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Originally from South Africa, Marilize Loxton holds a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing. With over five years' experience in the marketing industry, she's especially intrigued by the power of social media to connect readers and sell books. Now based in Hampshire, England, Marilize can often be found exploring countryside trails with her beloved cocker spaniel. When she's not writing young adult and adult fantasy novels, she's likely savouring a perfectly brewed cup of coffee.

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A WISH SO DEADLY

Marilize Loxton

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Dedication to follow

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<page vii–viii glossary>

Glossary of Elemental Talents

Emotergy (Emo):

The ability to sense, shape and project emotions and energies.

Astrovoyance (Astro):

The ability to perceive thoughts, glimpse the past and project multiple versions of oneself.

Aquakinetics (Aqua):

Mastery over water in all its forms, from vapour to ice.

Lunamancy (Luna):

The ability to wield gravitational and tidal forces.

Florakinesis (Flora):

Control over plant life, from growth to decay.

Heliokinesis (Helio):

The power to manipulate light and solar energy.

Psammokinesis (Psam):

Mastery over sand, dust and the earth.

Pyromancy (Pyro):

The control of fire, heat and combustion.

Soulreaping (Soulreaper):

The ability to capture souls and manipulate the dead.

<page 1 starts with Games Master's Post>

Games Master's Post

20th Day of Mors Half, Stellar Year, 1200

<fo>*Citizens of the Triumstellar Accord,*

<fo>*Can you hear the ocean stirring? Soon, Aurora Isle will rise from the depths, called forth once more by the alignment of our three moons, Crea, Vita and Mors. The ballot has been cast, the teams have been chosen, and the Reckoning draws near.*

But this year, our three principalities shall bear witness to a tournament unlike any before. An extraordinary spectacle to mark its three-hundredth anniversary. The tides of tradition have shifted and, for the first time in history, twenty-four teams will enter the arena. Twice the contenders, double the stakes ... and an even greater thrill!

In the coming days, we will see courage falter and bonds splinter. After all, legends are never forged without a little ruin. I could share more, but I am not one to divulge all my secrets at once. Stay vigilant, dear friends. For when the gong sounds, the tournament will begin.

Yours ever-watchful,

The Games Master

Chapter 1

<fo1>*Anguish.* The energy surrounding this place reeks of it. A lonely cottage perched on a hill, a dark silhouette against a brooding sky. Arched windows peek through a covering of overgrown ivy, panes waxy with age.

My boss, Alaric, didn't tell me much about this job. Only that the old couple who lived here recently died, and their family wanted the place cleansed of any negative energies left behind. Apparently, a Soul Wraith has been seen wandering the four walls.

Weeds claw at my ankles as I cross the wild garden. Their thorny fingers snag greedily at my tights, and a small nick sends a run up the side of my leg.

I curse under my breath. That's another pair ruined. I'll have to try and fix them in my room tonight, after my sister, Elara, has gone to bed. She'll never let me hear the end of it if she finds out I've ruined my last good pair. We don't exactly have the money to replace them. Recently, we haven't even had enough money for the heating.

The air around the cottage is thick. It's like trying to breathe through a mouthful of dust, suffocating with the bitter taste of neglect. Half-empty milk bottles litter the porch, filled with murky rainwater and crusted with grime.

I retch as the smell of sour milk fills my nostrils. Quickly push open the front door and step inside. The floorboards groan, dust particles pirouetting through the air.

My rucksack lands on the floor with a thud, and I rifle through it for a bundle of sage and a box of matches. Once lit, the sage crackles softly. Little orange embers eat away at the dry leaves until plumes of white smoke curl through the air.

I suppress a sneeze, inhaling the dust and the wisps of sage that envelop me as I crouch down to inspect the post. The floor is strewn with newspapers, piles of unopened envelopes and old copies of magazines.

Blooms & Roots Digest. Herbal Living Quarterly. One of the old residents must've been a Flora. I doubt they'd approve of the garden's current state. Most Flora elementals wouldn't be caught dead with weeds strangling their rose bushes.

The low sound of a hummed tune drifts towards me, and I look up. As if conjured from my thoughts, a tiny figure with white hair clutching a pair of knitting needles crosses the end of the hall, a half-knitted scarf trailing behind her on the dusty floor.

There you are, I think. Seems like an easy enough job.

The old lady stops at the foot of the stairs. Still humming. Knitting needles still clacking together. She has her back to me, entirely unaware of my presence. I tiptoe forward, trying not to startle her. But the floorboards are old and uncooperative.

The wood lets out a splintered whine. She doesn't move. I take another quick step forward, feeling the hair stand up at the back of my neck. She's almost within reach. There's a force tugging at my skin, urging me towards her.

