

PRAISE FOR CLARA THORN

“Clara shines as a spunky protagonist who is grown-up enough to accept her destiny.... Jones links math and magic in a way that makes math seem cool.... Fresh ideas, some welcome diversity, and memorable character work enliven the material.”

— BOOKLIFE

“Jones’ series opener brims with wonderful characters. ... While a school for magical youngsters has become a popular subgenre all its own, this novel unfolds as an engrossing mystery. ... Clara’s...synesthesialike power showcases the author’s radiant prose.”—Kirkus Reviews

— *KIRKUS REVIEWS*

“This is the kind of book that, when you send your child to bed, you know they're making a tent out of blankets and reading by flashlight so they can continue to read.”

— RAY HAYES (BETA READER)

“...an incredibly well written Young Adult Fantasy—using magical realism to bring the enchanting world of Underhill to life. The lore of the world...is easy to understand, as [Jones] reveals it in dribs and drabs, allowing the reader to learn about this new realm at the same speed as Clara.... He has hit on all of the typical tropes including found family and magic schools, while managing to create something completely and utterly unique.”

— REEDSY.COM DISCOVERY

CLARA THORN

THE WITCH THAT WAS FOUND

DON JONES

DONJONES.COM

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The Achillios Chronicles trilogy, *The Prime Wave Accounting* duopoly, and *short stories of witchkind* are all available **for free** by joining the author's newsletter at DonJones.com.

*For Amy,
who inspired Clara*

and

*For Emma,
who helped me find her*

Someday you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.

— C. S. LEWIS

CONTENTS

Prologue	I
1. A Pretty Good Day	3
2. The Odd Wall	19
3. Confronting the Truth	31
4. Hard to Concentrate	43
5. Nobody Likes Being Chased	55
6. Family Meeting	71
7. The Dream	77
8. Rooftop Contemplation	81
9. A Knock at the Door	85
10. Math in the Magic	91
11. We Seem to be Surrounded	97
12. This Must be Underhill	103
13. The Classmates	117
14. Wizard's Rules	131
15. There's Always a Bad Bunch	139
16. Practice Makes Friends	153
17. Sleep Tight	163
18. Trapspotting	167
19. Borders in Peril	181
20. A Message from Underhill	193
21. Secrets Within Secrets	197
22. News of the Day	211
23. Lunch and Conversation	219
24. A Cry for Help	223
25. Border Magic	227
26. You've Got Mail	243
27. We Need a Little More	247
28. Book Search	251
29. The Restricted Section	255
30. Wait, Astrology?	261
31. You're Sure This Doesn't Break the Rules?	265

32. Dangerous Fauna	271
33. Connecting Worlds	279
34. Motives	285
35. This isn't Helping	293
36. Lockdown	295
37. Let's Do This	311
38. The Shattering	323
39. Underhill Unhinged	329
40. Deep Breaths	335
41. Mathemagic	337
42. Oberherr Takes Over	345
43. Battle for the Borders	351
44. That Night	363
Epilogue: One Week Later	365
How to Make Fizzycider	367
Bestiary	371
About the Author	375
Also by Don Jones	377
Sample of "The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae"	379
Sample of "Daniel Scratch, a story of witchkind"	387

PROLOGUE

“Jess, we’ve got to go.” The man’s voice was tense with stress as he threw a few last pieces of clothing into a small bag.

“I know, Alex,” the woman said, her voice racked with emotion. “It’s just—will she be okay?”

“She has to be, hon.” Alex tried to soften his voice a bit to reassure her, but the tension refused to ease. “The Thorns are good people. And they *know*. Right now, the paladins don’t know about her, so she’s safest away from us.”

“She’ll be Lost,” Jess moaned quietly as she zipped up her own bag. “She’s not old enough yet.”

“They’ll keep her,” Alex said firmly. “One day, she’ll be Found. I’ve given them the information; they’ll get her there when she needs to be.”

They made their way out of the apartment and down the stairs. “How did he find us?” Jess wondered aloud.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alex grunted as he heaved their bags into the rickety old Subaru. “He did.”

Jess slipped into the passenger seat. “She’s never going to fit in,” she said. “Not with her talent.”

"It's all we can do." Alex sighed. "Now, look: we both need to concentrate. We've only made this work once before with the car. You need to give it everything you've got." Alex backed the car into the street, and then stopped to shift gears. "Ready?"

"I'm ready."

They both stared out the windshield. Jess' fingers twitched in a complex pattern, and her lips moved as she muttered something under her breath. Alex's lips moved as well, although his fingers remained tight around the steering wheel.

A dozen feet in front of the car, the air began to shimmer. Motes of blue and green light began swirling in an ever-growing circle. The motes lengthened into streaks, and then continuous circles. Within moments, a gently rotating ring of light floated in front of the old car, big enough to drive through.

"That's it, Jess," Alex grunted. He took his foot of the brake—

And the circle collapsed as if the ring of light had been sucked into the ground by a great subterranean vacuum cleaner. In the blink of an eye, it was gone, leaving behind a few fading sparks of bright blue and green.

"Alex," Jess said, her voice full of fear.

They heard the sound of crunching metal before something dragged the car backwards, and everything went dark.

CHAPTER I

A PRETTY GOOD DAY

Mrs. Hickling smiled as Clara laid the completed exam on her desk, and whispered, “Good for you!” Clara stood there as the teacher ran the answer sheet through the grading machine, and watched the older woman raise an eyebrow as the device spat out the sheet—marked with a zero, meaning no wrong answers. “*Really* good for you,” Mrs. Hickling whispered. “That’s it for the day. Why don’t you head home early?” Clara packed her things and slipped out of the classroom.

Clara had practically run out of the school building, skipping happily down the worn, cracked concrete stairs in the front. Going home two hours early meant she’d avoid the usual teasing, bullying, and mean looks that often accompanied her walks home. It also meant she’d avoid the hordes of SUVs zooming in and out of the school parking lot, picking up the kids who were too good to ride the bus but lived too far away to walk.

The Las Vegas weather was just starting to turn hot as summer approached, but this particular afternoon was near perfect. Clara took the school’s great stone staircase two at a time, and then looked back. The tall, deep-red building contrasted sharply with the bright

blue sky, and for a moment, she felt out of place here all alone. The teasing, bullying, and name-calling of her schoolmates was so routine, so usual and predictable, that Clara could practically conduct it all without anyone else present.

It would start with Danica, who would remark—particularly after Clara had been dismissed early after a perfect Math score—on how nobody liked smart girls, or how Clara thought she was smarter than everyone else, or how Clara was such a smarty-pants, or whatever. Danica was terrible at math, and not all that great at anything other than making fun of other people. Clara refused to even try to understand how being smart was supposed to be bad. After almost a year in this school, Danica’s comments—*Oh, you think you’re so much smarter than everyone, Clara!* and *Nobody like smart girls, Clara!*—were pretty easy to filter out.

Thomas’, less so. Thomas was one of the students picked up in a sleek black SUV—driven not by his mother, as was the case with most of the SUV crowd, but by an actual chauffeur. Clara had long wondered why Thomas was even *in* this school, as she supposed he lived in a much more affluent area of town, but she’d never worked up the courage to try and find out. Thomas’ insults were personal, cutting, and *mean*: Clara was poor (which was true enough), she didn’t deserve to go to this school (even though there was no other school nearby for her to switch to), she and her family lived on *charity* (which they didn’t, and why would it have been a bad thing if they did?), Clara was short (true) and ugly.

Self-consciously, Clara ran a hand through her hair. It was a little frizzy today, but that was because she kept forgetting to use the conditioner Mom had bought her. She dropped her hand and shrugged. It wouldn’t matter. Thomas was rich and Clara wasn’t, and that was all that really counted in Thomas’ mind. He was smart enough to never make overtly racial comments, but there were plenty of other ways to bring someone down. Clara tried not to care about what Thomas thought or said.

But she couldn’t ignore his go-to comment: *You don’t belong here.*

Daria was a basic bully. Clara took great pains to make it out of the building well before Daria, because on the few occasions the taller girl had caught her, Clara had wound up with black eyes, bruised cheeks, and, one time, a split lip. There was no reason for any of it: Clara had never said anything more than a polite “Hello” to Daria, but Daria had an intense need to exercise power over someone, and she’d chosen Clara to be her whipping girl. “She probably doesn’t have a very pleasant home life,” Dad had told Clara. “We’ve spoken to the principal about it,” Mom had added.

“Still,” Dad had finished with a small frown. “Might be best to steer clear of her.”

Then there was the gaggle of better-than-you girls led by Samantha—“Sam,” as her hangers-on were permitted to call her. They’d surround Clara, unleashing a litany of petty commentary: *Where’d you buy those shoes, Clara? A Dumpster?* or *Can’t afford makeup, Clara? It’d sure help with than skin of yours!* or *How can your parents let you out of the house in that sad excuse for a shirt? Mine wouldn’t even let me wear that to dig a hole!*

Clara would simply put her head down and push on, forcing the girls to follow her to the street corner, where they’d finally break off with a parting shot: “What makes you think you belong here?”

Belong. She’d tried so hard, this year, to fit in. She’d been polite. She couldn’t exactly dress the part, not with the family living so close to the wire, but she’d *tried*. Mom had even helped, taking some of her own clothing and distressing it in exactly the way the other kids seemed to admire and pay so much money for. Dad had managed to give her cash to buy lunches at the school cafeteria, like almost everyone else, instead of bringing her lunch from home. She’d tried to join the popular activities and clubs. She’d tried to cheer on the football team at home games. She’d tried *so hard*. But it wasn’t enough.

She’d found that most kids at most of her previous schools were pretty forgiving at first, willing to give the “new kid” a shot. But inevitably, most would draw away. That was the pattern: a few

weeks of effort, followed by Clara ending up with a few bullies and no real friends. It was like she gave off a “weirdo” vibe, and eventually, everyone picked up on it.

So although she’d started this school just a month into the term, Clara had still made no real, long-term friends.

A new year, a new school had become Clara’s mantra; no matter how bad each school was, Clara got through on the near-certainty that she’d never see any of these kids again after summer had passed. Although this year might be different: Mom and Dad had both said they fully intended for her to finish high school in this city, and Dad had even given up a high-paying job as a civil engineer to move them all here. He was in construction now, taking hourly work and overtime to make ends meet while he updated his credentials so that he could find a better job here in Vegas.

She groaned a bit as she fully realized that her tormentors could actually be a long-term thing this time. Samantha and company, Daria, Thomas... oh, right. The triplets.

Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna—youngest of *ten* children, they’d once mentioned in class. The others were all boys: Abraham, Benjamin, Carlton, Daniel, Edward, Franklin, and Gerrold, according to a presentation they’d given for a genealogy project. The other kids had twittered at those names, but Clara had found the alphabetical names eminently practical: you’d always know who was oldest and who was youngest. The triplets had apparently been a surprise: their parents had been aiming for a nice, round eight and had gotten the girls instead.

It wasn’t that the triplets were *mean*, Clara reflected. They were just so... aloof. They ignored most of the kids, but always seemed to have a special, intense, disapproving stare that they’d fire at Clara in tandem, piercing her with three identical, hard gazes. Without saying a word, they made her feel stupid in a way that Danica would doubtless appreciate, if she’d ever looked up from her phone long enough to notice. The triplets made Clara feel as lowly as Thomas tried to make her feel with his biting insults. They’d never once

touched her, but Clara almost wished they *had*, because in their case, she suspected she'd make an exception to Mom's strict rule about never fighting. Clara longed to smack the condescension off of their pale faces.

Shaking her head to clear it, Clara turned right off the school steps and began the long march home. *Turning right* was what really set Clara apart from her classmates.

Turning right meant Clara wasn't headed to the affluent neighborhood to the south, nor was she headed for the pickup zone that was always packed with fancy SUVs. No, Clara was headed north, through a small commercial district.

She watched restaurants wrapping up their lunch service and preparing for the evening dinner rush. She saw bar doors were thrown open as the staff cleaned out the previous night's evidence. She caught glimpses of lawyers working in mid-rise concrete office blocks as they scurried back from late lunch—

KAW!

Clara stopped so quickly she had to windmill her arms to keep her balance. The loud, harsh call had come from an odd-looking bird, sitting right in the middle of the sidewalk and cocking its head back to look up at her.

KAW! it repeated.

It was a crow—or a raven? Clara wasn't sure what the difference was, completely black except for one bright white feather in its left wing. It fanned that wing now, as if waving to Clara. "Shoo," she told it, taking a step forward.

It cocked its head to one side, hopped backwards, and then took flight, aiming for a point just above Clara's head, forcing her to duck as its furiously flapping wings churned the air above her.

Clara hated birds. *Flying rats*, Dad called them. *Full of diseases. Keep your distance.* She looked back, up, and around, but caught no sight of the crow. *Weird.* She resumed her journey home.

There were no tree-lined streets here; everything was hard. The cracked asphalt gave way to concrete sidewalks, which ended at

concrete, brick, or stucco walls. Alleys—filled with stinking garbage, puddles of oily water, and graffiti-covered walls—sliced blocks in half.

The transition back to residential neighborhoods was noticeable only because the homes here were single-story, in sharp contrast to the tall buildings of the commercial area. But there were still no tree-lined streets or grass yards: the people on this side of town couldn't afford the water bills that would come if they ran irrigators for trees or sprinklers for grass. The yards were hard—bare dirt, or, at best, rough gravel. The houses were simple, squat concrete boxes with almost-flat roofs, walls punctuated by creaking wooden doors and single-glazed windows. *Dam homes*, Dad had said when they'd moved in, built quickly and cheaply to house the families who'd moved here to work on the giant dam project an hour away. Ancient air conditioners squatted on the roofs, huffing and groaning to keep the homes' occupants tolerably cool in the advancing heat as summer began to take hold. Everything was faded, bleached to a light gray by decades of relentless sunlight.

The last herald of the commercial district was the small neighborhood market, a sturdy block building with wide windows. Hand-lettered signs advertised their key services: *EBT Accepted Here*, *You Buy It, We Fry It!*, and *Milk - Liquor - Wine*. A faded yellow Western Union sign hung lopsided on the glass door. An old man had plunked down on the dilapidated metal bench out front, huddling in the sliver of shade cast by the wooden eaves of the building's flat roof. He nodded politely at Clara as she passed, and she solemnly returned the gesture. The people on this side of town were polite to each other, but they didn't speak much. They were mostly older, their own children having found better fortunes elsewhere. They sat around now, watching the few passersby, staring at rickety televisions, waiting for life to come to its inevitable conclusion.

It was one of the cheapest places in town to live, and it was why Mom and Dad had moved here. And because it was “close” to the

school, a solid forty-five-minute walk being well within Mom's definition of "close."

As Clara stepped up to the short stretch of crumbling concrete that connected the sidewalk to the front step, she noted that Dad's ancient Toyota pickup truck was missing. *The Blue Banger*, they'd named it, in honor of its cracked and fading paint job and the almost-regular backfiring *bangs* it would make. Its absence meant Dad was still at work, which was good: working as a day laborer in the construction business was like rolling a pair of dice every morning. But if he didn't have a job by lunchtime, he'd give up and come home for the day. He was anxiously awaiting the state's approval of his civil engineering license so that he could search for better employment, but apparently, there had been a hiccup in their conversations with the last state they'd lived in, delaying the process.

"Hello?" Clara called as she unlocked the front door's deadbolt and stepped inside. The worn floorboards creaked as she closed the door behind her. "Mom?"

"Back here, honey," Mom's voice called from the rear of the house.

The little building's layout was simple, essentially dividing the interior into four roughly equal squares. To Clara's left was the living room, and to the right, the kitchen and dining area. At the back of the house was Clara's room on the left and her parents' on the right, with a little bathroom squeezed in between them.

Mom popped out of Clara's room. As always, seeing her made Clara feel lighter and happier. Safer. Her dilapidated glasses sat slightly askew on her face, and she absentmindedly straightened them. Her close-cropped hair stood in stark contrast to Clara's own voluminous afro, although her dark eyes sparkled with the same interest and intelligence Clara had learned to recognize in her own. "I was just tidying up. Why are you home so early?" A look of concern briefly washed over her features; Clara coming home early from school had, unfortunately, been an all-too-regular feature of their

lives, although it was usually preceded by a call from the principal, the police, or worse.

“Finished the Math final early,” Clara said and watched Mom’s shoulders relax. “Mrs. Hickling sent me home after she graded it.”

“And?”

“One hundred percent!” Clara grinned.

“Oh, baby! Oh, I’m so proud.” Mom walked to Clara and gave her a warm hug. Clara immediately relaxed into the embrace, savoring it. “That’s two down. What’s tomorrow?”

Clara tensed a bit. “English, which will be fine. And History. Ugh.”

“History’s important, Clara.” Clara’s mother released her and stood back a bit, her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

“I know, Mom. But Mr. Brant is a badly made animatronic. He’s *boring*.”

Mom’s face grew stern as her hands fell to her sides. “You already expecting to fail?”

Clara shrugged. “I’ll pass. But probably barely.”

“I suppose I’ll take what I can get at this point. Your test scores have been fine all year, though. Why the worry now?”

“Those were all multiple choice. The final is an essay.” Clara gave her mother a quick up-and-down, realizing that she wasn’t wearing an apron. “Did you have any jobs today?”

Mom had been taking jobs cleaning homes, picking up clients from Fiverr, TaskRabbit, and other “gig economy” websites. The money was okay, and it helped close the gap between their bills and Dad’s income, but the work was tough. With only one car, Mom was forced to walk four blocks to a bus stop, lugging all of her cleaning supplies with her, and then spend an hour or more on the bus to reach her clients’ homes.

“Not today. The Dickinsons cancelled, but they’re doubling up next week to make up for it. I’ve got three tomorrow. Big ones, too; I’ll be gone until dinner. If you’re going to come home early again tomorrow, I’ll leave a sandwich in the fridge.”

