

STRANGE SOBRIQUET CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER OUTLINE

By Brent Bowen

Chapter 1--Two Stand Alone

Strange Sobriquet takes place in the alternate world of Nydimm. KING VARRICK, the ruler of their world, believes he has attained utopia, but as the leaves of fall begin to change their color, so does the balance of power. A dormant evil returns to hunt down the prophetic children of Nydimm, catapulting the world into an apocalyptic conflict.

A newborn is rescued from the clutches of a specter by a race of upright canines Skuhies. One of their pack, RANGE, ensures their rendezvous location is safe, but is ambivalent about the duty. The scholars intend to solve the boy's mysterious origins, and if confirmed, deliver him safely to relatives in our world. Part of their plans call for one of the Skuhies to accompany the boy to the departure location and Range can sense the task is his. The scholars refer to the child as MITH, the name reserved for the heir of a legendary wizard and savior of Nydimm. So, the task is of great importance, but it will keep Range from his obsession in pursuing the Staff of Ignedy, an artifact believed to be the key in saving a cultural mecca from devastation.

Bowen/Strange Sobriquet Ch-by-Ch-2

Halfway across the world, on the eve of the King's succession plan announcement, GABRIEL, a teenage squire for an order of knights referred to as the Grand Wardens, stumbles on a mob attacking a young woman in the ADON castle courtyard. In an act of heroism, he pushes his way into the crowd and beats the attackers away with his master's mace, thwarting the kidnapping attempt. In the skirmish, he notices the assailant's peculiar eyes. Their pupils change into double black bars before shifting to a normal shape at death.

Chapter 2--Feraj's Blood

Range and his comrades escort Mith to the scholars they serve at Genizah. When the canine Skuhies enter the scholar's chamber, they witness projected scenes of massacres in several of Nydimm's great cities, every series of moving images ended with the kidnapping of a child. In particular, the rescued boy's replay draws everyone's attention, as they relive the moment where a specter kills the boy's mother--her sacrifice allows the Skuhies to slip away with the child.

From these images an overwhelming sense of duty washes over Range. His reservations fading, he instinctively pulls closer as the scholars inspect the boy's Cirri Stone and run a battery of tests that confirm his birthright as the Cirri Child Mith, the grandson to famous wizard Lord Feraj.

The result of the positive tests triggers a hidden message that recounts the boy's prophecy: "At the height of peril, a child of my blood, but one of the Cirri twelve, will return to you. This child will lift you from darkness and will be the savior of this world. You shall call him Mith. From his ignorance you will find salvation. He will uncover the Adama AxinE, galvanize the resistance and raise an unparalleled army of protectors. He is hope's hero."

With Mith's identity determined, the scholars finalize their plan to slip the boy by the Sundu and rendezvous with Lord Janus, keeper of a gateway to many worlds referred to as the Union. Range is chosen to be the boy's sole guardian in this journey, but he accepts it reluctantly, now struggling with the responsibility of defending the world's future savior and terror in how to care for an infant.

Chapter 3--The Sundu

Having been injured in the girl's rescue, Gabriel regains consciousness to learn from his mentor MACALLAN that the spared girl is not just any noble, but Violet Varrick, a Cirri Child and the princess of Nydimm. The attack is also not the only one of its kind, ten of the twelve Cirri Children have been either killed or kidnapped. Intelligence gathered points to the Sundu being responsible. Long believed dead, Macallan explains to Gabriel, the Sundu are a fanatical people who believe they will reach their promise land by using the noble Cirri Children to unlock the Union. Like a pack animal, their leader is referred to as the Alpha, and his proximity causes the change in their eyes.

Macallan departs when Violet arrives. Gabriel flirts with the princess, and while he believes he can do little but daydream about her, she lingers longer than she needs to in expressing her thanks. Excusing herself at the sight of Gabriel's nurse, Violet kisses him on the cheek and whispers she would like to visit with him again.

Now alone with Gabriel, his nurse wastes little time in revealing an illuminating twist on his Sundu education, explaining she puts her life at great risk in telling him the truth. She clarifies for Gabriel that his mother had not simply died during his birth, but was murdered, poisoned in an attack because she was a fugitive. And not just any criminal, but a Sundu assassin. The plan called to execute Gabriel, as well, the nurse explains, but at the last minute, the DUKE OF ADON secretly orders his life be spared.

Bowen/Strange Sobriquet Ch-by-Ch-5

Macallan hurries across the castle to a meeting with the Duke, the King's named successor, and the King's High Priestess ELIZABETH. The primary purpose of the meeting is to arrange Violet's escort home and enlist Macallan in a larger quest to save the kidnapped Cirri Children. But in the discussion, Elizabeth also confirms the rescue of the boy Mith. His discovery is of particular interest to Macallan because his friend HALE was the only man in Nydimm of Feraj's ancestry. And he had been missing for over a year, having been presumed dead nearly as long.

