

March of the Necromancer

By Christopher S Thurman

Chapter One

Ashes

“Coming...” a voice whispered.

Marvin started as his hand jerked back. Old dust and ash rained down from the ceiling as he jumped out of the way of the falling roof. Once he was safe he checked to make sure he was still holding the books he had grabbed. Satisfied, he looked to make sure the bag he had filled with books and cloths was not underneath the fallen debris. Grateful that nothing he had collected was smashed, he looked up at the collapsed ceiling. These older buildings were dangerous, and perhaps he should have been exercising a little more caution.

I’m just nervous that’s all. He coughed the dust from his lungs. *If it wasn’t for... whoever’s voice that was.* He was sure the voice was some sorcerer playing tricks on him. He had started hearing it as a buzz a few weeks ago, and it was now strong enough to be a whisper in his ear.

As if he didn’t have enough to worry about, with today’s ceremony, the Divining. Only a few more hours and he’d know if he had magic—or not.

“Are you okay?” his sister Hillary asked from the other room.

“I’m fine,” Marvin called back. Putting the two books under his left arm he flipped his now free hand through his hair to brush out all the grey particles. “Just wasn’t expecting the ceiling to be that weak.”

That was still no excuse for not being careful. Houses like this one hadn't been protected during the Yellow Stone Eruption, and they had taken a lot of ash and damage. That had been what? Thirty years ago? People suddenly had magic a few years after the solar eclipse that had come through in 2017. Everyone called it the Ascension since humanity was supposed to have ascended to a higher form of living than before, but Marvin wasn't sure if he agreed with that statement.

His older sister, Hillary, came to join him in the living room as she took in the mess. A large portion of the ceiling had collapsed and had crushed half of the furniture in the room, many of which they'd been planning on gathering to take back home. The smaller couch had made it without being smashed, but the padding was shredded from the jagged wood that had fallen on top of it.

"Are you kidding me, Marv?" She said placing a hand on her hip. "Those couches were perfect! Mom and Dad have been talking about getting new furniture for months now since you broke the last couch with your friend Ben. Now we're going to have to scavenge for new ones."

Marvin shrugged guiltily. He and his two sisters were scavenging in a city that had been covered in the ashes from Yellow Stone. Their parents had asked them to keep an eye on anything that might still be usable out in the Wasteland—cities that had been claimed by Yellow Stone's ashes and had covered most of the place with mounds of it. Their teachers told them that before that fateful day, most of this area had been a state called Utah, part of the grand United States of America. Now it was part of the Rocky Mountain Territory, ruled by sorcerers who keep them safe from those who would do them harm.

"I'm sorry," he apologized sheepishly. "I saw these books on top of the bookshelf and I thought they would be worth collecting. How was I supposed to know it'd bring the roof down?"

Hillary crossed her arms, frowning in that annoying way only an older sister could. She wasn't that much older than he was. Just a year and five months were between them, but she constantly hung it over his head. It drove him crazy when she tried to use that as an excuse to boss him and Megan, who was thirteen and younger than him by two years. He felt two whole years trumped the year and a half Hillary had over him, but decided not to bring it up at the moment.

"Maybe we can find something else the next time we go out scavenging," Hillary sighed, moving closer to him around the rubble. "If we're lucky Mom and Dad can come get these couches before a storm comes through and can save some of the padding. Is Megan still downstairs?"

"I am!" she called from below. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd be more careful, Marvin. I thought the ceiling was going to come down on top of me again."

He grimaced, recalling the time he had stepped on a rotted-out floorboard and had nearly fallen on top of Megan. "That was an accident!" he called down the stairs. "And so was this one." Why couldn't they see that he was so on edge with everything? They knew that he was going to the Divining after this. And Hillary knew how nerve-racking that could be. Especially in their family.

It was no secret that most of their family hated sorcerers. Their dad had suffered during his teenage years from several attacks from rogue sorcerers who either sought to destroy or to subjugate those called Norms who had no magic. He hadn't shared a lot of details, other than telling them it had been the worst time in his life. Their mom was different, as she didn't seem to mind magic, but neither did she talk much about it. Although he had overheard his Mom talking

about a guy-named Charles who lived up North to Dad when they thought no one else was around, and he thought he had heard one of them say brother but he wasn't sure.

Hillary held out her hand and Marvin reluctantly passed the books to her. She seemed fairly neutral to the whole idea of sorcerers and magic, and actually seemed to get along just fine with their escort Graham, a sorcerer who came out to keep an eye on them. Hillary took the books from him and inspected the outside covers, brushing off more dust and ash from the edges. She stopped on the fiction book he had found.

"March of the Necromancer," she read aloud, sounding slightly impressed. Below its title was a zombie that looked like it was trying to shamble its way out of the cover to get him. Its eyes were glazed over, and its skin was dark with decay. Liver spots covered its rotting skin as its hands reached out. Marvin shivered as his sister inspected it. He hated the dead and anything to do with them. Even when his grandparents had died, he hadn't seen their corpses before they were buried.