“History, Mom. Essay.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, babe.” Mom offered her a tired smile. “I’ll see if I can get Dad to pick up a chicken for dinner, then.”

The family had long since decided that being able to buy cleaning supplies at Costco would save Mom a lot of money, and the store’s \$4.99 chickens were one of the least expensive and most filling meals they could get, more than justifying the membership fee. The Thorns ate a *lot* of Costco rotisserie chicken.

“Anything exciting happen aside from being a math whiz?”

“Teddy Burnett probably flunked Social Studies this morning. His phone rang right after Mr. Simpson passed out the papers. He got sent to the principal, and Mr. Simpson said he wouldn’t get any extra time to do the exam.”

“Yet another reason kids your age don’t need phones,” Mom teased.

Clara had longed for a smartphone since she was old enough to understand what they were, but the Thorns had never been able to afford one for her. Even Dad was using a cheap prepaid flip phone now, and even that was only so he could call around to potential job sites rather than having to drive to them all. Clara had stopped pestering her parents about it once she’d started to understand the family’s financial situation.

“Although I guess it’ll be harder for you to keep in touch with your friends once school’s over?” Mom’s voice was hopeful.

“No friends, Mom,” Clara said with a sigh. Clara’s lack of friends was a long-running concern in the family. With Mom and Dad, at least; Clara found that she didn’t mind.

She gave Mom a hug and plopped onto the battered sofa that sat next to the door.

“I’m sorry, babe.”

Guilt prickled in Clara’s chest. She knew that all of the constant moving weighed heavily on Mom’s mind. She forced a smile. “I don’t mind. Honestly, nobody lives near here anyway, and it’s not like I’m

going to take the bus across town to have a playdate or something. I like helping you around here.”

“But this’ll be our first summer in one spot in a long time, Clara,” Mom protested. “We thought you’d finally have a chance to make some friends.”

“There are no other kids around here, Mom. I’m actually thinking about volunteering at one of the museums. They take summer docents if you’re thirteen.”

“Really?” Mom sounded hopeful but uncertain. “Well, that could be an interesting place to meet people. Which one? Natural History?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Because, you know, *dinosaurs*.”

“Ha! True enough.” The uncertainty seemed to have vanished. “Well, let me know what you need. I expect they’ll want Dad and me to sign off on something.”

“I will. Ms. Barrett suggested it and said she’d bring me a form tomorrow.” Clara paused for a moment as Mom stepped into the kitchen. “How’s Dad?”

Mom made a clucking noise with her tongue as she opened a cabinet. “He’s good. He called about an hour ago; he’s in a good spot today. Actually, a great spot. He’s helping with a survey, which means he’s making contacts with civil engineering firms. With any luck, one of them will have an opening once his license finally comes through.”

“So we’re... good?” Clara asked carefully.

“We’re good, babe,” Mom said lightly. Then she turned and met Clara’s gaze through the kitchen doorway, and her eyes widened. “Honey, we’re *fine*. I know this isn’t as nice as the last place, but it’s cozy, right? There’s plenty of food. The roof doesn’t leak. We’ve got the power bill covered. We’re *good*.” Her eyes locked with Clara’s. “Are *you* okay, babe? Truly okay?”

Clara’s stomach knotted. She hated complaining about their situation, hated that her parents didn’t think they were doing their best for her. It felt like Mom was constantly on the edge of apologizing. “Of course! It’s not that stuff, Mom. I don’t mind the house. Even

school's fine. I just... I wanted to make sure we're not going to have to move again all of a sudden."

"Oh, babe." Mom walked over, leaned down, and cupped Clara's face in her hands. "No, we're not going to have to move again all of a sudden. I think this is the right town for us."

"I thought you hated it here."

Mom had been quietly opposed to the move here, but Dad had simply repeated, "You know this is what we have to do," until she gave in.

"Let's just say it's grown on me. And I'm really happy *you're* doing well." She paused for a moment. "You *are* doing well, aren't you? Not just school?"

It was Clara's turn to sigh. "I'm fine, Mom. I just... I know Dad gave up a good job, and... I guess I feel guilty that we had to move. Again."

Mom's voice was suddenly guarded. "Guilty? Why guilty, hon?"

They'd never spoken of it, but it had been eating at Clara as the school year wrapped up. The end of the school year always seemed to be when everything went wrong.

"Danny Davis," Clara said quietly.

"Babe, what happened to Danny and his family was tragic, but you can't possibly think—"

"Mom, he beat me up on the last day of summer vacation. He'd been teasing me and pushing me around all summer, and he finally hit me. And the very next day, their house burns down?"

"Clara, you can't—"

"And the town before that, Mom. Des Moines, up north. Last week of school, I got my first period, I was so stressed out, and there was that earthquake." It had shattered windows throughout the school, burst pipes in the girls' room, and set off car alarms for blocks. Clara still had nightmares about it.

"Do you seriously think you could have—"

"It's just *weird*, Mom. It's always in summer, it's always right after something bad happens to me, and we always have to leave."

"Hon, we came here *for this school*." Mom's voice was firm now. This was ground she and Dad had been over many times, and she'd finally embraced it. At least in front of Clara. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

"Why *this* school?" Clara had never managed to get a straight answer.

"They're known for their Math program, for one, and we've known you were a whiz for a long time." The same answer they'd always given.

"Seriously, nobody taught math in the last place?" Clara had never pushed her parents on why the family moved each time, but it suddenly felt like the right time.

Mom's nose twitched as she considered Clara—a sure sign that she didn't have a good answer ready. "Not like the program here."

"But why couldn't we wait until Dad got a job?"

"He tried, sweetheart. But we'd already missed the enrollment deadline, and we were afraid if we waited any longer, you'd fall behind. You're important to us, Clara. Your education is the most important thing in the world." She offered her daughter a wry grin. "Granted, Dad didn't think it would take quite this long to get his state license sorted out, but it'll come through any day now, he says."

Clara stared at her mother for a long moment, sure there was still something she wasn't being told. "So we're staying."

"We're *staying*, Clara. Final answer. Even if—what's that girl's name? The one who bullied you?"

"*Bullies*, Mom. Present tense. Daria."

"Even if Daria beats you up and you break her nose, we're staying."

"Mom!"

Mom shrugged. "I'm not saying I want you to break her nose, Clara. I'm saying that nothing's budging us from this school. So you might as well start making some friends."

Clara flushed with embarrassment. "I try," she mumbled.

"I know. But look, I grew up an Army brat. We moved every two or three years. I know how hard it is. And I know how mean kids are at your age. But it's *safe*, baby. We won't yank you away again. Not until you're graduated, and at that point, you can move out and do whatever you want." Mom cocked her head and asked, "So you *sure* there's nobody?"

"Nobody?"

"Friends, I mean. Maybe... boys?"

"Mom!" Clara cried in horror. "Thirteen year-old boys are *gross*. They're not... *done* yet."

Mom laughed. "True enough, I suppose. Well, maybe this museum thing will be the perfect fit for you. You'll meet some other kids your age who aren't from your school. Maybe you'll hit it off with someone when you don't have all the school stuff going on around you all the time. Although..."

"What?"

"It's just that for someone so worked up about a History essay, you seem strangely eager to work at a history museum."

"Mom! It's not the same thing!"

"I'm teasing, sweetie. Although I do hope you'll maybe make a friend or two. Promise you'll try?"

"Maybe," Clara allowed.

Mom looked at Clara for a long moment, considering. "Tell you what," she said, glancing at the wall clock. "Dad won't be home for a few hours at least, and I think that perfect score in Math deserves a celebration." She grinned. "And I happened to get a very nice tip from the Ainsleys yesterday. What do you say we walk up to the market and I buy you an ice cream?"

Clara's eyes lit up. Ice cream was her favorite treat, and she didn't get to indulge all that often.

"I'll take that as a yes." Mom winked. "Let me slip on my sneakers."

Clara stood and watched as her mother efficiently tucked her feet into her own battered shoes. It'd be another few months before they

had the money for new shoes, Clara knew, and it's be a trip to the local—

KAW!

Clara's head snapped around as the loud birdcall sounded, seemingly just outside the living room window. "Did you hear that, Mom?"

Mom had stepped back into the kitchen to grab a set of house keys. "Hear what, hon?"

KAW!

"That. The crow, or whatever."

"No. But crows aren't that common here. You sure it wasn't a pigeon?" Mom's head was tilted to one side as she listened.

"Pigeons coo. This was a 'caw!'"

Mom shrugged. "I'm not hearing it. You ready to go?"

Clara suddenly felt chilly. "Yeah." A thought occurred to her. "Hey, would you walk to school with me tomorrow?"

Mom' raised an eyebrow at the odd request. "I think so. Can we go a little early? I can catch the bus on the block over, and tomorrow's folks all have their own equipment. I just need to carry my bag o' chemicals."

"Sure. I'll help carry, even."

"Then it's a deal. Mind if I ask why?" Mom accompanied Clara to school once or twice a month, telling her they needed "girl time" out of the house now and again, but she'd had more morning jobs recently that had made the timing difficult.

"No reason, I guess," Clara said, suddenly embarrassed. Was she eight, that she needed her mommy to walk her to school because there was a creepy bird outside? "Girl time? Maybe I'm nervous about History?"

"Little late for that, but I'll take it," Mom chuckled. "You sure that's all?"

It wasn't, but Clara couldn't explain it. So she simply nodded and said, "Yeah. That's all."

Mom gave her a curious look. "You *sure* that's all, baby?"

CLARA THORN

The chill spread to Clara's thoughts, which grew dark and burdened. This wasn't about History. Well, not entirely. She nodded slowly and forced a smile. "Yeah, that's all. C'mon, I'm ready for chocolate!"

It felt like a lie. But Clara couldn't tell the truth. Not when she didn't even know what the truth was.

CHAPTER 2

THE ODD WALL

The English final wasn't so tough—Clara loved to read, and writing about something she'd read was almost a pleasure—but History was exactly as bad as she'd feared.

The assignment was a single sentence: "Describe your understanding of the causes and drivers of the American Revolutionary War." *Rich guys didn't want to pay taxes?* she thought. But she had three hours, and Mr. Brant would likely be expecting something more. The problem was... who *cared*? The war had happened over two hundred years ago, on the other side of the continent, and—like a lot of History, in Clara's opinion—was mainly about a bunch of middle-aged white guys. Why couldn't she write something about local history instead? She'd at least managed to pick some of that up, thanks to the many informative plaques scattered about the town's historic sites.

So she set in, her pen joining the soft *skritch*ing of the two dozen others in the room as she guided it across the lined sheets of paper they'd been provided. More than once she had to stop, to try to recollect the facts and stories they'd been told, and, before long, the end of her pen was thoroughly chewed. She finished with scant minutes

to spare, took one last look at the paper she'd written—her handwriting had become pretty bad toward the end—and then trudged up to Mr. Brant's desk. She stood in line behind four other students to hand in her paper. Unlike Math, which was an easily scanned multiple-choice test, History would take a day or two to grade.

As she passed her paper to the teacher, he looked over his horn-rimmed glasses at her, one eyebrow raised in question. She shrugged, and his lips tightened a bit. "At least you're a good writer," he said with a small shake of his head. "That'll be worth something."

Clara left school feeling not at all reassured.

The afternoon ritual was almost exactly as she'd imagined it the day before: Danica teased her about probably flunking the History final (not impossible); Thomas commented how, poor as she was, college was out of the question for certain now (college had never been on her mind in the first place—how would Mom and Dad afford it?); and Sam's coterie critiqued her backpack, which just this morning had given up the ghost and separated from its shoulder straps. She'd been forced to carry it by the top handle, leaving Mom to lug her canvas tote full of pine-scented cleaning fluids. Daria, at least, was nowhere to be seen; she'd stomped out angrily halfway through the English final and hadn't shown up for History.

Clara put her head down and plowed through Sam's chattering flock, who, as usual, abandoned her once she reached the street corner. *They* were turn-lefters, and they'd never dream of following her into the unattractive, bustling commercial district. She lifted her head long enough to check the crossing light, hustled across the street, and breathed a sigh of relief. She liked the commercial area this time of day: the brunch-and-lunch place would just be shutting down, with the last lingering smells of bacon wafting through its open windows. The barbershop was on its final few customers. The container park—a small shopping area built entirely from reclaimed steel shipping containers—was getting the first trickle of customers to its bars and shops. The neighborhood Irish pub was changing over to its dinner service, taking a much-needed break after—

KAW!

Clara stopped, whirling toward the harsh sound. There it was, perched atop a metal-tube bike rack that was bolted into the sidewalk, waving its odd wing at her. “What are you—”

Wait, was that the triplets?

Clara forgot the bird as she watched the three girls walking quickly past the neighborhood sushi place, past the smoothie shop, and past the windowless building that housed the telephone equipment for the entire area. They they ducked into the Art Alley.

She blinked, her mind failing to grasp the reality it had seen.

The triplets *never* walked. They certainly didn’t turn right out of the school. And they absolutely never, ever, ever were the type to wind up in an *alley*, regardless of how many murals had been painted along its walls.

Clara’s curiosity was overwhelming. She checked the light, quickly crossed the street, waved to the sushi chef through the window, and looked into the alley.

It was empty.

The Art Alley was actually two distinct alleys that intersected to form a T. One ran east and west, connecting Sixth and Las Vegas Boulevard. The other ran north and south, from about the middle point of the east-west alley, all the way to Carson. Clara’s parents had told her the city had created the alley in part to discourage homeless people from sleeping in it: it was well-lit at night, and numerous local graffiti artists had been invited to paint murals on the sides of the buildings.

Clara stepped slowly off Sixth and into the east-west alley, leaning left and right to see if the triplets had maybe ducked into one of the little niches that sat between the tightly spaced buildings.

Nothing.

A couple of the Fremont businesses had space back here, open patios that they’d recovered from former loading docks and such. But those were mostly walled-in, and the one gate—Clara tugged gently on it to be sure—was locked.

So where had the triplets gone?

She hadn't taken her eyes off of the alley entrance since they'd stepped into it, and they certainly hadn't had time to run all the way to the other end. She walked to the middle and looked down the north-south alley.

Still nothing.

There was no way the triplets could have moved that quickly, but all that was here was—

She whirled as something darted through her peripheral vision.

One of the most memorable elements in the alley was a statue of a woman. She sat on a sculpted rock, raised a few feet off the ground on a sturdy concrete pedestal. Her legs crossed at the ankles, and long hair flowed down over one shoulder. She was painted a brilliant metallic purple, and in her mind, Clara knew her as the Purple Lady.

But it was the mural behind the Purple Lady that had caught Clara's attention. It was an abstract blend of blues, teals, and purples, and Clara thought the painting most resembled a fantastic galaxy of some kind. White and red geometric shapes overlaid portions of it, making a striking backdrop for the statue.

But something on the wall had *moved*.

Clara took a step closer.

Was the wall... *wet*?

Another step took her within arm's reach, and the wall did indeed look... moist. She leaned in, and saw what seemed to be a glossy film covering the wall. But it wasn't running down from the top; it seemed to be staying in place. Wouldn't oil... drip, or something?

Another half step forward, and she leaned in, sniffing at the wall. Nothing.

She leaned back and regarded the wall again. It still seemed to—
There!

Another shadow zipped past, directly in front of her. It looked like a series of numbers, almost. She looked over her shoulder, back

at the alley entrance, and again saw nothing that could have caused the shade.

She slowly turned her head back to the wall, waiting for another shadow to float by. Moments passed, and eventually one did. It was *definitely* numbers. Was this some kind of fancy art installation? Using a... screen, of some kind? Clara looked behind her, expecting to find a projector, but saw just another painted concrete wall. There was no telltale spot of light that would give away a concealed projector lens.

But where had the triplets gone?

Clara slowly extended one index finger toward the wall, intending to just brush the slightly gleaming surface. Slowly... slowly... slowly...

Her finger pushed through the wall.

Or rather, *into* it.

She yanked her hand back, clutching her finger in her other hand. It was complete dry, with—wait, was it *cooler*? She couldn't tell, as the sensation faded quickly in the afternoon heat.

The sounds of downtown Vegas faded away: the cars and trucks passing by outside, the clanking of nearby kitchen equipment, the *thup-thup-thup* of tourists in a helicopter overhead. All that was left was a *susshing* sound, a whispering of water twisting lazily through a brook. But there were no brooks here.

Clenching her jaw, Clara reach out toward the wall again, all five fingers on her right hand extended. Slowly... slowly... she watched her fingertips sink into the wall. She felt *nothing*, no sensation whatsoever. She pushed a bit further, almost to her wrist, and finally sensed something: a springy resistance of sorts, almost as if she'd contacted a sheet of rubber stretched across—what? The *inside* of the wall?

She took a half step forward and kept pushing. Wrist. Middle of her forearm. Almost to the elbow, and now the resistance was firmer, as if she'd stretched the sheet to its limit. Her fingertips were warm now, wherever they were on the other side of the wall.

Push, she thought.

Just as her elbow was vanishing inside the wall, the resistance *snapped*. She fell forward, through the wall, stumbling ahead and barely catching herself before she fell to her hands and knees. When she recovered her balance, she looked around...

...and found herself someplace else.

It was dimmer. The sun seemed well along its journey across the sky, settling into the deep, lazy orange of evening. The colors around her demanded attention, gleaming in intense, saturated colors: a deep emerald for the grass, a chocolatey brown for the dirt on the path. The tree trunks looked almost velvety in texture, and the leaves gleamed in a thousand intense shades of green. Color names from a long-past art class darted through her mind: olive. Viridian. Forest green. Sage. Olive. Persian. Reseda. Dartmouth. Lincoln. Kelly. Bottle. They were all there, mingled amongst the branches of the trees. And the *trees!* Each was a work of art, with sinuous, twisting trunks and branches that managed to jut out at wild, improbable angles and yet form an impossibly symmetric whole. High overhead, their branches wove together over the path, forming a long, gently winding tunnel.