I give in to the pull, allowing my Emo senses to focus on the threads of energy surrounding the old lady. Forming her. I reach out a hand. *All I need is a single touch...*

My fingers reach for the dangling end of her scarf, wrapping it around my hand and yanking it back. The old lady ducks and escapes the loop.

Her knitting needles clack against the floorboards, and she runs straight for the wall to her right, her small, hunched figure melting through it like it's absorbing her.

The scarf evaporates in my grasp, leaving a stain of wispy black energy hovering in its place.

“For Aether’s sake...” I wave the stain away with smoking sage. It was an amateur move, lunging at her like that. I was too eager. They’re always faster than they look.

I fling the sage at the wall in frustration. *So much for an easy job.* My fingers trace the gritty surface of the wall through which the old lady disappeared. I follow it down the hallway until I reach a closed door.

The doorknob twists easily, and I take a deep breath. I throw the door open. A cosy kitchen stares back at me.

The wooden cabinets are weathered and worn, and crooked shelves showcase an array of jars filled with herbs, spices and mysterious colourful concoctions. Potted plants sit wilted on the sun-drenched windowsill, their leaves now dry and brittle. No old lady.

I approach a cauldron perched on the stovetop, recoiling at the sight of a murky, lumpy substance within. Its aroma is faint – dirt, mostly – but I still wrinkle my nose in

distaste. Floras and their concoctions. If you ask me, the family will have a much harder time cleaning up this mess than a roaming demon.

Moving towards the shelves, I scan the collection of jars. The contents are mostly chalky and crystallized, but a small glass shaker grabs my attention – starbliss zest, a vibrant yellow spice known for its ability to amplify flavours.

I only know this because Elara has been gushing over it in some cookery catalogue for weeks. She would absolutely adore it, and it just so happens I'm yet to find her a birthday present. The glass shaker finds a home in the front pocket of my tunic, and I give it a satisfied pat before turning and surveying the rest of the kitchen.

Something stirs inside the pantry. This time, I don't rush. I take my time, slowly approaching the wooden door. I throw it open. The old lady stands frozen with her back to me. Her shadow throws strange shapes against the shelves at the back of the pantry, twisting and writhing unnaturally. Its outline is sharp and jagged, a contrast to her rounder, plumper form, and it's dancing and contorting like it's trying to escape.

We're both quiet. Motionless.

I close my eyes and try to focus on her bitter energy. I remind myself that I'm not facing an actual old lady, but a demon donning her face, born from whatever tragic, untimely death had claimed the old couple who lived here.

The old lady spins. I only see her dear, innocent face for a second longer before her skin pales and her wrinkles deepen, her irises turning dark as coals, shrinking like prunes as

the Soul Wraith begins to reveal itself. The old lady stares at me, and then a cough shudders through her, spraying out a thick midnight-blue liquid.

I bring my hand to my mouth as the liquid trickles from her eyes and ears, carving a path down her neck and into the collar of her dress.

The sight is horrifying enough to scar any unsuspecting person for life. But this isn't my first dance with a Soul Wraith.

The first time I saw one, I was barely old enough to understand what it was, or what it meant that I could see it – what it meant to be an Emo, an elemental with the ability to sense emotions and energies.

Soul Wraiths are corrupted energies, born from traumatic deaths. If left uncleansed, they twist and corrupt, transforming into demons that feed off fear, grief and despair. Only an Emo can see a Soul Wraith in its exposed form, and it only reveals itself to other elementals when it assumes a human face. Soul Wraiths haunt and pester, causing a slow decay to the people and places around them.

By the time Elara saw her first Soul Wraith, she didn't have our parents to turn to for guidance. We were two little girls, huddled together with five other foster children sleeping in beds around us.

I remember telling Elara to ignore the demon. To instead focus her talents on the positive energies that surrounded us – the warmth of our tiny bodies pressed together, and the lingering sweetness of the boiled sweets we pinched from our foster mum.

Elara never saw another Soul Wraith again after that night. At school, the scholars marvelled at her ability to control, manipulate and absorb positive energies. I was proud of her – jealous, too. Because no matter how hard I tried, I’ve never been able to sense anything positive after our parents died.

Where most Emos can choose whether to embrace negativity, I was thrust into it, compelled to master it, because it was the only option I had.

“You like testing my patience, don’t you?” I ask, though I’m fully aware there’s no chance of a response from the Soul Wraith.

I make my next calculated move quickly, snatching a chair from the small dining table behind me and hurling it at the old lady.

She screams a high-pitched screech that makes me wince. Her figure disperses; an eruption that splatters the midnight-blue liquid all over my body.

“Thanks,” I drone, wiping the sticky substance from my eyes and stepping back.