Chapter 4--The Cirri Diamond

On the heels of discovering his mother was a Sundu, Gabriel learns from Elizabeth that because of his bravery in saving Violet, he is to be promoted to a Warden Tyro. He is honored, aware few commoners ever attain the Warden ranks, but he also feels guilty, still overwhelmed by his mother's allegiance.

Elizabeth offers to heal his wounds and arranges for his nurse to deliver him later that day. During their session, she explains she will use his mind to tell his body how to heal itself faster. Initially, the probing of his mind soothes him, but somewhere a line is crossed, the focus no longer on his injury, but on his memories. Subconsciously he fights back and unleashes a previously untapped power. Though he can only vaguely follow the action, he knows he's done something to stop Elizabeth's probing. He regains consciousness to find the room ravaged, the nurse face-down on the floor and Elizabeth huddled in the corner, screaming at him to leave.

Away from the flurry of activity in a castle garden, Violet contemplates her return home to VISSERRELL and the fate of the Cirri Children, who have indeed been targeted by the Sundu for their diamonds. The gemstone birthmarks are significant not only because of their ability to unlock the Union but they also allow a child to see into the future. Unlike the other children, whose stones are fixed upon their navel, Violet's is set in a locket that rests around her neck, the result of an accident many years before. With the attacks, she worries how she will keep it safe.

Bowen/Strange Sobriquet Ch-by-Ch-7

Confused, Gabriel walks about the castle grounds and stumbles upon Violet in the garden. The guilt of his mother's identity fading some, he expresses his joy in his new rank. But this fact upsets Violet, as she reminds him that his new title will certainly usher him into the dangerous quest to save the kidnapped children. Violet finally tells Gabriel that if he must join the quest she demands to be with him in spirit and gives him her Cirri Stone. Aware of a Cirri Stone's significance, he at first refuses to accept it, but she lies, explaining it away as unenchanted. Finding the day's events all too sobering, he stops questioning its true nature and accepts the gift.

Chapter 5--Macallan's Sacrifice

In the moments before Gabriel's knighting, ELIZABETH inquires into his and Violet's fledgling relationship. In the conversation, she begins spreading accusations of his affiliation with the Sundu to her apprentices, one of whom is Violet's best friend.

While Gabriel waits outside the cathedral, he observes a raven perched atop the steeple. He identifies with the scavenger bird because it, like he, lives almost completely dependent on others leftovers. When Gabriel enters the cathedral the bird begins squawking, eerily intelligible, but faint. Focusing on the call, he decides the bird is saying "Stronger."

After Gabriel is made a Warden, he exits the cathedral and encounters the raven again. But this time the bird is clearly audible and almost indignant in its call as it flies away, screeching "Stranger! Stranger..! Stranger..."

Later that evening, Macallan awaits a guest to assist him with a secret task. He believes an old wizard friend, who has been left somewhat debilitated by stroke, is the only one he can trust. Many years before, Macallan promised Gabriel's father that he would sacrifice his spirit to protect the boy. The decision requires him to extract and harness years from his life into a living mineral called a NECROMARKER. His essence will then power a spell that will defend the young Warden during his time of greatest need.

At first the wizard refuses to conduct the extraction because of the magnitude of life force requested, but the Warden argues that this

is legacy, believing the significant juncture in Gabriel's life has arrived. And, eventually, the Warden convinces the old man to assist.

Chapter 6--The Hall of Heroes

Unable to find Macallan in his chamber, Gabriel must attend his reception alone. Despite his anxiety over Macallan's whereabouts and his own discomfort with social situations, Gabriel enters the Hall of Champions to much praise and jubilation from the crowd.

Violet leads him to a platform where he discovers that his memories of her rescue will be the evening's entertainment. With each passing moment, the crowd chants Gabriel's name. Once the show concludes, Gabriel finds his heroics etched into the hall's walls and ceiling as a lasting tribute of his deed.

During the display, Gabriel spots Macallan working across the crowd to join him, but once the lights go up and the dust and smoke from the entertainment begin to disperse, all chaos ensues. Weakened from his life extraction, Macallan half dives, half stumbles to the floor, catching the end of table and pitching it into the air. Gabriel rushes toward his mentor and finds him faint in color, but once revived, he pleads for them to assist Violet. The young Warden notices the end of the toppled table smolders, pierced by molten rounds, and hurries to Violet.

Gabriel finds the princess unharmed, Macallan's act thwarting another attempt on her life. He tracks the trajectory of the shots to the hall's roof, spotting two grapnel hooks, and commands the guards to investigate. They return to report that not only were the assassins and the castle guards found dead, but also every living thing outside that followed a path from the roof and through a nearby garden.