"Not bad." Hillary moved on to the next book. "This other one looks like a journal. Have you looked inside it?"

Marvin shook his head. "I'm hoping that the Sorcerers will be interested in buying that copy from me."

"The journal?"

"No," he replied with a frown. "The zombie book. They're always asking about bringing in any fiction that we find. I'm hoping that we can get some money for it. The only way we'd get any money out of the other one is if it is empty."

Hillary nodded her head in agreement as she opened up the leather-bound book that looked like a journal and raised her lip in disgust as she flipped through page after page. "So

much for this one being worth something. Someone has already written in it.” She flipped the pages from the front to the back. “The whole thing is completely used.” She tossed it back to Marvin.

He caught it and opened it, crestfallen as he read the first page of the journal.

This is the property of Sophia Welkins.

Started on January 1, 2017, and ending on...

He flipped through the pages until he came to the end, the last date recorded was October 21, 2019. *If this thing was written in 2017, maybe I could learn more about ascending!*

Ascending! His heart raced as he thought about how sorcerers could use their magic to change into second form, usually some kind of magical creature. Marvin had seen quite a few sorcerers make the change in Old Provo and he had watched, envious. Ever since he was little, he’d always imagined himself as a sorcerer that could change himself into a creature that could fly. His friend, Ben, would tease him that between his love of fire and his fascination with the sky, he would probably end up ascending into a dragon. Marvin would laugh and call Ben crazy, but deep down he wouldn’t mind if that came true.

At least I have one thing to look forward to today, he considered bitterly. Sure he would learn if he was a sorcerer or not, but how would it affect his relationship with his family?

Between his dad and his sister, Megan was definitely the most vocal in their family against sorcerers. When she had been younger she had seen a boy her age pulled from a school class and tortured under the pretense that he was a sorcerer in hiding. There had in fact been a rogue sorcerer in hiding, but it wasn’t the boy, and they had made no attempt to fix or apologize for the damage they had done to Megan’s classmate.

Ever since then, Megan had pointed out the atrocious acts that happened in Old Provo and encouraged people to fight back. But no one did. And who would, when your first line of protection against other sorcerers were your own? His thoughts became sour when he realized that she might come to resent him too if he was Divined as a sorcerer.

His excitement for the journal faded completely when he realized that Megan would want to read it too. Although she would probably want to read the book to find other ways to get rid of sorcerers rather than to learn their history.

“I think I’ll keep the journal,” Marvin said as he packed it away with the other book, hoping that Hillary would keep it between them. “Maybe it will come in handy.”

Hillary shook her head, and said in a lowered voice, “I know what you’re thinking. We’ve all been taught about magic and ascending in school. There’s no point in reading that since it can’t tell us more than we already know. Besides, if you do find out you’re a sorcerer, why would you want to learn about that stuff from a book instead of at Gwydion?”

He thought about her question. She had a point. But he knew the real reason he wanted the book. He loved reading those old journals that would talk about the first time some used magic, or the first time someone ascended and could move around as a magical creature. He was actually excited to see if this Sophia person had a similar story that he could read.

Shrugging and putting the book in his pack, he said, “I’m still gonna keep it. You never know when extra information will come in handy.”

“Fine. Whatever,” Hillary said, sounding exasperated. “Although I don’t understand your desire when you’re so afraid of magic anyway.”

“I’m not afraid of magic,” he countered as the butterflies fluttered into his stomach. “I’m afraid that we’ll have another case of crazy sorcerers come from out of town and start blowing the place up again.”

“And all of that happens because absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Hillary said in a mocking tone, using a phrase that Megan had told them many times before. “I know you don’t really buy into all that junk Megan says. Frankly, I’m getting sick of hearing you two theorize together.”

Most of them weren’t really his theories, but both he and Megan could talk for hours about where they thought that magic had actually come from. Megan didn’t have anyone else to think about that stuff with and Marvin liked to theorize about it. The problem was she liked to complain about the sorcerers and how they treated people.

He was just about to say something when they heard Megan’s stomping feet running up the stairs. She appeared with a pack over her shoulder and had a fine layer of dust on top of her head—probably from when he had nearly brought the house down. She stopped in the doorway, looking into the living room he had inadvertently demolished. When her gaze reached him, her eyebrows arched in disbelief.

“Ashes, Marv. You’re such a clutz sometimes.”

“I know, alright!” Marvin threw a hand up in the air. “I knocked over the things holding up the ceiling, and I disturbed the peace which brought everything down.”

“And they were such nice couches too,” Megan teased. “You guys ready?”

“I’m ready,” Hillary said, shouldering her own pack. “Are you ready, Marv?”

