

The Path of the Night

By Adam Coyne

Had she taken a wrong turn? The tight, twisting stone corridors were impossible for her to keep track of. Narrow openings of new paths flashed past left then right. The sound of her footsteps rang in her ears and echoed off the walls as she ran at full pelt through the oppressive darkness.

As she sprinted, now uphill, now down, she held an arm out to the side, brushing her fingers across the walls, desperate for some sense of direction. Her hand stung from the scraping of stone on flesh. The other hand she held out in

front of her in anticipation of running headlong into the tunnel wall at a sharp bend.

She imagined the tunnel getting lighter slowly, but banished the thought.

*No use hoping now*, she thought to herself. Just as she had resigned to the endless dark, she rounded a corner and there, a pinprick of light in the distance!

She spurred herself to an ever greater speed, focussing obsessively on the now literal light at the end of the tunnel, growing rapidly.

Just a little farther, she told herself.

With a rush of cold air, she burst from the tunnel entrance and onto the mountainside, blinking against the sudden harshness of the midday sun.

She ran on a short while before turning sharply to face the dark hole from which she had come. Her breath came in ragged bursts, her chest burned, but she kept her eyes fixed on the tunnel, waiting.

With a screeching cry and a rush of beating wings, a huge mottled owl shot from the darkness and entered a steep climb, soaring high overhead.

A fraction of a second later, a huge swarm of large black bats poured from the tunnel entrance and sped into the valley beyond, their fluttering wings fading into the distance.

Anna Hawthorn took a deep breath and sighed with relief. She checked herself over, gingerly touching the tips of her fingers.

*No real harm*, she thought resolutely. She patted the dirt and dust from her travel-worn cloak and turned away from the tunnel. She was glad to be able to leave the mines behind her finally. Ahead of her, across a shallow valley and perched precariously atop a crumbling pinnacle of rock, loomed a ruined ominous tower. She narrowed her dark eyes at it, deep in thought.

A cry from far above her caught her attention. She looked up and threw out her arm just in time for the huge eagle owl to land roughly on her forearm, her sharp talons gripping Anna's leather bracer tightly.

"Luna..." she purred, scratching the back of the owls twitching head gently. The owl turned abruptly and nipped Anna's finger, affectionately drawing blood with her sharp beak. "I know," Anna said in response, "but we're out now. See that?" She pointed at the ruined tower. "That's why we're here."

Luna hooted deeply.

"Off you go, just not too far, OK?" Anna threw her arm upwards, shaking Luna loose. The owl circled once before

soaring high above on a gust of wind, soon disappearing from view.

Anna pulled her cloak tighter around herself, bracing against the chill wind. She pulled out a small, ornate gold mirror from a hidden pocket and inspected her hair. She smoothed her black hair back and tightened the high ponytail, pulling her hood up afterwards. Tucking the handheld mirror back into the folds of her cloak, she started to walk down into the valley, her eyes constantly glancing up at the tower ahead.

The valley was a wide but shallow depression running from the hills under which the labyrinthine mines burrowed to the steep, rocky crags. It was barren and lifeless, as if the earth had been salted. There were no trees and no flowers. Only a single species of hardy shrub managed to survive in the desolate and cold earth, clinging on to the barest trickle of water and nutrients the land had to offer. The ground was hard underfoot, it cracked as she continued across the valley floor toward the rocks.

The sun had begun to set slowly, casting long shadows behind her. She looked into the darkening sky, searching for signs of her beloved companion, but saw nothing. Anna smiled to herself, knowing that Luna would soon be happily hunting in

the twilight. She pitied any small animal that had chosen to make its home here. It was likely to end up being the owl's dinner.

Anna climbed the jagged rocks carefully, not wanting to lose her footing on the loosening stone. At times, she would walk hunched over, using her hands to stabilise her as she climbed.

Slowly but surely, the tower loomed closer. At last, hauling herself up and over a precarious overhang of sharp rock, she found herself on a wide clearing, with neatly raked pebbles. Ahead, a wide stone staircase had been cut into the rock itself and led to a sturdy looking door at the base of the tower. She looked around. It looked like the driveway for a grand estate, ready to accept horse, cart and rider. Except there was no road. No path. No way for any such noble transport to reach the courtyard.