Chapter 7--Twists of the Nimbi Valley

After the second attempt on the Princess' life, Gabriel and his companions rush to escort her to Visserrell, where they believe she'll be safe. As they travel from the castle, they witness first-hand the curious path of death that led across the castle grounds, serving as an ominous reminder for Gabriel of the events from the night before and the apparent weakness he witnessed in Macallan.

New dangers and concerns await, as the Sundu have blocked every form of expedient travel from the Adon castle to Visserrell and the group is forced to trek by horseback across the Nimbi Valley. Shrouded in darkness by storm clouds and besieged by swarms of tornadoes, the Valley is the most perilous lands in Nydimm.

But they are not alone in their Valley journey, coming upon Range and Mith, whose rendezvous point with Lord Janus requires they meet in the same dangerous locale.

At identifying the boy as a Cirri child, Elizabeth commands the group to intercept the Skuhy and Mith. Unsure about their identity, Gabriel and his companions attempt to apprehend Range, but the group is cut off by an attack from a race of angelic cloud creatures, allowing the Skuhy to escape with Mith into the protection of the Valley's ridges and rolling hills.

The cloud creatures' actions perplex Violet. After all, they are bound to protect all Cirri Children and should not have attacked while she was among them, regardless of whether Elizabeth sought to capture the boy.

Chapter 8--Refracting Light

The group arrives in Visserrell without further incident, but with much fanfare--people of all walks of life line up along the castle's entrance to see the boy who saved the Cirri princess.

Greeted by another of Macallan's apprentices and Gabriel's friend WILLIAM, they are led to a meeting where the Wardens continue planning the next phase of the quest to save the Cirri Children.

Gabriel struggles with his enthusiasm for joining the ranks of heroes while he knows he will soon leave Violet and Macallan will suffer through the reminder that his best friend Hale is no longer with them. In Visserrell's warroom, the missing Warden's chair sits overturned, for though it is not currently occupied, it is not to be used.

While the Wardens make plans well into the night, Gabriel and Violet sneak away into a secluded crystal garden. What Gabriel believes will be a tender moment turns tense as Violet chides him for rushing into joining the rescue mission. When he tries to explain his sense of duty, she accuses him of exaggerating his importance. Aware she is simply upset with his departure, Gabriel reminds her he possesses her Cirri Stone and he will always be with her. But in this moment he decides maybe she is right. Is he ready to join the Wardens? He knows he will miss her, so he chooses to stay behind.

Once he acquiesces, they discuss the other Cirri Children. Violet shares with Gabriel her belief that the boy in the Nimbi Valley is the most powerful of all of the Cirri Children, convinced he possesses the ability to see outside of Nydimm and into other worlds.

Chapter 9--Securing A Soul

Yet the question of Gabriel's service is not truly determined until the King, fearing the budding romance between the young Warden and his daughter, demands Elizabeth add him to the final register. The decision infuriates Elizabeth, who had intended to exclude Gabriel because she worries about his developing powers.

Several stories above the crystal garden, Macallan spies on Gabriel and Violet and contemplates the notion of romance and how it is not meant for the type of man Gabriel is about to become: a man whose life will be committed to duty.

But his daydreaming is cut short when the wizard arrives to extract more of his spirit. His frail accomplice warns Macallan that despite his sacrifices there is no guarantee that Gabriel will survive his eminent trial. Ultimately, the wizard says, it will be up to Gabriel's spirit whether he lives or dies. The wizard is not the only person who finds the boy an enigma. As he probes the young couple's thoughts, he can sense that even a powerful Cirri Child such as Violet can only see a dense fog for Gabriel's future.

As others debate whether Gabriel will join the quest or stay behind, Macallan has his own choice to make. His spirit is exhausted from the extractions and ready to cross the Union, but he forces it to return to him--guarantee or not-- so he can complete his task of protecting Gabriel's life, if not his soul.

Chapter 10--Temptation's Sustenance

After nearly being intercepted by Elizabeth and failing to rendezvous with Lord Janus, Range and Mith miss their opportunity to cross the Union. Secluded in the woods outside of the valley, Range feeds Mith and reports their failure in crossing the Union to the scholars. As he recounts the events and confirms his next steps, they remind him that he is not, under any circumstances, to enter Solgrave because the Sundu presence is strong in that region.

Though he understands the instructions to not venture to the city of canals, the decision is difficult for the Skuhy to accept. Resuming his quest to uncover the Staff of Ignedyia and solving the mysteries of the sinking city were to be his reward for a job well done.

Even as Range works to chart the course to their contingency location, a new challenge arises. The Sundu ambush them. And, while they survive, Mith's food supply is scattered among the forest's floor. With the simple loss, what had once been an escort mission to the Nimbi Valley, now is a mission of survival. It will take them weeks to reach Lord Janus and the boy won't make it without food.

Knowing only one nearby city exists where he can replenish the boy's supplies, Range is left with little choice: against the better judgment of the scholars, they must travel to Solgrave.

