

THE DREADBOUND ODE BOOK 2

THE  
WEEPING  
SIGIL

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## Chapter 1

*“The void is the mother of mysteries. From her frigid womb springs all knowledge, all ignorance, all being, and all nothingness.”*

*-Tarquin Lynus, The Esoteric Design of Natural Law*

Henrik kicked the console and the lights within the tiny voidcraft flickered back on. His claustrophobia mounted with every breath. The sweat-clogged air grew thicker each hour as one after another, the *Muse's* bindings failed. By his rough calculations, he would suffocate long before he exhausted his meager supply of water. A day and a half at most. Just enough time to contemplate the staggering proportions of his blunder.

He had been adrift for three days. Three long and miserable days since debris from the shattered moon had collided with the *Muse's* hull and damaged the intricate magic that propelled his father's masterpiece. The vessel had proceeded in fits and jerks, until the last of its power sputtered out of the arcane engines, and the *Muse* began its meander through the abyss.

Henrik paced in circles around the cabin.

He stooped to the nearest porthole and gazed at the desolate starscape. Desperation grew in his belly like a cancer. Every single person he had ever known was

dead, obliterated by the fiery collision of Quaya moon and Heimir.

This ship would be his tomb.

Movement caught his eye. It was subtle, but it was there, a pinprick of light that moved relative to the others. Henrik chewed his thumbnail, his stomach churning with guilt and hope. A ship!

He dashed back to the command chair and crammed the helm onto his head. The device resonated with magical echoes, picking up the wisps of distant callers shouting across the endless stretches of night. Henrik hummed to himself until his senses blended with the helm's magic and the astral starscape unfolded around him. The veil stretched forever in its otherworldly beauty; twinkling quasars nestled in billows of gas, asteroids tumbling through their lonely orbits. He groped out, hoping to find another caller in its strange horizons. A few seconds passed. A few minutes. His heart settled back to its sedate rhythm and still he waited, his hope dwindling like the last embers of the night's fire.

Over and over, he attuned the relic to another sequence, combining the helm's runes in random patterns in desperate hope of finding help. Emptiness and silence greeted him as, sequence after sequence, the helm's magic failed to make contact.

He fought the urge to remove the helm and look for a ship with his naked eyes. He knew that his only chance lay in making contact over the helm, but the minutes stretched on and he at last despaired of finding any help. Everything he had seen would die with him. His father would go unvenerated, no likeness or offerings to keep him from damnation. *Forgive me*. It was a prayer, a thought so alien it shocked him. It was base superstition, and his father would not have approved, but after

everything else, Henrik felt a burning need to make things right, to tell the world about the thing from the docks. His silence had already caused too much suffering, and somehow, despite his rationalizations, he felt that that thing was the root of it all. A secret he must expose.

From the moment he had witnessed that bizarre murder on Skolja's docks, his world began to unravel. That terrifying shadow was merely the first omen, a sign that his smug conception of a rational world full of reasonable explanations was riddled with blind spots where lurked the horrors of antiquity. What was it? That blotted figure, darker than the night. And what could such a thing want in a backwater like Skolja?

After escaping Hel, the Kriegan outlaw who had chased him through the flooded streets of Skolja, Henrik had found his father's ship mired in the flotsam of the ruined village. The elation he'd felt as the Muse soared into the heavens had faded quickly as the totality of his isolation set in, and he began to use the magic of the Helm to reach out across the void, to discover what had become of... well, of everything.

But it availed him nothing. He was adrift, friendless, helpless, an exile of absurd proportions.

Henrik removed the helm, stifled the urge to hurl it against the wall of the Muse, and instead set it on the arm of the command chair. He smoothed back his wavy blonde hair, scratching at the stubble that had grown in around his mustache as he pondered his isolation, and what might have happened to the others from his village.

"Father," he said, "if you can help me, it's now or never."

Henrik thrust his head back into the helm, jaw clenched. He added silently to his father, *don't let this be the end*, before refocusing his mind and attuning his

senses to the helm. He groped in the infinite, starry night, his pleas desperate, feeling the last shreds of salvation slip through his fingers.

Amidst the star-dappled void, another presence glowed to life. The newly arrived apparition coalesced into the shape of a man, distorted, like it was composed of a trillion grains of sand wiggling and flaring with sudden light, a sparkling likeness of the caller on the other end. Behind it, the mass of a red giant loomed, storms marbling its face, rings of pristine white encircling the colossal planet.

