

“Fast paced, surprising, and madly compelling.”

Rosie Fletcher, Total Film

“A great, imaginative, gripping read...”

Nev Pierce, Editor-at-Large, Empire

“Joshua Winning could well be on to a winner with this unsettling but entertaining icebreaker; hopefully Nicholas and this trilogy will mature nicely together.”

Claire Nicholls, SciFiNow Magazine

“Don’t think you’ve read this before in the Harry Potter books, Sentinel sets a darker, grittier tone. The action is fast and violent, the monsters, including a seductive vampiress, are memorable.”

John Wyatt, The Sun

“Written poetically, with carefully-drawn characters, this is an extremely promising YA debut by a young author.”

Kate Whiting, Press Association

“Winning’s eminently readable style, coupled with some strong characters and a pace that nicely rounds out the book make this a cut above the vast majority of the young-adult fiction market that tries the same approach.”

Daniel Benson, HorrorTalk

“One for fans of Terry Pratchett, Edgar Allan Poe and Tolkien. Joshua Winning’s Sentinel has everything fantasy readers could want: action, mystery, gore, magic and an orphan with wacky relatives.”

Lizzy Fry, Culture Fly

“Adventure, twists, demons and mystery abound in this spellbinding tale of a hidden earthly underworld.”

David Estes, author of The Moon Dwellers

“Sentinel first hooks you with a cadre of compelling and appealing characters, then before you know it, you’re trapped in a nightmare of intangible forces that become more and more threatening, more and more clever, more and more inescapable. You definitely reach a point where you can’t put the book down.”

D.A. Metrov, author of Falcon Lord

“A well-crafted, sharply honed novel that creeps into your subconscious, settling deep before springing a few surprises upon the unsuspecting reader.

You won’t want to put it down, and you probably don’t want to read it on your own in an empty house!”

Sarah McMullan, The 13th Floor

First published in 2015 by
Peridot Press
12 Deben Mill Business Centre, Melton,
Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1BL

Copyright © Joshua Winning 2015

The right of Joshua Winning to be identified as the Author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All characters in this publication are fictitious, and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-1-909717-28-2

Set and designed by Theoria Design
www.theoriadesign.com

Visit: www.thesentineltrilogy.com
Follow: [@SentinelTrilogy](https://twitter.com/SentinelTrilogy)
Like: facebook.com/SentinelTrilogy

Rules for survival

- 1 Don't make friends
- 2 Don't talk about your past
- 3 Don't tell anybody what you can do
- 4 Don't show weakness
- 5 Don't let the monsters see you

- *Anon.*

PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO

SIRENS WAILED IN THE NIGHT AND the sky was a blood-red inferno of fire and ash. People gathered in the street to stare. They huddled in slippers and dressing gowns, transfixed by the burning house. Some offered reassuring murmurs. Others scrutinised the shadows, fearful that whoever had done this was still nearby.

“It was her. She did it.”

“Keep your voice down.”

The girl hugged her knees, teetering on the edge of the kerb. She was only five years old, but her scowl made her look older. The fire danced in her eyes and her pink pyjamas were flecked with cinders.

Across the street, smoke belched from a house torn apart. The building had been bisected and the girl could see her bedroom through a smouldering fissure. It was blackened and burnt. A nest of broken memories.

Her foster parents stood with their backs to her, arm in arm, watching the blaze. Her foster mother glanced over her shoulder and the girl trembled, caught in the woman’s accusatory glare.

“What are we going to do?”

“Let’s wait for the authorities to arrive.”

“What are we going to do about *her*.”

The girl screwed up her fists and shuddered at the keening of the approaching sirens. Her heartbeat quickened. Nobody was watching

her anymore. She got to her feet, her eyes trained on her foster parents' backs.

As she turned to run, arms snapped around her and she was hoisted from the ground.

"Don't go anywhere," her foster father warned in her ear.

The girl thrashed and growled and angry energy flushed through her. The air shimmered with heat and her foster father dragged her into a neighbour's garden.

"Stop it," he said. "Breathe."

He crouched down, holding her at arm's length, his forehead creased with concern.