With its collapsing infrastructure and heavy Sundu presence, the ancient city presents enough obstacles for the travelers. But the scholars understand the real danger may be Range facing a temptation that could jeopardize his duty to Mith.

Chapter 11--Split Legend

While Range rushes to find Mith food, the Wardens travel to the Gnosis Mountains, believing the Sundu have stashed the kidnapped Cirri Children in this savage terrain.

Gabriel begins to learn about his growing role in the larger conflict--the controversy surrounding his birth stemmed because many in Nydimm fear a Sundu legend that believes one of their own will become a gatekeeper of the Union and lead them across. Despite what it might mean to their relationship, Macallan shares another secret, as well: he was the Grand Warden who killed Gabriel's mother. Initially, Gabriel feels betrayed and cursed, but discovers there is a split interpretation of the Union legend, one where the same Sundu offspring becomes the protector for the Cirri Children. Macallan adamantly holds the latter conviction and pleads with Gabriel that if he does not believe, all of the children will die.

Soon after their arrival in the mountains, Gabriel encounters a creature, part serpent, part man, with a child in its possession. In a lucky stroke, he defeats the creature, but not before it murders the child. Though this first attempt at rescuing a child is a failure, Gabriel does manage to recover two Cirri Diamonds, another child's stone severed and tethered to the boy's clothes.

Hours later Macallan finds him dejected by this failure with the child, so the mentor demands the young Warden join him for a sparring session. It is during this training that Gabriel's confidence returns, as he begins to understand that he possesses the rare ability to

harness power not only from Nydimm, but all worlds connected to the
Union.

Chapter 12--Sundu Suspicions

Gabriel's company and the other Wardens assemble deep in the Gnosis Mountains. There is little fanfare in the reunion; however, as the stones Gabriel has recovered are the only product of their effort. Later that night, whispers questioning Gabriel's true allegiance begin to spread among the Wardens. But he is oblivious to the debate, his attention locked on Elizabeth, who, while drawing a culture to ensure he has not been poisoned by the serpent creature, promises him that she can arrange a meeting with Violet "in his dreams."

After the Adon healing session, Gabriel distrusts Elizabeth, but she delivers, as his dream returns him and Violet to Visserrell's crystal garden. And while the conversation begins more amenable than the original encounter, its results in a foreboding conclusion: a dense shadow emerges from the corner of the garden, overtaking much of the landscape, and when Violet investigates, it consumes her.

Concerned about the extent of Gabriel's ability, Elizabeth runs a battery of tests on his blood and identifies unique properties that fend off the serpent's poison. Coupled with eye witness accounts of his sparring sessions with Macallan, she commissions another Warden, who shares her suspicions, to spy on the young Warden.

Chapter 13--A Friend's Betrayal

The next day, the dream of the shadow continues to haunt Gabriel, illusions of its presence lurking in his periphery. And despite Violet's relative calm during the episode, the shadow overtaking her has him preoccupied about her safety, instead of concentrating on his next sparring session with Macallan.

Before he can explain to Macallan what is troubling him, they are interrupted by the Warden tasked with spying on Gabriel. He informs them that scouts have spotted the Sundu and the group is making preparations for battle. As they return to camp, Gabriel passes the Warden and feels moisture and a chill against his back. Running his hand along his gelmail, he detects no rips or tears to explain the sensation, so he dismisses it, unaware the Warden has planted him with a device to record his experiences.

Shortly thereafter, the Wardens enter the valley ready to face the Sundu. But they do not expect four cursed horsemen, each possessing his own horrible gift, along with the Sundu horde.

Regardless, the horsemen hold at least one Cirri Child, so the Wardens press on. As the horde and the Warden battalion wage war, Gabriel and Macallan intentionally stay back to rescue ISABEL from one of the riders. Along with Mith and Violet, the girl is among the last of the Cirri Children.

But when the child changes hands, Gabriel and Macallan are separated. Alone and in his weakened condition, Macallan is no match for the spectral horseman. The Grand Warden finally succumbs to Death's sickle, but not before the cursed Sundu horsemen reveals his

identity. Admitting to his betrayal, Hale, the man who was once Macallan's best friend, peers over him.

Chapter 14--What the Past Holds

During the middle of the night, Violet awakes to a vision of Hale and decides to investigate. In the process, she unlocks something quite unexpected, a suppressed memory from her childhood: her severed Cirri Stone is not the product of any accident, but the result of kidnapping by a maniacal wizard and her survival can be attributed only to a rescue by Hale and Elizabeth.

The discovery crumbles all that she holds true. It is clear her father has been lying to her for years and, worse yet, she begins to doubt her abilities and her status as a Cirri Child. Despite these worries, something continues to tug at her, a sense that a connection exists between her past, her vision of Hale and the quest to save the children. She decides she must pursue it.

Having been split from Macallan, Gabriel pursues the rider carrying Isabel. He chases the rider until they reach the original battlefield, only then to learn it had been Elizabeth all along.

