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# Sundark Messenger

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Daniel  
Camomile



# THE SUNDARK MESSENGER

*Sample Chapter*

By Daniel Camomile

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## *Prologue*

The shafts of moonlight that pierced the silty green water came and went like the ghostly stems of forest trees. Amid the tranquil gloom, a solitary figure moved. Treading along the gravelly floor of the lake, a traveler walked. Clothed in gray and white and carrying a walking staff, the lean face of the submerged traveler appeared as serene as the surrounding water.

The floor of the lake had been sloping deeper and deeper downward, and though the light had all but gone, the traveler held to his gloomy path. Only when the light of the moon was gone did the traveler ignite an unquenched blue flame from the head of his staff, sending a cascade of bubbling steam up from its surface. He stopped at the rim of a sheer underwater precipice, plunging down into deep blackness. Through the unbroken murk of the bottomless abyss, another light glowed, faint and far below.

Taking one last look up toward the muffled light of the full moon above, the traveler leaned over the edge of the abyss and held out his staff. He was abruptly swept away by a current, descending into the endless darkness of the water. The hazy glow of the distant light grew in clarity the deeper he went. Gradually, the glow revealed itself to be a huge arched window in the wall of the chasm, flaming with warm torchlight from within.

Setting a foot on the outcropping threshold, the traveler stepped into it, passing through the clear membrane that held back the weight of the lake. The traveler stood dripping in an empty, torch-lit hallway with vaulted ceilings so high that the ceiling escaped the fire light. His stature was sturdy, though not remarkable, with lengthy black hair with silver veins tied back firmly. Though plainly in his middle years, his weathered and tanned face showed few creases or furrows, save for what appeared to be a burn scar surrounding one eye, which was itself covered with a black eye patch. He held nothing but a smooth black and silver-embellished staff headed with

what looked like an empty cage of twisting wood. Silently, he began walking along the hall.

“That’s a fancy trick, Oris. How’d you do it?” a girl’s voice chimed from nearby.

Oris smiled and spat a small, porous stone out into his palm.

“Silver Pumice. One of the old tricks of the trade.” he said, tucking the object into the pocket of his gray duster coat, adding, “Do you intend to show yourself tonight, or are you just here to keep me company?”

“Oh, you know me, moony.” the girl’s voice teased, “I might pop in later if you get into a bind. Time will tell!”

Her voice trailed off into an echo, leaving Oris alone in the silence of the dank hallway, his feet not making a sound as he moved. At the far end of the hallway the open passage terminated into a deep, multi-level rotunda with a staircase spiraling down its perimeter. Coming to the stairs on the edge of the rotunda, Oris could see the ceiling was an ornately gilded dome. It was painted with chipping frescoes depicting wars, burning cities, glowing archways of light, and one central, grim-looking figure dressed in kingly raiment and holding a sword, black as ebony. Oris paused and gazed up at the frightful icon, then glanced downward.

The levels of the open rotunda descended a hundred feet before ending in a black, polished floor. From below, Oris could hear hushed voices reverberating. Below, in the glow of the torches, two black-robed figures with pointed hoods were ascending the stairs, hunched in confidential conversation. Oris stepped back into the hall and synched his duster by a belt and took from the head of his staff a scrap of charcoal.

Crushing it in his hand, Oris blew and immediately the dust formed a cloud in the air. The little black cloud hung for a moment then grew and spread over Oris like a dark shadow as he backed up against the wall. After a moment, the hooded men stepped into the hallway, within inches of where Oris stood,

holding his breath. As they passed within audible distance, one said to the other,

“But it’s different this time. With the leafing branch, the crack is spreading again...”

Their whispered conversation became indistinct as they passed on up the hall. Oris noted the red crest emblazoned on the shoulders of their robes—an open scroll containing a circle with a single spot at its center, resembling an open eye. Oris did not stir for a long moment after they had passed.

“No... that can’t be.” He muttered under his breath.

“What are you waiting for?” the girl’s voice returned, whispering impatiently, “You heard what they said about the branch. We’re in the right place! Now hurry before they circle back.”

Oris grit his teeth and sucked in a deep breath before leaving the safety of his enchanted charcoal shadow. Dashing noiselessly down the stairs, he scanned his surroundings with a new look of anxiety. His footsteps resonated as he reached the bottom of the stairs. The black floor of the rotunda bore traces of an ancient mosaic, whose tiles still clustered here and there. The ground floor branched in three directions. Doors made of enormous stone sealed off two ways. The third stood open, the rubble remains of the enormous door piled around the entrance.

