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# DRAGONWATCH

## MASTER OF THE PHANTOM ISLE

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**BRANDON MULL** is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of the Fablehaven, Beyonders, and Five Kingdoms series. A kinetic thinker, Brandon enjoys bouncy balls, squeezable stress toys, and popping bubble wrap. He lives in Utah in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon with his four children and a dog named Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Brandon loves meeting his readers and hearing about their experiences with his books.

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# DRAGONWATCH

MASTER OF THE PHANTOM ISLE



## BRANDON MULL

ILLUSTRATED BY  
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*For Chase, forever my little pal*

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## CHAPTER ONE



## Under

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

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

“Who is the Underking?” Seth asked.

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

“I tried,” Seth said.

“For how long?”

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

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

"Maybe you could summarize?" Seth asked hopefully.

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

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

"He won't like me?" Seth asked.

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

"He's king of the underground?" Seth asked.

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

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

"If it should be dead but isn't, the Underking probably

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

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

“He asked for you,” Ronodin said.

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

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

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

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

“I don’t remember,” Seth said.

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

“I could be anyone,” Seth said.

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

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

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

“And you’re a unicorn?” Seth asked.

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

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

“I have no choice,” Seth said.

“In this matter, no,” Ronodin said.

“I’m not a bad guy,” Seth asserted.

“How do you know?” Ronodin asked.

“I just know,” Seth said.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’d become a zombie?” Seth asked.

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



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

"What if he sneaks up on me?" Seth asked.

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

"What about in a mirror?" Seth asked.

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

"You've never seen him?" Seth asked.

"I would be undead if I had," Ronodin said.

"What if he isn't there?" Seth asked. "What if it's just a sound system?"

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

"Why does he want to see me?"

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

"Won't it seem rude if I walk in backwards?" Seth asked.

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

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

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

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

“Never,” Ronodin said. “Few have.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll try,” Seth said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” Seth said. “Does that matter?”

“Not really,” Ronodin said, extending a hand to rest a finger on the forehead of a small, narrow skull with pointy teeth. Ronodin closed his eyes for a moment, and, as he removed his finger, the door vanished. Cold darkness flowed from the doorway, washing over Seth and quickly blackening the hallway.

Pale blue light flared at the end of a short, gnarled wand, held by Ronodin, the tip bright enough to drive back the inky darkness, but not very far. Though it lacked any tangibility that Seth could discern, this particular darkness seemed especially resistant to light. Ronodin handed the holly wand to Seth.

“Why take a light if I don’t want to see him?” Seth asked.

“Even without light,” Ronodin said, “you would still see the Underking if you gazed in his direction. But you will need some light to stay on the tiled path. This holly wand can drive back even empowered darkness. Step gently, avoid the pits, and do not stray off into the bones.”

“And I’m supposed to walk backward,” Seth said. “Without looking up.”

Ronodin shook his hand with formality. “You’re

catching on. Off you go.” Ronodin released his hand. “Remember, if something goes wrong, if you need anything at all, you’re absolutely on your own.”

Seth had no reply. It was possible Ronodin was trying to use humor to relax him, but Seth suspected he was simply apprenticed to a jerk. Ronodin gestured for him to proceed. Seth turned his back to the gaping doorway and passed through it in reverse with careful steps. Holding the wand low to better illuminate the ground, Seth kept his eyes downward to see where he was going without peering too far ahead. He had not taken many steps before darkness swallowed all view of Ronodin and the doorway.

The plain black tiles reflected little light. Seth backed along quietly. Jagged heaps of bones appeared off to one side of the floor, starkly white at the edge of the light from his wand. He reached a pit of impenetrable blackness, no bigger around than a hula hoop. No matter how close Seth brought the wand, no light brightened the pit.

Seth felt a creeping suspicion that something behind him was watching, perhaps even sneaking up on him, but he couldn’t look in case he might accidentally see the Underking. There seemed to be movement in the darkness beyond his light, unseen, unheard, but convincingly present. Seth felt unsettled, then scared, and though part of him knew the impulse was irrational, it took an effort not to run off screaming in a random direction.

As he inched along the tile floor, messy piles of bones appeared off to one side. Seth wound around several

smallish pits, wondering how long he would be traveling. Was he crossing a normal-sized room, or might this go on for miles?

Walking backward in a crouch was tedious. He felt entombed by the incredible quiet and stillness surrounding him. The shuffling of his feet seemed to desecrate an otherwise perfect silence. Seth resisted the mounting, suspenseful terror.

Occasionally he reached an individual bone, which he avoided in case it was cursed or diseased. The air was so cold that Seth could see his breath pluming in the wandlight.

Dry words reached Seth with no warning, slithering into his ears while chilling his nerves. “Who brings light into my darkness?” inquired a voice that seemed ancient, all rasp and whisper.

Goosebumps erupted all over Seth and his muscles tensed. The fear of anticipation was over—doom had arrived. Seth had to resist the urge to look over his shoulder toward that desiccated voice. Whoever had spoken was awaiting a response.