Gabriel realizes the error in his decision to leave Macallan's side and races back to his mentor. But it is too late. Pushing his grief and rage aside, he questions the Wardens attending to Macallan. Aside from their explanation that they responded to a call from Elizabeth when he did not, the only information they can provide is Macallan's final cryptic ramblings, "Hale...death...eyes flashed...alpha near'r than you think."

With the mystery of Macallan's last words and the knowledge Elizabeth communicated with several Wardens during the battle, he

contemplates why Macallan would send him after the child if he knew it was Elizabeth who had rescued her? Or did he know?

Chapter 15--A Secure Spirit

Even with Isabel's rescue, the quest continues because her stone is somehow separated from her and still in the Sundu's possession. Though he continues on with the order, Gabriel can not shake a feeling of guilt for leaving Macallan, the accusing whispers and glances from everyone in camp a constant reminder that he shares in the responsibility for his mentor's death.

Concerned about the clues Macallan may have left for his charge, Elizabeth attempts to crack the vessel holding the Warden's remaining spirit. But as she presses further, trying harder and harder to enter, it knocks her unconscious and demands of her to be relinquished to Gabriel.

Now summoned by Elizabeth, Gabriel visits with the priestess and learns of his responsibility to administer Macallan's last rites. He is still suspicious about the events leading up to Macallan's death and her communication with the other Warden's, so when she infers he is responsible for deserting Macallan, they argue about who is truly to blame.

The conversation grows tenser when the priestess informs him that because of this negligence she has requested the King to demote him. They both resign to defeat. With the humbling news, he leaves her tent knowing his life as Warden is likely over, but he leaves with Macallan's Necromarker.

Chapter 16--Disclosed Identity

Violet awakes the next morning to terrible news about the quest. But she determines the outcome before it can be shared, her mind filling in the blanks of her vision from the night before: Hale has betrayed Macallan, the full realization dawning on her that she watched Macallan's death.

With word of the Warden's death and her desire to learn more about the lies regarding her past, she grows tired of waiting for her father's return and breaks into his study. She doesn't locate any clues about her accident, but she discovers a glowing orb hovering over his desk and engages it. The orb's contents reveal a request from Elizabeth to demote Gabriel. She assumes her father has not seen the information and decides to help the young Warden, hiding the correspondence away in her gown.

Just as she does, the chamber door flings open and her father enters. With no shame in her trespassing, Violet confronts him about her fears of being a fraud and her anger with him for lying to her. Seeing no point in continuing the façade, he shares what he has recently learned from Genizah. A fraud does exist within the twelve named Cirri Children, but it is not her. And then, he explains the even more incredible finding that another true, unidentified child is out in society, a considerable concern if the Sundu discover the child's identity first.

With her father still preoccupied in thought about the discovery of another Cirri child and before he can perhaps notice the orb she holds in her skirt, Violet slips out of his office.

Chapter 17--The Sacrifice Revealed

Without proper nourishment Mith grows weaker by the day, so when Range reaches the outskirts of Solgrave, it is with a mix of relief and apprehension. The city sits on the brink of collapse, but he manages to locate and convince an old friend to guide them through the perilous canals in search of the boy's food.

Along a river in the Gnosis Mountains, Gabriel performs Macallan's last rights. The young warden is unsure what will become of him with his hero and the embodiment of his values lying before him lifeless. But in the service, a portion of Macallan's sacrifice is triggered. Gabriel succumbs to a surreal vision of his mentor's last moments. In these memories, Gabriel finds clarity and direction. He experiences Hale's betrayal, but a change in Hale's eyes coupled with Macallan's thoughts are even more telling. Gabriel realizes Hale could not be the Sundu Alpha. Aware the Alpha's proximity set off the transformation of Hale's eyes, and coupled with his pursuit of Elizabeth, Gabriel figures the King's priestess to be the ultimate traitor.

Yet Gabriel encounters a new obstacle along with the discovery. A raven, similar to the one at his knighting, caws, flushing out the Grand Warden who had been spying on him. With Gabriel still recovering from the vision's effects, the Warden escapes before he can establish what the man has seen or knows.

Determined to exact his revenge despite the risk of repercussions, Gabriel contacts Violet using her stone and requests her assistance in implicating Elizabeth as the Sundu Alpha.

Chapter 18--Collapsing Plans

Before Gabriel and Violet can devise a plan, the King barges into her room and she breaks contact. The King has discovered the orb containing the request to demote Gabriel missing and demands her to return it. To protect Gabriel, she lies and swears to him she doesn't have it. But in seeing her father's rage over the orb's theft, she decides she must ditch it.

With her spy following Gabriel's every move, Elizabeth learns of the young Warden's vision and speculates whether he has learned of her true identity. Aware she can't act against him without considerable risk of revealing this truth to all of the Wardens, she plants the Warden spy with more misinformation about Gabriel and decides to probe further before deciding how to proceed.