She couldn't. Her insides churned. The garden wall trembled and the grass rustled as if disturbed by the wind. She'd dreamed the house was collapsing around her, and when she'd woken up, the dream hadn't ended. She wanted to sob, but she didn't. She bit the emotion down, clenched her fists until they hurt. And still the rage roiled inside, causing sweat to trickle down her temples.

Across the garden, a tree erupted in flames.

Her foster father jumped and squinted fearfully at her.

Through the dreadful churning in her belly, she heard the pad of determined footsteps behind her.

"Elizabeth, no—" her foster father began.

Something struck her in the back of the head and the girl felt the grass whisper against her cheek.

The last thing she saw was fire and ash in the night sky, and she knew it was all her fault.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FESTIVAL OF FIRE

PRESENT DAY

“YOU’VE BEEN OUT HUNTING AGAIN, HAVEN’T YOU?”

Sam Wilkins sucked his cheeks and gave the doctor as much of a surprised look as he could muster.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he grunted, hearing the falseness in his tone. At seventy-one years old, he really should be able to come up with a decent little white lie. He had one of those honest faces, though. Everyone told him that. The nervous smile and hooded eyes always gave him away. He ran a hand through his thinning silver hair as Dr Geraldine Adams glared at him over the rim of her glasses.

“Your blood pressure’s not so much through the roof as swooping about with the sparrows,” she said sternly. She was in her early sixties, crinkled around the edges, but fiercer than ever. She had been a savage Sentinel in her day, wily and ruthless as a coyote, but like many older Sentinels, she had forgone hunting in favour of her day job. A loss, Sam thought, but at least he could still rely on her in a pinch. And she remained formidable; spectacles magnified her eyes and they were inescapable.

Dr Adams removed the apparatus from his arm and dumped it on the desk, pausing to slip an escaped strand of her own silvery hair back into the neat pile pinned atop her head.

Sam rolled down his shirt sleeve and said nothing. He was glad Dr Adams’ check-up hadn’t involved removing his shirt. He’d never be

able to explain the still-yellow mottling of his skin; slow-fading bruises from the fight in the temple beneath the cemetery.

“You know you’re gambling with your health, Sam,” Dr Adams persisted, tapping notes into a computer. The office was small but light, slatted blinds letting in fingers of sunlight. A framed photo of a puffy, toothless child rested on her desk. A scrap of A4 paper was pinned to the wall. Chubby handprints had been eagerly pressed into multi-coloured paint.

“Samuel Wilkins!”

The elderly man nodded and returned the doctor’s stare, twisting the battered grey fedora in his hands.

“You should be taking it easy,” Dr Adams said. “Let the youngsters do the hard work, it’s their turn now. You should be enjoying retirement. Get a dog. Play chess. Learn French. Forget about monsters.”

Sam didn’t tell her that sounded like his idea of hell.

“Would that I could. There’s bad stuff coming, worse than we’ve seen in our lifetimes. You don’t just sit back and let that happen.”

“But you certainly don’t go out looking for it,” Dr Adams told him. She knew him too well. Softening, she touched his liver-spotted hand. “I’m begging you, stop. It’ll be the death of you.”

Sam held her gaze. It was now or never – the real reason he’d submitted himself to Dr Adams’ scrutiny.

“Ever heard of a Dr Snelling?” he asked.

She removed the hand. “Why’d you ask?”

“He worked somewhere here in Cambridge.”

“Smelling?”

“Snelling,” he corrected her. He checked his pocket watch. Two pm. He would have to hit the road soon.

“Doesn’t ring any bells,” Dr Adams mused. “Should it?”

“Nothing important,” Sam assured her. “Though, there is something.”

“I’m not going to help you on any monster hunts. You should know better, and frankly—”

“Just... a nod or a shake of the head,” Sam interjected. “Has anything ever crossed your path, you know, anything regarding possession and the such? I’m asking you as a professional, of course. I don’t want to

know what you get up to outside of work hours.”

Dr Adams shot him a look that would have left his left cheek glowing if it had been a slap. “Samuel Wilkins—”

Sam raised his hands and got to his feet, backing toward the door. “Don’t mind me, just an old fool with an overactive imagination,” he said, opening the door.

“Snelling,” the doctor said suddenly.

Sam paused. “Sorry?”

