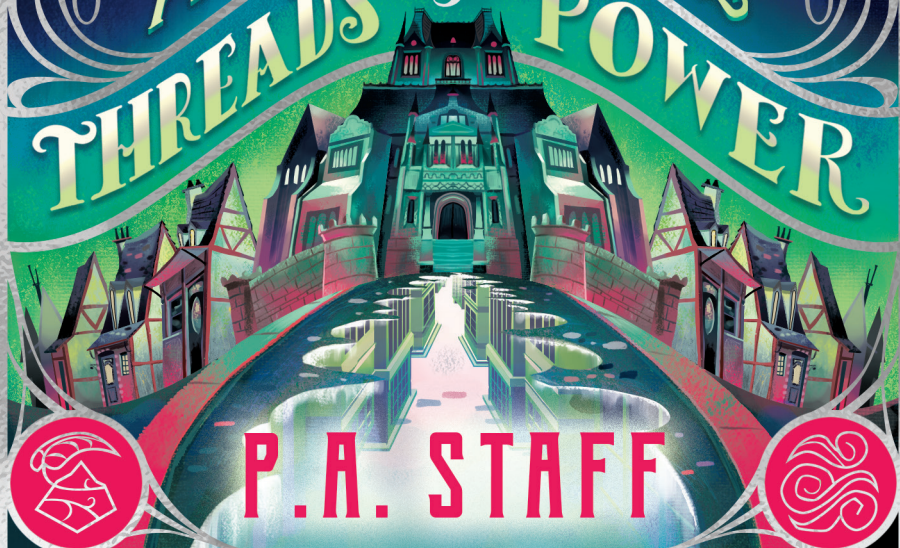


A BOY WITH NO MEMORY. A WORLD SEARCHING FOR A HERO.




# CASANDER DARKBLOOM


## AND THREADS OF THE POWER



P.A. STAFF



CASANDER DARKBLOOM  
AND THE  
THREADS *of* POWER







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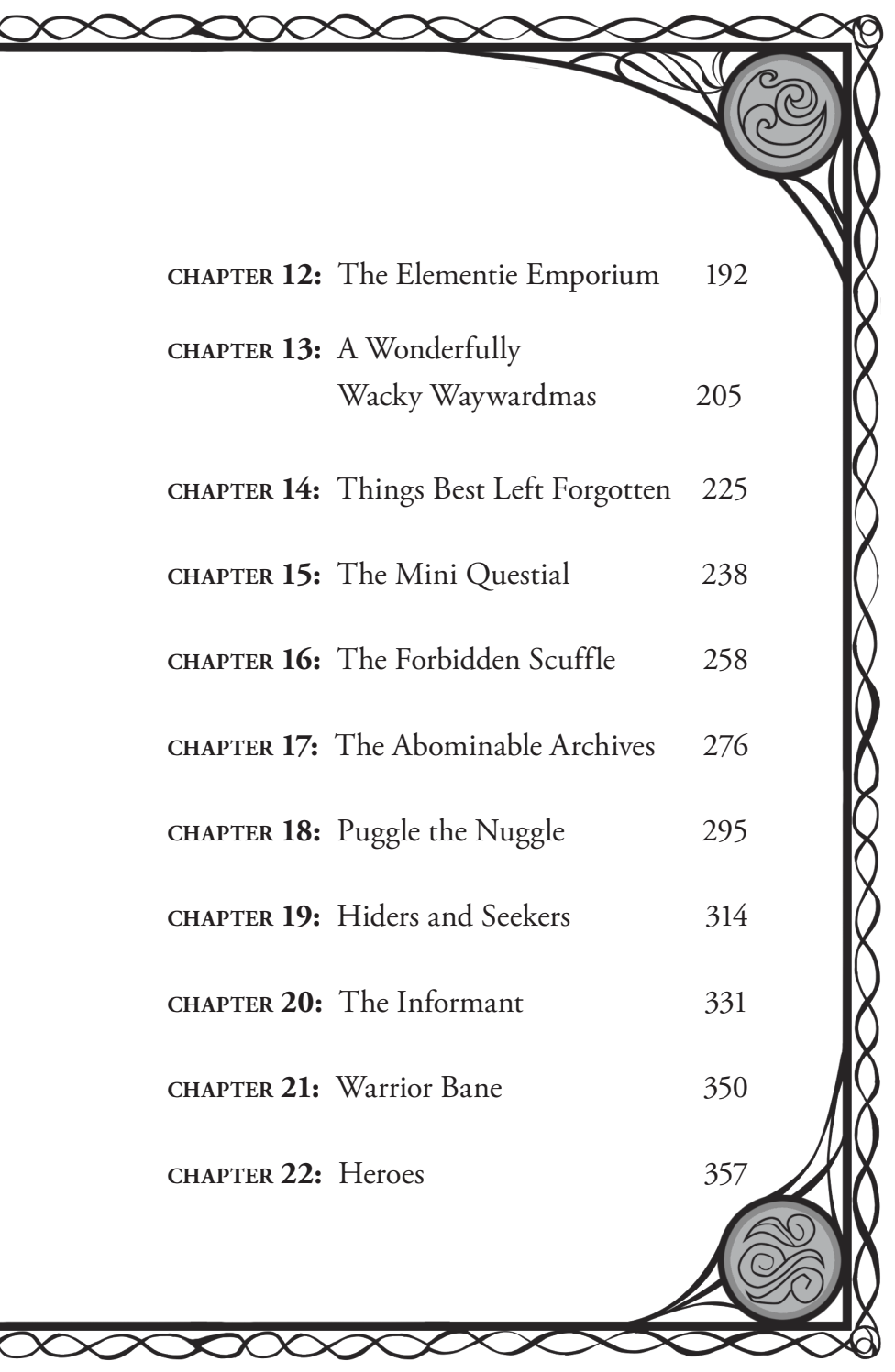
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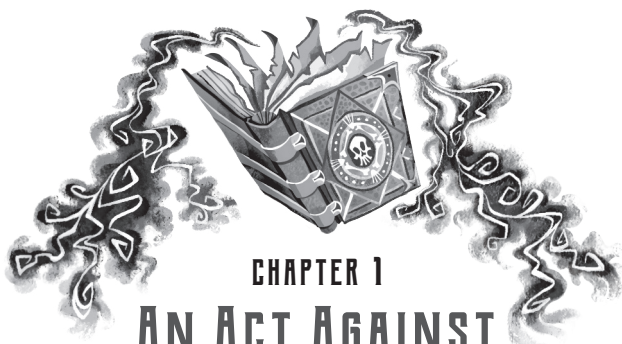
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CHAPTER 1  
**AN ACT AGAINST  
NATURE**

