



TED SANDERS
The
KEEPERS
The PORTAL and the VEIL

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PART ONE

As the Rabbit Runs

CHAPTER ONE



Joshua

JOSHUA KNEW ABOUT SECRETS.

A secret was something you kept. A secret was a promise, and a promise—the way Isabel explained it—was like a burning light in the dark. A light that showed you where to go. If you kept your eyes on that light, kept walking toward it, you would never get lost, and your friends wouldn't either.

But as Joshua lay here alone, thinking hard in the cool quiet of the Warren, he wondered how you were supposed to know who your friends were. April was his friend, and her raven, Arthur, too. He felt pretty sure of that. They were far away now, in danger, and he was very worried about them. Worried in a way that you only worried for friends. Horace and Chloe and the other Wardens were far away too, out there trying to rescue April, and he liked them for that. He was also worried about them a little bit—maybe they were sort of

friends. And now he was alone in the Warren with Brian and Mrs. Hapsteade. They were very nice to him, especially Mrs. Hapsteade. She was old, but was she a friend?

Because if she was a friend, Joshua had maybe done a terrible thing.

He hadn't meant to. Not really. He had made a promise to Isabel, even though he wasn't exactly sure what the promise meant. He wasn't even sure "promise" was the right word. What he had said he would do—what he had done, what he was *doing right now*—it didn't feel like a light in the dark. It felt like something heavy and cloudy. Doubt instead of hope.

He opened his hand. Isabel's wooden ring lay in his palm, warm with his worry.

"Take it," she'd told him. *"Take it into the Warren, and then I can fix everything. Tell no one. Take it, and I can make us both the way we were meant to be. You'll see."*

A promise. And Joshua had nodded back at her. Was that a promise too? He thought maybe it was.

But was Isabel a friend?

She was his protector, that was for sure. She'd taken him away from his last foster home, where no one seemed to care whether he stayed or went, a place he wasn't sorry to leave. She'd protected him from the Riven, right from the start, and had kept him safe more times than he could count. She'd promised she would help him, and she had—finally—brought him here to the Wardens.

But was she a *friend*?

Joshua sighed. Whether Isabel was a friend or not, he had done what she had told him to. He had brought the ring down the scary elevator and across the waters of Vithra's Eye and into the Warren, right into this round stone room Mr. Meister and Mrs. Hapsteade were letting him stay in. The Warden's sanctuary was cozy for a cave, maybe the coziest place he'd stayed in all his time traveling with Isabel.

Isabel, meanwhile, was far above somewhere, in her room in the Mazzoleni Academy, the boarding school that sat atop the Warren. She wasn't allowed to come into the Warren. The Wardens had taken her harp, Miradel, and were guarding it here. They didn't trust Isabel. And Isabel couldn't find the Warren even if she tried, not ever—Mr. Meister had fixed it that way, using something called a spitstone. But thanks to Joshua, Isabel's ring was inside the Warren now. He hadn't figured out yet what that meant. He was afraid to even wonder.

He got out of bed. He paced back and forth slowly, his bare feet curling on the cold stone floor, the ring warm and smooth between his fingers. He should tell Mrs. Hapsteade about the ring. He really should. He should have told her already.

"But I don't want to get in trouble," he explained to himself out loud—not too loud, because Mrs. Hapsteade was in the next doba over. Her stone house was simple and tidy and somehow cold and warm at the same time, just like Mrs. Hapsteade herself. But even as Joshua murmured the words, he felt—he knew—that they weren't quite right. Getting in

trouble wasn't the reason he hadn't told Mrs. Hapsteade about the ring. The real reason, a reason that scared him and thrilled him, was this: the nod he'd given to Isabel when she handed him the ring *was* a promise. A promise he'd *wanted* to make.

"Take it, and I can make us both the way we were meant to be."

Joshua knew what that meant. He knew, and the knowing was almost more than he could bear. The whole reason he'd been traveling with Isabel in the first place—the whole reason for everything in his life that he could remember at all—was that he, Joshua, would one day become a Keeper.

Isabel had told him so, over and over again. She told him so the first day they met, before she took him away. She said she could see it in him. And even if Isabel was lying, Mrs. Hapsteade said she could see it too. She and Mr. Meister both had told him he had potential. But they hadn't actually helped him yet. No one had told him what kind of Keeper he might be, or what his instrument was. Maybe a compass, or a sextant. Something to do with maps, he hoped.

The Wardens were all Keepers, of course, dedicated to protecting the Tanu from the Riven. They all had their own Tan'ji, instruments that gave them their amazing powers. April had her Ravenvine, and Horace his box. Chloe had her dragonfly, and Gabriel his staff. Lately, Joshua had spent a lot more time than he wanted to admit thinking about what his own instrument might look like, and what powers it might have.