Dr Adams bit her lip. He’d never seen her do that before. “There was something, back in the nineties,” she muttered. “Now what was it? No, I can’t think.” She glared at him, jabbed a pen in the air. “And you shouldn’t be rooting around in anything of the like.”

“I’d best be going,” Sam said. “If you happen to think of anything, drop me a line, won’t you?”

She was sterner than ever. “No more hunting.”

He assured her, as convincingly as he could, that he would do nothing of the sort. Even as he said it, he knew he had no intention of stopping. What else was there? If he went to his grave fighting, that’s the way it had to be. He was born a Sentinel and it was his duty to protect people from the dark things that prowled just out of sight, unnoticed until it was too late. He supposed ignorance was bliss.

Dr Adams prescribed him some pills for the blood pressure and Sam begrudgingly fetched them from the pharmacy. He’d never remember to take them.

The walk home was balmy, the sun heavy on his shoulders as he hurried down the street. The fedora clung to his forehead and the heat made him nervous. The snow had melted the day after that terrible night in the mausoleum, when he’d discovered that even more Sentinels had been turned against them – had become Harvesters. The cold evaporated like a bad dream and the sun blasted apart the lingering clouds.

Sam shuddered. So sudden a change in the weather didn’t bode well. It was a diversion; a distraction from what was to come. How could spirits buoyed by the return of bright August mornings ever imagine the darkness that awaited?

He surveyed the street. Cambridge was different in the wake of that

night. True, it had always been subject to demonic activity, that was the reason he was stationed here. The demonic activity had stepped up in recent weeks, though. Ever since Anita and Max Hallow were killed in a train crash and the demon Diltraa picked its way through the city's child population. Diltraa was banished, but still Sam worried. There were others, and the Harvester population was only swelling. And then there was Malika, the red-haired witch. There had been no sign of her since Diltraa's demise, but Sam suspected she was merely licking her wounds before leading a fresh assault.

When he got home, he double-bolted the front door and wound string from the handle to the radiator. The string was lined with little bells that tinkled when he plucked it. He was taking no chances. After checking the back door and downstairs windows, he fixed himself a late lunch. A cup of tea and a few slices of toast. He took them upstairs and climbed the step-ladder into the attic, ignoring the ache in his right knee as he went.

The attic was as he'd left it the day he and Liberty had found the message on the Ectomunicator, the old typewriter-like device that the Sentinels had once used to message one another. He hadn't been up here since that evening; he couldn't face it after what had happened at the church. The guilt sat like a stone in his stomach. Immovable and constant. Richard. Vince. Jack. He'd killed them all. They had been Sentinels, but something had turned them; transformed them into bloodthirsty Harvesters whose sole desire was to kill Sentinels.

There was only one thing he could do to stop himself succumbing to the gnawing guilt – he had to find out why. What had turned them? And who was behind it? Somebody was assembling an army. He had to stop them.

Liberty was doing what she could in-between looking after her daughter. Though she was a handy person to have around – Liberty was a Sensitive and attune to psychic activity – Sam was relieved she was focussing on family. He was loathe to drag her into this again, especially so soon after she had been used by Malika to open a portal into Hallow House. The trauma of that nasty ordeal had nearly killed her and, five days later, Liberty was only just starting to resemble her old, sarcastic self.

No. He wouldn't bother Liberty. The weight of responsibility rested on his shoulders alone.

With a sigh, Sam seated himself at the desk at the back of the attic. He clicked on the lamp and a circle of light fell on the Ectomunicator. Wearily, he drew the dust cover over it and retired the contraption to the back of the desk, making way for his meagre lunch.

He sipped the tea, crunched the toast unenthusiastically, popped one of Dr Adams's blasted pills, then opened a drawer under the desk and took out a clunky old laptop. He powered it up, hoping he could remember everything Max had taught him – he hadn't used it in some time. The little lines in the corner of the screen told him he was connected to a wireless network, so he opened a browser and started typing.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for – there was no information regarding Sentinels or Harvesters on the Internet beyond the ramblings of the conspiracy hounds. He tried a few random searches. Nothing useful came up.

