

Prologue

Herbert Grizzle, Overseer of the Death Rite, didn't like surprises. He did like laws, order and predictability. And his job involved plenty of those.

He patrolled the Freedom Tower, satisfied at the way everyone who noticed him stopped talking and started working even faster. Nobody made eye contact with him lest they be accused of slacking.

There was a gloomy elegance to the Death Rite. The darkness, the truckloads of ornate coffins, the swift efficiency with which the officials unloaded them. Half a dozen supervisors shouted orders over the rumbling truck engines while Grizzle strolled among the organized chaos.

Ever since the Draven family had flouted the law and tried to oppose the Death Rite, it had become particularly important that everyone understood how crucial it was. The Dravens had thought that being powerful meant they could break the rules. They'd learned the hard way that they were wrong. *Nobody* could defy the law.

Assured that everyone was doing their duty with the appropriate diligence, Grizzle summoned his magic and slowly floated up into the air, his long black jacket billowing around his bony frame.

Twenty metres above the ground, Grizzle steadied himself and hovered there, the air hardening beneath his boots to form an invisible ledge. The full moon cast ghostly silver rays upon the scene below, making everything seem otherworldly. For the past thirty years, these proceedings had been Grizzle's nightly rhythm: trucks delivering the Nullborns birthed within the city of Astralis and the surrounding areas, Nullborns from further away being delivered by magic, and appearing out of thin air in the cavernous ditch that circled the Tower. He was a conductor, this was his orchestra, and he relished the grim harmony of it all.

Tonight's Death Rite was particularly important, as Esmond Ike had just been reappointed as Head of the High Commission of Magic and would be giving his victory speech soon with the Freedom Tower as his backdrop. Floodlights had been set up and a red carpet had been rolled out. A gaggle of journalists was waiting, cameras ready, and the crowd of onlookers was growing larger by the second.

The High Commission of Magic consisted of the twelve most powerful Mages in the world. They regulated the use of magic, and had their own force of officers and detectives who investigated magical crimes. Their leader, of course, had to be the most powerful of all, as the job was the most important in all of the Above Plane – second only to President. It was no surprise that Esmond Ike had got it again. HCOM leaders had only ever come from one of three powerful families, and most had come from the Ike family.

A sudden prickle of premonition raced down Grizzle's spine and interrupted his thoughts.

The rebels were coming.

He looked towards Fairvale Forest a mile west from the Tower,

his anger flaring, and tapped into the tide of magic pulsing within him. Immediately, his vision sharpened, cutting through the darkness and zooming in as though he was wearing binoculars. Shadows shifted at the edge of the forest. It could just be nocturnal animals on their nightly hunt but Grizzle was sure it wasn't. He could sense people drawing closer, and his senses were never wrong. They were probably planning to snatch some Nullborn coffins in full view of the cameras that had been set up to capture Esmond's speech. Well, Grizzle was prepared for them. Armed police officers surrounded the Tower, and High Commission officers were also on patrol.

Those pesky rebels needed to accept that there was no place in society for people born without magic. The Above Plane was for Mages only – people born in a halo of white light who would awaken magical powers in their teens. The Death Rite was a necessary step to ensure that Nullborns, people born without a halo, would never be allowed to cause destruction again.

When Nullborns had been allowed to live, the results had been catastrophic. The ancients, in their wisdom, had decided they must uproot the weeds before they choked the wheat. Hence the Death Rite. Anyone who tried to fight against such a fundamental, centuries-old custom was asking for banishment.

Mentally, Grizzle reached towards Jonas Varkad, the lead police officer, and spoke into his mind. *I believe the rebels are here.*

We haven't seen any sign of them yet, Jonas replied, his voice filling Grizzle's head. *But we're combing the whole area. Tell Esmond's team it's safe to get started.*

Satisfied that Jonas was on the case, Grizzle reached towards Wes Riddek, head of Esmond Ike's security team. *Everything is under control. Esmond can come out now.*

Then he focused on the workers below. The four chambers in the Tower's wall had been opened – square holes that were just large enough to admit a coffin; one in the north, west, east and south faces of the Tower. Workers hurriedly placed the coffins on fifty-metre-long conveyor belts that fed each hole. One by one, the coffins disappeared into the dark void within the Tower, never to be seen again.

Built centuries ago for disposing of Nullborns, the Freedom Tower stood at the centre of Astralis, a sturdy monument to unity and order. It was made of aethrium, a rare indestructible substance that looked like a cross between steel and glass, and it gleamed, even at night. Nobody knew how exactly it worked or what it did to the Nullborns, but they did know that the Death Rite was painless – a humane death for inhuman creatures.

It took only twenty minutes to get all the coffins into the Tower and Grizzle felt a flicker of satisfaction at such efficiency. There'd been two hundred and eleven coffins tonight.