Above this gate was burned, as if with fire, the same emblem of the scroll and the eye. Inside lay a dark passage lined with seamless columns carved from the rock. Oris walked to the mouth of the tunnel with cautious steps, gripping his staff in both hands. The heavy, foul-smelling air of the place throbbed with a constant, subtle droning sound, and from the far depths of the passage there emanated an otherworldly blue glow. Oris glanced back up at the stairs, as if considering escaping. He grit his teeth and continued into the dark corridor.

Oris followed the pillared passage, staying silent and shedding no light from his staff. With every step nearer, the droning hum grew, interrupted now and



then by the hiss of subdued voices. Oris kept close to the pillars, ready to duck between them at the first sign of movement.

Oris felt a hand grasp his arm as he walked past, coming from the shadows between the pillars. Oris pulled away sharply and ignited the head of his staff into flame again, positioning himself for a fight. Standing between two pillars, with one gaunt arm still outstretched, stood the hunched and gnarled figure of a man, as pale as a corpse.

The man made no move to attack or to run, he only stood and stared with cloudy and colorless eyes. Oris stared back for a moment, then lowered his staff. The face of the man was like a weary and dumb animal, utterly expressionless and void of thought. His gnarled feet were shackled to the floor. By the milky cataracts of the eyes, it was plain this man was blind.

“Who are you?” Oris endeavored to whisper, but the husk of a man made no reply. It was then that Oris noticed there was another man, with the same condition, standing just behind in the darkened recess between the pillars. Lifting his light higher, Oris could see along the edges of the long, dark corridor the glinting eyes and sallow faces of hundreds of mindless drones, all peering out at him with pitiable, vapid expressions.

Oris continued along the passage, keeping his staff’s flame alight as he carefully passed every husk-haunted alcove. The columned hall ended in a junction, with passages branching right and left, and a steep set of stairs climbing straight ahead. The blue light came from ahead, so Oris ascended the stairs, gripping his staff tighter and whispering rapidly in a strange language.

At the top of the stairs, Oris found an enclosed second-level walkway overlooking a wide open chamber, intensely aglow with the blue light. The open space below the walkway was a tear-drop shaped tiered amphitheater, carved out of the solid rock. The same deep droning noise pulsed heavily in the air, now punctuated by a low, dissonant chant of many voices. On the surrounding walls, ancient faded murals of divine-looking figures gazed placidly down on the unholy scene below.

Several tall figures cloaked in black stood among the stone steps of the descending amphitheater, surrounded by heaps of books and scattered papers over desks and chairs, altogether looking like some displaced library. At the foot of the amphitheater was erected one central object around which the whole throng congregated. A rough, circular arch of pocked black stone, framing what appeared to be an enormous polished disk of cloudy blue-green glass the height of two men. In front of the radiant, otherworldly window, there were two figures, one was another of the shackled people from the hallway, while the other was a veiled woman dressed all in white. She was reaching out and lightly touching the glass with the end of a slender branch with a cluster of buds at its end, and a single green leaf.

“There it is! I told you I was right.” the girl’s voice hissed excitedly in Oris’ ear, “Now just grab that stick and let’s get out of here.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re hardly here as it is.” Oris retorted, “And it’s not as simple as that. This is far darker than anything I had imagined. I know that symbol... and I think I might know who that woman is. I need to get a closer look.”

As he said this, the chanting suddenly increased in volume and rhythm. The captive was seized by two of the cloaked figures, and his hands were pressed forcibly against the glass. With a sudden cry, the woman in white lifted the branch over her head and brought it crashing against the luminous glass. There was an intense flash, like green lightning, and a deafening sound like thundering bells reverberating from the core of the core of the earth. There was a heart-rending scream and then sudden silence. The next moment, all was as it had been, the green mirror undamaged by the blow. The captive lay on his back with trails of smoke trailing from his hands and eyes.

“I’ve seen enough.” Oris ground his teeth from where he watched in the shadows, “There’s nothing we can do now. I’ll report back to Marren what we found, but we can’t...”

“Oris, behind you!” the girl’s voice cried suddenly.

Oris whirled around and held out his staff. A black hooded shape rush toward him from the stairs he had come up from. With a subtle white flash from Oris' staff, the assailant was flung like a doll against the stone ceiling and fell senseless with a thump to the ground.