The smoothed pebbles crunched under Anna's feet as she approached the staircase. On one side the rock had been carved and polished for use as a natural handrail. She ran a slender finger over it as she climbed the steps slowly.

Anna paused before the huge double door. It had looked so small from the courtyard below but now that she stood by it she saw it was massive. Great, dark planks of wood reached up more than twice her height, held together by thick iron. A

gargoyle's head served as a heavy knocker, leering menacingly at her in the waning light. She reached up to grasp it, weary of the noise it was sure to make, but as her hand brushed it she saw, just below, a tiny hole.

Pleased, she drew back from the gargoyle.

From her shoulder she lifted a small cloth knapsack and, pulling it in front of her, started to rifle through it. She lifted out a small pair of tools and, slipping them deftly into the hole, she pressed her ear to the wood.

Hardly daring to breathe, Anna twisted the tools in minute adjustment, listening for the telltale sounds. At length and after having to restart several times, there was a soft *click*, followed by a *thunk* and a *groan*.

The door had opened.

She looked back over the courtyard. The sun had just set below the horizon in the distance, plunging the land into dusk's embrace.

*Less than ideal*, she thought. Getting lost in the mines had cost her valuable daylight. Turning back to the door, she edged it open just enough for her to slip inside and eased it closed behind her.

The darkness was complete. Anna Hawthorn tried to wave a hand in front of her face, but she could not see a thing. It was as if she had been stricken blind.

With no choice, she stood by the door and waited. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the dark and blurred shapes began to coalesce around her.

She stood in a broad entrance hall. The ceiling was lost far above in the darkness. What looked like a grand staircase dominated the far end. On either side was an open doorway, the floor sloping down beyond her sight. Above her and to the left was a small balcony.

Judging this was the best she was going to get, Anna took a careful step forward. She wanted to investigate the two doorways before thinking about climbing the stairs. A fluttering noise distracted her. Looking up she tiptoed toward the stairs. There was a click at her feet. She froze.

The room erupted with light. All at once, torches in recesses along the walls sprang to life, flames appearing out of thin air. A hundred candles burst aflame in a huge chandelier hanging high overhead.

Anna tried to control her breathing and waited, her eyes stinging from the new light. She dared not move.

From all around her a deep rumbling noise echoed throughout the tower. It seemed to emanate from the very stone itself.

To her trained ears, it sounded like laughter. A low, menacing, mocking laugh.

It faded away, lingering in the air for an eternity.

"Anna." A voice whispered in her ear. She jumped, turning to face it, but there was nothing there. It had been so close she could feel the breath on her cheek.

"Alright," she said calmly, turning to face the stairs once more. She plunged a hand into the satchel again, but this time pulled out a small glass bottle. Uncorking it, she tipped the clear contents into her hands, wringing them together as if washing under running water. Her hands smoked as if scalded by boiling water. Anna took no notice. She dabbed her wet hands against her neck, transferring wisps of smoke which curled around her ears as they rose.

She dropped the empty bottle back into her bag and approached the stairs. Both side doors had the same steep downward slope, curving underneath the staircase. Anna assumed they both ended up in the same place.

She picked the right hand door out of habit and followed the tunnel as it turned sharply left, spiralling down into the

stone. Anna noticed the ground become more and more earthy, the smooth stone giving way to soft, trodden-in dirt.

Eventually the spiral straightened out, leading into a dark underground room, small and plain. The floor was soft, rich-smelling earth. The ceiling had been strengthened with slabs of stone, held up by thin stone columns. It was empty but for one item, lying in the centre.

A long wooden box. Its lid, spanning the length of the box, hung propped open, revealing a red cloth lined interior.

Approaching the long box, Anna bent low, inspecting it carefully. She rubbed the soft cloth between thumb and finger. As if coming to a quick conclusion, she straightened up and brought her bag around for easier access. She quickly removed a cloth pouch and, reaching inside, withdrew a handful of the salt it held. This she threw onto the ground surrounding the box as if sowing seeds. She tossed the empty pouch into the long box and removed a flint and tinder from her bag.