Range and his friend navigate the debris of Solgrave's waterways in their search for Mith's food. They eventually find refuge in an old woman's market. Or so they thought, as Range and his guide must evade gunfire and then convince the woman from squeezing off another round. She eventually welcomes them and they discover her paranoia is warranted, her store ransacked, Sundu bodies strewn along the floor. Explaining the Sundu arrived shortly before them and more are expected, she, without prompting, locates Mith's food and urges them to leave. Her anticipation of their needs astonishes Range and he suspects the woman can read his thoughts.

Though he never receives an explanation about the woman's telepathic prowess, he is certain of it once they set off in the canals. Her premonition saves their lives, as she calls to Range

across the city, warning him of a trap just in time for them to steer clear of danger.

Chapter 19--The Lighting Rod

While the trap is avoided, Solgrave's devastation closes in all around Range and his companions. Each time they try to turn up a canal to return to the lagoon and earn their freedom from the city, another building explodes. The detonations block their path and force them back into the main canal, where the city's infrastructure is the least stable. It is soon clear to Range that the storied hub for arts and history is nearly a wasteland.

Eventually, they run aground and a marble column breaks loose, smashing into their stern. Catapulted into the canal, Range struggles to locate Mith among the rubble. Fortunate for them all, the Skuhy finds the boy--in his protective gear--underwater, lodged against the grate of a retired duct system.

But it is not his only discovery. He pushes off the bars, loosening year's of grime and sludge. And there, gems and gold glimmer from the Staff of Ignedya, which is soldered to the grate. Undaunted by the surrounding dangers and consumed with the temptation to rescue the archeological treasure, Range dismisses his friends' pleas. He leaves the boy with the guide and dives back into the water. But while he works to free the staff, a ground-splitting quake bucks him from the ducts. In the rush to his next attempt at the staff, he glances to the surface and finds Mith submerged, head bobbing along the canal wall. He abandons the staff and rescues boy, but his endeavor comes at a great cost: a building wall has collapsed, crushing and killing his friend, the man's dead grip the only thing keeping Mith from being lost in the canals.

After the tragedy with his friend, Range abandons the staff and recommits to Mith, successfully leading them both out of the city.

Across Nydimm, the Wardens avoid any interaction with Gabriel. He presses for an explanation and learns from William, who is perhaps his last confidant, that the Wardens have accepted Elizabeths' accusations of his incompetence, and possibly worse, his affiliation with the Sundu. Battle horns sounding the call to arms cuts their conversation short, but Gabriel hears enough to decide he must desert the Wardens.

Chapter 20--Curse To Be Forgotten

Though Elizabeth leads the Sundu, an even greater evil pulls the strings. She confers with her master HEIDLER for guidance. And though the enigmatic wizard acknowledges Gabriel as a threat, he remains reticent to kill the young Warden. This reluctance concerns Elizabeth because she is all too familiar with her master's preference to not dispose of power, yet to use it to his advantage--she's living proof. Finally it dawns on her that while Gabriel possesses many talents, it is his small influence with the princess and King that poses the greatest threat. Now that Elizabeth possesses ten of the twelve Cirri Stones, Heidler instructs her to return to Visserrell for the princess. She accepts his direction, but also convinces him that she can mitigate Gabriel as a threat by eliminating Visserrell's memory of him, thereby allowing Heidler to keep him as a pawn.

In Visserrell, Violet gains her priestess friend's conditional support in manipulating the orb. They complete the work and she slips out of the chamber just as the guards arrive to search the room. Aware she has little time, Violet rushes to nearest drop point and commands the orb to Gabriel.

Elizabeth confronts Gabriel while he packs his horse and he confesses his plans to leave the Wardens after the forthcoming battle. And though he has no intention of continuing his service even into the next engagement, the damage is done. Elizabeth warns that while he may be defecting, he will depart, "not known as you are."

With knowledge of Gabriel's departure, Elizabeth races back to her tent. Though rushed, her encounter with Gabriel proves successful

as she acquires the strands of Violet's hair and now possesses all of the elements required to complete her enchantment. Originally her plans were only to render Gabriel forgotten to Violet and the King, but in a moment of spite, it is not enough to satisfy her. She scoops in a handful of dirt, extending the scope of the curse to the point where he is forgotten to everyone of Nydimm, creating unintended and dire consequences for everyone.

Chapter 21--Wiped Away

Violet returns to her chamber to chronicle her exploit in her journal, believing she has safely avoided detection and delivered the package to Gabriel. Focused on scribbling away in the journal's pages, she doesn't notice her father's presence. He startles her, his fingernails clenched white into the glowing orb that had left her hands moments before. The rumble of thunder outside matches the pitch of their exchange. But just as their argument reaches its peak, a crack of lightning disorients them both, sapping all thought from the moment. Time lapses and they cannot recall their conversation or the purpose of the orb that is now blank. When Violet returns to her journal great gaps of content lay among the pages, though some are dog-eared, as if at one time they had been important, but are now, oddly, empty.

