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MASTER OF THE PHANTOM ISLE

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ALSO BY BRANDON MULL

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DRAGONWATCH

MASTER OF THE PHANTOM ISLE



BRANDON MULL

ILLUSTRATED BY
BRANDON DORMAN



SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

FOR REVIEW ONLY



For Chase, forever my little pal

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CHAPTER ONE



Under

Ronodin opened the door without knocking. “The Underking wishes to see you.”

Startled, Seth looked up from the desk, where he had been making a coin spin by flicking it. Ronodin had assigned him to read a thick book about phantoms, which had sounded like an interesting topic until he encountered long-winded passages written in archaic language. Even skipping ahead a few times, he had failed to find an interesting part.

“Who is the Underking?” Seth asked.

“Our host,” Ronodin said. “We’re currently residing in a small section of his lair. You weren’t reading.”

“I tried,” Seth said.

“For how long?”

“Every minute felt like an hour,” Seth said. “You should be amazed that I’m still awake.”

Ronodin scowled at the book. “It may take some time to reach the interesting parts.”

“Maybe you could summarize?” Seth asked hopefully.

“Later,” Ronodin said, folding his arms. A handsome young man dressed in black, Ronodin always seemed sure of himself. Seth hadn’t known the guy very long. They had no history. In fact, Seth had no history with anyone. His memories went back less than a day, to a room in a castle with a girl named Kendra who claimed to be his sister. Ronodin had appeared shortly thereafter, as had some other people, including a magical dwarf. After a confusing confrontation, Seth had been teleported to another castle, where a big wooden puppet had grabbed him and brought him through a barrel to this underground location. He had been here for only a few hours.

“This matter of the Underking is a real problem,” Ronodin continued. “I had hoped you could avoid the meeting entirely.”

“He won’t like me?” Seth asked.

Ronodin gave him a smirk. “He’ll more than like you. He’ll crave you. He hungers for all living creatures, let alone someone with dark powers.”

“He’s king of the underground?” Seth asked.

“King of the Under Realm,” Ronodin said in a solemn tone. “He rules over all of the undead.”

“Like zombies?” Seth asked. “And phantoms?” He glanced at the black book on the desk. “Maybe I should have read more.”

“If it should be dead but isn’t, the Underking probably

governs it,” Ronodin said. “Entering his presence is incredibly dangerous. I have done so only five times, and I’ve known him for centuries.”

“Then why should I risk it?” Seth asked.

“He asked for you,” Ronodin said.

“What if I just slip out of here?” Seth asked.

Ronodin sighed. “For one, we couldn’t sneak away. The Underking is enormously powerful here in his domain. His attention is already on you. In addition, we need access to his tunnels. The Under Realm connects to your world in many surprising places, simplifying travel.”

Seth stared at Ronodin. How was he supposed to respond? Where could he even start? Apparently he was the hostage of an underground king. And what about Ronodin? Was he his ally or his captor? Seth sighed. Maybe he deserved this predicament. There was no way to be sure. Whoever he had been in his forgotten past, he must have led an interesting life.

“Don’t look at me that way,” Ronodin said. “Survival is uncomfortable sometimes. You’ve been through worse.”

“I don’t remember,” Seth said.

“Sounds like a relief to me,” Ronodin said. “Start over with a clean slate, unburdened by past mistakes.”

“I could be anyone,” Seth said.

“Not anyone,” Ronodin corrected. “You are a shadow charmer. You wield arcane power. You can speak to wraiths and quench fire.”

Seth knew he had the powers Ronodin was describing because, in their short time together, Ronodin had given

him opportunities to use them. Supposedly Ronodin could help his powers increase.

“And you’re a unicorn?” Seth asked.

“In human form,” Ronodin said. “You mustn’t keep the Underking waiting. It could make things worse for you.”

Seth tried to calm himself. Without memories, it was hard to make sense of his circumstances. It felt unfair to be facing consequences he did not understand. How had he gotten into this mess? There didn’t seem to be any way out. For now, his best chance was to learn what he could and try to stay alive.

“I have no choice,” Seth said.

“In this matter, no,” Ronodin said.

“I’m not a bad guy,” Seth asserted.

“How do you know?” Ronodin asked.

“I just know,” Seth said.

“I’m not a bad guy either,” Ronodin said. “But we’re both outsiders.”

“Who live in the subterranean lair of the king of zombies?” Seth asked.

“We’re visitors here,” Ronodin said. “Follow me.”