And now at last, just like she'd been promising all along, it

seemed like Isabel might be going to help him find out.

But there was a problem. Isabel was a thief and a liar. She had told him that she too was a Keeper—that she was Tan’ji. But she wasn’t, it turned out. She wasn’t Tan’ji and neither was Miradel, her harp. Those were lies. And when she and April and Joshua finally found the Wardens, it turned out Isabel had known all along who the Wardens were, and that she’d only been using April and Joshua to find them for her own reasons. *That* was a lie. And she’d done other things, too, things worse than lies. Things that had put his friends—his real friends—in danger.

Joshua squeezed the ring. He should destroy it. Or no—it could be a trap. Isabel was good at setting traps. He would tell Mrs. Hapstede what he had done. He would show her Isabel’s ring and try to explain. She didn’t trust Isabel. She was guarding Miradel even now. Maybe the ring was nothing. Or maybe it was something, but Mrs. Hapstede would be so busy dealing with it she’d forget to be mad.

Before he could change his mind, he started down the ladder to the first floor of his doba. He was so nervous he almost slipped and fell. Although Mrs. Hapstede had been kind to him so far, he got the feeling that she could be cruel, too. But that was okay. Maybe he deserved it. He’d been a bad friend.

Joshua stepped out of the doba and into the Great Burrow, the uppermost level of the Warren. The Great Burrow was as wide as a football field and five times as long, lit by dozens

of golden lights from which swirling clouds of soft sparks drifted. Joshua had noticed the lights got a bit darker at night, and now the whole chamber was lit like a forest at sunset. And it *was* like a forest, except here the trees were huge stone columns as wide as houses, and the columns really *were* little houses. Almost all of the dobas were empty now. All but one.

He moved slowly through the golden gloom to Mrs. Hapsteade's doba. He was in no hurry. In fact, he had to make himself move forward, the ring still clenched in his fist. Mrs. Hapsteade's front door was a thick black curtain, which meant there was no good way to knock.

"Mrs. Hapsteade?" he called.

No answer. Cautiously, he peeked inside. "Mrs. Hapsteade? It's Joshua. From next door." He squeezed the ring again, searching for words. "I have something to tell you."

Mrs. Hapsteade's Tan'ji, a long white writing quill called the Vora, sat in its usual place atop a squat bookcase across the room. Three calm candles threw three feathered shadows up the wall. If the Vora was here, so was Mrs. Hapsteade.

He took a step in. "Hello? Mrs. Hap—"

And then she spoke from the shadows off to his right, her usually firm voice thin with strain. "I am Mrs. Hapsteade," she croaked. "I am Dorothy Hapsteade."

The words pulled Joshua inside, heart racing. Just beyond a tipped-over chair, Mrs. Hapsteade lay on the floor curled into a crescent, chin against her chest. The hem of her dress had ridden up over her knees and her hands were in her hair,

pulling strands loose from the tight bun.

“I’m going,” she breathed through clenched teeth. “Going gone. Lost and found and lost.”

She was in pain, he could see that. Her eyes were cloudy and frightened. It had to be the ring, Isabel’s terrible ring. It had done something to her . . . poison or a trap or something. He’d made a stupid promise and waited too long and now—

Mrs. Hapsteade groaned. Joshua dropped to his knee in a blind rush of fear, scarcely thinking. With the ring cupped awkwardly in his hand, he smashed his palm flat against the stone floor. Isabel’s ring snapped like a crisp twig, a broken edge stabbing him sharply. On his palm, a bloody speck. On the floor, the ring shattered into three brown moonshapes. But still Mrs. Hapsteade writhed and muttered. What was wrong with her?

“The harp,” Mrs. Hapsteade moaned. “My fault.”

“Miradel?” said Joshua. “Where is it?”

“Here,” said a new voice.

Joshua lurched up and staggered back, swallowing all his breath.

From a dark nook across the room, a small scribbled cloud of green light swelled into existence, pulsing like a heart, coming closer. “Don’t be angry, Joshua. Don’t be afraid.” Isabel stepped forward, her red hair like curls of copper in the emerald light. Miradel, her harp, hung from her neck. The tangled ball of wicker throbbed slowly, glowing green from within.

“No one is being harmed,” Isabel said. “No one is doing anything wrong. I only came to set things right.”

Joshua took a step sideways, toward Mrs. Hapsteade curled on the floor, head in her hands. He understood now, should have understood right away. Isabel had found the Warren. She had found Miradel here, and had severed Mrs. Hapsteade.

“I promise she is okay,” said Isabel, watching. “She’ll be fine.”