The Norn felt a shock of joy, his whole body aglow with warmth, like he had just polished off a bottle of heady wine.

“Hello!” Henrik greeted the arrival in the conqueror’s tongue.

“You are an off-worlder,” the manifestation observed.

“Yes,” said Henrik, the first note of fear puncturing his elation. “A Norn. Ally caste. From Heimir.”

The apparition said nothing for a moment. “Your voidcraft is strange.” He said. “I’ve never seen a relic like it.”

Damaged or not, the ship was incredibly valuable. If this other vessel could tow him, it would. But Henrik had the distinct impression that he also needed to demonstrate his own value, for there was no compelling reason he could see for them to bother extracting him before the journey back to port.

“I’ll tell you all about it when you bring me aboard.”

Whoever he was talking to probably would not believe that his father had built *the Muse*. A lone tinkerer re-creating the wonders of the ancients was so far-fetched as to beggar the imagination.

“What makes you think we’ll bring you aboard?”

“I’m adrift,” said Henrik. “I need help.”

Another pause. “Getting you off that ship is dangerous. Why should we bother?”

Henrik squirmed in his chair aboard the *Muse*. “It’s my ship. But if you get me to safety, I’ll give it to you.”

“Don’t be naïve. It’s our ship now.”

“You said that you’ve never seen a relic like this ship,” said Henrik. “That’s because it’s not a relic.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that my father and I built it together.”

“Ha!” said the caller, his starry effigy throwing back his head in amusement. “Is that the best lie you can manage? Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Henrik shouted. “It’s not a lie. I swear it by the Pontiff’s light. My father was the mayor of Skolja. He swindled cold iron from the mine and we based the ship on Zaracas’ writings. We built it in secret in the black smith’s shop. I’ve studied the binding of spirits for years.”

“What is Caden’s first axiom?”

Henrik smiled. “Easy. The Binder’s will shapes most the binding.”

“Who wrote *the Cosmology of the Soul*?”

“Officially, no one. According to the Inquisition, it doesn’t exist. But Aelus wrote it.”

“What are the three basic rune types?”

“The archetype, the essence, and the intention.”

“Well, well, well. Maybe you *are* a Binder. We can make use of that,” the caller said. “No need to go overboard and say you built the damned ship. I’ll send someone over to fetch you. Have you ever seen a voidlurk?”

“No,” said Henrik, taking a deep breath. “But I’ve read about them.”

“Good,” said the caller. “Try not to panic. And whatever you do, don’t fight it. You’ve got five or ten seconds of consciousness once you open the hatch. Exhale before you open it. The air pressure inside is going to blow you clear of the ship, but stay calm, and don’t fight the voidlurk.”

“Yes,” said Henrik. “I heard you.”

“Well, it was worth saying twice. When you hear the tap on the hatch, count to ten and then open it.”

The scintillating figure dispersed as if on a wind. Henrik doffed his helmet and secured it to the arm of the command chair. Ghostly energies flowed through the fine threads of cold iron in the hull, lighting *the Muse’s* interior. Henrik took a long look at the marvel his father had created. He suspected that once he left the ship, those aboard the other vessel would claim it as salvage, and if he objected, they would leave him to the mercies of the void.

But however valuable, however wondrous, Henrik was glad to be free of it. It felt like a prison now. He had expected to die alone out here, adrift in the dark, choking on stagnant air. Still, Henrik felt a twinge of guilt at his eagerness to escape his father’s marvel. It was a far better testament to Olen Torvald’s life than some silly idol. What a pleasant fiction to imagine his Father still cared about such things, a better tribute would be to survive.

He had been a spoiled shit of a son, his brief stint as mayor a total failure. His only hope of redemption was survival, to bear witness. And not just for his father. Something in the pit of his stomach told Henrik that the shadowy thing from the docks was a harbinger of even greater woe. It beggared his imagination to envision a fate worse than the destruction of Heimir, but his self-interested silence, and his failure of leadership, had

already caused far more pain than he could bear. In the deepest bowels of his soul, he knew that he had seen the beginning of the end.