Beyond the trees, glimpses of sky suggested heavens of the purest cerulean Clara had ever imagined, let alone seen. It was a blue so intense that it wanted to make her cry for its perfection.

She snatched her eyes away from that intense color when she heard a sound: a girl's voice, ahead of her on the path but too far for her to make out the words. The triplets! She hurried along. The air slid past her as she moved, offering the slightest hint of resistance, perhaps, but parting easily. She quickly came to the end of the tree tunnel, the beautiful wood thinning into a meadow. The road widened, and Clara saw the triplets off to one side, sitting in the long-bladed, brilliant grass. She backed into the tunnel, darted to one side of the path and behind a tree, and peeked out to watch the girls.

"I don't understand how we could have done so poorly in History," one of the girls was saying. Harriett, Clara suspected: the girls

always wore a slightly different shade of hair ribbon each day, and she suspected those were how you were meant to tell them apart. Harriett—she thought—wore the darkest, Idalia the next-lightest, and Johanna the lightest. Today's ribbons had been red, but here—wherever *here* was—the colors had taken on a new vibrancy. Harriett was now the deep maroon, Idalia the cardinal, and Johanna the bright crimson.

"Because Brant is boring and we stopped caring after the second week," Idalia (perhaps?) grumbled.

"Mother and Father will *not* be pleased," Johanna (probably) pointed out.

The wind picked up a bit, blowing directly toward Clara and carrying the scent of cinnamon.

"Did you see Clara? She kept at it even longer than we did," Idalia said. That much was true: the triplets had stood as one and turned in their papers almost ten minutes before Clara had finally called it quits.

"I didn't see her on the way out," Johanna mused. "Usually she's out the door as fast as possible."

"With Dariel on her all the time, I'm not surprised," Idalia pointed out. "Remember when Dariel thought she could bully us?"

"Bound or not, we can at least stop *that* from happening," Harriett said with some satisfaction. "But I still think Clara is... *off*, somehow."

"Your eyes slide off her unless you focus," Idalia agreed.

"And even then, something just kind of... bores into you," Johanna said. "Is the wind picking up?"

It was, Clara realized. The gentle, cinnamon-perfumed breeze had shifted to a clove-scented bluster, whipping her unruly hair. She stood to move toward the triplets and found that the air seemed to have thickened as well. She could still breathe easily, but moving forward was like walking through syrup. She took a step backward and found herself not only unimpeded but *encouraged*, the air

seeming to take her up on the offer to retreat and almost leaning on her to help make it happen.

A burst of blue-white light flashed and the triplets started, scrambling to their feet. "Professor Mycroft!" Harriett said.

Clara blinked hard, for there was indeed a fourth person on the side of the road. An older woman, with gray hair done up in a tight bun. She wore a long dress of deep gray, buttoned right up to her chin and almost brushing the ground at her feet, and she looked at the triplets with glinting eyes. Clara ducked further down behind the tree, hoping to remain out of sight.

"Girls!" the professor said, her voice cutting and urgent. "There's been a breach at the Border. Have you seen anything? Anyone?"

The girls, their attention focused on the older woman, shook their heads in unison. "We only just came through a few minutes ago," Idalia said. "We haven't seen anyone. They'd have passed us."

"If they stayed on the trail, yes," the professor said, rising on her toes a bit to look further down the road.

The wind had redoubled its efforts, now carrying a scent of rotting fruit and working itself up to a serious gale. The professor turned, looking down the road toward where Clara had come from, her eyes squinting against the waning sunlight.

"Professor!" Harriett shouted, and Clara's eyes snapped to where the girl was pointing. A shaggy dog of some kind was standing on the road past the girls, its head down and teeth bared, its eyes pointed toward the tree tunnel where Clara still hid. It growled ferociously.

"That's a kleinerwolf," Mycroft said evenly. "Get behind me, girls; I've got it."

The professor held her hands in front of her. She positioned herself between Clara and the creature, so Clara couldn't see exactly what happened, but a moment later, there was a flash of green light and a *yip-yip-yip* sound as the doglike animal bounded off the road and into the neighboring trees.

The wind was *really* working it now, and the air seemed to want

to squeeze around Clara, pushing her back. She found herself sliding along the grass and back onto the path, her worn sneakers unable to find sufficient purchase to resist the driving wind.

“Professor!” a male voice shouted from behind her.

Clara turned, the wind still pushing her inch by inch along the road, and saw an older boy standing there. He was wearing a school uniform, like the kind she’d seen in movies, with a burgundy vest over a white shirt, gray trousers, and a lazily knotted gray necktie that streamed out behind him in the increasingly aggressive wind.

“Professor!” he shouted again. “Over here!”

Another growl managed to cut through the windstorm, this time from the side of the road and *much* closer to Clara. She turned, the wind almost fetching her up against the boy’s legs, and saw another kleinerwolf hunched down. Its teeth were bared, its eyes glowed a sallow green—and it was looking directly at her.

“Christopher, *reicio!* Quickly!” Mycroft called. She sounded closer, but Clara was too terrified to turn toward her voice. “Girls, who is that?”

“It’s Clara!” Johanna shouted over the howling wind.

The wind finally shoved Clara, still crouching, against the older boy’s legs. She looked up and saw his hands stretched toward the snarling creature, his fingers twitching in a strange pattern. She blinked her eyes, which were so filled with tears and grit that she thought she saw glowing numbers flickering around Christopher’s arms and hands. Then there was a flash, again like a bright-green strobe light, followed by a yelp from the wolf-creature.

“Not doing it, Professor!” Christopher called, his fingers again beginning to twitch in unison. Clara turned and saw the monster picking itself up. A matted line of grass showed where something had shoved it back, but it was once again focused on Clara and snarling fiercely.

“There’s another!” Clara said, pointing. In fact there were two more, each stalking out of the tree line, heads low to the ground and teeth exposed.

"*Distineo!*" Mycroft shouted. Clara turned; the professor was suddenly just an arm's length away, one index finger pointing at the animals. Her fingertip was... glowing yellow? "That will only hold them for a moment, Christopher. It's the girl. She's not meant to be here." The professor turned her attention to Clara then, the fingers on her free hand flicking through a complex pattern. "*Perspeculor...* powers above and below, no, not meant to be here at all. You don't belong. Not yet, child. You'll need... well, a bit of work, but we've no time now. The land itself is against you. Christopher, get her back through the Border!"

With that, the older woman turned back to the wolf-creatures and shouted, "*Proturbo!*" Another flash of green light. "Christopher, go!"

Clara felt the boy grab her shirt collar and heave her halfway off the ground. "Sorry about this," he said, his voice remarkably calm. "*Iactus!*" he shouted as he hurled her back down the path. He must have been incredibly strong, because she found herself sliding rapidly along the dirt, directly toward a shimmering ring of light that she hadn't previously noticed. *This must be when I wake up*, a part of her mind calmly surmised.

But she didn't. She crashed into the circle of light—*Ouch!*—but didn't slide through.

Christopher cursed loudly.

Clara twisted on the ground. He charged toward her. Professor Mycroft was still holding her ground, and Clara stared in horror at the half dozen kleinerwolves now stalking toward where the tree tunnel began. The animals seemed frozen to the spot, held in place by deep-gold halos, but their heads were unerringly tracking Clara. Six pairs of glowing eyes bored into her, and she could see their muscles tensed, ready to move the moment they were released.

"It'll be the membrane," the professor shouted. "You'll have to put her through yourself!"

"On it!" the boy hollered in reply. He skidded to a stop just next

to Clara and knelt down. “Again, sorry.” He offered her a quick smile, picked her up and shoved her through the glowing circle.

“Christopher!” Clara heard Mycroft shout, and then she was through.

She rolled onto the filthy asphalt of the alley and lay there for several minutes, breathing heavily. Her hands were shaking, her mind spinning. What had just happened? She focused on slowing her breathing, and as her heart slowed her mind followed.

Eventually, she pulled herself to her feet, staring at the colorful mural on the concrete wall. It still glistened as if it was wet, but she refused to touch it again.

What had just happened?

And what had that professor meant by... “Not yet?”

CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTING THE TRUTH

“What in the world happened?” Mom asked the moment Clara closed the front door behind her. “You look like you’ve been dragged through the dirt!” She hurried over and started brushing Clara’s hair back, looking for wounds.

Clara pushed her mother’s hands away. “Mom, I’m fine.”

“What’s the matter?” Clara’s father asked, coming out of their bedroom with a worried look on his face. “Hon, what happened?”

“Look,” Clara said, holding her hands up to fend off her parents. “I need to sit down. I’m fine, but something weird happened.”

On the walk home, Clara had seriously considered not saying anything—but she’d always told her mom and dad *everything*. Part of why she loved them so much was how open and honest they were, and how they never made her regret telling them absolutely everything that was on her mind. This might have been the strangest day of her life, but she was telling her parents all about it.

Even if they thought she was crazy.

Her parents backed off, their faces covered in worry. Dad’s forehead was even more wrinkled than usual, and he was nervously rubbing his bald head. Clara sat on their rumpled old sofa, and her

mother sat next to her. Dad sank cross-legged onto the floor in front of them. Clara took a deep breath and began.

"You know the triplets?" Nods from both parents. "Well, they turned right out of school today, and I've never seen them do that before. You know the alley next to the Mexican place? The Art Alley?"

"Sure, the one with all the graffiti," Mom said.

"Yeah. They walked into it."

"Whatever for?" Dad asked.

His tone sounded more curious than concerned, all of a sudden, and Clara looked at him for a moment before answering. "I don't know. The point is, I followed them, but they weren't there."

"I thought you just said—I'm confused," Mom said. "You said you followed them."

"They walked in. It's a long alley, right? But when I walked in after them, they were gone. No way they had time to run to the other end."

"How is that possible?" Dad asked. "Were they in a Dumpster?" Clara thought his voice had grown more intense, and she noticed that he'd rocked forward a bit. He'd also stopped rubbing his head.

"No. There aren't any in that alley. Well, there are, but they're locked up."

"I'm still not following, hon," Mom said. "How could they walk in and not be there?"

"That's the thing. The one mural looked... well, weird. Oily. So I touched it, and my hand went right in."

"Into... oil?" Mom asked. "Is that why you're so dirty?" Her expression was one of pure confusion.

"No. Into the *wall*."

"Into... like, the concrete crumbled?" Dad asked. Something about his tone told Clara he knew better.

"No. It was fine. Or it's not even concrete, I don't know. I went *into* the wall, Dad. All of me. There was... another world. Like in the Narnia books, only without a wardrobe. And it wasn't winter." Clara caught herself starting to ramble, and pulled herself back on track. "I

swear, I'm not crazy. It really happened. I'm not making this up. I'm not lying to you! It really—"

"Babe," Mom said, putting her hand on Clara's forearm. "Babe, we know." Her expression was suddenly serious, her eyes locked onto Clara's. "We know."

"We'd hoped it wouldn't... well. I guess it doesn't matter," Dad said quietly.

Clara caught her breath, unaware until that moment that she'd been on the verge of hysterical tears. She stared at her mother.

"We know," Mom repeated. Clara looked at her father, and he merely nodded his head solemnly. His forehead had smoothed, and he'd leaned back a bit. Clara noticed that his blue dress shirt collar was soaked with sweat.

"What do you mean, you know?"

Mom exchanged a look with her husband and sighed. "Clara, there's a *lot* we have to tell you. Some of it may be a little hard to hear, but I want you to trust us, okay? We love you; we'll always love you."

Clara's chest tightened. "Mom, what's going on?"

"Hon?" Mom asked Dad.

"Right." Dad stood and walked back to their bedroom and then emerged with what looked to be a very old, very heavy magnifying glass. The thick lens was wrapped in a sturdy bronze collar, which attached to a stout, leather-wrapped wooden handle. He held the glass before his face, staring at Clara. She could see his nose, distorted by the lens. "Yeah," he said. He lowered himself back to the floor and placed the glass beside him.

"Dad, what's going on?" Clara's heart started to beat more rapidly. "You guys are weirding me out."

"It'll be fine, dear," Mom said with a firm pat on Clara's arm. "I guess the first thing to cover is that we're not your real—well, not that. We're not your *birth* parents. We adopted you, when you were very, very young. Barely more than a baby, really. We meant—hmm." She stopped herself, pursing her lips and staring at her husband

with a look that Clara recognized immediately: someone was in trouble.

Then her words sunk in. “Wait, what?”

“You’re adopted, Clara,” Dad said calmly, although he was looking at Mom. “We’ve debated telling you for a couple of years, now, but it just never seemed like the right time. This doesn’t in any way change how much we love you, and this isn’t how we wanted to tell you, but... there are things you need to know, now.”

“Adopted?” Clara’s mind refused to wrap itself around the word. Everything she’d ever known... was a lie? This was like the time she’d stood up too quickly while trying to drain the last of a Slurpee—she was lightheaded, the room spinning, her head aching. She placed both hands, palms-down, on the sofa cushion for balance. “You’re not my real parents?”

“Clara Marie Thorn, we are as real of parents as any child on this world has ever had, and don’t you forget it.” Mom’s voice was sharp, and tears were welling up in her eyes. “It’s just that your father and I... we couldn’t have a child the usual way. Honestly, we’d given up on having children.” She put an arm around Clara’s shoulders and tried to pull her closer, but Clara resisted. Mom made a noise in her throat—a small, painful noise unlike anything Clara had heard from her before—and let her arm fall off Clara’s shoulder.

“But then why—”

“It’s a long story, Clara,” Dad said quietly. “Your birth parents were neighbors of ours, and... they got into some kind of trouble. Bad trouble. They needed to run, but they needed you to be safe. So they asked us to look after you. We’d known you since you were born, and of course we said yes. But after a couple of years, they hadn’t come back and—well. We were able to have some papers drawn up, and we adopted you.”

Blood pounded in Clara’s ears, and her skin was alternating between sweaty and clammy. “So if I’m... but...” Clara shook her head as the information sank in. “So who are my parents?” She felt her own eyes starting to tear up, and her chest was impossibly tight.

“Well, *we’re* your parents, Clara Beara,” Mom said, her voice gentle. The old nickname made Clara smile a bit, and the tightness in her chest loosened a little. Mom’s face blurred as tears began to fill Clara’s eyes. “But your birth parents are Jessamine—Jess, we called her—and Alex. Holdaway.”

“So my last name is Holdaway?” Clara said quietly, her smile fading.

“Your last name is *Thorn*, as it has been since we adopted you,” Dad said firmly. Clara turned to him and saw the calm determination in his face. All at once, she saw her father as a person: the years of tired effort, the iron confidence, the soft heart, the strong hand that had always held hers so gently. “You’re our little girl, Clara. You always will be. Don’t ever forget that. We’d always thought to tell you... I guess when you were older. We kept putting it off.”

“With all the moves, and the changes in school... it just never seemed the right time, baby. We’re sorry.” Mom’s expression was genuine, and Clara could hear the thick emotion in her voice. “But if you’ve been *there*, then... well, now you need to know. All of it.”

The truth about her parents—*both* sets, her birth parents and the ones sitting here with fear and apology written all over their faces—was still banging loudly in her mind, and for a moment, Clara had quite forgotten about the incident in the alley. “What does this have to do with my re—with my birth parents?”

Mom sighed again. “Your parents had magic, Clara. Which means you have it as well. It runs in families, they said.”

Clara’s brain struggled for a moment with the word *magic*, but then she remembered what had just happened to her, and tried to accept it for a moment. Although this was getting to be an awful lot to *accept for a moment*. Then again, accepting it left room in her brain for other possibilities, and something came into focus that had never made sense before. “Then what... all those things? In the other cities?”

He nodded. “Apparently little hiccups aren’t uncommon as you run through puberty. But we moved you here because... well, your

parents had given us some advice. As much as they could, in a big hurry, but they told us there were schools—Ordinary, they called them. Not magic. But schools where the magic people sent their kids part-time. To learn ordinary things, like history.”

“And math,” Mom said with a grin.

“But the triplets—” Clara said, her mind suddenly piecing it together.

“I expect they’re witches,” Mom said evenly. “And that place you crossed over to is where most of them live most of the time. Your parents called it Underhill, but they told us to keep you away from it. In fact, Jess stressed how important it was that you not go there until you were ready.”

“It... seemed to want to get rid of me,” Clara said, remembering the intense winds and the snarling wolves.

“I’m guessing you’re not ready,” Mom said.

“Ready? What would—wait, are you saying I’m a... what? A witch?”

“That’s the word your... that Jess used, yes,” Mom answered with a nod. “When you were born, they told us about themselves. About magic. About their—your—people. Honestly babe, we thought they were crazy at first, but they showed us. Jess could *fly*. Alex could do these amazing illusions.” She shrugged. “When you’re confronted with that much evidence, you eventually stop refusing to believe it. Magic is real.”

“*That* was an evening,” Dad muttered. “There wasn’t enough wine in the world, that night. But they gave us this glass,” he added, tapping the magnifying glass that lay next to him. “They said it would show us when the magic had ‘taken to you,’ as Alex put it. And it has. You’re all glowing when I look at you through it.”

“Jess and Alex said some magical families would entrust their secrets to close friends who were Ordinary, when a child was born,” Mom said. “Kind of a godparent thing, from what I gathered. They wanted their children to have a connection to... *here*. To the Ordinary world. *Talam*, they called it sometimes. That’s why they brought you

to us when they needed to run. We already knew—about them, and about you.”

Clara sat for several moments, just staring at her mother. Her brain had finally stopped trying to piece it all together, and she had a sudden, almost irresistible urge to giggle. She sensed, though, that if she started, she might not be able to stop.