With her harp, Joshua knew, Isabel could control the Medium, the energy that flowed between Keepers and their instruments. She had severed Mrs. Hapsteade, cutting her off from her Tan’ji. Joshua had seen Isabel sever people before, including April. It only lasted a little while, but according to April it was awful. For a Keeper, being unable to feel your Tan’ji was like being dead alive.

“Let her go,” he said.

“The knots will come undone later,” said Isabel. “I didn’t want to do it, but I had to. She had Miradel here. She was expecting me.” Isabel came right up to him, bending to pick up the broken pieces of her ring. She crossed to Mrs. Hapsteade and knelt, holding out the shards. “This is how I found my way in,” she said. “I’m telling you so you can trust me, later. I’m telling you my secrets.”

“The ring,” Joshua whispered, his stomach twisting. It wasn’t poison, no. But something just as bad.

“A trap,” said Mrs. Hapsteade.

“A signal,” Isabel said. “A lighthouse. You know the spitestone casts a cloud around this place, a cloud made just for me. But I wove a tiny thread of inversion inside the ring before I gave it to Joshua. Once he brought it into your precious Warren, into the cloud of the spitestone, the ring gave out a tiny light inside the dark—also made just for me. The ring called to me, the same way your Tan’ji calls to you.” She wagged a finger at the white quill across the room and smiled sadly. “The way it *usually* calls to you, I mean.” She sighed almost giddily. “I followed the ring’s call down from the Academy, and across Vithra’s Eye. The spitestone couldn’t stop me.” She dumped the broken pieces of the ring onto the floor and stood up. “And you had Miradel. Thank you for keeping her safe. Now Joshua and I can begin.”

“I don’t want to begin,” said Joshua, only half hearing her. “You tricked me.”

Isabel raised her eyebrows, smiling. “Did I truly?”

Joshua squeezed his eyes shut, shame crawling over his skin like worms.

“Don’t look backward now, Joshua,” said Isabel. “We’ve been searching for so long, you and I. Can’t you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“Your instrument—your Tan’ji. It’s here in the Warren. I know it is. But the spitestone is still clouding me.”

Joshua opened his eyes. His heart felt like it would burst. *His instrument.* It was here in the Warren after all, a thought he had barely allowed himself to have. But he had to shake his

head. “I can’t feel anything.” And it was true, he couldn’t. Did he even want to? *I wouldn’t even know what to feel*, he almost said.

Isabel ignored him, instead bending over Mrs. Hapstede. “Where is the Laithe?” she asked the older woman sweetly.

The word was new to Joshua, but it pushed a soft tremor of warmth through his chest. *Laithe*. It sounded like “blade,” a dangerous word, but this word sang with comfort and confidence. With promise. He almost hated the sound of it, but thought he might die if he never heard it again. What was it?

Mrs. Hapstede’s angry eyes found Isabel’s. “No,” she muttered, “No, you can’t. Can’t this way.”

“It’s the only way,” Isabel replied.

“Forbidden.”

“I never liked all your rules,” Isabel said lightly. “Not when I was young, and certainly not now. But it doesn’t matter. We’ll find it, wherever you’ve hidden it.” She stood and turned away, Miradel swinging at her chest, a forest of faint green shadows tumbling over them all. Abruptly she stopped. “Oh,” she said, as if she’d forgotten something. “One more thing.” She crouched over Mrs. Hapstede again, her smile growing as wide and sweet as a snake’s. “I believe there’s a young man here named Brian. I’ll be needing his help.”

Mrs. Hapstede grimaced. “Can’t . . . help you. There is no help.”

“That’s what you always said. I’m not Tan’ji. Only a Tuner. Never mind that you were the ones who made me that way.”

She cupped Miradel in her hand and lifted it, still pulsing. “If Brian fixed April’s Tan’ji, then he can fix me too. All I’m asking for is a little loan. Just to borrow Brian’s powers for a while. So he can fix what you made wrong.”

Mrs. Hapsteade turned her face into the stone floor, muttering. “All wrong.”

Isabel straightened, frowning down at Mrs. Hapsteade, and strode to the door. “We’ll fend for ourselves,” she said, seemingly to no one in particular. “We always do.” She jerked her chin at Joshua. “Come, Joshua,” she said, and swept out.

Joshua looked back at Mrs. Hapsteade, still severed on the floor and tangled in the invisible threads Isabel had woven around her. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Sorry,” Mrs. Hapsteade slurred. “Sorry so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

Somehow Mrs. Hapsteade’s eyes managed to find his. They were so empty—so full of lost things—that he almost had to look away.

“Don’t let her fix,” she said through gritted teeth, “your mistakes.”

Joshua stared for a second, and then stumbled out of the room. He squinted in the golden gloom of the Great Burrow, blinking back a sudden wetness.

Isabel took his hand. She smiled down at him. Miradel sparkled darkly. “And now we begin,” she said.