Marvin nodded and together the three of them left the ruined house. They moved onto a dirt covered road, watchful of anything that might cause them trouble as they walked quickly

away. The blue sky was tinted with the hints of the afternoon sun as the souls of their shoes disturbed the otherwise abandoned city.

“I feel like I’m in that Tolkien book,” Hillary said with a sigh as she glanced around at the houses they passed. Each one carried a few inches of dirt on their roofs while piles surrounded them like miniature hills. “You know,” she continued, “the one about those little people who live in holes in the ground?”

Marvin looked at her surprised. “You actually read that?” he asked. He had liked the book too, but was surprised that she had enjoyed it as well.

“Well, of course I did,” Hillary said, rolling her eyes at him. “It was a really good story, and I thought it had a great message.”

“Don’t know why you enjoyed it,” Megan said, glumly. “It’s not like we don’t have enough magic going around without having to read about it in school.”

“Can we just drop it all together?” Marvin asked as he could see the hill where the old highway sat. “I’d rather not talk anymore about magic. At least not until after we’re done.”

“You mean after you’ve been Divined,” Hillary corrected. “Relax, Marv. I made it through the Divining just fine. I’m sure with how much you despise magic, they’re not going to be able to find any at all,” she said with a wink.

“If you say so,” Marvin said. He did wish she’d stop teasing him about those conversations he had with Megan. She knew he liked magic. He just wasn’t sure if she knew how much. His stomach had butterflies in the extreme, and he wasn’t sure if he could physically make himself go to the Divining.

The Divining was a service provided by Sorcerous Hall, the government in Old Provo where they lived. It was offered to help find the youth fifteen years old who had magic. Sorcerers

called Diviners would go from kid to kid and see if they if they were special or not. Thankfully, his sisters dropped the topic which allowed him to tuck those thoughts away as they continued up the hill to the dilapidated highway.

Their ride was an old two-wheeled cart about half the size of a car, that sat at the top of the hill with their escort, Graham.

“Find anything good?” Graham asked in a rich baritone voice as they neared, his long blue trench coat waving in the disturbance he made. Graham was part of the Warmakers, a group of sorcerers in charge of protecting the borders of cities like Old Provo. The Warmakers assigned to patrol city borders were called Border Patrol. He was taller than Marvin by about half a foot, and he had short, cropped blonde hair that waved a little in a light gust of wind.

“Some crusty books and dirty clothing,” Hillary responded, giving him a warm smile. “We did find some nice couches, but a little accident happened and they lost their value.”

Graham chuckled. “You wouldn’t happen to know if they were salvageable by magic, would you? I know a guy who might be able to repair it.”

“It’s alright. I’m sure we can find others that Mom and Dad will want,” Hillary said, continuing the conversation as Marvin and Megan loaded the wagon quietly.

He had noted recently how Hillary was becoming more comfortable around Graham and he had to wonder why. Marvin got along with him alright, but that didn’t explain why she was so eager to talk to him. Megan though... She was glaring daggers at Graham.

“Would you knock it off?” Marvin hissed to his younger sister, as Hillary laughed at something Graham had said, his deep voice echoing in air. “He’s our ride home. The least you could do is avoid glaring at him.”

“It’s because of his kind that we’re out here, Marv,” Megan said, turning her cold eyes on him. “If it hadn’t been for the sorcerer Baal, Yellow Stone would have never erupted. Then this place could have been happier, and I wouldn’t be finding the mummified remains of families in the basements of the houses we scavenge.”

Marvin’s insides froze as he realized what she had seen. Anyone who hadn’t taken shelter from Yellow Stone’s blast, and the ash fall that had come... well... it wasn’t pretty to find what remained of them. “How many?”

“Six,” Megan answered. “All huddled together and holding hands. Now tell me again why I shouldn’t be mad?”

Marvin kept his mouth shut, but instead returned the glare at her. It wasn’t Graham’s fault that he was a sorcerer. He didn’t choose to be one. No one technically chose. You just—were. Decided, whether by fate or by the magic itself to become one. Graham just happened to be one of the nicer ones that they knew.

Marvin glanced sideways at Graham. He was glad that they were friends with the sorcerer. There had been tales, from the early days of the Ascension, how sorcerers had gone crazy with their power and sought to destroy everyone, ultimately causing the eruption at Yellow Stone. Unfortunately, there were other stories, some much more recent, of sorcerers who abused norms with their magic. That was what Megan wanted to fight against. But how could you fight against someone when they could hurt you with a wave of their hand?

His thoughts trailed off as Hillary came over to be with them, her eyes beaming. “What are you guys waiting for? Let’s get in.”

Together the three hopped into their cart, and then turned around to face Graham.

“You all ready?” Graham called.

“Yes, Sir,” Hillary called back enthusiastically.