Sam leaned back in his chair. It had all started with Richard. Richard and Dr Snelling. Sam had tried to call Dr Adams when Richard was attacked, but she had escaped the snow for two weeks in Mauritius with her husband. Sam wished she'd been there to see Richard. Maybe she could have figured out what Snelling had done to him. She could have helped Sam save him.

He remembered those cold, accusatory eyes boring into him from the kitchen floor and shuddered.

"Snelling," he muttered, shaking the image off. He typed the name into the browser, which returned over seven million unique results. Sam puffed in exasperation and clicked through the first few links. Most of them were useless. Building companies, some scientist called Snelling who didn't seem relevant, and reams of other unrelated news stories.

He paused, his hand hovering over the mouse pad. Sam squinted at the website he'd opened.

"How interesting," he murmured.

The book made a satisfying *thwack* as it hit the wall and thumped to the floor.

Nicholas Hallow grunted, disappointed it hadn't smashed through into the next room – at least then he wouldn't have to look at it. Instead, the book sprawled on the carpet. The way it had landed, he could still read the silver words along its spine.

The Sentinel Chronicles – August 1997.

He'd found the book on his bedside table five days ago, the morning after he'd fought Diltraa. It was the one book in the Sentinels' extensive records that he'd been unable to uncover. The book's absence from the library had aroused his suspicions because he was born in that very month. And then suddenly there it was, as if the room had coughed it up, taunting him with the promise of answers.

Every page was blank. Every single one of them.

The disappointment thudded in his chest.

Another dead end.

Nicholas couldn't help feeling he was the punchline to a particularly stupid joke. Jessica Bell, the leader of the Sentinels, had revealed something that even now made his skin crawl, as if he'd shrunk inside of it. Almost sixteen years ago, he'd been born in the village of Orville, less than a mile from here. His birth had almost destroyed the village and every single person living in it. They were all killed, their souls frozen in time.

"They're dead," Jessica had said, *"but they continue to live undead lives, caught there for all eternity."*

Remorse wrenched at his insides and Nicholas glared at the book. There had to be a way to find out how he'd caused such destruction. And there had to be a way to fix it. Jessica had been so busy since the night in the garden, though. That was five days ago, and he'd barely seen her since. They'd burned Diltraa's remains together; the Garm's, too. Pounded the bones into ash, and that was the last of it.

Nicholas suspected that he was still being protected from something. He wished they would just be straight with him. He'd survived a demon – what could be harder than that?

"Not a fan of the ending?"

Nicholas jumped. A cat peered at him from the door. Isabel's fur

was black, zigzagged with silver. The fact that she could speak was as unremarkable to him now as the fact that all other cats couldn't.

"You're getting good at being stealthy," he remarked. "I didn't hear you at all that time."

The cat regarded him coolly. "Or perhaps you were too busy daydreaming, as usual."

"I need to find out what happened in Orville," he said, shoving a hand through his dark, curly hair.

Isabel couldn't help. Technically, she'd been dead when he was born, her spirit trapped in the pentagon-shaped room on the ground floor of Hallow House. She was as clueless about the town as he was. She'd taken the time, though, to explain certain things to him. He'd learned words like 'Harvester', which were Sentinel-killing bounty hunters, and he'd overheard conversations as Jessica met with visiting Sentinels. A mad man with a katana had rampaged through the streets of Manchester, killing twenty people; a chemical plant had a meltdown, incinerating hundreds of workers; thousands of dead fish washed up at Beach Rock in Norfolk.

Isabel had uttered the word that nobody else dared.

"Apocalypse."

"There's plenty of time for that later," Isabel said. "They're about to start. Come."

In a blink she was gone.

Casting a final look at the book, Nicholas resisted the temptation to give it one last kick and hurried after her, plunging through the empty corridors of Hallow House. When he'd arrived here two weeks ago, the never-ending warren of hallways had given him a headache. Now, he knew the house inside out.

By the time he arrived at the entrance hall, the cat had vanished. Instead, he found Sam waiting for him.

"Come on, lad, let's not miss it, eh?" the elderly man said. Nicholas noticed rings under his eyes and Sam seemed thinner than usual. His grey suit was practically baggy.

"How are things?" Sam asked as they left the house.

"Oh, you know. Paying the bills by killing demons. It's a grind but the kids need new shoes."