Gabriel sets along the path into the Gnosis Mountains when he recalls Macallan's plea that if he does not believe, all of the children will die. It is in this memory that Gabriel remembers Isabel is still much in danger and guilt over his desertion convinces him to turn around. He races back to the moor to reconvene with the battalion.

But he arrives as disbelief sweeps across the troops. By the hand of the Horseman Death, the Grand Wardens have all been drained of life. The remaining Wardens retreat, pandemonium ensuing when the specter of Death sweeps over them, his sickle writhing. Among the chaos, Gabriel locates and attempts to rescue William, but a series of explosions detonate near his horse, knocking him unconscious.

Chapter 22--Bleeding Shadows

In his unconsciousness Gabriel returns to a nightmarish re-enactment of his Visserrell garden encounter with Violet. But unlike before, when the cryptic shadow swallowed Violet, it now traps him within it. No matter how he claws at it, the edges of its confines extend with him, as if he is now one with the dark matter. In this image, doubt creeps into his mind. For the first time, Gabriel can see himself capable of supporting the Sundu and even bringing harm to the Cirri Children.

In Visserrell, a horrifying vision of the Grand Wardens massacre brings Violet to her knees. She rushes to her father, who reaches out to Elizabeth and Genizah for confirmation. When the message of their demise is returned, it rekindles Violet's conviction she should explore the connection between Hale and her mysterious past.

With her eradication of the Grand Wardens and possession of ten of the twelve Cirri Diamonds, Elizabeth sets to depart camp. But before she can leave with Hale and her Sundu escorts, the King's orb arrives, almost unraveling her deception. She manipulates the situation to maintain her cover with Visserrell. Racing from the camp, she mimics a retreat from the Sundu, and then returns the frantic message to the King. When Hale finally catches up with her, he inquires about Macallan's apprentice, intending to receive a report about Gabriel. But Elizabeth inadvertently misinforms Hale--a product of removing the young Warden from her memory. She believes he seeks news of William, Macallan's other squire, and though she doesn't

understand why Hale would care, she reports that he was killed with the Wardens.

Chapter 23--Facing Death

Gabriel awakes, interrupting his vision of the shadows and Violet. He returns to consciousness only to find all of the Wardens dead. At this point, he knows he is Isabel's only hope and decides to return to camp. Fortunately, his horse has not left him stranded with the dead, but the horse acts distant, as if the creature doesn't remember his master. After several failed attempts, Gabriel finally soothes his steed and sets off for the Warden's camp.

He arrives to find it deserted. Scavenging Elizabeth's tent, he notices the smoldering alembic and realizes the camp was vacated in a rush. He examines the alembic's contents further and also suspects a spell has been cast against him, finding remnants of his marker, but can't determine to what end.

Leaving camp, he discovers Elizabeth's path and tracks her and Isabel to an abandoned intra-world portal, arriving just as the priestess enters the conveyance. Panicked by the prospect of another child's death, Gabriel rushes to stop her, but Hale and two Sundu guards prevent him from sabotaging the transport sequence before she can escape.

Gabriel is now left to face the man who has become Death. Gabriel matches the former Warden's every blow. They fight to an eventual standstill, but it provides enough time for the guards to reset the transport for Hale to retreat. As Hale departs, he offers a telling warning to his new adversary, "Elizabeth didn't do her job, did she?" he asks, his voice losing some of its snarl. "Or maybe she couldn't? Somehow you slipped through her grasp, but you won't mine. You're only

fortunate more important things await me now. We'll see if you can protect both Mith and Violet. Remember, boy, I claim everyone."

Chapter 24--A Safe Introduction

Lord Janus arrives and arranges Range and Mith's passage across the Union. He explains that when they reach the other side, Range is to take the boy to the Moon Cathedral and find a certain Bishop because he will "ensure a safe introduction to the boy's family." Range determines--despite the certain demeaning stature of his kind in our world--the only way he can repent for his neglect of the boy in Solgrave is to continue as the child's guardian after they cross.

Range discovers the meaning of Lord Janus' parting words when they arrive across the Union in Oradea, Romania. They are not alone. Hale also has crossed over. Range races to the cathedral with Mith. They beat Hale, but Range is unable to locate the Bishop right away. When the Bishop eventually steps out onto the altar, he doesn't show the slightest surprise to see the adversaries congregated before him and simply collects the child from Range before directing his attention to Hale.

"So, you've decided to grace us with your presence. Welcome, Hale. It's been a long time. Here to confess your sins?"

"You know why I'm here Bishop. Bring the child to me."

"You will have the child in time. But since you're not Death here, I won't let you have him now."