Ronodin walked out without looking back. Seth hesitated, then followed him, jogging to catch up. If this meeting needed to happen, he had better follow the unicorn’s advice.

“You must not look at the Underking,” Ronodin instructed. “To gaze upon him is to join the undead.”

“I’d become a zombie?” Seth asked.

“Or worse,” Ronodin said. “You will walk into the room

with your back to him. You will keep your eyes closed. You will never face him or open your eyes. Not for any reason. Understand?”

“What if he sneaks up on me?” Seth asked.

“We’re in his domain,” Ronodin said. “If the Underking wants you dead, you will die. If he wants you undead, little could stop him. Your job is to cause no unnecessary harm to yourself. Remember, don’t look at him.”

“What about in a mirror?” Seth asked.

“That might work with a gorgon,” Ronodin said. “Not the Underking—eyes closed, back to him.”

“You’ve never seen him?” Seth asked.

“I would be undead if I had,” Ronodin said.

“What if he isn’t there?” Seth asked. “What if it’s just a sound system?”

“He could be a hamster for all I know,” Ronodin said. “Or he could be a monster the size of a mountain. I suspect he looks somewhat like his subjects—he rules them because he is one of them.”

“Why does he want to see me?”

“You are a guest in his domain,” Ronodin said. “You are a shadow charmer in a time when that gift has become exceedingly rare. Beyond that, I cannot pretend to fathom his mind.”

“Won’t it seem rude if I walk in backwards?” Seth asked.

“He knows what is required to communicate with him and remain mortal,” Ronodin said.

They turned a corner and moved down another subterranean corridor. Seth tried to imagine what it would feel

like to become a zombie or a wraith. He had recently met a few wraiths with Ronodin, and they seemed like miserable creatures, cold and empty.

“Have I talked to the Underking before?” Seth asked.

“Never,” Ronodin said. “Few have.”

“I wish I could remember who I am,” Seth said.

“It might prove better this way,” Ronodin said, “at least for our present purposes. You’ll be more of an enigma to him. Trust your instincts. You’re not like other mortals. You know the basics about the magical world.”

“I know magical creatures are real,” Seth said. “Seeing the wraiths was no surprise. I generally remember them. In theory, I mean. I just don’t recall having any experiences with them. I don’t feel anything about them. I have a bunch of information but no opinions about it. There are no associations to rely on. How can I have reached this age with no connections to anything?”

“Seth, you lost your memories,” Ronodin said. “If that erased your opinions too, find the benefit. Our assumptions often blind us. Now you have a chance to experience life through new eyes.”

“I guess,” Seth said. “What else should I know about the Underking?”

“Honestly, the less you know, the better,” Ronodin said. “Be respectful. Be humble. Be meticulously honest. Don’t make any foolish bargains. Agree to what you must. Don’t look at him.”

“That sounds awkward,” Seth said. “Talking without looking.”

“The Underking would be the last thing you beheld with mortal eyes,” Ronodin warned. “Three of the great monarchs wear much of their power on the outside: the Dragon King, the Giant Queen, and the Demon King. The Fairy Queen and the Underking are more subtle, and all the more dangerous for it. If you want strategy, my advice is to be content. Desire nothing. Ask for nothing. The undead are full of insatiable cravings. More than with most, contentment looks like power to the Underking.”

“Could he help me get my memory back?” Seth asked.

Ronodin stopped walking. “What did I just say? Desire nothing.”

“Which makes me think about what I want,” Seth said.

“Put that longing away,” Ronodin said. “Pack all of your desires away, lock them up, and throw out the key. Portray yourself as a young shadow charmer whom I have offered to teach. You are here to learn from me. You do not desire accelerated learning. You don’t desire anything. You are the simplest, most content boy in the world.”

“I’ll try,” Seth said.

“Once he knows what you want, he’ll figure out how to tempt you,” Ronodin said. “Beguile you. Ensnare you. Destroy you.”

“I do want to remember my identity,” Seth said, “whether I admit it to him or not.”

“Try to change your thoughts about that,” Ronodin said, continuing along the corridor. “Your survival could depend on it.”

“Can the Underking read my mind?” Seth asked.

“Possibly,” Ronodin said. “But voicing a thought gives it added power. Makes it more deliberate. Deny all desires in his presence, and you may survive.”

“Do you think I’ll pull through?” Seth asked.

“Much of that depends on you,” Ronodin said. He stopped at a large black door ornamented with bleached skulls of varying size, few of them human. “Ready?”