PARIS, FRANCE

**I**N THE BEGINNING, WHEN THE UNIVERSE WAS MERELY stardust and night, the world was woven from powerful threads of twilight and white.

Life and death. Good and evil. Dawn and dusk. That was the way things were at the origin of time, before the clocks started spinning, the years flew by, and the strength of these threads weakened as people evolved and spread across the world.

In some, the threads changed into different shades of colour – but in many people, they dulled, faded and lost their powers altogether.

It was this fact that Claudius Bane liked to remind himself of often, especially on nights like this. Nights that were unusual. Nights when the uneasy sense of something terrible was brewing in the air and he needed his courage

the most. It brought him a great deal of comfort to remember that he was one of the special ones. Someone who had more magic, more stardust, more powerful threads still woven through his veins than most ordinary people around him.

A trait that marked him as different.

One that identified him as someone known as *an Other*.

A cold, brisk wind whipped against Claudius's cheeks as he strode purposefully along the banks of the Seine. It was almost midnight; lamplight reflected off the river's quivering water and most of Paris was asleep as the clocks approached the witching hour. Alone, he hugged his long, sweeping violet cloak tighter around his body, shivering. Yet it wasn't just the freezing weather that chilled him to the bone.

It was what he had come here to do.

And who he had come to meet.

The summons had arrived yesterday at noon. Claudius hadn't the faintest idea how a letter from the Normie world had even reached the Balance Lands in the first place. All he knew was that one moment, he had been sitting at his desk, grading students' papers, and the next, a single, starched envelope was floating through his window, transported on an Airscaper mailman's wind.

Upon first inspection, it looked as simple and innocent as any other letter – probably a disgruntled parent complaining that their unruly child had ended up in detention again. But the envelope's black-and-white seal –

a snow-white bird entangled mid-flight with a scrawny jet-black raven – instantly made his fingers tremble. It was the symbol of the Lifemakers and Deathmakers. The most powerful, dangerous and rarest kind of Others to exist.

Only a handful of words were scrawled across the page inside in thick, black ink:

*Bring The Book of Skulls and Skin.*

*121a Rue de la Noir, Paris.*

*12 o'clock.*

*Or else I'll tell them everything.*

The sender hadn't signed their name at the bottom.

They didn't need to.

Claudius had only one secret he was willing to do anything to protect – and there was only one person who knew it.