Sam chuckled. He could always count on a chuckle from Sam, no matter how poor the joke.

Together, they trudged into the countryside. The evening air was warm, but Nicholas shivered. He noticed orange flickers as they approached the forest and he looked at Sam nervously, hoping they were safe out in the open.

A ring of poplar trees bordered a wide clearing. The sky was a cheek-blushing pink, and at the clearing's centre, a large crowd had already gathered. Nicholas's insides leapt when he realised every one of them must be a Sentinel. He could count the number of Sentinels he'd met on one hand, and he scanned the horde keenly, discovering Sentinels of all shapes and sizes. They looked utterly normal. Supermarket people. The fear that he was under-dressed in shorts and a T-shirt – summer clothes Sam had fetched for him from Midsummer Common – quickly evaporated. Aside from the odd raven feather or silver pendant, the others were completely unremarkable. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of disappointment.

A breeze stirred and Nicholas couldn't help trembling. "Is it safe? Out here?"

"Oh yes," Sam said. He pointed to the trees. "Don't you see them?"

Nicholas peered at the band of poplars and noticed that a figure stood between each trunk.

"Sensitives," Sam told him quietly. He winked.

Nicholas's eyes widened. Sensitives. Like him. If that's what he was. After his parents' deaths, he'd become aware that he could sense things before they happened. In one of the library's books, he'd read that Sensitives could do that, too.

Sam led him further into the clearing and they joined the crowd. The Sentinels had gathered for a memorial ceremony. After they had dealt with Diltraa's remains, Jessica told Nicholas about what had happened in Cambridge in his absence. Sentinels were attacked and turned, including one of Sam's friends, Richard. A lot of people had died in a tomb beneath a cemetery, and Nicholas was relieved Sam wasn't one of them. No wonder the old man looked so tired.

His insides squirmed when he thought about Malika and her demon master, Diltraa. They had orchestrated a plan to break into Hallow

House and they'd succeeded, almost killing Jessica. A swell of pride briefly stilled the squirming anxiety. He'd been responsible for chasing Malika away. He'd used his powers to buckle the witch's defences and even glimpsed some of her own dark thoughts.

He frowned at the memory. He'd seen Malika huddling naked in a corner of the Pentagon Room. The image felt old, like a piece of the past, and he still didn't understand what it meant.

Meanwhile, Diltraa had been slain by Esus, the silver-masked phantom who guided Jessica.

Shaking off those troubling thoughts, Nicholas contemplated a crude wooden structure at the centre of the dell; it was a platform with a set of steps. The Sentinels crowded in front of it eagerly, though they were disarmingly solemn. Firelight filled the clearing; night had yet to fall, but a number of wooden posts had been driven into the ground and set ablaze. They reminded Nicholas of Guy Fawkes Night.

A sudden murmuring rippled through the Sentinels. Nicholas saw that the crowd had parted and people were craning forward, straining their necks, clawing at the rows of shoulders in front of them to get a better look at something. At first, he only glimpsed silver and black as somebody approached. Then he saw Jessica and his breath caught in his throat.

The leader of the Sentinels glided like a scythe through the congregation. In the firelight, her skin was mercurial, her eyes dark and enchanting. Stiff black feathers were fastened in her golden hair and fanned about one shoulder. A silvery-white dress – cut at an angle to expose one gleaming shoulder – swept the ground behind her. Perched on her bare shoulder was a raven, and the bird assessed the crowd with uncommon interest.

The Sentinels dipped their heads.

Every nerve in Nicholas's body hummed, as if Jessica's presence had forced them to spring awake.

He scowled. Behind her, swaggering with the aloof manner of an alligator, stomped a brute of a man. His boots were the size of cement blocks, his hands, strapped in brown leather, as large as dinner plates. A powerful chest strained against the confines of a leather bodice. His face was like a Cubist painting; a botched nose had clearly endured

numerous blows and his squashed mouth was forever contorted in a sneer.

This was Lash. A stupid name, in Nicholas's opinion, but fitting given his position as Jessica's new bodyguard. Though Diltraa and Malika's infiltration of Hallow House was being kept a secret for now ("There would only be panic, and what use is that in a war?" Isabel had told him), Lash had moved into the manor to ensure Jessica's safety. Nicholas had only encountered him a handful of times, none of them pleasant.