The exposed Soul Wraith flits past me in a shroud of black, only vaguely resembling something human. It zooms through the kitchen, toppling the remaining three dining chairs, and slithers around the doorframe back into the hallway.

I sigh as I try to scrape the liquid off my face and out of my straight black hair, but it clings, stretching into slimy strings before splattering on to the floor. The odour catches me off guard. It smells sharp and metallic. I didn’t register what it means before.

Most Soul Wraiths I encounter are spawned from untimely deaths caused by accidents – manifesting as black smoke – or illnesses – erupting as white smoke. It only strikes me now... Midnight-blue liquid means poison.

Chills ripple across my skin, but there's no time to consider the implications. I hurry across the kitchen into the hallway, where I bend to collect my bundle of sage. It's no longer burning, so I have to rekindle it.

The hallway is still. Even the shadows seem to hold their breath. To my right is the staircase in front of which the old lady first appeared. The stairs stretch up to a sunny landing, but, despite the warm rays streaming through the window, the air is chilly – that's how you know an exposed Soul Wraith has come through here.

I follow the chill down the hallway into a parlour at the front of the cottage. An ancient piano sits in the corner. On the wall above it hangs a row of family portraits. A man and woman, ageing together over the years.

I recognize her tiny figure and white hair, a cardigan hugging her small frame. She's smiling and her brown eyes are warm, gleaming with kindness. It seems so beyond the realms of possibility that she was once kind, now that a Soul Wraith dons her face.

The fading plumes of sage follow me through the parlour. I glide my fingers along the intricate details of the fireplace, pausing for a beat as I stare into the dark abyss of the chimney's gaping mouth. It would be a good place for a Soul Wraith to hide, but I'm not sensing any energy inside.

I tiptoe towards a small leather trunk next to a battered emerald sofa. There's nothing special about its appearance. But I can sense it. A vibration so subtle, stirring such faint inky-black tendrils through their air that I nearly overlook it.

"Got you," I whisper as I edge closer, sage in hand.

The Soul Wraith stirs inside its confinement, but I'm ready. The trunk is slightly ajar. I slide the sage through the crack, and a torrent of energy bursts forth, wild and untamed.

It flies over my head, and I gasp. My first instinct is to fling myself back across the sofa, reaching out with every ounce of my being. The moment my fingers brush its feathery tendrils, the Soul Wraith succumbs to my touch, and I absorb it like I'm inhaling it.

The sofa envelops me as I close my eyes and let myself be consumed by the unfolding vision. It's old and fractured, marred by the Soul Wraith's shadow, but I can make out the form of the old lady, captured in a world of despair.

She's sat by the kitchen table, sunlight streaming in through the window and surrounded by earthy fumes bubbling up from the cauldron. She wields a golden pincer in her thin, shaky fingers, harvesting starbliss zest from a potted starflower in front of her.

Something startles the old lady. Someone, rather. I can't make them out, but the sight of them stains the old lady's soul with anguish, which darkens throughout their verbal exchange. I can only make out fragments.

"What are you doing here?" the old lady demands.

The intruder speaks in a smooth, melodic tone, but her words drip with a poisonous edge. “I’m here to collect my inheritance. From my dear brother, rest his soul. Isn’t it tragic how he died? Bandits, I hear. Ambushed him on his way to the capital. I don’t imagine he had much to steal, by the looks of this place.”

“He didn’t leave you anything. He wanted nothing to do with you.”

“His feelings towards me are irrelevant. He had some ... family heirlooms in his possession. Now that he’s gone, they rightfully belong to me.”

“I vowed never to let you have them.”

The air around the intruder crackles with restless, impatient energy. It’s warm and heady, like fingers drumming against my senses.

“Where are they?” she demands.

The old lady rises to her feet, her pincers extended like a weapon. “I know what you’ve got planned,” she says. “I’ll never tell you where they are, even if you kill me.”

“As you wish...”

The vision shifts. It’s pressing down on me, crushing my ribs. The old lady keeps shaking her head and saying, *NO. NO. NO.*

Then suddenly, all I can taste is an overwhelming sourness ... and bitterness rushing up my throat. The intruder’s fingers curl around the old lady’s neck. She begins to cough, and I grab at my heart.

It's a sharp sensation, like a blade gutting the old lady from the inside out. I can feel the air being pulled from her lungs, see darkness clouding her mind, her senses dulling to nothingness. A quiet, terrifying surrender as her soul is pulled from her body, leaving behind only cold silence. In a flicker, as if extinguishing a candle, the vision splinters.

The Soul Wraith, now cleansed through my absorbing its negative energy, dissolves, and I sit up, gasping for air.