“You okay, babe? I know this is a lot,” Mom said.

Clara nodded slowly. “It... I guess it fits. I’ve always felt like I didn’t belong. Like I didn’t fit in. Because I didn’t.”

“It’s why making friends has been so hard, never mind all the moving,” Mom sighed. “We hoped it would eventually pass, but other kids seem to be able to sense that something is... a little different, I guess.”

“Can you?”

Mom nodded, carefully keeping her hand on Clara’s arm. “You have a different vibe than Ordinaries, yes. Than us. We’re used to it, but even when we first met Jess and Alex... Hmm. I guess they just felt... different. Off, somehow. Like you’d think they made eye contact just a little too often, or a little too long, but that wasn’t even really it. There was just something about them.” She shrugged. “We got used to it, and I think that’s why they decided to trust us. Most Ordinaries, most non-magic people, they don’t get used to it. Magic people who live here, in our world, tend to move around a lot.”

“But if I don’t belong here, why did that other place push me out?”

“You *belong* right where you are, young lady,” Dad said, his voice mock-stern. “But as to why it did that... I don’t know. All we know is what Jess told us: ‘Keep her away from Underhill until she’s ready.’ Hon, we don’t even know how we’ll know when you’re ready, or what that even means.”

“This is... I can’t even,” Clara said after several moments. “With you, with them, that place... I can’t...” But she *could* believe it, couldn’t she? It had just happened to her. “You never told me?” Clara

knew she sounded a little angry then, and she realized she *was* a little angry.

“Baby, your parents were terrified,” Mom said, almost pleading. “We figured the best way to keep you safe was to treat you like our own Ordinary daughter. In case whoever was after them decided to try and come after you. All the moving when you were still little, that was all to make sure nobody could find you. And then, I guess... I guess we just didn’t know how to tell you. Or if we should. Or if it mattered.”

“But you came here. Because of the school.”

It was Dad’s turn to sigh. “Alex told us about the school. About a couple of them, actually. He said it’d be important to have you in one of them before you turned fourteen. There are spells on the school to keep your... I guess to keep your magic under control. They put them there—magic parents, like Jess and Alex—to keep the magic children damped down. They always pick year-round schools, so their kids can spend a semester here and some the year... I guess they have their own schools. For magic.”

“On the other side?”

“I assume so.” He nodded.

“Huh.”

“You okay, babe?” Mom asked again.

Clara thought about it, taking an inventory of her feelings. Parts of her felt numb, as if they’d simply given up and shut down. Other parts of her were arguing that this was some elaborate plank. Adopted? A witch? Ridiculous! Still other parts seemed to be trying to ignore the whole thing, rehashing the History essay or remembering the exact shade of purple the statue in the alley had been painted. A final part—the pragmatic part of her that had always taken over when it was time to change cities again—was nodding its head and saying, *Yep, this all makes sense now.*

And a tiny, tiny part of her was just mad at everything and everyone. “I don’t know. Maybe. I need... I think I need to think about it.”

“I think you need a shower,” Dad said, only half joking.

Clara gave him a weak smile. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Grilled cheese for dinner?” Mom asked. It was Clara’s favorite.

“With soup?” Clara asked hopefully.

“I believe I’ve got a can of tomato bisque with your name on it,” Mom assured her with a smile. She let her hand slide off Clara’s forearm as the girl stood. “It won’t take long to make, so you just let me know when you’re ready, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Mom.”

Her dad pushed himself upright and gave her a bear hug. “We love you, Clara. I know this is a lot. I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you sooner,” he said softly into her ear. “This is all new for us, too.”

“I know, Dad,” Clara said into his chest.

“You smell like cloves,” he said as he released her.

“Yeah.”

She gave Mom a quick hug and went into her bedroom. She pulled some clean clothes out of her rickety old dresser and retreated to the bathroom. A long, hot shower later—the water heater was the newest appliance in the house, thank goodness—she slipped back to her room. Mom and Dad were both in the kitchen, talking in low voices, but she wasn’t concerned about that right now.

Right now, she wanted to think. Or *not* think, she wasn’t sure which.

She closed the door softly behind her, holding the worn door-knob to muffle even the slight *click* of the door catching, and then she lay down in her bed. The old bed frame—like all the other furniture in the house, it had been here when they arrived to this “fully furnished” home—creaked as she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Adopted.

Clara *wanted* to feel... something. Angry. Hollow. Sad. Outraged. Betrayed. She sat and tried on each emotion, one at a time, waiting for one of them to click and for hot tears to start rolling down her cheeks. But it never happened. *Adopted, adopted, adopted*, she repeated over and over in her mind, until it became a nonsense

series of syllables. *A DOP ted. Ad op TED. Ted, dop, a.* Before long, she ran out of emotions to consider, and ran out of variations on the word.

In the end, she decided, she didn't care. It was just a word. It didn't change her. It didn't change Mom or Dad. They were all she'd ever had, and for thirteen years, the three of them had been all *any* of them had. Whatever relationship of law or birth that was or wasn't involved just didn't seem... pertinent.

She didn't even remember her birth parents. Her oldest memory was barely even that: a whiff of a scent. Something light but spicy, something she'd never smelled since. She'd always assumed it was a perfume or a food or something—but it wasn't anything Mom or Dad had ever worn or cooked. Maybe it was a half-remembered scent of her birth parents? There was no way to know.

So she turned her mind to other concerns.

Magic.

That felt pertinent. This afternoon, Clara had stepped through a concrete wall and into another world. That world had pushed her out and apparently sent wolves to... eat her, she supposed. Three of her classmates were witches, and two other witches—were the boys called witches too?—had pushed Clara back into the real world.

Real. Probably best to stop using that word.

The *Ordinary* world. What had Mom called it? *Talam*? What a strange word. *Tah-LAHM. TAH-lame?* Maybe she could ask the triplets what it meant.

Magic is real.

Clara was a witch. Jessamine Holdaway, her birth mother, had been a witch, and Clara was a witch. And being a witch was why she'd never fit in, never felt like she belonged anywhere. She gave off a witch vibe. She weirded people out.

But apparently, she didn't belong in Underhill, either. She wasn't ready. *Not yet*, the older witch had said.

It couldn't just be age, though. The triplets were the same age as she was, and the magical world had accepted them just fine. Was it

because her real—her *birth* parents weren't around? Did they have to do something to make her fit in there?

Clara's mind felt like a hamster that had done a million turns in its little wheel, and she suddenly needed to get up and move. To get away from it all. What was Dad's phrase? *I need to get outside my head for a minute*. Adoptions, magic—she found herself supremely uninterested in all of it.

She rolled out of bed, opened the door, and stepped into the living room. "Mom?"

"Hey, babe," Mom said, poking her head out of the kitchen.

"How about that grilled cheese?"

Mom's expression was a textbook definition of relief. "Coming right up, my love."

Clara sat at the wobbly Formica-covered table that served as their dining room, its three avocado-colored vinyl chairs just as rattly as everything else in the house. Mom bustled about, turning on the gas stove and buttering slices of bread.

Dad pulled out the chair opposite Clara and sat down. "Would it be okay if we asked you to stay away from that alley? At least until... I don't know. I guess we need to figure that out?"

That was part of what made Mom and Dad so great. They never *ordered* Clara; they *asked* her.

"Yeah, I don't want to go back in there by myself anyway," she admitted. "But what about the triplets?"

"I think talking to them is a safe bet." Dad nodded agreement. "They saw you... when you were over there, right?"

Clara nodded.

"It wouldn't surprise me if they bring it up. But you'd better grab them tomorrow—it's the last day of school. If what Alex and Jess told us holds true, once Ordinary school is over they'll go back Underhill full time until next year."

"Yeah."

Dad looked away for a minute, absentmindedly rubbing his head. Clara almost smiled at the familiar, unconscious gesture. He'd

been bald for as long as she could remember, and when she was little she'd thought he was trying to summon a genie out of his head by rubbing it like a lamp. He let his hand fall to his lap and spoke slowly. "Clara... just know that this happens to all parents and kids. You're growing up. You're going to be doing more of your own things, making more of your own decisions. We'll always be here for you, but we won't be able to protect you as much as we used to." He gave her a sad smile. "It's tough on us, but we're proud of you. We'll always have your back."

A strange feeling settled over Clara. As she watched Mom flipping sandwiches on their little griddle, she felt both comfortable and... alone. "You can't come with me." It was a statement, not a question, and it came from a place of surety Clara didn't recognize.

Dad nodded. "That's what Jess and Alex told us. Non-magical people can't go there. 'Not anymore,' they said."

Clara caught Mom giving her a sideways glance as she flipped the sandwiches again. "Okay." It wasn't okay. But Clara knew she was growing up. As good a family as they'd been, Clara was going to have to leave it. Leave the *one* tiny place where she'd always knew she fit in, where she always belonged. It was... scary. But if the Ordinary world wasn't to be hers, then maybe this magical world... maybe it could be.

Maybe she'd find the place where she truly fit.

CHAPTER 4

HARD TO CONCENTRATE

To call the last day of school “tangled” would have been something of an understatement.

Clara and her parents had stayed up late—far too late, probably—talking about what she’d seen in Underhill, how she was feeling, and what she was thinking. All of which had made Clara feel safer, but she’d wound up not crawling under her covers until midnight—which was going to make the Science final especially difficult. At least the afternoon held the PE and Health final, which in practice meant a lot of multiple-choice questions on the names of bones and what a calorie was. She could handle that.

Worse was that her visit to Underhill had evidently woken something within her.

As she trudged through the commercial district, she kept catching flickers of blue and pink out of the sides of her eyes. Each time, she’d snap her head to see, but whatever it was would immediately dissipate into a fog—leaving her wondering if it wasn’t just an especially hazy day that her mind was using to play tricks on her.

That possibility vanished when she caught sight of the school building.

The building had been built in the 1950s, following a style Dad had called “Spanish Neoclassical” (“Which isn’t even a real style,” he’d added). A heavily built concrete edifice complete with pillars and square-edged trim, it had been painted a deep, almost burnt shade of red. The color reminded Clara of the Red Rocks conservation area her parents had taken her to a few times in the cooler months, while the overall shape of the building reminded her of nothing so much as a giant box.

Today, that box was wreathed with gently flowing symbols, all glowing in shades of red, blue, and green. They flowed in neat horizontal lines, stacked perfectly atop each other, with each line seeming to move at its own speed. They wrapped around the building and passed over doors and windows as if they weren’t even there.

Clara stood on the opposite corner, transfixed. The arrival of the morning’s first SUVs, careening in with their usual reckless abandon, shook her loose, and she hurried across the street.

This must be the magic that Dad had mentioned: *There are spells on the school to keep your... I guess to keep your magic under control. They put them there—magic parents, like Jess and Alex—to keep the magic children damped down.*

As she neared the building, she realized that the glowing text looked like math equations, just like the magic she’d seen yesterday and again around that boy’s hands. Her brain seemed to seize the concept with glee: *Magic is math!*

Good thing it isn’t History, she giggled to herself.

The numbers in the equations weren’t entirely right: That 2 had far too large an upper hook, for example, and the bottom loop on that 3 was bloated. She didn’t recognize all the symbols—were they meant to be Greek letters?—but she did recognize variables like x and y peppered here and there, along with the punctuation of math: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division signs, along with fractions, parentheses, and more.

This was *magic*.

The triplets marched right by her, giving her their usual hard looks, this time tempered with a bit of curiosity. She fell in step beside them, opening her mouth to speak, but Harriett—sporting a hair ribbon of deep green today—pursed her lips and gave a quick shake of her head. The three of them picked up their pace, stepping ahead of Clara and up the school’s massive front staircase. As they did so, Clara realized that the girls too were coursing with glowing equations, only these ones seemed to zip around them with abandon rather than stacking in neat lines. They flowed under their clothes, even under their skin, creating an effect more like darting fireflies. Clara took the steps more slowly, fascinated with what she was seeing, and almost tripped when the three girls stepped right through the building’s equations as if they didn’t exist.

Well, that makes sense, Clara thought. *I’ve been walking in and out all year without noticing*. Still, she hesitated slightly as she crested the stairs and stood before the grand entryway. Students darted past her on both sides, plunging through the equations—which she now realized were each about a foot high—without the slightest acknowledgment that the glowing lines of text existed. Clara stepped through carefully, not knowing what to expect—and felt nothing. *Which is what I should have expected, I guess*.

The interior of the school was less garish, but she still caught glimpses of glowing equations darting across the top of a doorway, along the baseboards, and between rows of student lockers. She made her way to Science class and took her usual seat, distracted by the magical lights that apparently only she could see. Or perhaps the triplets *could* see them, and had simply grown used to them? Regardless, the Science classroom was almost as heavily covered as the exterior of the building had been, with misshapen numbers and other symbols marching in close proximity over the walls and ceiling, and even spilling onto the floor beneath her feet.

“Clara,” Mrs. Bennet said quietly as she laid the exam papers on Clara’s desk.

Clara started, focusing back on the classroom. She realized that

the more she looked at mundane things—her pencil, the bubble sheet where she'd record her answers, even the desk itself—the more the glowing equations would fade into the background. Never quite vanishing, but dimming to the point where she could ignore them more easily. But she had to be careful: the slightest glance at a wall would bring the equations back at full brightness, as if they were eager for her attention.

She put her head down and began focusing on the exam.

Which of these diseases is not caused by improper disposal of sewage?

She chewed the end of her pencil, considering the options. C, *Heart attack*, and her pencil filled in the little bubble marked "C."

What are the products of anaerobic respiration in yeast? D. *Which mirror shows a lateral inversion of light?* A, *plane mirror. A merry-go-round is an example of what kind of motion?*

She fell into a state of easy concentration, as she often found herself doing on tests where she was comfortable with the material. B, D, E, C, D, B... the answers flowed readily.

Until: *Morning dew is an example of which portion of the water cycle?*

Transpiration? she asked herself. She looked up, letting her gaze unfocus as she tried to remember. They'd learned this no more than two weeks ago, she knew, but—

The equations surged back to life, startling her and breaking her concentration. She inhaled sharply and dropped her pencil. Mrs. Bates frowned at her as she leaned down to recover it, and Clara could feel the teacher watching her as she returned to her test.

It happened again on *You find an igneous rock that contains large crystals. This means what?* and *The probability of producing a tall plant from two hybrid tall plants is what?* Each time, she looked up to gather her thoughts, the equations blazed back to life, and she dropped her pencil.

Mrs. Bates was clearly annoyed. "Enough, Clara. If you can't hold your pencil, I'll just collect your exam now. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bates. Sorry. I'll be more careful." After that, Clara forced herself to keep her head down until the exam was complete.

"You've never been this disruptive during a test," Mrs. Bates said when Clara turned in her test. "Is something the matter?"

"I didn't feel well all night," Clara lied. "I guess I'm still a little shaky. I'm sorry."

"Hmm," Mrs. Bates murmured, her expression softening a little. "Well, be sure and eat something simple for lunch. And tell Mr. Carson in Health, so at least he knows."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lunch passed quickly. Clara looked for the triplets, but couldn't find them anywhere in the lunch room. She collected her own meal and ate it quickly, hardly tasting the pizza that once would have been the highlight of the afternoon. She hurried to her final test of the year, keeping her eyes low to avoid as many of the distracting lights as possible.

The Health exam was as boring as she'd hoped, and she dashed her answers off quickly. Mr. Carson excused her as soon as she was done, wishing her a safe summer and telling her that he hoped she'd feel better soon. Clara looked quickly around the room, realizing that the triplets had never shown for the exam: their desks, one in front of the other, were all empty.

She rushed out of the school, hoping she could catch them—but no, they'd come in an SUV today. They wouldn't be walking home then, would they? So not past the alley.

Clara's spirits fell. This was supposed to be her last chance to speak with them, to ask them what had happened, to find out... something. Anything. What to do next. She'd even have been willing to ask the triplets' parents, if she could have caught them, but there were no SUVs outside the school at this hour.

Clara's feet switched to autopilot and began carrying her toward home. Or so she assumed until she found herself approaching the Art Alley. She pulled up short in front of the smoothie shop, idly waved through the window to the woman behind the counter, and stared. Three men stood in front of the alley's east entrance, all wearing brown leather dusters that were entirely inappropriate for the early-

summer heat. On their heads were... *contraptions*. They looked like heavy goggles made of brass and thick glass—which reminded Clara of the magnifying glass Dad had used the night before. None of them were looking directly at her, but...

Her mind raced: Dad had said he could *see* magic clinging to her, that she was all... *glowy*. Could these men see the same thing?

Now her heart began pounding, and she quickly turned around and—

“Clara!”

Idalia stepped out from the building’s main entrance, a nondescript glass door. “We’ve been waiting; our table’s ready!” The triplet grabbed Clara’s upper arm with a surprisingly strong grip and yanked her into the building.

Clara blinked as her eyes adjusted to a suddenly dimmer space. She looked around—this wasn’t the lobby of the Carson building!

Clara knew that lobby well: the smoothie shop had an interior entrance here, one they preferred people to use when it was blazingly hot outside. The lobby also led to a small mixed-use space that hosted everything from judo classes to meditation groups. A set of stairs led up to an empty space that was intended to be a bar or restaurant. An exit on the far side opened into a courtyard full of tables from one of the other restaurants in the building.

This was definitely not that lobby.

“What were you *thinking*?”

Clara recognized Idalia’s voice. “Where are we?” Her eyes were starting to adjust, and she could now make out a set of three comfortable-looking chairs, haphazardly arranged in whatever this small room was. Heavy brocaded curtains covered three walls, and as Idalia stepped further in she let a fourth curtain fall over the door that was already latched behind them.

“The Carson Pocket,” Harriett answered. “You’ve never come in here?” The triplet sounded agitated, even angry, and Clara recoiled a bit.

"I don't even know what that means," Clara admitted. "I was looking for you three," she added in a small voice.