In Nydimm, with the portal destroyed, Gabriel fears he'll never reach Violet before Elizabeth and searches for another way to expedite his travels to Visserrell. Finally, he taps into his considerable gifts and modifies an instrument he has located in Elizabeth's tent into transportation for the long trek to the castle.

Chapter 25--The Last Cirri

Upon Elizabeth's arrival, the King demonstrates his implicit trust in her by asking her to escort the Cirri Diamonds to Genizah.

A day later, Gabriel arrives at Visserrell and breaks into the castle grounds. He rouses Violet to fill her in on all his trials. But with the curse, she does not recognize the face before her and screams for help. Confused by her fear, Gabriel announces himself and produces her Cirri Stone as proof of their relationship, but the sight of her diamond, particularly in the hands of the strange man, triggers more panic and she breaks into screams again. The guards barge into her chamber and Gabriel must flee the castle, Violet's diamond clenched in his hands.

Still frazzled by the encounter, Violet rushes into her room to announce her stone has been stolen. The King leads her to his private oracle hoping they might identify the perpetrator, but all the oracle will say is that the "stone is lost. With the stranger." Only contributing to the confusion, the oracle does corroborate part of the thief's story, explaining the stone had, in fact, been given to the stranger by the princess many months before.

Feeling lost and confused by his failure in Visserrell, Gabriel drowns his sorrow in the ink and alcohol supplied at a nearby tattoo parlor. He is just beginning to realize the truth about his curse and figures if others can't remember him, he will inscribe history's truths onto his body for all to witness. While the artist works, Gabriel again sees the raven that has been present at his Wardening

ceremony and Macallan's funeral. In the bird, he sees a symbol of resilience and imagines that while he may not be able to maintain a relationship with others, he concedes there is an ironic beauty in how his new-found state could work to his advantage. The sight of the raven also reminds him of his pledge to Macallan. His charge to save and protect the Cirri Children remains, so he decides to return to Visserrell, but this time not for Violet. No, this time, saving Isabel will be his aim.

Chapter 26--Final Failure

Gabriel returns to Visserrell to rescue Isabel. Several miles outside of the castle, he confronts Elizabeth and charges into her battalion without hesitation, nabbing the girl. While Gabriel evades the battalion attack, he is unaware of the nearby Sundu threat. Their poison darts zip through before he can engage a shield and hit Isabel. Ravaged by yet another failure, Gabriel breaks down, clutching the dying girl in his arms. Before long his energy shield is draped with Sundu warriors, and in the darkness, he finds despair. For the first time, he contemplates using his defeat as a means to quit, a means to hide from the conflict that faces Nydimm. But also in the shadows, the Sundu features stand out, the Gemini mark of their eyes rekindle his hope. It is a sign that Elizabeth has not yet departed, and while Isabel is dead, he can still detain Elizabeth and rescue the stones.

Eventually, he breaks free from the Sundu, yet his hesitation to act again allows Elizabeth to escape. Worse yet, the Sundu continue their pursuit, Gabriel racing for his life as other darts render his shields inoperable and him open to attack.

Fortunately, Lord Janus rescues him, covering their tracks before the Sundu arrive. The wizard explains the full effect of Elizabeth's curse and a future moment in his life that he will need to recognize to complete his destiny. The curse will indeed assist him in serving as the guardian for Violet's Cirri Stone. That is until, the keeper tells him, he faces another warrior who will not only be his equal, but will also remember his God-given name. "Only to this man should

you give the diamond," instructs the wizard before departing again with the Union.

Chapter 27--The Stranger

After months of solitude, in which Gabriel has spent time coming to grips with the curse that has become his life, he continues his search for the other Cirri Stones. He travels to a settlers' town near the Rual Mountains. He is not alone in his search, encountering his friend William. After rescuing his friend and gaining William's confidence, the two share a few pints and exchange information regarding their quests. Because he is forgotten every 15 minutes, Gabriel concocts ways to remind William of his identity and re-establish his trust several times during their conversation.

In the exchange, he learns of rumors about an unidentified twelfth child being hidden in the Ruals, away from the Sundu, and that some of the other children, believed dead, may yet still be alive. Also a relief to Gabriel is news of Violet. It seems she has run off all of her suitors, the princess postponing marriage because she believes the whereabouts of her stone and her true love are inextricably linked.

While the conversation lifts Gabriel's spirits, he knows it can't last and his intuition proves correct when William spots Macallan's mace in his possession. It severs the thread of trust Gabriel had established and requires a quick explanation to avoid a confrontation. Even though he excuses himself from William on shaky terms, Gabriel still finds hope in the conversation, confirming he can find answers in the Rual Mountains.

He also confirms his commitment to the cause. As he prepares to search for the Cirri Children, the diamonds, and possibly Elizabeth

herself, he knows, with his curse, he could choose to not continue and no one would be the wiser. But with a purpose, it didn't matter if anyone held him accountable. In the end, he would know and that was enough.