This doesn't make sense. The vision indicates that the old lady was strangled. Any basic tome on Emotergy would confirm that a Soul Wraith erupting in blue liquid signals death by poison. It's one of the fundamentals – red embers for death by fire, soapy foam for suffocation or drowning, black shards for bloodshed, black mist for accidental death, and white mist for death by illness. Each dispersal is a reflection of how the victim's soul was corrupted; a twisted echo of their final moments. I must be missing something.

My heart is in my throat, gagging me. It's not often I'm shaken, especially during a job, but that encounter was far more intense than I bargained for.

Something wicked happened to that old lady. It was cruel and cold and inhumane. I can still taste it in my mouth. I push my hair behind my ears, and my hand comes away sticky with sweat and slime. I'm about to get up and leave when a force – something icy and relentless, stronger than any Soul Wraith – grips me. It tugs at my core, pulling me towards the floor until I'm on my hands and knees.

I blink, confused. *Lingering effects from the vision, perhaps?*

I'm searching for the bundle of sage when I sense it. A flicker of energy. Something on the floor, or, more accurately, under it.

I lower myself closer to the floor, peeling back the rug that covers half of the floorboard in question. It's slightly raised at the edges, like it's hiding a secret. My fingers slip easily under the upturned corner, and I give a gentle tug.

The floorboard resists, but only for a moment. It pops suddenly, nearly tossing me back, and there it is, in the recess beneath – a small embellished chest, like a jewellery box, covered with dust. I reach in and lift it out. A thick layer of dust comes away on my finger, and I grimace. It must've been years, perhaps decades, since someone stashed it under here.

The old lady. Her husband – who must have been the killer's brother, murdered by bandits. Are these the family heirlooms from the vision? The items the old lady refused to give up? They must be priceless if someone is willing to kill for them.

I bite my bottom lip as an all too familiar battle churns within me. *It would be so easy... No one even knows this is here...*

A part of me knows that stealing from Alaric's clientele could be a one-way ticket to losing the only job I've ever been good at.

But on the flip side, I'm not being paid well for my services. Elara and I need the money. Plus, if nobody is aware that something's been taken, can it even be called stealing? I hold my breath, caught in a tug of war with my conscience.

Eventually, the pull of temptation proves too much to ignore. I open the box. Purse my lips. I'm almost disappointed. I was expecting it to be filled to the brim with jewels, but all I see are three golden rings. Still, any one of these is probably worth more Sol than I could make in a year, if not two. And there's something about them, an energy that makes my skin prickle.

I reach into the box. A gnawing, invasive power emanates from the first ring I touch, an eerie whisper echoing in the shadowy recesses of my mind. I recognize what I'm sensing, and my stomach rolls.

These rings are Necroseals. A Soulreaper's relics. Soulreapers are elementals with the ability to manipulate the forces of morality.

At school, we were taught that a Soulreaper's reaping is more than just separating life from death. It's a violent extraction of essence. Their power corrupts and twists, consuming one's very being.

It makes sense now, why the Soul Wraith spewed blue liquid despite the old lady not being poisoned. And I was wrong. She hadn't been strangled either. The old lady had been made rotten from the inside out before her life force was sucked dry. It must have been the work of a Soulreaper.

I've never met one. They're rare among elementals. Most were either executed or subdued and heavily monitored after the Great Unrest several centuries ago.

The Great Unrest was a brutal civil war that ravaged the three now-united principalities, Astraloria, Wrisha and Solara, ignited by the desire to control resources. Some Soulreapers were deployed to raise armies of the dead for battle, and others to infiltrate enemy lines and drain the souls of rival soldiers while they slept. Their talents were unpredictable and volatile.

After the war, the newly formed High Council passed the Soulreaper's Decree to oversee and regulate the practice of necromancy. Young Soulreapers are schooled and monitored at the Necronova Academy in south western Wrisha, and any Soulreaper found to be practising their talents without sanction is banished for good.

I can't believe the Principal Guard could have let this crime go unnoticed. Perhaps the Soulreaper responsible has already been apprehended – or they're far craftier than anyone gives them credit for. I must remember to ask Alaric. Maybe the old couple's family mentioned something to him.

I look back at the rings. If these really are Necroseals, they're worth even more than I thought. My fingers plunge into the box. I help myself to two rings, one adorned with a ruby and the other a delicate light-blue moon diamond.

The third is a gold band. It's plain, no gems, but, looking more closely, I see it's covered in delicate engravings. Elara would love this.

I pocket my three rings, grab the sage, which has rolled under the sofa, and return the box to its hiding place. Sure, I'm not supposed to swipe from clientele, but who's going to know? Besides, after that vision, I'm definitely not getting paid enough to have a conscience.

I slam the front door on my way out and don't look back.