The conveyor belts retracted into the Tower, humming softly, then four loud clangs pierced the air as the chambers slammed shut – until tomorrow night when they would do this all over again.

Grizzle looked up at the pinnacle of the Tower. On cue, the first silvery wisp escaped the flue – a Nullborn spirit floating back to the Beyond Plane.

The Death Rite had begun.

A few seconds ticked by then a blindingly bright turquoise light twisted free of the Tower and shot high into the heavens, gradually dissipating into nothing the higher it went. More followed in quick succession, flashing and soaring, a spectacular symphony of colour.

Grizzle glanced towards the forest where he suspected the rebels were hiding. Jonas and his officers would have arrested them by now. He reached out with his mind to speak into

Jonas's . . . and nothing happened.

Grizzle frowned. Had Jonas closed himself off? Grizzle had instructed him to leave his mind open for the duration of tonight's Death Rite. He reached out again and realized that not only could he not gain access to Jonas's mind, he also couldn't sense him at all.

I'll be having some strict words with him, Grizzle thought. He tried to summon his magic to float back down to the ground and found himself oddly . . . stuck. Even more alarming, he couldn't actually *feel* his magic.

A horrible realization struck him. Perhaps Jonas hadn't closed himself off. It seemed, instead, that Grizzle was closed *in*.

Frantic, he tried once again to tap into the deep waves within him that usually bubbled with latent power, but there was something in the way. It was like a dam had been built.

Nothing like this had ever happened to Grizzle before. He'd awakened his powers at the age of thirteen – many, many, *many* years ago – just like most other Mages in the Above Plane. Since then he had *never* been unable to access them.

With a frustrated growl he tried again. And still couldn't reach them. Horror washed over him. What was happening? He couldn't just hover in the air forever, like a massive fly caught in a web.

What's wrong, Grizzle?

If Grizzle could move, he would have jumped as high as the Nullborn spirits still shimmering above. Someone was speaking into his mind without him granting them access!

Can't tap into your power?

The voice was young. Smug. Taunting.

Who are you? Grizzle thought, but he wasn't sure if the person would hear him since he couldn't use his magic to speak into their mind.

But whoever it was did hear because he replied, *I'm the Spider*. Grizzle was about to frown, then he remembered his thought from moments before about being caught in a web. This individual must have been listening in on his thoughts.

Power is everything, isn't it? the voice asked. *People with all the power get to make laws about the powerless. They think they have the right to decide who gets to live and who doesn't.*

Grizzle's blood turned to ice. Then he told himself to relax. He just needed to calm down and figure out what trick had been used to block his magic. Then he could break free and have Jonas arrest this scoundrel.

This is how it feels to be powerless, the voice gloated. *To be at other people's mercy.*

'Let me go,' Grizzle demanded aloud.

As you wish, the voice whispered through his mind.

Then the invisible ledge beneath Grizzle's feet vanished and he began to plummet towards the ground.

'No!' he cried, his voice echoing through the night.

The wind buffeted him, stealing his breath and any further protests he might have made.

Stop! he screamed internally. *Stop this now, whoever you are!*

But he knew the other person wasn't listening anymore.

He also knew, with horrifying clarity, that this was no joke.

I'm going to die, he thought as his body careened through the night, towards the crowd that had gathered for Esmond's speech.

Rage surged through him. *This cannot be happening!*

Esmond Ike lowered his car window as Wez Riddek, head of his security team, approached.

‘I’ve just received word from Grizzle that it’s safe to proceed,’ Wez said, opening the car door for him.

‘Excellent.’ Esmond stepped out and looked up to the pinnacle of the Tower. Herbert Grizzle, the Overseer of the Death Rite, was hovering above it, monitoring the procedure.

Esmond made his way to the red carpet, then forced his lips into a grin as cameras flashed and the night air filled with cheers. His smile would have been real if his wife, Ida, had agreed to come. She should have been by his side, celebrating his victory with him.

He waved to the large crowd of people that had gathered on the other side of the stanchions and they cheered again. After a few minutes of posing for pictures, the event coordinator came to usher him away and he heaved an internal sigh of relief. He’d displayed as much faux cheerfulness as he could manage for one night.

As he stepped off the red carpet, he was surrounded by bodyguards and a throng of merry, and rather tipsy, government officials who congratulated him once more. Esmond was thrilled at being reappointed Head of the High Commission of Magic for a third term. His Assistant Head, Baron Calhoun, had been honing his power in order to try to compete for the role, but when the results were announced an hour ago, he’d been a very distant second place. Barring some kind of scandal, this role was Esmond’s for life, as it had been for his father until his death eight years ago.

Esmond was led into a section of the crowd that was overflowing with VIP guests. Music swirled on the frigid night breeze and chatter filled the air. The top strata of Astralis’s society, dressed in their finest clothes, had gathered to celebrate his win. A few people had erected transparent magical shields around themselves to stay warm.