Seth stood up straighter, keeping his back to the speaker and his eyes closed. “I hardly know anymore,” he said. “I’m told my name is Seth.”

“You are warm and alive, young one,” the voice observed. Each wheezy word carried the impression of skeletal hands reaching for him.

“I’ve been warmer,” Seth said, trying to sound calm. “Alive for now, I guess. Who are you?”



"I am master here," the voice affirmed. "Ruler of all who dwell down below."

"The Underking," Seth said.

"What brings one so warm to such a cold place? Why does one who bears a light seek the shadows?"

"It wasn't my choice," Seth said. "Ronodin brought me here."

"The living who venture into my realm must join the undead," the Underking said.

"I don't want that," Seth said.

"What is it you want?" the Underking asked.

"Really?" Seth asked. "To leave."

The Underking laughed softly. "The moment you entered my domain, you belonged to me. Have you no purpose here?"

Seth decided he had better fall back on Ronodin's instructions. "I'm a shadow charmer. Ronodin is teaching me."

Seth waited in silence. There came a faint scraping sound from the direction of the voice, as if the speaker were stirring.

"I could teach you so much more," the Underking rasped softly.

"I bet," Seth said.

"The unicorn knows a type of darkness," the Underking said. "I dwell where the darkness deepens, Seth—where it continues for time immeasurable. All light is brief, Seth, so frail and fleeting, a feeble flash against the steady night."

"I just want to train with Ronodin," Seth said, sticking to the plan. "Can I stay here and do that?"

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“Ah,” the Underking said. “You speak the sacred words.”

“I mean, stay temporarily, while I train,” Seth said.

“You are alive,” the Underking said. “Living is about change. Temporary states. You wish to remain under my protection for a season, like the unicorn. Are you brave?”

“I’m here,” Seth said.

“Are you true?” the Underking asked.

“I think so,” Seth replied.

“There are limits to what the unicorn can make of you,” the Underking said. “What more do you want?”

“Just to learn from Ronodin,” Seth said, remembering the warning to keep his needs simple. “I don’t want anything else.”

“Speak truly.”

Seth sighed. “I’m trying to remember who I am. But I trust I’ll figure it out.”

“You are cursed,” the Underking said. “My realm welcomes wayfarers such as you. And mortal shadow charmers have grown so very scarce. Turn and look at me.”

“I better not,” Seth said.

The Underking gave a hoarse chuckle. “Would some illumination help?”

Seth could feel new light through his closed lids. With his back to the Underking, was it safe to peek? By slitting his eyes, Seth glimpsed cold white radiance filling the room, revealing all without brightening anything too much. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed again just in case.

“If I look at you, I can never leave,” Seth said.

“Gaze upon me and you will endure,” the Underking

whispered, the words penetrating deeper than if he had shouted them. “You will outlast the stars.”

“I just need a place to train with Ronodin,” Seth said.

“What about my crown?” the Underking asked, the words reaching Seth as if whispered from close to his ears, private communication meant for him alone. “You could replace me, young one, and the splendors and powers of the night would be yours. You could be master over sightless reaches of virgin darkness undefiled by light, endless voids, lifeless and deathless, behind, beneath, and above the petty stages of the sunlit worlds.”

“I’m just trying to keep out of the rain,” Seth said. “I don’t need more than a place to stay for a time.”

“I will grant you sanctuary here,” the Underking rasped. “All boons come at a price. I do you a favor by sparing the scant flicker of your life, and I do another by granting refuge. You will agree to two conditions in return, or your spark will be quenched here and now. You will not leave my domain until permission is granted by me, and you will assist Ronodin in freeing some of my captive subjects. Is that agreeable?”

Seth wasn’t sure he had a choice, if he wanted to survive. “Will you ever give me permission to leave?”

“I will let you leave temporarily to perform errands for me,” the Underking said. “Eventually, if you so desire, I will devise a task for you to perform that will grant you freedom.”

“How long will I have to wait before you give me the task?” Seth asked.

"I shall devise it when I devise it," the Underking answered.

Seth felt sure he would get no better offer than this. "All right."

"Sealed," the Underking said.

Seth jumped as he felt something cold close around his wrist. Peeking, he saw a ghostly manacle clamped just beneath his hand, the translucent chain fading into invisibility after three links. The manacle was weightless, and the initial cold sensation quickly faded. Seth tried to touch the manacle with his free hand, but his fingers passed right through it. When he shook the arm to which the manacle was affixed, it refused to come loose.

"What's on my arm?" Seth asked.

"A reminder of our arrangement," the Underking said. "Ronodin will now represent my will to you. Follow his instructions as you would mine."

Seth knew some sort of trap was closing around him. But at least he was alive. Hopefully he could stay that way long enough to figure out what battle he was actually fighting. "I understand."

"Away with you then," the Underking rasped, the slithery words diminishing. "Take the light with you."