"Did they see you?" Johanna asked softly, motioning for Harriett to calm down.

"I don't think so."

"They can't follow us in here anyway," Idalia said. Her eyebrows were drawn together in concern, and Clara didn't think she sounded entirely certain.

"Who are they?" Clara asked. "And where are we?"

"Hunters," Harriett said flatly, giving Clara a look that said she should have already known the answer. "Witch hunters," she said more quietly.

"You didn't know, did you?" Idalia said, putting a gentle hand on Clara's forearm.

Clara shook her head. "No. Not until... yesterday. What happened."

"How is that possible?" Harriett asked, her ire dying away her eyes widening in disbelief. "How could you not... just not *know*?"

"We figured you were one of the high-and-mighties or something, the way you ignored us all year," Idalia said. "We didn't know you... How could you not? I mean, your parents—"

"My birth parents had to leave me when I was a baby. My parents—the ones who raised me, I mean—they're... Ordinary? Is that what you call them?"

All three girls' mouths dropped open.

"Haven't you seen where I live?" Clara asked. "We're hardly high or mighty."

"We... didn't know," Johanna said, some shame creeping into her voice. "We just... oh. We never imagined, is all."

"So you really don't know what this is?" Idalia asked. "The Pocket?"

Clara shook her head.

"There are a couple of them in town. They're small pockets of

Underhill. Secret ones. Places we—magical people—can escape to. We’ve been using this one as a hangout.”

“We came back to clean up, now that the semester is over,” Johanna added.

“But how did we get in?” Clara asked.

“There’s a second door handle on the outside,” Idalia explained. “It’s invisible, but if you know it’s there, and if you have a little magic, you can grab it. When you do, the door opens here, instead of into the Ordinary building.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t know,” Harriett muttered, apparently still stuck on that.

“I didn’t,” Clara said with a bit of heat. She immediately felt bad, and added, “Sorry. I’m sorry. This is so much, so fast.” An awkward silence descended. Clara bit the inside of her cheek. She needed to get the conversation back on a useful track. “Those men. They’re actually hunting us?”

“They’re called paladins,” Johanna said, glancing at the now-covered door. “Or they call themselves that. And yeah. They hunt magic-users. Witches. Us.”

“Whatever happened with the Border yesterday must have lit up their radar,” Idalia said. “There’s been no sign of them in town at all until today. We were going to duck back for lunch, and they were there. We’ve been here ever since.”

“You missed the Health final,” Clara pointed out.

“Zero people in our family will care.” Harriett snorted. “We’re only there for the math, science, and history classes.”

“For all the good History did,” Johanna muttered.

“What *did* happen yesterday?” Harriett asked, her eyes narrowing as she looked at Clara. “At the Border?”

“The wall?” Clara asked.

“Yeah. It’s called a Border. It’s one of two in the city, I think,” Idalia said. “What happened with you? The professor... it was so weird.”

Clara’s voice grew small and quiet. “I don’t know. When I got

there it was fine, but the longer I was there... the harder it got." She shifted her weight uneasily from one foot to another under the triplets' attention, suddenly wishing she was back outside.

"Harder?" Johanna asked.

"Like walking through water, then syrup, then... something thicker. And the wind was pushing me back the whole time, and it kept getting stronger."

"We could see that," Johanna mused. "But we couldn't *feel* it. So that's why you were sliding around."

"And the wolves," Clara said.

"Kleinerwolves," Idalia corrected her. "We asked our parents about them. They're magical, bred by the ancient Fae as guards. After you went through the Border, back to this side, a bunch of them tried to come after you."

"Nothing came out of the wall after I did," Clara said.

"No, they can't exist here. They'd have dissolved," Idalia said.

"But that probably caused enough ripples on this side for the paladins to pick it up." Harriett scowled. "That's why they're here now. So thanks for that."

Again, everything I do screws something up, Clara thought. Her throat grew tight and she wrapped her arms around herself, trying to make herself smaller. "I'm sorry," she whispered, looking down at her shoes. "So what do we do?"

Harriett scowled. "We? Eventually, someone will come for *us*. Someone who can handle the paladins. They're probably already missing us." She looked to her sisters as if for reassurance, and Clara realized that the girl was scared.

"Mom was picking us up. She'll already be in a panic," Idalia said. "But she can't handle a pair of paladins on her own."

"There are three," Clara said. Harriett's scowl deepened.

"Even Dad won't take that on. They'll have to round up help," Johanna said miserably.

"There's the apartment," Idalia suggested. Harriett's scowl

relaxed a bit, and Clara thought she saw a glimmer of hope in the other girl's eyes.

"What apartment?" Clara asked.

"It's an emergency bolt-hole," Idalia said. "It's protected, and our parents can come and get us there. The paladins won't know about it."

"Where is it?"

"It's actually pretty far," Idalia said, her voice uncertain. "About... six blocks?"

"What's the address?"

"Maryland and Clark, I think."

"That's more than six blocks," Clara said thoughtfully. "And you... *think*?"

"We've only been there once," Idalia said defensively. "We never thought we'd need it."

Which is why you should know where it is, Clara thought. The triplets were spoiled; Mom and Dad had *two* safe places for Clara to hide out at need. Both were businesses, and the owners of both had Dad's cell phone number handy. They'd done this in every town Clara could remember being in, and they quizzed her once a month on various ways to get to each one. "Wait, can't you just use magic or something?"

Harriett rolled her eyes. "I wish. We can do basic self-defense, but nothing that would bother a paladin. Our powers are bound while we're in school. The school itself reinforces that every day; it's got spells all over it."

Yeah, I noticed, Clara thought wryly.

Idalia frowned. "And... we don't know that much magic, anyway. Next term is when we start learning the real stuff. Not that it would matter."

"Why?"

"Paladins carry iron," Johanna explained. "It deflects and diminishes magic. What little we're able to do wouldn't even scratch them."

"It's why they wear those heavy coats," Idalia added. "They're lined with little iron plates."

"My powers aren't bound," Clara said.

"First, do you even know how to use magic? At all?" Harriett asked.

Clara blushed and shook her head.

"So, no. And you probably *are* bound. You've been going to the school all year. That's part of what it does: makes sure we don't have any 'accidents.' Our Mom recharged them the week before we started, and all the parents take turns keeping them fresh every month."

"Magic's out," Idalia summarized.

"Your apartment seems like the best bet. We can't stay *here* all day," Clara said.

"When we leave, we'll be right back on the street," Johanna cautioned. "If they're there, they'll see us."

"Okay," Harriett said. "We'll walk out the front, real casual, and—"

"The front? No way," Clara said. Getting around this area was *her* specialty. "So this... pocket, this place, this lets us right back out on the street?"

Idalia nodded. "It'll look like we came out of the building lobby."

"Can we turn right back around into the lobby?"

Another nod. "It'll look a little weird, with four of us popping out and then running right back in."

"But the lobby door is recessed off the street. If they're still standing in the alley entrance, they won't see us."

"True," Idalia allowed. "Then what?"

"There's a door in the back of the lobby that lets out to the courtyard—and there's a gated exit on the opposite side. Those guys won't ever see us. We can get out into the alley, back to Carson, cut down to 7th, right on Fremont, and head down to Maryland. Then we'll hook back a couple of blocks to Clark, and see if you can see your place."

“Wow,” Idalia said, impressed. “You know this area that well?”

“I *live* here,” Clara said firmly. “I’ve got an emergency safe spot along the way on Fremont at 10th, and there are two coffee places we can duck into if we need.” She stood. “No time like the present.” That’s what Dad had always said when they’d suddenly needed to move to a new town. “You guys ready?”

The triplets looked at each other and jerked their chins down in a unified sort of nod. Harriett still had a slight scowl on her face as she turned to Clara and said, “Lead on. If you got us into this, I guess you might as well get us out.”

“Just keep in mind,” Johanna cautioned Clara, “this is *serious*. These guys exist to *kill* people like us. If they catch us...” The girl’s face was lined with tension. Harriett seemed to be vibrating with anxious energy, and even the mild-mannered Idalia was chewing her lower lip.

Clara nodded. “We’ll be fine.”

She wished she believed herself.

CHAPTER 5

NOBODY LIKES BEING CHASED

“You can’t even do, like, illusions or anything?” Clara muttered as they filed through the kitchen toward the shop’s back door.

“We *can*, but they’re not considered basic self-defense against Ordinaries, so it’s part of what’s bound,” Harriett replied with some heat in her voice.

“We only just started this year anyway,” Idalia reminded her.

“I don’t get that.”

Johanna rolled her eyes. “You don’t get your magic until you’re thirteen,” she said. “Except for accidents. Our school—in Underhill, I mean—is mainly the same as Ordinary school until this year.”

“Less math,” Idalia said under her breath, causing Clara to smile.

“I didn’t realize.” Clara hadn’t considered that the triplets—that *any* child of magic—wouldn’t be more advanced than her. If they’d spent half the year here, then they were only about six months ahead. She could catch up.

Assuming she could get everyone past these paladins, assuming she could find a way into Underhill that wouldn’t make it reject her,

assuming she was even allowed to go to magic school, assuming her parents would let her...

Dad had a saying about what you made of yourself when you “assumed” things.

Clara turned and pushed the back door open to peek outside. Thick lines of magical equations, all glowing a bright red, were darting down the alleyway toward the street. Clara had no idea what that meant, but perhaps it was a good sign. Apart from the zipping numbers and symbols, the alley seemed clear.

“Let’s go.”

The four of them hustled into the cramped roadway between the buildings. This was the north-south leg of the Art Alley. If the men were still standing at the east-west entrance on 6th, then they shouldn’t see the girls dashing out. Clara’s eyes narrowed as she reviewed her mental map of the area and plotted their route.

“Here!” a loud, male voice yelled.

Rats, Clara thought.

KAW! a crow’s voice rang out.

“One thing at a time,” Clara muttered aloud as she scanned the street.

The men had already stepped into the alley intersection and looked to be halfway to where the girls were. Clara glanced toward the shimmering equations, which were flowing along the street directly toward the man, shattering and vanishing in an angry red mist as they neared his feet.

“Run!” Clara ordered.

She took off, heading south, and then turned west onto Carson. She’d seen the triplets in gym class and knew they’d be able to keep up, if not slightly outpace her. She led them to Las Vegas Boulevard—they’d have to pass the main Art Alley’s opposite entrance here, but she hoped the constant traffic would help make them harder to spot. There were no shouts as they dashed across, and Clara kept them moving across Fremont. They ran another block, passing a tall

condominium building, and rounded the corner and ran east down Ogden. Clara was starting to pant a bit, but the triplets were keeping up easily.

Clara led them back across the street and into the El Cortez, slowing to a fast walk as they entered the casino. A security guard immediately began moving toward them, but Clara was careful to stay in the main aisles as she headed for the little Subway shop on the far corner of the casino floor.

"We're not allowed to be the casino without a grownup," she said as she hurried. "They're not going to be able to cover all the exits here if we move fast. Have you all been in here before?"

Three heads shook in unison.

Of course not, Clara thought. *Too good for this place.*

"I'm going to point you each in a different direction. Head straight for the exit I point at, okay? When you get out, meet back here on Ogden, but on the north side of the building. We're going to be heading east, and we'll catch up at the corner. Got it?"

They all nodded; Clara hoped they'd actually understood the directions.

"Harriett, there. Idalia, there. Johanna, you're with me. Go!"

The girls scattered, dodging the security guards who objected to them being back in the main casino area. Clara led Johanna out the sandwich shop door directly onto Ogden Avenue, immediately turned right, and ran east. They passed a second entrance just as Idalia burst out to join them, and then passed the hotel's parking garage as Harriett ran out the ground-level exit.

"They saw me," Harriett panted as she joined them. "But I think I lost them."

"We'll find out in a minute," Clara said grimly. "Nope," she added almost immediately afterwards, as one of the leather-clad men skidded to a stop at 9th Street. "Plan B," she said through gritted teeth.

They ducked into a small market. Clara knew the owner, and

rushed over to the counter. "Mrs. Ramone, I need to use the back door," she said, her voice filled with urgency.

"You need the cops?" the old woman asked.

"Maybe. If guys in leather trench coats come in here, yeah. See if you can slow them down."

Mrs. Ramone pulled a shotgun from under the counter. "I'll slow them down. Nobody messes with my kids."

"Thanks."

Clara waved for the triplets to join her, and then dashed into the store's tiny back room. One long wall was the back side of the shop's reach-in refrigerators, the other lined with shelves that were piled high with cans and boxes of food. A heavy fire door stood at the far end of the room. "Look, I think your apartment might be out of reach right now. All those guys are between it and us. I'm going to take you to my place, okay? The houses are close together, and I know most of the neighbors. We can stay off the streets and just jump fences."

"Okay," Idalia said, and the other two triplets nodded. Their faces were flushed, and their eyes full of worry.

Clara suddenly felt overwhelmed—who was she, to be leading three witches on a chase from men who apparently wanted to kill them? *I'm a witch too*, she reminded herself. *And my family's used to running*. "Let's try this again," she said, hopefully with more confidence than she felt.

Clara edged the fire door open carefully, this time looking for any glowing equations that seemed to be in an undue hurry. There were none: what few symbols she could see glowed a gentle blue and seemed content to drift lazily across the pavement. "I think we're clear," she whispered. "But just to be safe, make sure you stick with me." She looked back, and the triplets nodded their unnerving, three-in-one agreement. "Let's go."

Clara led them outside, stepping carefully and quietly, her head swiveling back and forth to check both directions. She darted across the adjacent street and crouched behind a rusty old Dumpster that

sat on the edge of the neighboring lot. As the triplets ducked down beside her, she glanced at the ground. The equations she could see were moving more deliberately now, curving lazily back toward the shop they'd just left. Their easy blue glow had gained a pink edge, and as Clara's eyes tracked them back to the store, her ears picked up the muffled sound of raised voices.

"They're in the shop," Idalia said, echoing Clara's thought.

Clara gave a curt nod and dashed from behind the Dumpster. This lot was empty, but she risked crossing it, knowing there were few spots for cover anyway. The next lot was Mrs. Rankins', and it featured tall stands of oleander that somehow managed to survive without any irrigation. With every long step, she expected to hear the men's voices shouting for them to stop, but the sound never came. They dove through the tall bushes and into Mrs. Rankins' hardscrabble back yard.

Clara crouched down, looking through the oleander's squat trunks. "Two of them. Looks like they came around the side, not through the store."

The men were staring at the ground, sweeping their heads back and forth, as if they were—

Oh. Through their goggles, they could probably see the equations, just like she could. Or at least the glowing lights.

Clara looked down at the ground beneath them, and saw fuzzy little equations burbling up from the dust. Most of them swirled around the girls' feet for a moment before vanishing back into the earth, but a few darted off toward the paladins. As she looked closer, Clara could see those ones almost flickering, the equation itself changing. Peering even closer, she saw that the equations were shifting to include a stylized "Fe."

"Harriett," Clara said carefully. "Did you say that those men's jackets have iron plates in them?"

"To absorb magic, yeah," the triplet whispered.

"It's attracting *our* magic," Clara said. "That's how they're

following us.” *Fe* for *Ferrum*, the Latin word for iron. They’d learned that in Science class at the start of the year.

“What?” Idalia asked.

But Clara ignored her. Could those equations somehow be changed *back*? The other lines of magic bubbling at their feet weren’t consistent, but they all seemed... balanced. Crisp, if oddly shaped, numbers joined with others, and to Clara’s mind they just felt... *right*. Smooth. Pleasant, even. But the twisted equations, the ones that flickered and shifted to include the “Fe” symbol, were unbalanced. They felt *itchy*. The sensation behind Clara’s eyes reminded her of the time she’d uncovered a cockroach den and the little insects had scattered in every direction. It was the *Fe* symbol: every time she looked at it as part of the larger equation, her brain prickled.

She wanted nothing more than to reach out and dig her nails into it, to scratch it out of existence.

But how could you scratch a glowing symbols?

Could she... split it?

“F” was fluorine. A lowercase “E” was often used to represent energy, as in Einstein’s famous $E=mc^2$ equation. Clara concentrated, trying to convince the equations to shift themselves, to split iron into energy and fluorine. She imagined herself reaching out with one hand, *scratching* the symbol until it came apart like a scab.

But nothing happened. If anything else, there was a kind of resistance, almost like a scab that wasn’t ready to let go. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but it certainly wasn’t going to cooperate. Clearly, this wasn’t how magic worked.

What about shifting the equations back? Her eyes caught one of the other shimmering lines of magic, one with a less complex equation that was flowing into the oleander bushes rather than back into the ground, and she quickly memorized it. Refocusing on the “Fe” equations, she gritted her teeth and *pushed* with her mind, insisting that the magic shift to a new configuration. This time she made her mental scratch more of a *pinch*, like she was mushing two pieces of

modeling clay back together, erasing what they'd been and turning them into something else.

It took immense concentration and attention, but the magic burbling out of the ground around them stopped zipping off toward the paladins. Instead, as each equation morphed and twisted to include the "Fe" symbol, Clara pinched it back into the equation she'd memorized. Those lines of magic began flowing into the oleander.

"Do you feel that?" Johanna whispered.

"It's... weird. Like, wet. And sticky," Idalia said.

"I think that's me," Clara said, her jaw clenched as she concentrated on shifting the magic.

"How are you doing it?" Johanna asked.

"*What* are you even doing?" Idalia added.

"I've no idea, but it's working," Harriett whispered. "Look."

"They've lost us, haven't they?" Idalia said in awe.

Clara ignored them, focused as she was on the glowing lines of magic. As she converted more and more of them, it became easier. Fewer equations shifted to the "Fe" configuration, and more and more began spontaneously joining the others she'd forced to flow into the bushes.

"She's anchoring it in the bushes," Idalia said. "Can you feel it?"