Three sharp cracks resounded against the hatch. His heart thudded and he held his breath, but after a few seconds he remembered to start counting. *One. Two.* Henrik stood on the command chair so that he could reach the hatch overhead. Just as he hit nine, Henrik exhaled, glanced around the cabin of *the Muse* one last time, and cracked the hatch.

The door blew open and Henrik was jerked free of the cabin, striking his shoulder on the rim of the portal on his way out. The cold hit him like a bucket of icy water. A wave of lightheadedness overwhelmed him, followed immediately by pain everywhere. Henrik caught a glimpse of a man crouching on the hull of the *Muse* just as something rubbery wrapped around his wrist. Henrik looked down at the thing that had lashed out and caught him before he'd drifted off into infinite space.

Henrik panicked.

As his precious few seconds of consciousness ticked by, Henrik struggled to pull away from the strange creature dragging him back toward the ship. It looked like a giant jellyfish, a few tentacles anchoring it to the hull of the *Muse*, the others snaking out towards Henrik to pull him in. Beneath the transparent membrane of its skin, the voidlurk's innards glowed like the constellations of distant stars. Another of its tentacles ensnared his right wrist and Henrik opened his mouth as if he could scream. Instead, one of the voidlurk's tentacles stabbed into his throat, slithered into his windpipe, and secreted a warm, gooey substance into his lungs. Henrik gagged, his swollen hands groping to pull the tentacle from his mouth, but the creature easily overpowered him. It let go of the hull of



the ship and flung its body at him. As his vision dimmed, the thing's membranous body enfolded Henrik's head like a hood. He fought to free his head from the creature's body, but the voidlurk pinned his arms to his sides with more of its tentacles.

Henrik wasn't breathing, but somehow the urgency to draw breath had gone. The painful pressure beneath his skin eased and the swelling subsided. As Henrik stopped struggling, the voidlurk relaxed its grip. It flexed the tentacle down his throat and Henrik gagged again.

The voidlurk unwound the tentacles holding his arms in place.

According to Bormian's *Primal Histories*, the voidlurk were native to the frost cloud that encircled the system at a great distance. The frost cloud was far more remote even than the outer planets, the giants. In the early period of the Bright Era, the Shining Ones explored the furthest reaches of the frost cloud, where they disturbed the primeval horrors. *Domestication of the Darklings* by Tiscrana claimed that the Shining Ones had brought back the voidlurks and began to breed them, gradually taming them with long lost magical experiments.

Once Henrik's analytical side engaged with the idea, the last of his panic evaporated. In fact, he marveled, looking around him at the spectacular view, though his skin ached from the cold. Through the voidlurk's membrane, a rainbow haze surrounded everything. Back the way he'd come, the sun shone in the darkness. All around were twinkling stars and wisps of far off celestial clouds. Below him, if such a word still had any meaning out here, *the Muse* caught the light of the stars, a brassy disc glinting in the distant light of the sun. Not far off, a cylindrical vessel with rows of lit portholes spun in a

lazy circle. Henrik had drifted farther away from the ships than he had realized. He quelled a note of anxiety, recalling Tiscrana's chapter on the training of voidlurks. Experimentally, Henrik tugged his right hand, still held by the voidlurk's tentacle. He felt a vibration as the creature expelled a puff of gas and Henrik started to drift to the right.

After more than a little fumbling, and some heart-stopping trial and error, in which he sensed he had somehow angered the voidlurk, Henrik started to get the gist of using the creature to maneuver through the void. Tug the right tentacle go right. Tug the left go left. Tug both go forward. Right slack, tug left go up and so forth.

It was slow going, but eventually he was able to return to the ship. The cylindrical vessel that had intercepted *the Muse* had drifted nearer his father's ship. Whoever it was that had crossed the void to get him crouched on the hull of *the Muse* beside the open hatch, another of the strange creatures draped itself over the man's head, its tentacles twining around his wrists. As Henrik neared, he realized that the man was definitely a Tyrianite. Even with the voidlurk enfolding his head, the light of the distant sun showed his dark skin and smaller frame. By the time Henrik had mastered his fear of the creature keeping him alive, and the knack of steering it, the man bounded off of the *Muse*, and drifted across the stretch of emptiness separating one ship from the other.