Her quick strikes echoed in the room and before long the cloth pouch had kindled a small flame and begun to spread to the box's red lining. She waited long enough to be sure the wood caught and hurried out of the room and back up the tunnel to the entrance hall.

A strong, unnatural wind picked up, fluttering the wall sconces and throwing flickering shadows across the room.

Anna's head snapped to the side, catching a sudden movement in the corner of her eye, and in one fluid motion she had snapped a small crossbow from her back and fired a bolt up at the balcony.

She dropped the crossbow gently to the floor and, pulling it slowly from another strapping behind her shoulder, aimed a second crossbow at the balcony, waiting. She breathed slowly and purposefully, concentrating on keeping her heart rate down.

Nothing moved. Anna could see her silver tipped bolt stuck fast in the stone wall high above. Whatever had been there was gone. She returned her weapon to her back and stooped to collect the other. Pulling a bolt from her belt, she fitted it into the shaft and drew back the limbs, hooking them with the safety catch. Holstering this behind her other shoulder, she placed a foot lightly on the lowest step, paused to listen, and started to climb the main staircase.

At the top of the stairs a narrow passage turned to the right, presumably leading to the balcony overlooking the entrance hall. Directly opposite the staircase was an open doorway that led into a wide banqueting hall. To the left stood an arched wooden door.

Anna considered her options briefly before following the narrow walkway round to the balcony. She plucked her bolt from

the wall and examined it. The point had blunted from the impact against the stone. She tutted and put it in her bag.

Glancing over the balcony she found it commanded a wide view of the entrance hall. In the centre of the floor was a device she had not noticed before. A large circle with intricate, intertwining patterns inside. She didn't recognise it.

Anna returned to the banquet hall and strode inside confidently. Glass cabinets lined the walls, displaying all manner of objects. Books, weapons, items of unknown origin. The owner was clearly a collector of old and mysterious artefacts, she thought.

In the centre of the room was a long dining table, covered with a red cloth that reached the floor. At the far end was a single large and ornate chair. The table was immaculately set for one. A heavy gold chalice, inlaid with gemstones, stood on the table next to a bottle of red wine, thick with dust.

Anna walked around the room, checking the display cases, fascinated with the varied collection of items. A noise from above made her start; a wailing scream. She rushed to the doorway, ready to try the closed door, but stopped.

As she ran past the low dining table, she had sworn she had seen...

Anna turned back to the dining room.

In the chair at the end of the long table there now sat a pale, slender man. The shadows seemed to fold and swirl around him, cloaking him in darkness. He steepled long, pointed fingers together, elbows on the table.

"Anna Hawthorn," he said. He spoke with an air of nobility; perfect enunciation mixed with equal parts disdain and apathy. "So, *lovely*, to meet you at last."

"Do I know you?" Anna asked, moving to stand at the opposite end of the table. "Or rather, *should* I?"

"Certainly not," he said with a chuckle, "but I know you, Anna. I know your thoughts. I know why you've come." He waved a hand airily in front of his face, as if losing interest in their conversation. "I can assure you it won't go quite as planned," he locked eyes with her, black infinite orbs burning with a hidden power, "for you." He chuckled mirthlessly once more.

Anna eyed the man cautiously, painfully aware of how confined the room was despite its grandeur. He wore his jet black hair loose, letting it brush his shoulders. His face was gaunt and pale, except for his lips, which were full and red.

He spoke once again, the sound of his voice sending a shiver down Anna's spine. He smiled to himself.

"My name is Edmund Cain. I used to be a prince," his eyes fell to his hands for the briefest of instants, "a long time ago."

"And what are you now?" asked Anna quietly.

A wide, toothy grin spread across Edmund's face. "What, indeed," he snorted. "Tell me, child, what did you hope to find when you entered my tower? What is it that drives you?"