Behind the VIP crowd was a standing-room-only area, packed to overflowing with thousands of people. Two metres above the standing crowd hovered thousands more people – those powerful enough to keep themselves suspended in mid-air for an hour or two and get a better view of the stage.

At Esmond's appearance, dozens of VIP guests and some of his HCOM colleagues flocked towards him. He dug up his fake smile once again as he exchanged pleasantries with them.

'Ida couldn't make it?' asked a smooth, deep voice from behind him.

Esmond turned. It was Baron Calhoun. His posture, as ever, was rod-straight and his blue eyes were twin frozen pools that didn't thaw when he smiled. He was a sore loser.

'She'll be here soon,' Esmond said, although he knew full well she wasn't coming. He figured it was best to pretend she was running late and hope that Baron forgot all about her. There was only so much Esmond could do to protect Ida when she kept publishing critical articles about the High Commission. She was at her office right now, probably editing yet another scathing piece. As Editor-in-Chief of the *Australis Gazette*, she often worked late, but tonight it was particularly vexing that she wouldn't tear herself away for just a couple of hours.

'Any word from the security team?' Esmond asked, hoping to divert the conversation away from Ida, especially with so many people listening.

'I received an update a few minutes ago,' Baron replied. 'There's been no trouble from the rebels so far. Maybe the presence of so many police and HCOM officers has deterred them.'

A few people heaved sighs of relief.

‘Interesting,’ said Morty Hoakes, another member of the High Commission. ‘Do we dare hope they’ve decided to stop making a nuisance of themselves?’ As ever, Morty’s wild shock of unruly hair stood at odd angles, as though trying to escape his head, and his bow tie was askew. He was, however, wearing matching socks tonight.

‘That is unlikely,’ Esmond replied.

Ida had been reporting on the rebels’ campaign against the Death Rite and the whole of Astralis was buzzing about it. They hadn’t experienced so much upheaval since the Dravens. The High Commission was going to have to take some drastic action.

‘I do think it would be beneficial if Nullborns could be detected in the womb,’ Baron said. ‘Getting rid of them before their mothers ever get to see them would be less traumatic for all involved.’

Esmond schooled his features in order to not show his disgust. ‘I highly doubt that would be less traumatic, Baron.’

A few people laughed and Baron’s eyes narrowed. ‘Getting soft, Esmond?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Just think what terrible press that would give us,’ said Narja Kenning, another of their colleagues. Tonight she was dripping with pearls and using a spell to make her skin glow like she had molten starlight running through her veins.

Esmond nodded his agreement. ‘We need to come up with some kind of compromise. But tonight is not about work, so how about we drink and dance and hash this out on Monday?’

A few people chuckled and agreed, but Baron was scowling. ‘Compromise?’ he asked. He never let anything go. ‘I don’t think *compromise* is what you do with criminals who think they can overthrow a centuries-old practice that is foundational to the

peace and stability of our Plane. The law says it is a crime to be born without a halo. That crime carries the death sentence. I see no room for compromise in that.'

Esmond was saved from having to respond when the event coordinator stepped forward. 'Mr Ike, it's time to take your seat.'

Esmond gladly followed him to the very front of the VIP section where his son, Damien, and daughter, Missy, were already seated.

'Congratulations, Dad,' Damien said, grinning.

Esmond beamed. 'Thank you.'

He mostly kept his children away from the spotlight, but on occasions like this it was expected that his whole family be present. Damien, especially, would have to get used to the spotlight as he was likely to become the Head of HCOM in the future. He was turning fifteen in a few days and hadn't manifested any powers yet, which was unusual, as most people got their powers at thirteen. But Esmond had no doubt that once he did get them, they would be just as big as his own – and every other Ike before them.

Esmond lifted his brows at Missy, who was eleven and getting delightfully sassy. 'No congratulations from you?'

'I already knew you were going to win,' she replied. 'Congratulations, though.'

'Thank you.'

A blue-rimmed portal opened beside them and Esmond was taken aback when Ida stepped through it. She took the seat between their children. Esmond couldn't help the grin that curved his lips. She'd come after all. Ma Penny, Ida's mother and his children's favourite chaperone, was sitting behind them, her hair studded with an abundance of jewels that twinkled under the bright floodlights – flamboyant as ever.

Esmond sat beside Missy and reached across her to squeeze Ida's

hand. She smiled, but Esmond knew it was for the benefit of the cameras pointed at them. This was the last place she wanted to be.

The music stopped abruptly as Vice President Joella Vrost ascended the stage. She always attended these celebrations on behalf of the President. Her attire was simple, as usual. Sharp pantsuit, minimal makeup, hair pulled back in a neat bun. She was, however, sporting glowing skin. It was the latest trend among elite women with power to spare on the more trivial things of life.