Graham chuckled in reply. Grabbing the shafts coming out of their wagon, he ascended into a centaur. Marvin had to hide his excitement as he watched. It always amazed him how a sorcerer could do that, and he longed to have that ability too.

“Hold on tight everyone!” Galloping forward, Graham raced down the Highway, leaving the remains of the buried city behind.

Marvin grinned a bit as the wind brushed against his skin. *Is this what it felt like to have a car?* he wondered. He had seen a car when he was eight, and that was because a sorcerer had brought it out to showcase some of the history that he had been able to save after the ascension. The thing had been a massive black Chevy Silverado truck, with the paint sleek and smooth against its top. Since then, Marvin had only seen cars and trucks that were worn out or destroyed for parts.

The dirt on the road eventually gave way to the cement that had not been covered in ash, and Marvin took in the site of Old Provo. Sorcerous Hall stood as an imposing building with its colored towers and stonewall framework. It was said that the original structure of the mall had been torn down and replaced with this new building. Sorcerous Hall was the headquarters for sorcerers like the Warmakers, who helped to run the Rocky Mountain Territory in the area, and each had their own tower devoted to them like an office space.

The Warmaker’s tower was colored red—With turquoise for the Druids, gold for the Peacebringers, and brown for the Governor who managed Old Provo specifically. But the one that caught Marvin’s eye the most was the Diviners tower, its oily sheen reflecting off of the sun even from here. It oddly reminded Marvin of a beetle’s shell.

The rest of Old Provo was hard to see from all the years of tree growth behind Sorcerous Hall, but he was still able to see sorcerers flying around in their ascended forms. Griffins, dragons, rocs, and other magical creatures flew around the city, looking to get from one location to another, sometimes carrying goods, other times carrying people. Some of the other buildings still stood. But none seemed more imposing than Sorcerous Hall.

“Here we go,” said Graham as he pulled into one of the three offices on the highway. The offices were new additions to the highway since the ascension. They were small shacks that Border Patrol sorcerers used to keep track of who and what entered and left the city on foot. They were also the exchange centers where items from scavengers were purchased. Graham’s form shifted, and Marvin found himself staring at a man again. “You should have plenty of time to make it to the Divining, Marvin. Let’s go ahead and get your stuff checked in and get you on your way.”

He knew that Graham couldn’t help but be excited for him. Ashes! He was excited too. He just wished Graham hadn’t said anything to remind him since his stomach began to squirm a hundred fold. He was also worried about Megan’s reaction. She could be a bit extreme, and he wanted to avoid trouble if he could.

Trying to distract his mind—and Megan’s, if he could—he worked together with his sisters as they pulled out the things they had collected, holding them up for Graham to see as he wrote in his ledger. Marvin showed the zombie book to Graham and was happy to see the sorcerer marked the book to be bought for fifty cents.

Marvin worried throughout the whole exchange, but he shouldn’t have. Megan appeared more solemn since their arrival, and she hadn’t given Graham her death glare as he nodded his thanks to her for holding up an item. Hillary had lost all of the cheer that she’d had before

leaving the Wastelands, and her smile looked forced. Marvin knew what they were thinking. The Divining was mere minutes away, and there was a chance that their fifteen-year-old brother would turn out to be a sorcerer after all.

When there wasn't anything else they had collected that the sorcerers wanted, Graham finished his notes and made sure they were paid the money he owed them. He held his hand on his ledger and pulled a duplicate that glowed for a minute before handing them the receipt of the items they were keeping.

"There," he said, with a smile. "That should be good for anyone who wants to confirm at the market these were found in the Wastelands."

"Thank you," Hillary said, giving a small smile in return.

"You'd best be on your way, Marv." Graham nodded at the sun in the sky. "They'll be starting the Divining soon over at Sorcerous Hall."

Marvin nodded as he walked away with his sisters to the stairs that would lead him to his fate. They were silent when they reached the steps down from the highway, and they were still silent as they made their way to the road below.

Reaching the bottom, they could see the castle-like formation. Marvin had been told to head for the north side with his parents where he would be taken with others his age. Apparently, they had a place set aside for large crowds to observe the ceremony.

Marvin felt drawn to stare, in fascinated horror, at the bone white tower that shone like a beetle's carapace. His feet rooted in place, he wondered if he'd be there for ever.

"Hey," Hillary said, touching his shoulder and throwing him out of his trance. Smiling a little, she pulled him in for a hug. "See you soon."

"Yeah," he said with a croak.

Megan came over and gave him a hug too, but didn't say a word as she pulled away. Instead she gave him a hard stare and then turned away, walking down the road that would lead her home.

Shocked by his sister's reaction, he gave Hillary a questioning look.

"I'll talk to her," Hillary promised. "You'd better hurry, or you'll be late."

He nodded but he didn't move until both of them had walked out of sight around a corner.

Looking back at the blaring white tower, Marvin took a deep breath and headed down the road.