Anna smiled, shifting her weight onto one foot. "I'm glad you asked," she said, itching behind her ear. With perfectly trained reflexes, she whipped a crossbow off her back and fired a silver tipped bolt into Edmund's forehead. "I came for you!" she shouted.

Rumbling, hideous laughter filled the room.

Anna blinked. Edmund was no longer sat at the end of the table. Her crossbow bolt glittered in the candle light, stuck fast into the headrest of the ornate empty chair.

She narrowed her eyes, squinting into the shadows around the room. Stooping, she picked up her crossbow and deftly loaded another bolt.

The laughter subsided, leaving in its wake a paralysing silence.

Edmund's voice whispered in her ear, "You came to *die*, girl."

Anna flinched reflexively, spinning to the side and slashing with a shining blade she had concealed under her cloak.

Her knife sliced through empty air with a *swish*. Anna backed out of the dining room, her eyes flicking between the corners. She pressed her back against the black oak door, her gaze fixed on the doorway she had just left.

With one hand, she groped behind her for the handle while aiming her crossbow forwards, covering the doorway, the stairs and the walkway to the balcony.

*Please be open*, she thought desperately. Carefully she twisted until she heard the lock *click* and felt the door fall away behind her, holding it so it wouldn't open all the way.

A blood curdling scream echoed up from beneath her, rage and despair fused into one horrifying sound.

*He must not have liked the improvements I made to his bedroom*, she thought grimly, but with a touch of spite. *Now or never!*

Anna spun around, threw the door open and flew up the spiral staircase in front of her. She was climbing to the top of the tower, she realised, as the staircase became increasingly narrow. Thin, glassless windows dotted the stone wall and as she ran, Anna glimpsed the world below, bathed in moonlight.

Panting, she burst through a door at the top and found herself in a small room, evidently at the very top of the tower. She closed the door behind her and slid the lock into place. Turning around, Anna quickly investigated the room, but there was nothing but a desk behind the door with a quill and a leather bound book, lit by a large, dripping candle. A larger window at the far end commanded a wide view of the world.

As she turned back to face the door, she caught sight of a small box beside the desk, hidden in the shadows. She had barely taken one step toward it when she heard, and felt, a surge of wind. Anna looked toward the window, but realised the wind was coming from the staircase.

Quickly, she backed further into the room, away from the door.

Anna Hawthorn dropped her bag and threw off her cloak with one swift movement. The wind picked it up immediately and swept it out of the window. Underneath, her linen trousers had been strapped carefully to her legs. She wore a tight leather jerkin, cut off at the shoulders and with a plunging neckline. She adjusted her bracers and pulled both of her crossbows free from their shoulder mounts.

The wind surged up the staircase, buffeting the locked door. It strained against its hinges, threatening to burst,

and then fell suddenly silent. The sounds of the wind died down and the swirling gusts disappeared from the room.

*This is it*, she thought, her heart beating against her ribcage.

Without warning, the door exploded, showering Anna with fragments of wood, metal and stone. She shielded her face with one arm as they landed all around her. When she looked back she saw that not only had the door disintegrated but the surrounding stone from the doorframe had been blasted away as well; chunks of it lay broken where the door had once stood.

Where the door had been, Anna now looked into a void. A darkness so thick she could see nothing of the staircase beyond it. As she watched, the darkness seemed to move with a rhythmic expanding and contracting. From deep within, two red orbs were now visible, hanging in midair as if watching her. A distorted face coalesced from the shadows for an instant, twisted with rage.

Anna raised her crossbows, pointing them directly where the face had appeared.

Two things happened at the same time, so quickly that Anna almost couldn't react in time.

The shadow burst into the room, rushing forward at her with such a speed that she was sure to be swept out of the window to die on the rocks far below.

But before she was taken by the gust, another dark shape flew *into* the room from the window.

Pulling out of a steep dive from the heavens, Luna shot through the window and past Anna's head, the owl's soft underbelly brushing her scalp.

With a screech, Luna unfolded her huge wings and stopped immediately. Filling the room, the great owl buffeted the shadow with force enough to displace the mass of darkness, revealing the ruined doorway behind.