‘Good evening, distinguished Mages,’ Joella said, using her magic to send her voice booming through the night. ‘Thank you all for gathering to celebrate the reappointment of Esmond Ike as Head of the High Commission of Magic for a third term. I’m sure I speak for everyone when I say that Esmond is a remarkable leader whose unwavering dedication and boundless passion inspire us all. Guided by his vision, the High Commission has accomplished so much good over the past eight years, and we look forward with anticipation to the continued positive impact he will undoubtedly have in the coming years. Please come up and say a few words, Esmond.’

Applause broke out and cameras flashed as Esmond stood. The stage was positioned so that he would have the Freedom Tower behind him as he gave his speech. A reminder to everyone – especially the rebels – that trying to revolt was futile.

As Esmond climbed the stage steps, the first Nullborn light floated from the Tower in a silvery streak that pierced the sky. It was perfect timing. Grizzle was still up there, overseeing the Death Rite.

Esmond air-kissed Joella, then turned to face the crowd and sea of cameras. He’d just opened his mouth to speak when something dropped from above and landed with a thud at his feet.

It took Esmond a moment to work out what it was. When he did, horror struck him. A body! Blood had splattered over Esmond's polished shoes.

A gasp went up from the crowd, voices rising with alarm.

Who is it?

What's going on?

Isn't that Herbert Grizzle?

Esmond's jaw dropped as he realized that it was indeed Grizzle. He looked up at the Tower in confusion. Grizzle had been hovering by it only a moment ago.

There were more cries as a fist-sized ball of yellow light appeared out of thin air just above Grizzle's body. It crackled with an energy that felt very foreign to any magic Esmond had ever encountered.

The ball of light began to move, leaving a trail of shimmering yellow in its wake that didn't fade. It was writing something. The crowd went deathly silent as everyone awaited the message.

LET THEM LIVE.

Esmond's heart constricted. This was the rebels' doing.

A transparent blue shield materialized around him – his security team protecting him. Similar shields appeared around his family on the front row of the crowd.

Stewards were already flocking towards the stage to get the body and Esmond spotted Baron giving orders to other members of the High Commission, no doubt about blocking the magic of whoever was behind this publicity stunt. Unfortunately, the cameras were rolling, broadcasting this to the whole Plane, and journalists were taking pictures.

The stewards were on the stage now, but before any of them could grab the body, it moved and they all leapt back. Grizzle's

arm lifted from the ground and the whole crowd gasped as he used his index finger to write an exclamation mark at the end of the slogan in the same yellow script. Then his arm flopped back to the stage floor, limp and lifeless once more.

Unease rippled through Esmond's entire being. Only a very powerful Mage could do such a thing – someone with power to rival his own, and he knew of no such person in all of the Above Plane.

Baron, accompanied by Wez and a troop of imposing bodyguards, approached the stage. 'I don't think whoever did this is here in the crowd,' Baron said, 'but I can't say for sure. I can't trace their power, so I can't block it. You'll need to be taken to safety.'

'What do you mean you can't trace their power?' Esmond snapped.

'Sir,' Wez said, as the bodyguards formed a protective circle around them, 'we're sending you and your family to a safe unit.'

'You expect me to run off and hide after what just happened?' Esmond demanded. 'I need to address the crowd. Reassure them.'

Baron placed a firm hand on Esmond's shoulder. 'The people will understand. This is protocol. You can give your speech remotely.'

Before Esmond could protest any further, a weightlessness took him over. He could easily resist – after all, he was infinitely more powerful than Wez and any of the security team – but he allowed his body to be snatched away.

He reappeared in a spacious room with no windows and no furniture – only stark white walls and nondescript stone floors. His family materialized around him. Missy's face was streaked with tears and she was trembling.

Ida drew her into a hug. 'I'm sorry you had to see that,' she said gently.

‘That was the rebels, wasn’t it?’ Damien asked. Esmond could tell he was trying to put on a brave face, but his fear was obvious in the crack of his voice and his wide eyes. ‘It was a threat, right? A threat to you.’

‘They can’t hurt your father,’ Ma Penny said. ‘He’s the most powerful Mage in the Plane.’ Then she began to regale them with a tale about a prankster who had once snatched the head teacher’s wig when she was in school.

With his children distracted by their grandmother, Esmond focused his mind and reached towards the crowd that had gathered for his reappointment speech. He cast his awareness throughout the whole area and immediately understood what Baron had meant about being unable to trace the culprit’s power.

Magic always left a signature, a kind of trail that you could follow to the person who had wielded it, if you knew what to look for. Most criminals learned how to cover their trails, but there was always something that could be used as a starting point to track them.

But here, there was absolutely nothing.

Esmond couldn’t sense them or their magic at all.