"I can taste leaves, so yeah, I guess so," Harriett said.

"Catch anything?" One of the paladin's voices carried across the road and through the stand of oleander.

"No," another male voice answered, clearly irritated. "I had something for a second, but it faded."

"You've looked over there?"

"That's just a stand of trees; there's no way they're behind there. We'd be able to see their auras through the vegetation."

"Yeah. Okay, let's beat it. The lady inside called the cops, and we don't want to be here when they get here."

"Back down Fremont, then?"

"My best guess is that they doubled back, yeah. Maybe even to the school."

"Crap."

"C'mon, let's grab the others and fan out that direction."

"They're leaving," Johanna whispered, nudging Clara. "You can stop."

Clara inhaled sharply, not aware until then that she'd been holding her breath. Sweat was rolling down her cheeks and forehead, and she felt slightly dizzy. Her heart began pounding as she suddenly gulped air.

"I don't feel so good," she said quietly, leaning to one side in the dust.

"I'm not surprised," Idalia said wryly. "I've never seen someone anchor a class-three illusion on a *plant* before. I didn't even know you could do that."

Clara pulled herself upright, holding on to an oleander for balance as she willed her heart to slow. "What do you mean?" Now that she was no longer concentrating on them, the bright lines of magic were less visible now, their equations blurred and indistinct.

"You normally anchor illusions on the air," Idalia explained. "Air doesn't have a strong sense of identity, so it's more willing to accept whatever you tell it to look like."

"But it wasn't *really* an illusion, was it?" Harriett said thoughtfully. "It felt more like... I guess as if the plants were just more... *planty*?"

"Planty?" Johanna mocked as the triplets stood and started brushing themselves off. Idalia helped pull Clara to her feet.

"You know what I mean." Harriett gaze focused on Clara. "What exactly did you do?" The girl's tone was accusatory, and her eyebrows were scrunched together in irritation.

Clara blinked, not sure why Harriett was upset. "I could see the magic coming out of the ground around each of us. Some of it was changing and darting off toward those men. That's what they were tracking. So I just... I guess I just told it to go into the bushes instead.

Some of it already was, so I just... I concentrated, and wanted the rest of it to do the same thing.”

“That isn’t how magic works,” Harriett said flatly. “That’s impossible.”

“But that’s what I—“

“We can talk about it later,” Idalia interrupted. “We need to get under cover. Where to next, Clara? The apartment?”

“My house,” Clara said firmly. “From what they said, they’re going to be heading in the direction of the apartment, so it’d be better if *we* didn’t.”

Clara led the triplets through the neighborhood, weaving through back yards and alleys and staying clear of the open sight lines of the streets. It took perhaps ten minutes for them to arrive at Clara’s.

“This is it.”

“Good disguise,” Harriett said approvingly as they rounded the house toward the front door.

“What do you mean?” Clara asked.

“Run down like this? Good disguise. If you stayed someplace nice, you’d be more visible. Nobody would think to look for witches in a place like this.”

“Oh. Yeah,” Clara mumbled, embarrassed. This was the best her non-witch parents could afford. “C’mon in.”

She opened the front door and ushered the triplets in. She stepped inside, and before she closed the door, she glanced up and down the street. No paladins in sight.

“Oh, hello.”

Clara turned and saw Mom standing in the kitchen, a bemused smile on her face, her glasses once again askew. She was wearing an apron, which means she’d only recently come home from a job.

“You must be the triplets I’ve heard so much about,” Mom continued.

For some reason, Harriett blushed.

“She knows,” Clara said, pushing through the triplets to give

Mom a hug. "Mom, this is Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna." She released her mother and broke the news. "Some men were waiting outside the alley after school."

Mom's face grew tight with concern.

"They chased us. Mrs. Ramone in the market called the cops on them, and we got away." Clara didn't mention what she'd done with the magic. "I thought it was best if we came here."

"Those men are paladins," Johanna put in. "They hunt witches. Us. And unless this house has wards on it, they'll be able to tell we're in here."

"They're on the other side of Fremont, back toward the school," Clara protested.

"Yeah, but if they come this way," Idalia said, "they'll see our auras through the walls."

Mom's head had been swiveling between the girls as they spoke. She took a deep breath. "Let me call your father. Why don't you girls have a seat in the other room?"

The triplets obeyed, arranging themselves on the sofa. Clara stayed in the kitchen while Mom dialed Dad's cell phone and spoke in low, urgent tones. When she hung up the phone, she said, "He's heading home. But... hmm. Stay right here."

Mom bustled back into her bedroom and re-emerged a few moments later with a dark wooden ball in one hand.

"That's an *amicus*," Johanna breathed, her eyes wide. "Where'd you get it?"

"Clara's parents—her birth parents, I mean—gave it to us. They said if we were ever in danger, if we were backed into a corner, that we should use it, and help would come."

"Birth parents?" Idalia repeated slowly, turning to look at Clara.

Clara blushed. "I'm adopted, but Mom and Dad have had me since I was a baby."

"So you're *not* witches," Harriett said, her voice once again accusatory.

"We are not," Mom said mildly. "But we've always known about

Clara. It's why we brought her to this school. If men are hunting you, I think now's the time to use this." Without another word, she threw the ball onto the wooden floor boards.

In Clara's eyes, it was an explosion of magic. Streams of blue, pink, and purple enchantment flooded out of the ball, blasting into the walls of the house and arranging themselves into neat, flowing lines, much like the magic that surrounded the school. A second pillar of pure white stabbed through the ceiling, bright equations flowing through the roof as if it wasn't even there.

"Wow," Johanna said softly. "That's a doozy."

"You can see it?" Clara asked.

"The aura? Of course. The whole room is glowing. It'll fade as the magic sets, though."

Clara saw far more than just the "room glowing," and the magic did anything but fade as it settled into shimmering lines of equations. In fact, they seemed to grow brighter, becoming sharper and more distinct. Her eyes darted back and forth as she tried to catch one of the equation's details, but they were moving too fast for her to keep up. She took an involuntary step toward one wall, her right hand outstretched. The magic flowed in and around her fingers, tickling slightly but not slowing in the least. This close, she could make out more of the equations' details and—like the ones around the school—they felt beautifully, sublimely balanced. Although she couldn't understand the details of *why*, as she looked at them, she was absolutely sure that they were mathematically perfect.

"What's this, then?"

"Oh!" Clara's mom exclaimed.

"Professor Mycroft!" the triplets said in unison.

Clara turned and saw the older woman standing in the middle of the living room and looking directly at her.

"Ah," the professor said mildly. "I wondered if it might come to this. Good day, madame. You are, I presume, Clara's mother?"

"Adoptive," Mom said, her voice high, as if she might burst into maniacal laughter at the slightest provocation.

"I presumed," Mycroft said with a nod of acknowledgement. "Girls, what's happening?" she asked, turning toward the triplets.

"Paladins, Professor," Johanna answered. "They were at the Border. We tried to get to the safe house, but—"

"But they spotted us," Idalia finished. "Clara brought us here."

"And well she did," Mycroft said approvingly. "Although it's been some time since an *amicus* dragged me about, will-ye-or-won't-ye. I presume that was your doing?" The professor turned back to Clara's mother.

"Ah, yes. Clara's—that is, her birth parents, they, uh—" Mom started.

"I'm beginning to understand," Mycroft said evenly. "I am Professor Miriam Mycroft of Liginbaum's School for Witches. And you are?"

"Arlene Thorn."

"I've met Clara, of course, and am pleased it is under less duress this time, young lady," Mycroft said. She glanced around the room, and Clara wondered if she could see the magic as well. "Well, perhaps a bit less duress, although it's settling in nicely. And who are Clara's birth parents, if I may be so bold?"

"Jessamine and Alex Holdaway," Mom answered.

Mycroft's eyes grew wide. "You don't say," she breathed. "My and my. Well." She shook herself slightly before continuing. "And so we find ourselves surrounded by paladins, or near enough. Hmm."

"Can you take us home, Professor?" Idalia pleaded.

"Of course, dear girl. Well, the three of you. Clara—hmm. We'll need to get you Underhill soonest, of course, but for now there's the small detail of... hmm." She paused for a moment and considered Clara, tilting her head back and forth slightly. "Underhill doesn't *want* you at the moment, as you learned yesterday."

"Sorry," Clara mumbled. She held a hand out and her mother took it immediately, squeezing it tight.

"Not your fault in the least, dear, just the lack of... I suppose a

charm, is what you might call it. One to permit you ingress.” Mycroft seemed to stumble a bit over the word *charm*.

“We don’t have charms,” Johanna said, clearly confused.

“Applied when you were babes, an opportunity not afforded Clara,” Mycroft assured them. “I shall have to research the proper procedure, of course. I, ah, haven’t been presented with a babe in quite some time, you see. Very... odd. Hmm.” She once again regarded Clara with undisguised curiosity, seeming a bit flustered as well. “Your parents were quite famous amongst magic-users, you know. Counter-hunters, until they vanished.”

“Counter-hunters?” Clara asked.

“Yes, quite. Our own defense against the paladins. A strong offense, if you will.”

“I didn’t know.”

“No, of course not. But we’ll need to get you Underhill. You belong there, you know. It’s where... well, where we all are. Your people.”

“Before... you said I didn’t belong,” Clara said quietly.

“Yet, I’m sure I said,” Mycroft said firmly. “Yet. What with the fauna attacking and all. But once... well, the right charm, as I’ve said, and then all should be well. It’s absurd to think of you staying in Talam any longer than necessary.”

“Talam,” Clara said, remembering the word. “You mean here.”

“This world, yes,” Mycroft said, one hand fluttering to indicate everything around them. Clara edged closer to her mother, acutely aware of how shabby their home must look to this professor. The swirling lines of light marching along the walls seemed to create a stark contrast to the rest of the room, highlighting the worn floorboards, the less-than-pristine paint on the walls, the battered baseboards. “The Ordinary world. We call it *Talam*. A very old word, and quite as Ordinary as the world it describes. But the Holdaways’ daughter... No, to have you remain here any longer than necessary would be a grave error.”

“So you can... apply this charm, you said, to Clara?” Mom asked.

Clara could hear the emotion welling up in her voice. "You can take her... there?"

"Indeed," Mycroft said briskly. "Just a bit of research to freshen my memory on the, ah, charm. Yes." She glanced around the room. "The *amicus* shield should last for several days at least, far more than I'll need. And it should prevent any of our kind from even sensing its presence. Well made. Even I'm having trouble detecting it now, and I expect within moments it shall be fully settled." Clara blinked at that: *she* had no trouble seeing the magic still. "But Clara should remain indoors," Mycroft continued. "The spell will disguise your home, suppress any signs of magic that might alert a wandering paladin, but were you to step outside, they'd spot you immediately. Fortunately, Ordinary school is over, yes?"

"Last exams today," Johanna said, relief evident in her voice.

"I await those marks, young ladies," Mycroft told the triplets without turning to them, and Clara could see the girls' faces fall. "I know you all feel it's a lark, but understanding the Ordinary basics is quite as important as what you learn at Liginbaum's."

"Yes, Professor," the triplets mumbled in unison.

"So. Clara shall remain inside. You and your family should otherwise be able to come and go as you like, Arlene, but I'd suggest you remain at home as much as possible. And here." She stretched out a hand and dropped a small object into Clara's mother's hand. "Break that in half if there's an emergency. I'll come immediately. But stay here if you can. A mother's love will help the magic focus on Clara, as it should. Do we understand? Are we agreed?"

The professor's voice was commanding, and Clara felt very much as if she was back in a classroom. She and Mom nodded vigorously.

"Excellent. Girls, to me." Mycroft gathered the triplets around her. "I shall use the *itinerantur* to take us to a Border that we know to be safe, and thence to Underhill and the school. You all remember the procedure?"

The triplets nodded, though Clara could have sworn they all paled slightly.

“Away, then.”

And with that, the four vanished in a swirl of glowing strands. Clara tried to catch a glimpse of the equations, but they faded away almost instantly.

“Dad will be home soon,” Mom said, her voice shaking slightly. “I think we should follow the professor’s advice and stay inside. Okay?”

Clara simply nodded. With Mycroft and the triplets gone, her eyes were being pulled back to the gently glowing lines of mathematical precision that flowed across the walls of her home.

CHAPTER 6

FAMILY MEETING

“Well, that’s a lot to digest,” Dad said thoughtfully. He’d pulled into the driveway not half an hour later. “Although I wish I’d been here to see that professor vanish with the triplets. That must have been something.”

“Honestly, they were here one moment and gone the next,” Mom said. “It was kind of anticlimactic.”

Not to me, Clara thought, remembering the profusion of shining threads that had burst into life and carried the four away.

“Clara, are you okay, honey? This has been a lot for you, I know,” Dad asked.

Clara thought about it, and nodded slowly. “Yeah, I think so. Some things make more sense, now, at least.” She paused, unsure how much she should share but... these were her *parents*. Aside from the whole adoption thing, which still felt very distant and unreal, they’d never held anything back from each other. “I can see it, you know. The magic on the house.”

Mom slowly lowered her cup of tea to the table. “That professor said you couldn’t.” She sounded uncertain. Worried. Clara felt a lump rise in her throat—Mom didn’t need any more trouble on top

of everything that had already happened. “That none of them... none of *you* could.”

“I don’t think *they* can, Mom.” Clara sipped her own cup of tea—warm tea, even in a Las Vegas summer, had long been the family’s go-to in a crisis—and set it gently back on the table. “Professor Mycroft kept saying it was ‘settled,’ but... I don’t know. I can definitely see it.”

“Right now?” Dad asked.

“Yeah. It’s all over the walls, just like it was all over the school. It’s all lines, colored lights, sort of, flowing all over the walls. They look like math equations.”

Mom looked startled. “Math? I didn’t... well, I guess I didn’t expect math. Sparkles maybe, but not math.”

“I don’t know what else to call it, Mom. The numbers and symbols are weird—they’re all stretched and pinched—but... they *feel* balanced. Like... like a quadratic equation, with all the variables filled in. But they’re huge, long lines, and they’re moving. It’s like the scrolling text on the news channel, where it’s just constantly running by. Only this is one on top of another on top of another.” She grinned. “If it makes you feel better, they do kind of sparkle.”

“How about that,” Dad mused. “I wonder what it means?”

“Jess and Alex never talked about math,” Mom mused. “But then they never really talked to us much *about* magic. No point, I guess, since we couldn’t see it regardless.”

“I wonder if different people just experience it differently? Like synesthesia?” Dad wondered.

“What’s that?” Clara asked.

“It’s a neural disorder,” Dad answered distractedly. “It’s when your sensory organs—your eyes, your ears, whatever—connect to the wrong part of your brain. So you smell colors in addition to seeing them, or smells come across as sounds. I wonder if there’s just something different about your brain that experiences magic differently than the others.”

“So I have a disorder?”

“No, no, I’m sure it’s not that. I was just trying to make an analogy. It could be that everyone experiences magic a little differently.” Dad shrugged. “I guess we won’t know until you can ask one of them. Do you see it... everywhere?”

“For sure on the house, now. Even on the windows and doors. And even before, after school, I could see it coming up out of the ground around us. Those men—the paladins—they have iron plates inside their trench coats, the triplets said. It attracted some of our magic, and I could see that. It’s how they were tracking us. I made it stop doing that; that’s how they lost us.”

“All the more reason to stay indoors,” Mom said with a shiver.

Dad gave Mom a meaningful look. “Or...”

Mom scowled.

“What?” Clara asked. Dad had his “Sometimes you have to do the hard things” expression, the one he used when Clara was complaining about homework. Mom was wearing her “Don’t you tell me what hard things are” expression, which she only used with Dad, and only when he was about to say something he knew she wouldn’t like.

Clara’s fingers curled into loose fists, and her shoulders tightened.

Dad sighed. “I mean, we could do what we’ve always done. Leave town.”

“But you’re just getting in with that engineering firm,” Mom protested. “And the school—”

“It’s not like we’ve never walked out on a job before,” Dad pointed out with a grin.

Clara broke in, her back now tensing as well. “But you said I needed this school. It suppresses magic. Without it... something might happen.”

“I know, I know,” Dad said. He sipped the last of his tea and plunked the mug back on the table. “But hunters, Clara. People specifically looking for you?”

“Like they looked for my parents?”

“Exactly, hon. Bailing is an option. We could go to... I don’t know. Montana, this time. Someplace small, where nobody would look for us. Or heck, someplace big, where we could get lost in the sea of people. Atlanta, maybe.” Dad looked at Mom, and she pursed her lips, saying nothing. “Maybe we can just put this behind us.”

Clara thought about it, but then shook her head. “I don’t think I can this time, Dad. I see it *everywhere* now. All the time. And the girls, the triplets, they said I’m at the age where it starts coming out. I have to learn to use it, or it could go wrong.”

Mom gently laid a hand on Dad’s forearm. “Theo, I don’t think we can just run this time.” Her soft voice, not her arguing voice. She knew Clara’s father wouldn’t push this one.

“Yeah, maybe not,” he admitted. “But I don’t like the idea of people *hunting* Clara. Hunting us.” He started to rub his head and caught himself, lowering his hand back to his lap with a wry grin.

“We stay inside,” Mom said firmly. “That Professor said she’d come back as soon as she figured out how to put a... charm, or something, on Clara. So she could go to their world. To Underhill. She’ll be safe there.”

Dad took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You’re right. I know. I just... I hate waiting. Not knowing.” He looked out the window. “It’s late. Clara, why don’t you see if you can get some sleep?”

Clara looked out the window and saw that, past the glowing magic, it was indeed late—the sun must have gone down an hour ago, maybe more. They’d polished off dinner—more grilled cheese, although without the tomato soup this time—and two rounds of tea as they’d talked about what had happened that day. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to,” she told Dad.