Anna, patient until the last, finally saw her target. Edmund Cain's face, twisted into a hideous mask of hate, appeared within the cloud of rapidly dwindling shadows.

She pulled the release mechanisms, her arms bucking upwards slightly under the force of the released bolts.

As if in slow motion, Edmund's face changed, becoming more human in form. He spotted the silver bolts streaming toward him from behind the troublesome bird and a sudden desire to flee gripped him.

But even with the benefit of superhuman reflexes, he had been outmanoeuvred. Anna had fired the bolts the second she had felt the air react to Luna's entry into the room, praying Edmund would still be in the same position.

The first bolt hit Edmund below the eye, piercing his left cheekbone. The second impacted his right eyebrow. He

reeled backwards with shock, the darkness utterly banished under the weight of Luna's buffeting wings. Caught off guard, Edmund stood in the broken doorway, stunned. He looked down at his chest in alarm, patting himself firmly.

He frowned then, touching his face and finding the bolts stuck there, a wicked grin returned to his face.

A wild, cackling laughter escaped his mouth, his eyes wide with mania.

"You foolish child," he spat, "you missed."

Edmund rushed forward, arms outstretched, long clawed fingers writhing and a murderous look on his face. Luna swirled around the room, desperate to protect her master, but Anna cried out, ordering her to stay back.

She dropped her crossbows and held her arms out wide, as if embracing an old friend. She closed her eyes.

Edmund gripped her around the waist with one arm and held her neck with the other, lifting her easily from the stone floor as if she weighed nothing. His head snapped up at an angle, staring upwards at the roof. His eyes burned with a red fire. His mouth stretched open wide, impossibly wide as several rows of jagged teeth grew suddenly from his jaws with a grinding sound. A wild, guttural roar filled the room

deafeningly. Luna screeched in retaliation, panicking outside the window.

Lowering his head once more, Edmund gripped Anna's neck with his jaws and bit down. Anna gasped at the pain. It was immense and nearly blinding. A strong pressure now pushed against her throat and just as quickly, retreated.

Edmund released Anna's neck from his bite, his eyes twitching. A strong convulsion shook him and he dropped Anna's body. She groaned as she hit the floor hard.

Edmund began to make hoarse, scratching sounds as he convulsed more and more violently. Dropping to the floor, he clawed at his face and throat, tearing deep gashes into his flesh and he thrashed about on the floor uncontrollably.

Anna pushed herself into a half seated position, her back against the wall under the window. She was bleeding profusely from Edmund's bite, rows of ragged holes on each side of her neck. From her wounds a thin, bright vapour floated into the air.

"What?!" Spluttered Edmund, his monstrous mandibles now retreated and replaced by his previous human-yet-devilish features. "No one survives my wrath!" He reached out a hand toward Anna, fingers stretching toward her unnaturally, as if every part of his body aches to grasp her one last time. His

skin was rapidly changing from a pale parchment yellow to a sickly blue.

From his self inflicted wounds and out of his now gaping mouth the bright smoke flowed and frothed.

With a final gurgling cry, Edmund's outstretched hand fell limply on to his lap and his head lolled forward to rest on his chest.

Anna watched him for several moments, half expecting him to lung at her once more. When it became apparent that no such post-mortem threat remained, Anna pulled herself to her feet.

With a screech, Luna burst back into the room, landing on the desk. She dropped a piece of dark fabric from her beak.

Anna smiled, retrieved her cloak from Luna and stroked the owl's soft head. "Thank you my love," she said as she tore a long strip from it, pushed it onto her neck and wrapped another strip around it as tight as she could without restricting her throat.

She limped to the desk and found the lockbox amid the ruins and detritus. Hefting it to the desktop she pried it open carefully.

From its protection she drew a golden amulet, three pointed and depicting two hands grasping a flame, sprouting from a large red gemstone. It was on a long golden chain.

She lifted the chain over her head and let the amulet fall to her chest.

"Come Luna," she said softly, climbing over the remains of the door and heading for the staircase. "One final test awaits."