“There's more! Oris, get out!” the girl's voice called out again. But this time, Oris found he could not move. His limbs would not respond, paralyzed by an invasive, dominating will. Another of the cloaked figures approached, stretching out a sickly green four-fingered hand. Oris fought and struggled, but even as he did, his feet were lifted off the floor by an invisible force and he was carried out from the walkway and into the open air over the amphitheater.

“And to what, dear man, do we owe the pleasure?” the woman in white said imperiously, turning to face Oris' suspended body. “Pay due reverence, everyone! There is a Sulvinarian Luminary in our presence!”

Inhuman cackling laughter filled the chamber from the cloaked throng. Drawing back her silk veil, the woman revealed her fair-skinned face, her age only betrayed by the streaks of gray in her raven hair. Her thin lips curled in a half-smile as she continued,

“After eleven years, I would have hoped you'd have the courtesy to announce yourself formally, Oris.”

“Has it really been that long? How the years fly when you're not a slave of fear and madness.” Oris retorted in a clear voice, “I'm honestly upset with myself for being surprised to find you at the center of this web. You really are terribly predictable, my dear.”

The woman in white gave a throaty laugh as she sauntered in Oris' direction, dragging the leafing branch carelessly along behind her.

“You've kept your silver tongue. It was always one of your finer features. But I'm hurt! You call me a slave of fear? Madness? I thought the same of you when you ran away from our little project. Like I've said before, you hate to

look your destiny in the face, Oris.” She gestured with her outstretched hand toward the looming blue-green glass as she said this.

Oris’ hovering body turned toward the object and slowly began drifting nearer. As if awakened, the green mirror began churning with cloudy shapes inside. Dim flashes, like far-off lightning, lit up the depths of the glass, revealing the cloudy silhouette of a figure moving within. The woman went on, walking along beside Oris as he floated nearer the evil-looking glass.

“Your arrival is quite advantageous, in fact. See, I possess one undying limb from your precious tree, but none of my volunteers appear to possess the necessary resilience for the task of breaking through the barrier. I require a more willing, cosmically attuned vessel.”

As she was speaking, Oris saw a flicker of movement in the upper periphery of his sight. Glancing up, he saw a familiar friend crouching on an iron chandelier above. Oris let out a roar of laughter and replied to the woman in white,

“Come now! This is embarrassingly short-sighted even for you. You know the power I’m given is not enough to break the seal! It was forged by the Priests to keep fools like you from meddling with things they don’t understand.”

Oris’ movement toward the glass ceased. The woman let out an exasperated sigh.

“I have missed our little arguments. You may not be able to break the seal, but I think you know the one who can.”

Oris said nothing, gazing into the swirling gloom beyond the glass. The woman laughed,

“You cannot fool me, Oris. I know you have special insight, a way of seeing through the veil of reality. A new power, device, or accomplice. How else would you have found this place? If you would aid me, Oris, the reward would be immeasurable.”

“And betray my king?” Oris growled, “And throw the realm into another living hell? I knew the kingdom of Caelus had enemies on the inside, but I did know they were willing to barter with false gods as well as cruel empires.”

“Enough idle talk, Oris!” the woman in white roared, dropping her hand and letting Oris fall several feet to the ground. Oris fell on his feet and stumbled forward with a clatter, loudly toppling a stack of tomes. The woman continued speaking with added intensity,

“You think I’m a fool? I know you care nothing about banners and thrones. Or have you given up your convictions completely? This has nothing to do with the war, or your king Marren. Our dealings are beyond the comprehension of mortals and nations! You know what I’m seeking... because you seek it yourself.”

Pulling himself off the floor and leaning on one knee, Oris glanced up in time to see the figure on the chandelier leap with noiseless feet onto a ledge of the wall behind the green mirror and then drop to the floor, out of sight. He grinned marginally and let out a grunt, as he replied,

“And what is it that we both seek?”

“The truth.” she said with a glint in her eye, “Tell me. Tell me you have not been disgusted with the lies, the greed, the ulterior motives of your perfect civilization, Caelus and their beloved Priests. Tell me you have not become an unwitting pawn in their cruel and heartless game. Tell me you have not been denied the truth for the sake of a profitable lie. Or have you deceived yourself as well?”

Oris was silent for a moment, gazing back at her with a heavy expression. Standing to his feet again, Oris replied,

“The only one here deceived is you. You stand knocking at the door of the prince of lies and madness, begging for truth. Look at yourself! This is a dead end and you know it.” Pain entered Oris’ face as he held out his hand, saying, “Come back.”