Jessica swept between the adoring masses, then steadily mounted the platform. While Lash took his place at the side of the stage, Jessica revolved to address the crowd. The voice that rang over their heads was clear as the starry heavens.

"There is a darkness abroad and we are the thing it covets," Jessica called. "It swells with each cycle of the moon and already great numbers have succumbed to its suffocating embrace."

The tiny hairs on the back of Nicholas's neck prickled. The woman before them was a formidable creature. Proud and defiant. When he'd first met her, Jessica had been waiting for him at the house with an impish smile. He'd seen a tear in that facade, though, the night Diltraa invaded the manor. Jessica had been reduced to a sobbing child. Nicholas found that hard to believe now.

Was this bold new image a ruse? A performance to inspire faith in her followers? Or had something happened that night in the gardens? Something that had changed her? Peering up into her heart-shaped face, he couldn't decide either way. Whatever Jessica was doing, though, it was working. Every Sentinel had fallen under her spell.

"For your losses, I am sorry," Jessica continued. "Those who died did so fighting the cause that their fathers and mothers fought before them. It is a proud death, though one not free from sorrow."

At these words, Jessica's gaze rested on a short blonde woman whose eyes were glistening with tears.

"They must be honoured," Jessica said. "Their labours remembered. No death will ever be in vain, no spilled blood forgotten. That is the reason we are collected here today, to—"

"Tell me why my son died!"

A voice erupted from the crowd. Shocked gasps bristled through the clearing and Lash squinted, a hand sliding to the dagger strapped at his belt.

Silence fell.

“Peter Carmac,” Jessica said, barely moving. The raven at her shoulder glowered into the throng, the black balls of its eyes impossible to read. “If you wish to speak, speak.”

All faces turned toward one man. He was in his late fifties, Nicholas guessed, skin toughened by years of hard labour, a blobby nose riddled with burst capillaries. He gripped a cap in his hands but shoved his chin up at the stage.

“My son, he was one of them found at the church, St John’s,” Peter Carmac called in a voice bitter with grief. “He’d went missing a few days before, not like him at all. He was a good boy. Then he turned up dead, shot in the face. I couldn’t even...” His voice quavered and a tear-stained woman who Nicholas assumed was his wife put a trembling hand to his shoulder. He shoved it off. “I couldn’t even recognise my own boy! And I want to know why!”

Carmac. Nicholas didn’t recognise the name, but he assumed Peter Carmac’s son was one of the Sentinels who had been turned in Cambridge. He felt a surge of compassion for the man. Sentinels were confronted with death more than the average person – they were demon hunters, after all, and their lives were fraught with risk. Many of the faces in the crowd bore the tell-tale signs of hardship and loss.

Jessica clasped her hands before her. Her skin was like marble.

“On the night of the 21st August,” she began slowly, “an Ectomunicator message was sent to every Sentinel posted in Cambridge. It requested their urgent attendance at St John’s Baptist Church. This message was sent by an imposter. It was a trap for Sentinels. Those who answered the call were mercilessly slaughtered. Later that night, their bodies were discovered in the chambers beneath the church.” She paused, absorbing the expressions of grief and horror stretched across every face. “It is our belief that Harvesters were behind the attack. They are gaining in strength and number. We believe they are uniting with a common goal. Gone are the days when they hunted alone. To that end, a ban has been placed on all Ectomunication.”

“But my son...” Peter Carmac’s voice rose, cracked.

Jessica’s expression was sorrowful. “There is much we do not know. The one thing we can say with absolute certainty is this: the days of peace are behind us. War is coming and we must prepare. But that is talk for another day. Let us proceed with the festival and honour those who are no longer with us.”

Nicholas looked up at Sam and saw that his face had crumpled. He wondered if he’d known the victims. With a start, he remembered Isabel. What had happened to her? She certainly wasn’t with Jessica, and she couldn’t be among the crowd, she’d be crushed. He scanned the clearing, then spotted a sinewy shape in the limbs of a poplar tree. Isabel’s whiskers caught the firelight and she looked wild.