“Me either, baby. But let’s all go try, okay?”

Clara nodded. She helped Mom clean up the dishes, and then went to her bedroom and closed the door softly behind her. She sat on the edge of her bed for a long moment, the events of the day

playing back over and over again in her mind. She felt exhausted, but not exactly tired—it didn't make sense.

Eventually, she laid down on top of the covers, not even bothering to undress. She didn't plan on going to sleep, figuring she'd simply lie there and think all night, but within moments, her eyelids fluttered and closed.

CHAPTER 7

THE DREAM

T*his is Underhill*, Clara thought immediately. The sculpted trees, the winding path: all of it was familiar. Except now it was nighttime, and Underhill didn't seem to be pushing her out. Also, the leaves on the trees were *glowing*.

So was the grass, she noticed. All the plant life was glowing such a bright, deep blue-green that she could barely make out the gentle light of the moon—wait, *moons*, at least three of them —floating high in the sky above. They were blue-white and diaphanous, softly flickering as if they themselves weren't sure they existed.

The nighttime air was cool and crisp, layered with scents of jasmine and rosemary. Far off, where the trees began to thicken into a proper forest, Clara saw drifting motes of yellow and pink—fireflies of some sort, she assumed. Vegas didn't have fireflies, but she remembered them from prior cities, and these ones danced in a complex ballet of light, bobbing and weaving around each other. As her eyes adjusted, she realized there must be thousands, their movements stretching back as far as she could see into the deep forest.

Entranced, Clara began to walk down the path, the light crunch

of the fine gravel beneath her feet lending a counterpoint to the constant soft chirps and *meeps* of unseen insects and amphibians.

At least she hoped they were insects and amphibians, and not—

“Kleinerwolves don’t hunt at night,” came a voice behind her.

Clara whirled and came face to face—well, face to knee, really—with a tiny elf-like creature. Its skin was a midnight blue, its pointed ears stood long and graceful, and its hair shone the purest of whites. Its eyes were round sapphires set in almond-shaped lakes of cream; its nose was long and thin, and its full, navy lips curved into a pensive frown. It held its bare, narrow arms crossed over its tiny chest, which was clad in a simple brown shift that fell almost to its ankles.

One of those arms featured a white stripe, running from the creature’s shoulder nearly to its bony wrist.

“I’m Clara,” she introduced herself, taking a step back.

“I know,” the creature said, taking a step toward her and craning its head up toward hers.

“Who are you?” Clara asked after a moment of silence.

“It’s all out of balance,” the creature said quietly, letting its arms fall to its sides. It shook its head sadly. “Far, far out of balance. Where have you been?” That last was delivered in a somewhat accusatory tone, Clara thought.

“I’ve...” She realized she didn’t know how to answer. “My parents had to give me up,” she finished softly. The world shimmered slightly—was that a tear in her eye? She blinked it away, but still felt an unbearable... *something*. Some emotion she couldn’t name was filling her soul. Everything here felt more intense, more real, more immediate—including her emotions.

“You’ve been Lost,” it acknowledged, nodding its head. “But you came back.” Now it frowned. “But then you didn’t stay.”

“I was pushed out,” Clara reminded it.

“Yes.” Its frown deepened. “Something is wrong. You should be here, but you shouldn’t.” It shook its head in frustration. “Don’t

understand it. But you must come back. You must help restore the balance." Its blue eyes bored into hers. "You *must*."

"I want to come back," Clara whispered. "Professor Mycroft—"

"Professors," the creature snorted, its lips now curling in disdain. "Professors and people, ministers and madmen." It shook its head in frustration. "They're the problem. Upsetting the balance. You must come back, and some of them must *go*."

"I don't understand."

The little creature took another step forward, almost leaning back to maintain eye contact with Clara. It bared its teeth for a moment and snarled, "Magic can't be bottled up all the time. There must be *balance*."

"I..." Clara couldn't make sense of the elf's words. What did any of this have to do with her? "I truly don't understand. Isn't this where magic comes from?"

The creature clacked its teeth and stepped away, turning around as it did so. "Magic comes from where it comes from," it said, with such surety in its voice that Clara believed it instantly, before she realized that the statement was hardly an answer at all. "But it can't stay *here*. Not all of it." It whirled back to her, firing an angry glare. "Where have you *been*?"

"Lost," Clara whispered, repeating the word it had used.

"Lost," it agreed gently, its expression softening. "But Found."

"Am I?"

"Soon enough. Not a moment too soon. Maybe a moment too late. The edges..." Hints of hurt and concern rippled over its tiny face, and it cast its gaze to either side of the path. "The edges are unraveling." The little creature looked distracted, and now its face seemed to pinch in pain, its eyes wrinkling and its jaw clenching. "The flora rots, the fauna rebels." It seemed to be talking to itself now. "Too few bridges on the borders," it added, its voice a soft moan. It turned back to her again, its eyes now hurt and imploring. "Where have you *been*?"

"Lost," Clara repeated with a small sob. Her tears were flowing

freely now, rendering the fairy world in a kaleidoscope of blue and green fragments.

It nodded. "But Found. Soon. Maybe not soon enough." Its small voice cracked and grew sharp. "It is time to come home."

"I'll try."

"You were meant to create balance."

"I don't know what that means."

"You will."

"I'll try."

It nodded slowly. "Only please, hurry." Now the creature reminded Clara of nothing more than a tiny, lost, forlorn child, its voice begging for someone older and wiser to help. "Please."

"I will," Clara promised, fully aware that she had no idea *what* she was promising. She nonetheless felt compelled to aid this tiny creature. "But, who are you?"

"There's too much, too many," it said mournfully, ignoring her question. "Pinching off, pulling apart. The *edges*, Clara," it moaned. "The edges are fraying." The pain in its tiny voice stabbed into Clara's heart, and tears began rolling down her cheeks. "Please. It *hurts*."

"I will," Clara promised, choking back another sob as the creature's emotion seemed to flow into her. "I'll find a way. I'll—"

"KAW!"

CHAPTER 8

ROOFTOP CONTEMPLATION

Clara sat up with a start, her clothes damp with sweat. She sat on her bed for several moments, feeling her heart-beat slowing from the panic of her dream.

Dream? It had seemed so real.

She glanced at her bedside clock, its glowing red numbers telling her that she'd managed to sleep for at least a few hours. It was now early morning, not yet near sunrise. She listened carefully, but didn't hear Mom or Dad from the other room. Perhaps they'd finally found sleep as well.

She eased herself quietly out of bed, stepping carefully on the worn floorboards, avoiding the one that she knew would creak loudly if she put her weight on it. She sidled over to the room's sole window and slowly cranked it open. The night air rolled in, cool and quiet as it often was this early in the summer.

She boosted herself to the window sill, drew her knees to her chin, and pivoted her feet out the window, a maneuver she'd practiced many times these past few months. She landed with a light *crunch* in the dusty backyard.

A low block wall, barely as high as her chest, ran along a portion

of the back of the house's. Mom had said it had probably been intended as a planter of some kind, although one side had long since crumbled away, releasing a flow of dirt. But the rest remained sturdy, and when she clambered atop it, her arms outstretched for balance, it put her within reach of the home's flat roof. A good jump let her get her forearms onto the rooftop, and from there, she scrambled the rest of the way up.

The roof was sparsely covered in white gravel, the rocks intended to hold the roof's tar-and-paper covering in place and provide some protection against the elements. She eased herself down onto the rocks, wiggling her butt to push enough rocks out of the way to comfortably sit. She drew her knees up, crossed her arms atop them, and looked out over the neighborhood.

The roof had become her quiet place, and her midnight visits here had become an almost weekly affair. In the distance, she could make out the *thumpa-thumpa* of one of the tourist nightclubs on Fremont, although at this distance, the bass sound was so warped and indistinct that it seemed little more than an echo of her own heartbeat.

The lights of the valley's many suburbs crept gently upward, as if she sat in the bottom of a broad bowl that the rest of the county sloped upward and away from. Only tonight, for the first time, she could also make out sparks of magic—deep blues, vibrant purples, and shimmering greens—darting back and forth across the skyline. Facing this direction, the towering casinos were behind her, their bright, shifting lights tinting the sky but not drowning out the vista before her.

We could leave, she thought, echoing Dad's words as she tried the idea in her mind.

But what would that accomplish? Clara clearly didn't belong in this world anymore, if she ever had. Without going to school, her magic would apparently begin to leak out, and it was only a matter of time before another incident occurred, potentially forcing them to move. Again and again, in a never-ending cycle. Not only did she not

belong, but she was keeping Mom and Dad from belonging anywhere either. They had, she now realized, sacrificed so much for her. They'd taken in a baby that wasn't even theirs, left home after home after home to keep her safe, given up job after job, all for her.

She couldn't ask them to do it anymore. *Wouldn't* ask.

She belonged in Underhill. That much was clear, especially after tonight's dream—a dream she instinctively knew was a vision, a message from... well, from Underhill itself, she supposed, if such a thing were possible. It felt more real than anything ever had, more real even than this very real city that was now stretched out before her.

She *belonged*. The idea flitted through her mind, lighting it afire. Somehow, she *fit* in Underhill, was *meant* to be there. She'd never been meant for this world, for its schools, for its troubles, for its bullies and teasers and all of it. Underhill explained it all: she was a square peg in the round hole of this world, and all her troubles, all her difficulties, were because she'd never been intended for here.

No, Mom and Dad couldn't keep hopping from place to place, from job to maybe-job, from bare-certainty to uncertainty. In fact, once Professor Mycroft put her charm on Clara, and Clara returned to Underhill, Mom and Dad should probably move one last time—but this time to someplace *they* belonged. Where they could get good jobs again, live in a nice house again, and have normal lives again. Lives without an incident-causing young witch on their hands. And once Clara had her magic under control, she could visit them—for holidays and school breaks, just like in all the stories of British children in boarding schools that she loved to devour.

She'd made up her mind, without even realizing that the decision was hers to make: She would wait for Professor Mycroft and return to Underhill—this time to stay, aside from, she hoped, the occasional visit to her parents. Underhill apparently *needed* her. She not only belonged there, she was special in some way. Perhaps that was connected to how she could see magic when the others couldn't.

She looked at the roof beneath her and allowed her eyes to

unfocus slightly. The magic protecting the house shimmered just below the surface of the roof, its continually flowing equations blurred by the thickness of the roof itself. Here, outside the magic, she could—

Oh, no.

She was *outside*.

Exposed.

Clara's heart began pounding as she slid off the roof. She landed off-center on the low block wall, teetering for a moment before she jumped to the ground. She turned and scurried back through her window and quickly cranked it shut behind her, not worrying about the noise she was making. It wasn't until the window was fully closed and she could see the magic flowing before her that she relaxed again, lowering herself to her bed and willing her heart to slow its panicked beat. She laid back, closing her eyes and counting slowly as her heart returned to its normal pace. One... two... three...

CHAPTER 9

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

“Clara, we thought about it last night. We talked a lot,” Mom started as soon as Clara sat down at their rickety little dining table. Mom slid a plate of toast and eggs in front of her, followed by a small glass of orange juice.

“We can’t just... abandon you, baby. We can’t just send you off with these people that we don’t even know, that you’ve barely even met,” Dad added. He’d already finished his breakfast and was into his second cup of coffee. Clara wondered for a moment why he wasn’t already at work.

Mom sat down and continued, “But we’re not sure how to protect you from these people.” Clara glanced at the counter, saw the plate sitting there, and realized Mom must have already eaten too. “So we think the only option is to move again. There are a couple of other schools Jess and Alex told us about, and we can—”

“Mom, I don’t want you to keep doing this,” Clara interrupted. “Dad’s job—”

“Isn’t, babe,” Dad said, a rueful look on his face. “That project is wrapping up, and they didn’t need me anymore.”

“But I thought the engineering firm—” Clara started.

“Oh, they actually put in a good word for me. There’s an opening in the county, actually, but—“

“You should take it,” Clara insisted.

“Hon, we just can’t keep you safe here,” Mom protested, looking at her husband for support.

“Mom, you can’t keep me safe anywhere. Not anymore.” Clara’s voice was full of confidence. “All the other magic kids are back there—Underhill. Even if we stay here, without the school, my magic is just going to get away from me. They all said so. If we move, it’ll still happen. I *have* to go there.” She gave her parents an earnest look. “It’s where I belong. It’s where I’m *supposed* to be, now. You guys stay here. Dad, take the job. It’ll get you... you’ll get back to how it’s supposed to be. You can get a nicer place. I’ll come visit! As often as I can. But... Mom, Dad, that’s where I’m supposed to be.” Clara held her breath as she looked back and forth between her parents. Last night, it had all seemed so clear—the dream, her newfound determination. Now, in the morning light, in front of Mom and Dad... she chewed the inside of her cheek as her stomach fluttered with nervousness.

Her parents exchanged glances, and Clara realized this must have been the direction their own conversations had taken. Dad was for it, she could tell. Mom was the one hesitating.

“I know we don’t know them, Mom, but... my birth parents did. These *are* my people. And... I had a dream last night. It was really... I guess *real* is the word. This is what I’m supposed to do. I thought about it a lot last night too, Mom. This is what I want.”

“Honey, I’m just not sure—“

“Mom, it’s my decision this time,” Clara said firmly, suddenly feeling even more confident. Just saying the words seemed to make it true. “You guys are right: you can’t protect me anymore. Not from this. You brought me here—my birth parents told you to bring me here—for this. Not just to go to that school, but so I’d find my people. So they’d find me.” She gave her mother a gentle smile. “They did.”

"The job has a signing bonus, Arlene," Dad added softly. "I can get us into an apartment in a much nicer part of town. Or even a condo in one of the high rises. With a pool and everything."

"You and pools," Mom said with a tired smile. It had been a running joke for as long as Clara could remember: even when they'd been forced to stay in motels, Dad always insisted on one with a swimming pool. "And I know, babe," she said to Clara. "I know. You're right. It's just..." She sighed and fell silent for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "We've just been so focused on protecting you, for so long... I guess it's hard to let go."

"I know, Mom. But I have to. You know—"

They were interrupted by a loud, firm knock at the front door.

"Who could that be?" Mom asked, her expression tightening.

"I've got it," Dad said, his brow furrowing as he slid his chair back and stood. "Clara, go to your bedroom, please."

Clara nodded and scooted into her room, leaving the door cracked a bit so she could see the front door.

Dad opened it. A tall, slick-looking man in a dark suit stood on the front step.

"Hello, folks," he said with what looked like a forced smile. He held something up for Dad to look at, but Clara couldn't see what it was from her vantage point. "Any chance you've seen any of these girls? Triplets, as you can see. Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna are their names. Their parents say they never came home from school yesterday, and they're worried sick."

Dad looked at the photo carefully. "Never seen them."

"Any chance your own kids might have?" the man asked.

"We don't have kids of our own," Mom said, joining Dad at the door and almost fully blocking Clara's view of anything but the top of the man's head. *Move, Mom*, Clara thought, and then realized Mom was also blocking *his* view into the house.

"No? We're told you've definitely had at least one kid coming in and out."

"I tutor in math," Mom answered quickly. "So of course. But

those three girls aren't my students. I've never seen them. I do hope you find them, though."

"Are you with the police?" Dad asked. "We can call if we see them."

"I'm a private investigator," the man said smoothly. As he did, the magic flowing through the house's walls briefly flared to an angry red. *He's lying*, Clara realized. *And the magic doesn't like it. Or him.* She let her eyes unfocus. The flowing lines of power were moving more slowly now, bunching up around the door, gathering itself to keep the stranger out. "We'll have an Amber Alert out shortly," he added, and the glowing lines flared red again. "Please, take my card. Call me if you see them."

Dad's arm moved as he accepted the man's card, and the protective magic become even denser as it prepared to repel the man. But the man just passed Dad a card and withdrew his hand, causing the magic to loosen up a bit and begin to flow more quickly.

"Thank you, we will," Dad said. He and Mom stepped back as Dad swung the door closed—almost in the man's face, as he didn't turn away until the door was almost fully closed.

Dad threw the deadbolt. Clara stepped out of her bedroom, but Mom had already turned and held up a hand, telling her to stay put.

Mom and Dad crossed the small living room, and Dad showed her the card.

Brindwell Investigations, it said, along with a local phone number. It contained no other text, and no mention of the man's name.

"He's with them," Clara said quietly. "The magic on the house didn't like him. He was lying."

"I figured," Dad said wryly. "If they'd issued an Amber Alert, they'd have someone from Metro canvassing, not a private investigator who doesn't even list his name on his card."

"They're going to be watching the house now," Clara warned.

"Which is why you're not even to look out a window," Mom said, her voice taut.

"I'll call and start the job application process with the county,"

Dad said, looking at Mom. She nodded a reluctant agreement. "You both stay here. I can run out and get some groceries, if we need."

"We're fine for a few days," Mom said. "As long as you don't mind canned."

"I'd feel better if we could all stay," Dad admitted. "So fine. Let's give this Professor Mycroft a day or two, as she asked. You still have that thing she gave you?"

Mom nodded. "It's been in my pocket ever since."

"Good. If things get hairy, we'll summon her back. Clara, you're not to even poke your nose outside of these walls, is that clear? Stay away from the windows, like your mother said."

Clara nodded hurriedly, remembering her mistake last night. Was that why the man had shown up this morning? Had he detected her on the roof last night, somehow?

"Good," Dad said. "Okay. I think we should all... try and relax a bit, I guess. Give me a few minutes to make this call, and then maybe we can play Uno or something?"

"I'll get the deck," Clara said, relief washing over her face. Even her shoulders unknotted a little. That man might be hunting her, but Uno was the family's go-to for relaxing. Their battered old Uno deck had been one of the few constants in her life these past years.

"I'll put on a kettle," Mom said. "This calls for tea." She gave Clara a firm smile. "You get first shuffle, young lady."