*The Book of Skulls and Skin* felt like a weighted stone in his satchel now. It was an old tome. An ancient relic. Just having it in his possession – when nobody from the Grand Council knew it was missing – felt wrong. But bringing it into the mortal world ... that was an act against nature.

Overhead, rain cracked the sky open and thunder roared in disapproval. With the Eiffel Tower at his back, Claudius eventually reached the address on the note and rapped on the apartment's door three times.

It creaked open after the final knock.

“Who are you?” a small voice whispered from the other side.

*A child.*

This certainly wasn't who Claudius had been expecting to meet.

He swallowed hard. “My name is Dr Claudius Bane,” he said, before clutching his bag protectively closer and taking a step back into the shadows. “Someone sent for me from Wayward School. I'm here to deliver a book, but I believe I may have the wrong address.”

The door swung open.

“No,” the boy standing inside replied determinedly. His ferocious amber eyes narrowed. “I summoned you here and you're late.”

Words failed Claudius as he opened and closed his mouth like a gormless goldfish. The young boy staring back at him was merely ten or eleven years old. He was round-faced, but tall and lanky like a string bean, with soot-black hair. His eyes sparked like smokeless flames, causing Claudius to look away first.

Impossible.

He had expected to meet someone else – *anyone else* – but not this child. How had someone so young been smart and powerful enough to send a letter to the Balance Lands? What was this prodigy doing in the normal world? And, most worryingly of all, how did he know about *The Book of Skulls and Skin*?

Another uneasy feeling hummed in the air around Claudius now, thicker than before. *Fear*. He had seriously misjudged this encounter. The threads of power throbbed so violently within the boy before him that Claudius could feel them. Taste them. Smell them.

They felt like cold, lifeless fingers drawing lines up and down his spine. Like grave dirt on his tongue and the stale scent of something no longer living.

*Deathmaker.*

That was the Order of Others this boy belonged to.

“Come in,” said the boy sternly, stepping aside so Claudius could pass.

Still shaken, Claudius silently obliged.

The apartment was furnished in a simple fashion. There was a plain brown table surrounded by plain brown chairs. Flaky teal wallpaper overlooked two rickety beds tucked away in a corner, one of which cradled a frail-looking woman with her head turned to the wall. Raspy breaths rattled through her ribcage as Claudius and the boy approached. Her skin was as white as chalk, her hair as fine as silk, and she wore a holey nightgown which had been eaten away by moths. For a second, a flicker of familiarity tickled Claudius’s skin, but he had never met anyone so weak and sickly in his life.

“Don’t worry, Mama,” the boy said, snatching *The Book of Skulls and Skin* from Claudius’s bag before Claudius could stop him. He knelt beside his mother and placed

the book in her lap. "I'll make you better. This will all be over soon."

"Aeurdan," the woman croaked, reaching out for her son.

The boy took her hand and opened the book. When Claudius saw which page he had landed on, he leapt forward:

*Blood rituals and power binding.*

"What are you doing?" cried Claudius.

He never got an answer.

With a quick flick of his hand, the boy sent Claudius Bane flying across the room. Claudius didn't even have time to shout before he collided against the far brick wall with a sickening *crunch*. Helplessly, he watched as the young boy plucked a sewing needle from his mother's pocket, before first pricking her finger and then his own.

"NO!"

But it was too late. The boy had already closed his eyes and begun muttering the incantation.

Suddenly, the woman started to scream.

An impossible wind rose from nowhere and ripped through the apartment. The woman's pasty skin began to flake apart, turning to dust and disappearing into thin air. Her whole body shrank until her clothes hung and flapped like fabric on a laundry line, her eyes flashing milky white as she gripped her son's hand harder, trying to tell him that something was wrong. Very wrong.

When the young boy opened his own eyes, they were filled with terror.

“Mama!” he howled.

“Look what you’ve done!” shouted Claudius. He climbed stiffly to his feet and rushed towards them, but by the time he got there, the woman had vanished. A gossamer trace of dust was all that was left behind.

“Mama! Mama!” the boy wailed, clawing at the place where she had been.

The wind dissipated as quickly as it had come. Tears streamed down the boy’s face as Claudius spun around, searching for *The Book of Skulls and Skin*. What had he done? How had this happened?

His eyes finally fell on the tome, tossed under the other bed, at the same time the boy saw it. Together, they rushed towards it. Claudius’s hands wrapped around the book’s leather first – until he was swiftly dragged backwards by a small pair of hands around his ankles. Claudius kicked out at the boy. The boy recoiled and screamed. Then, with one more flick of his hand, the boy catapulted Claudius Bane to the other side of the room with a mighty, invisible force.

This time when Claudius hit the wall, everything went black.