Henrik touched down on the hull of *the Muse* and scrambled to get a hold on a seam between two sections of the saucer. A frantic thought occurred to him, that if he missed the jump and soared past the other ship the voidlurk might not be able to compensate for their momentum. How finite was the gas it built up and excreted in order to move around in the void? Would he

drift off into the endless expanse of nothingness, would the voidlurk abandon him to return to the ship? Or would it turn on him? Henrik knew from his studies that the longer one remained in symbiosis with a voidlurk the more painful and dangerous the separation became once he'd reached safety.

So Henrik coiled into a crouch, gauged the angle that his rescuer had taken to return to the other vessel, and sprang from the lip of the Muse through the gap between the ships. The agoraphobic sensation he felt when he'd been thinking about the jump paled beside the frigid, sweaty, terrified moment of panic and vertigo that wrung the urine from his bladder as he traversed the nothing. Before he could collide with the hull of the cylindrical ship, the voidlurk's tentacles lashed out and slowed their approach, deftly clinging to the rivets and ridges of the Tyrianite ship.

A tapping vibration reverberated through the hull. Henrik looked over his shoulder to see his rescuer motioning him toward the rear of the ship. He tried to reorient himself, fumbling to control the bizarre creature sustaining him. Now that he was touching the ship the beast seemed less responsive to his commands, but as soon as the Tyrianite started moving, his voidlurk followed along the hull like the rear horse on a trail ride.

Without releasing the humans' wrists, the jellyfish-like voidlurks used their tentacles to pull themselves along the surface of the ship. As Henrik followed, he saw a blurry face peeking out one of the vessel's portholes at him. When they reached the rear of the ship, his rescuer held out his hand to Henrik as if to wait. Even through the membrane wrapped around his head, Henrik could see the faint emanation of light surrounding the other man. He

held up his own hand and marveled to see the same faint shimmer just above the surface of his skin.

Once the loading door at the back end of the vessel had unfolded, the Tyrianite entered a small compartment, and Henrik's own voidlurk followed him in automatically. Inside, Henrik felt, rather than heard, the whirring of a motor and the hatch began to close. The hinge slammed shut, sealing them in a tiny chamber. Vapor hissed all around them and his voidlurk began to coo. When the pressure in the chamber had stabilized, the voidlurk tugged the tentacle from Henrik's throat. Gagging, he dropped to his knees and puked out black sputum. By the time his coughing subsided, someone hooked an arm through his and was hauling him to his feet.

The compartment that he and his rescuer occupied opened from the other side onto the interior of the ship. The arm dragging him to his feet belonged to another Tyrianite, this one slender and unusually tall for his kind. Taller even, than Henrik.

The voidlurks quailed on the floor of the air lock. Something about the pressure within the cabin surely disagreed with them. One of the creatures groped toward the other with its tentacles. Once they touched each other, they each emitted a satisfied hum, entwining with one another until the pair had become an indistinguishable lump of snaky tentacles and gelatinous flesh.

The lanky Tyrianite ignored his companion, who still knelt at the back of the ship hacking up a disgusting puddle of fluid onto the deck. He set a large metallic chest beside the pile of voidlurks and opened the lid. The interior seemed utterly empty and unremarkable, but as soon as it was open, the voidlurks scrambled inside and nestled at the bottom in a tangle. The man then put the

lid back on the chest and held his hand over each corner, one at a time. He hummed softly. A faint glow emanated from the rune-stones carved into the lid.

Henrik staggered and the man reached out to steady him. Vertigo wobbled Henrik's knees. He felt as if he were at sea, the waves rocking him back and forth. A painful and somehow terrifying sensation spread from his lungs into his throat, like a pocket of air rapidly heating inside him. His fingers and toes tingled and burned as if exposed to winter's wrath.

The tall Tyrianite guided him to a metal bench at one side of the cabin. Hammocks and nets of rough twine hung from protruding rivets, full of stowed gear and crumpled clothing. The walls were painted with fresh whitewash, the smell of it still faint in the air. Somewhere in the cramped cabin, a yellow light tinged the scene with sickly pallor.

"Welcome aboard." The lanky Tyrianite beamed at him. "Ever since the disaster, all these two seem to do is argue. It's like a civil war in here. It'll be nice to have someone to talk a little shop with."

Behind the man, a third, much colder voice spoke up. "Don't get too attached to your new pet, Quirinus. You know he's going on the block the second we reach Tyria."