The woman let out a chuckle of pity, shaking her head. She lifted the budding branch again, tracing one of her slender fingers along the edges of a green leaf as she said,

“I had hoped you’d see reason, old man. Perhaps you cannot break the glass, but you will make a fine addition to the other failures. Place his hands on the glass!”

Two of the cloaked cultists advanced and seized Oris by the arms, dragging him forcibly toward the glowing lens of the glass. Oris’ hands were forced out in front of him and placed on the warm surface of the glass, which throbbed with a powerful living energy. The chanting began anew, and with revived ferocity, as the woman in white lifted the branch over her head.

But before she could strike, a willowy figure darted from around the edge of the arch and swiftly snatched the branch out from behind the woman’s back. The woman in white spun around with a shout. The chanting stopped. For an instant, everyone stared stunned at the elf girl standing in the center of the amphitheater, wearing a short dress of vibrant leaves and feathers.

“Pretty stuffy down here.” she said with a little laugh. Plucking a leaf from the branch, she added, “You should really open a window!”

“Stop her!” the woman in white cried.

Before anyone could act, the girl punched a hole through the leaf with her fingernail, and instantly the room was flooded with a blinding blizzard of flower petals. Amidst the chaos, the woman in white screamed with furious indignation. A flash of green fire split the storm of flower petals, turning them to white ash, which lingered like a snowy haze in the air. As the air cleared, everyone remained where they had been, but Oris and the elf girl were gone. The woman clenched her fists in fury, then relaxed and began to laugh contentedly.

“You’ve escaped for a day, old man. But you’ve shown your hand.” she said, walking over a spiral shape now burned into the floor where Oris had been

standing, “The truth will come to light, and your little friend will lead the way.”

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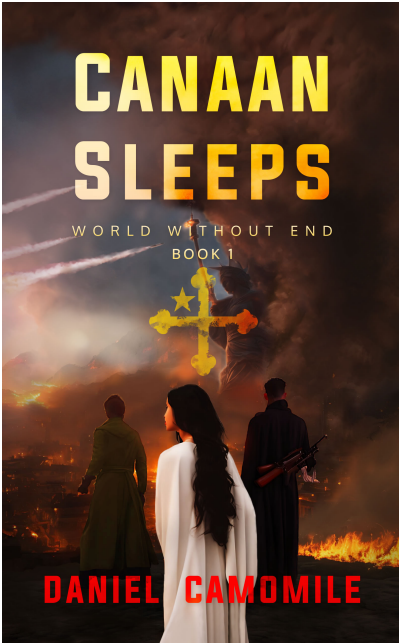
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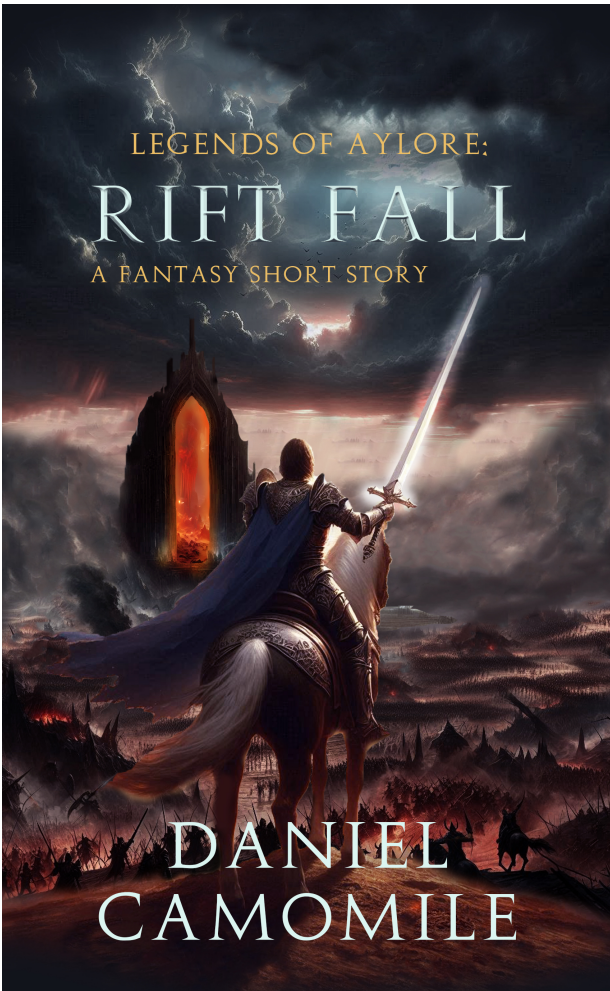


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