There was movement on the stage. Jessica swept noiselessly down the steps, Lash clumping behind. She moved around the side of the platform and the crowd spilled after her.

“Where we going?” Nicholas asked.

“You’ll see,” Sam said, resting a hand on his shoulder.

Elbowed forward by the Sentinels, Nicholas followed the current around the platform. It was strange being among them. He didn’t feel part of their world. It was as if he was intruding on something private and painful. Nobody acknowledged his presence, though, nor challenged it. He attempted to make himself as small as possible, shrinking away from the elbows that prodded him.

Waiting for them on the other side of the platform was an immense iron cauldron. It coughed smoke that strove eagerly into the pink sky. Jessica stood to one side and waited for the crowd to settle.

“Death is forgetting,” she said at last. “The dead forget, but they will never be forgotten. Let us show them that we remember, and always will.”

With that, the raven leapt from her shoulder. It took to the air and dropped something into the cauldron. A rush of sparks and smoke mushroomed up to meet the heavens. High up now, the raven wheeled through the air, tracing the curve of the poplars.

Jessica smiled kindly at an elderly woman to her right and Nicholas noticed that a queue had formed by the cauldron. The old woman clutched something in her gnarled hand. A slip of paper. She hobbled

to the cauldron and dropped it in. A flash of flame briefly lit her face, then nothing. She wiped her eyes with a silk scarf as she shuffled away.

Nicholas watched as, one by one, the Sentinels approached the cauldron and dropped in slips of paper. He felt a nudge at his side.

“Here,” Sam said quietly. Nicholas looked down as the old man pushed something into his hands. A square of paper folded roughly in half. Confused, Nicholas unfolded it. Two names were scribbled there.

Anita Hallow.

Maxwell Hallow.

His parents.

“Go on,” Sam said, his face expressionless.

Nicholas swallowed. His heart was suddenly beating very fast. He joined the queue. More slips of paper were consigned to the cauldron and the line dwindled until finally Nicholas was by Jessica’s side. She gave him the same benevolent half-smile she’d bestowed upon the other Sentinels and returned her gaze to the cauldron.

His insides trembling, Nicholas moved closer. He looked down and saw that he was clutching the folded note so tightly that he’d almost crushed it. Forcing himself to take a breath, he raised his hand and cast the paper into the flames.

“On this night, the Trinity are with us,” Jessica called. “They share our grief. Accept their comfort.”

She tapped the rim of the cauldron lightly and it hummed like a bell. Glowing embers flurried up with the smoke.

Nicholas staggered back.

The smoke snaked into the crowd, but nobody spluttered. Nicholas felt it whisper about him and where it thickened above the cauldron, flaming figures pirouetted. In golden flashes they pranced and flickered, at once bright as the sun, then hazy as candlelight.

Nicholas was rooted to the spot.

He looked around to make sure everybody else was seeing the same thing and, with a start, he found that he was alone. The other Sentinels had vanished.

The air grew melancholy. Transfixed, Nicholas watched the flaming figures bow and flex. They danced out of the smoke, twirling in front of him. They grew wings, became birds, skittered high into the air,

then set the trees aflame. Nicholas gasped as the clearing transformed into an inferno. Prickling heat raged through him.

Where was everybody? Even as he thought it, he caught a glimpse of something silvery between the trees. Had Sam and the others gone into the forest to continue the ceremony? No, the forest was burning. They couldn't be in there.

Something drew him into the trees anyway. In a daze, Nicholas stumbled toward the flickering silver. Though the voice in his head warned him against it, his legs didn't listen. He passed into the forest, which was no longer aflame, though the trees were blackened and steaming.

Attempting to suppress the panic wedged in his throat, Nicholas fumbled onward. He didn't dare call out.

Branches shook and he heard a rush of wings.

Snelling? No, Snelling was dead.

A dark shape bowled toward him and Nicholas only just caught sight of the raven before it crashed into his face. He threw his arms up and hit the ground.

Caaaw!

The raven swept up and away, then bowled toward him again. Nicholas cried out as black smoke erupted in the air and a masked figure emerged where the bird had been. It swung a sword at him and Nicholas tried to shuffle back, but it was too late. He squeezed his eyes shut as the blade plunged for his neck.