"Okay, Mom," Clara said with a grin. They could pretend that things were the way they'd always been.

For a few minutes, anyway.

CHAPTER 10

MATH IN THE MAGIC

U no and TV kept them occupied through the night, accompanied by a masterfully crafted dinner of canned vegetables, Spam, and three cans of Sprite that Mom had squirreled away for a special occasion. But Clara slept restlessly, tossing and turning constantly and coming fully awake every hour and a half or so. Each time she did, her eyes immediately went to the flowing lines of equations on the walls, ensuring they were still there. Before long, the equations began to bleed over into her dreams, until by the time the sun finally peeked through the window blinds, Clara didn't know if she was awake or still asleep.

Mom and Dad tried to keep a cheerful thread of conversation going all through breakfast, but Clara could tell they were both tense. Halfway to lunch, Mom started digging through their entertainment contingency plan: a stack of worn board games that she'd picked up at a thrift store for a dollar each. Most were missing pieces, but Dad always said if they were desperate for a distraction, they'd just modify the game rules to accommodate the missing bits.

Today felt desperate.

Mom had just pulled a dilapidated copy of Monopoly from the

pile and starting counting out the little paper bills when Dad gave a deep grunt. Clara and Mom looked to see Dad staring out of the little window above the kitchen sink.

“What is it, hon?” Mom asked.

“Look,” Dad said, never taking his gaze from the window.

Forgetting their directive to stay away from windows, Clara and Mom crowded in next to him.

“Oh,” Clara said softly.

The “private investigator” from yesterday was going door to door, showing his photo of the triplets, Clara guessed, to everyone in the neighborhood. As he stepped away from one door and walked back toward the street, his gaze stayed riveted on Clara’s house.

But that wasn’t the worst of it.

A half dozen paladins, all wearing heavy, scarred leather dusters and the thick glass-and-brass headgear, were wandering around the neighborhood. They were carefully examining each house on the block, tilting their heads to scan each one from foundation to roof, and even conducting careful examinations of the sidewalks, the chain link fences, even the fire hydrant on the corner.

“Maybe he really is a detective?” Mom said.

“Really, Arlene?” Dad scoffed quietly.

“Okay,” she conceded. “This is weird. And those—what do you call them, cosplayers? They were the ones you saw?”

“Those are the paladins,” Clara said. “The ones in the coats. They’re not cosplayers, trust me. The triplets said they have plates of iron in those coats, to deflect magic. And those goggles—”

“They’re like the glass your parents gave us, yeah,” Dad said. “I figured. But it doesn’t look like they can see the magic on the house. They’re not giving us any special attention.”

“Yet,” Clara muttered darkly. “Those are the same guys who chased us yesterday. They were waiting at the Border, trying to grab the triplets. I don’t trust them.”

“Nor do I,” Dad agreed. “Let’s keep an eye on them.”

Monopoly forgotten, the three took turns peeking out the

windows, keeping the blinds closed and just lifting one of the slats to keep track of the men. The paladins eventually moved out of sight down the block, which was somehow worse: Clara had the distinct feeling they might descend on the house at any moment.

Clara found herself examining the equations that still circled the walls, squinting to see the distorted symbols and numbers as clearly as possible. She knew she must look odd, standing against the empty living room wall as if she were studying the drywall.

It wasn't long before she started to identify patterns in the flowing lines of magic. And she found that if she focused on a particular set of symbols, they'd almost stand still in her mind. They would even explain themselves if she held perfectly still and utterly quiet. *This* set of symbols represented her, Clara, in the weave of magic. *That* was a symbol of focusing, and *that* one a fraction that permitted her ingress and egress, but kept others from her. Another pair of symbols represented Mom and Dad, and *this* one... the caster. Her birth mother, Clara realized. Or father, she couldn't tell which.

The twisting, snake-like sequences, which repeated more than any others, seemed to be equations of binding. They connected the home's roof, floor, walls, windows, and doors into a single, unified whole that would stand against anyone who wasn't permitted through. And the circular arrangement of symbols, intertwined throughout, concealed the magic itself from anyone except, apparently, Clara.

To anyone else, even another witch, the house would appear mundane and... Ordinary, Clara realized, suddenly understanding the intent of a particular series of symbols.

She leaned in closer and then froze as the magic seemed to touch her. Walking through the equations at the school had felt like nothing, but the magic here has substance. Clara could almost feel it on her face, radiating a tingling coolness, sliding next to her skin like tissue paper. It felt *balanced*, pressing evenly and gently against her.

And not just on her face: It came from... *everywhere*. It was as if some vital energy was being channeled out of the air itself and

concentrated into these flowing lines of force. She couldn't pinpoint its origin, but very near the walls, she could feel enough energy coming together to be perceivable. She reached toward the wall, her fingertips hovering just inches from a peeling spot of paint, and caught the barely detectable flow of it, the slight tickling that she now associated with magic. It was almost like static electricity, but not the sudden jolt of power that made you jump. Instead it was a smooth, constant flow, an excitement on the surface of her skin. She concentrated on that feeling as she drew her fingers away from the wall, and the staticky feeling stayed with her.

She began to experiment, drawing her fingers back and bringing a touch of power away from the wall, and then shaping it in her mind. First she drew the symbol for herself, and she felt the magic twist easily into the correct shape. It felt *balanced* as a mathematical equation, the energy sitting easily in her mind and palm. As a test, she added another symbol in her mind, and immediately lost the sense of balance. The energy tipped back and forth like a seesaw, unable to steady itself until she removed the errant symbol and allowed everything to settle again.

After a while—and several instances of Mom asking if she was okay—Clara turned toward the living room window. She put her knees on the sofa and leaned on its back as she lifted one slat of the blinds and peered out at the front yard. There were no paladins here, and no sign of the dark-suited man. She focused on the sidewalk and began drawing a little power to herself. The feeling of static electricity increased and as it did, she shaped the energy into a mimicry of the patterns she'd seen on the wall: equations for binding, for concealment, for herself, for her parents. In place of the caster's symbol, she put her own, and she felt the magic twist with discomfort. Inspired by how the energy seemed to flow, she distorted her own symbol and felt the magic settle compliantly into the new configuration. So that was why all the numbers and symbols seemed distorted—they had to be, so that the magic would flow correctly. *Interesting.*

Now, a broad circle of concentric lines of equations spun lazily in the middle of the sidewalk that led to their front step.

She turned back to the wall to check her work and realized that she'd missed several fine details. The equations she'd just brought into being were more than just "balanced"; they felt comfortable and natural to her. Comparing them to the runes circling the walls, she realized those had... flaws? The equations all countered each other correctly, but they had... the best description she could think of was "rounding errors." *That* pattern worked, but it leaked a little bit of magic. But if she changed it, she'd have to change all the others like it or risk the entire construct unraveling. Each sequence of symbols needed to be steady, one half offsetting the other, or they'd twist, flare, and fall apart.

She must be missing something; surely her mother—or father—would have cast something perfect, given all their years of experience. Perhaps the minor instability was on purpose, a way for the magic to flow outward at need. Perhaps her own work was *too* stable, and wouldn't actually have any practical ability to protect or repel.

She gave a mental shrug. Once she was Underhill, she'd figure it out for certain.

She let the slat on the living room blind fall closed, and turned to the kitchen. "Mom! Dad! Guess what I—"

"Hush," Mom whispered quickly. "They're coming back."

CHAPTER II

WE SEEM TO BE SURROUNDED

“**T**hey came from up the block,” Mom whispered as Clara joined her parents at the kitchen window.

Clara had been so focused on their sidewalk that she hadn’t noticed the six men in dusters, and the dark-suited man, walking toward the house. They fanned out in front, their heads slowly tilting and swiveling as they examined the house from top to bottom. The dark-suited man stood watching them for several minutes, and then, on some unseen signal, stepped off the cracked public sidewalk and onto the narrower sidewalk that led to the front door.

Clara watched carefully as he strode confidently up the sidewalk—until his left foot encountered the protection spell she’d placed. His foot paused in midair, and his plastered-on smile flipped into a frown. He lowered his foot carefully, just shy of the circle of shimmering magic, and stared intently at the ground. He barked an order over his shoulder, and the six leather-clad men stopped scanning the house. They all stared at the front door, eerily quiet and completely motionless.

The man turned back to the house, his eyes wide and the hint of

a smile playing about his lips. *He knows he found me.* It was the first genuine expression Clara had seen from this group so far. He looked... *hungry*.

He stepped off the sidewalk, walking through the dry dirt to skirt Clara's spell, and then stepped sideways back to the sidewalk, his eyes bright. His thin, mean lips finally breaking into a tight smile.

Well, that was pointless, Clara thought. She watched the man take the last few steps to the door, and lost sight of him as he knocked loud and hard.

"I've got it," Dad muttered as Mom crushed the object Mycroft had given them. "Clara—"

"Bedroom, got it," Clara said quickly, scurrying back into her bedroom. This time she left the door cracked but stood well inside the room, afraid the man would see her peeking out.

Dad opened the door. "Hello again," he said carefully.

"I know you know something," the man said evenly, his voice hard. "And I know something's... unusual about this house." His tone suggested he expected Dad to offer a protest, but when Dad remained silent, he continued. "You'd do best to tell me what I need to know, or I'll—"

The door slammed shut, and Clara heard the bolt slide home.

"That's enough of that," Mom said, heat rising in her voice.

Clara rushed to the living room window, again lifting a slat to peek out. "They're all in the yard now," she reported. Then: "They're hammering... spikes, I think. Into the ground, just inside the fence."

There was a *pop* and a rush of wind. Clara turned and saw Professor Mycroft standing behind her, blinking her eyes rapidly. "Oh," the professor said. "I see. What's the situation?"

"Outside," Dad said grimly.

The professor gestured, and the blinds in the living room and kitchen retracted quickly, leaving a clear view of the front yard. The dark-suited man had retreated to the public sidewalk, while his men continued hammering spikes into the ground.

"Iron spikes." Mycroft sniffed as she looked out the window.

“They’re trying to ground out the protective spell, but there’s no way—”

She stopped as one of the men produced a length of metal chain from beneath his coat. He attached one end of it to a spike at the far end of the yard, and then began drawing the chain to the next spike.

“Oh, well, that’ll do it,” Mycroft muttered, her voice suddenly serious. “Let’s get you out of here, Clara.”

“What about Mom and Dad?”

“I’ll take the protection spell down as we go. That will give those idiots something to deal with. Once all the magic’s down they’ll be able to tell there are no witches in the house. I expect they’ll leave. Still,” she added thoughtfully, “best you call the local police.” Clara’s Dad nodded as he pulled his phone from his pocket. Mycroft paused and took one last look out the living room window. “Didn’t expect all that,” she grumbled. “Hold still, Clara. I need to, ah, cast that charm.”

“You found it?” Dad asked.

“Just this morning, in fact. I was double-checking it when you summoned me. Not much call for it at Liginbaum’s, of course; took me forever to find the right book. Here Clara, stand in front of me.”

Clara faced the professor, standing as straight and tall as she could.

“No need to be stiff, girl. This shouldn’t hurt a bit.” Mycroft narrowed her eyes, and a tingling on the back of her neck told Clara a new spell was beginning to take shape.

Thin lines of magic leapt from Mycroft’s fingers to Clara and wove around the girl’s arms, legs, and even her face. Clara tried to look at them, but the equations were so tiny, the symbols crammed so closely together, that they most closely resembled solid lines of light.

Clara wasn’t sure what she’d expected—perhaps a warmth or a coolness? Regardless, it seemed as if something was... *bleeding* away from her.

No, not quite. It was almost as if she'd been covered in... gauze. Or that crinkly fabric prom dresses were stuffed with. Tulle?

But Mycroft was drawing all that away. Clara could sense it brushing against her skin, as if she'd been covered her entire life and only now recognized the covering for what it was. As it drew away, brushing her skin and setting it tingling, the glowing lines on the walls of house became even more clear and distinct. *This is what magic feels like!*

The sensation grew stronger and more intense, until Clara could actually see gossamer lines of magic being lifted from her. Snatches of equations lingered in her mind as they were drawn away, and she could detect a few of the same imperfections—the “rounding errors” in the math—that she'd seen on the walls of the house.

As quickly as it had started, it was over, and Clara blinked with newfound clarity. Everything around her—the air, the wooden floor, even the light streaming in from the window—was more real, more solid. Mycroft huffed as if she was a bit tired, and Clara caught her quickly tucking a glowing gemstone into the pocket of her robe.

“That should do it,” Mycroft said. “All right. We’re going to use a bit of traveling magic called *itinerantur*. I’ll take us from here to a Border I know is safe, and then to Underhill.”

“Is that how you came here?” Clara asked.

“No, the artifact I gave your mother drew me directly from Underhill. That’s a difficult bit of magic, not using a Border, and it requires a specific anchor on this side. Can’t do the same trick in reverse—more’s the pity, because anchors don’t work well in Underhill. So no, we’ll have to go back the old-fashioned way. As I said, I’ll pull the protective spell down first, and that’ll give those paladins what-for, I assure you.”

“Metro’s on the way,” Dad interjected.

“The police? Excellent. Clara, you must hold tightly to my arm as we travel—*itinerantur* is safe, but if you fall free before we arrive at our destination, it’ll take me ages to find you. Shouldn’t be more

than a few seconds that you have to hold tight, though. Understand?"

Clara nodded, suddenly nervous. She put her hand on the forearm Mycroft proffered, gripping it tightly. *It's happening.* Her heart fluttered and her stomach was flip-floppy, like the time Dad had taken her on the spinner ride at a parking lot carnival.

"Right," the professor said with a nod. "First, the protective spell."

Clara looked to the living room window as she sensed Mycroft working another spell. This one came across as a tearing sensation, like a sheet of paper being slowly torn in half. The lines of equations that had been circling the house for—what, two days now?—suddenly split, the free ends whipping wildly before they streamed outside. Almost all at once, every line of magic in the house ripped loose and rushed outside. Clara could see the ruptured energy blasting into the metal chain the men had strung out, which started to glow a cherry red.

"Off with us," Mycroft announced. "I'll be in touch," she added to Clara's parents.

I didn't even hug Mom! Clara thought with sudden panic. Her last vision was of the chain exploding, sending orange-hot links of fractured metal toward the men in leather jackets and glass-and-brass goggles.

And then everything went dark.

CHAPTER 12

THIS MUST BE UNDERHILL

The traveling magic was exhilarating—both icy cold and boiling hot, all at once, and accompanied by a rush of wind and bright colors that were somehow dark as night. As Mycroft had promised, the senses-defying experience was over in less than a moment, and Clara blinked furiously in the bright light of wherever they'd appeared.

"New Orleans," the professor supplied. "If the humidity wasn't enough to clue you in," she added crossly, fluffing the front of her heavy robe with one hand. "Not exactly the closest Border to Las Vegas, but one we know hasn't been compromised." She released her robe and gestured to the wall in front of them.

"You guys like alleys, don't you?" Clara remarked. This Border was, like the one near her home, in a particularly aromatic, narrow passageway separating two old cinderblock buildings, sporting a line of blue trash bins lined up along one wall.

"Better for privacy," Mycroft pointed out, "but I agree. Something in a flower garden would be nice for a change. Notwithstanding." She stepped forward and poked a section of aging brick wall, her finger sinking in and leaving a little ripple. Looking more closely,

Clara spotted the telltale glowing equations drifting just under the wall's surface. "In we go."

They stepped through the wall—sensations of fast-moving water, spicy smells, and twinkling spots of dark light—and Clara found herself in Underhill for the second time that week.

"The Plains of Bláthanna," Mycroft announced. "A fancy phrase that means 'flat place with a lot of flowers.'"

Fancy or not, it was certainly apt: the professor and Clara were standing on a wide gravel path that meandered through a vast meadow that was, indeed, filled with flowers. They came in every color imaginable, and some Clara had never imagined. Blues, reds, yellows, and whites, but also colors she'd only read about in Art class: framboise, cerulean, jacaranda, amaryllis. Some of the petals even seemed metallic, glinting in silvers, coppers, and golds.

"Is this place dangerous?" Clara asked as they set out on the path.

"The *gríobh* aren't to be trifled with, but now that I've applied that charm, Underhill shouldn't see you as a threat. But that doesn't mean it's perfectly safe, mind you." The older woman's voice took on a lecturing tone that Clara recognized from years of school. "The *seangáin tine* keep to themselves, so long as you stay out of the meadow. Antlike creatures as long as your thumb. You may see a *beach mheala* fly across the path now and then, but leave them alone and they'll leave you alone. Basically giant honeybees, although they've evolved magical defenses over the millennia. Beyond that... well. Witches weren't always the primary residents of Underhill, you know. The druids preceded us, and the *Tuatha De Danann* before them—the Fae, you'd call them now. They left parts of Underhill... hmm. A bit *mischevious*, I suppose you'd say. Particularly out here in the hinterlands."

Clara absorbed all of this quietly, her eyes never ceasing their eager scan of her surroundings. Past the seemingly endless barrage of colored flowers, the peculiarly sculpted trees resumed, marching

off into the distance until they met the foot of enormous, distant mountains. “How far is it to the school?”

“About an hour’s walk, unfortunately,” Mycroft sighed. “And there’s no speeding it up. Travel magics are notoriously unreliable here.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“In the Ordinary world, geography is fixed absolutely,” Mycroft said, her voice falling back into its lecturing pattern. “Any given landmark, building, or other site is always at the exact same location, once you account for the Earth’s rotation and movement through space. In Underhill, landmarks are *relatively* the same, but not absolutely. Meaning the distance between any two landmarks will be the same, but those landmarks may shift position within Underhill. It’s rather complicated. Witches have made entire careers studying it and trying to formulate a set of rules, always to no avail.”

“So you walk everywhere?”

“More or less. Simple teleports over a few hundred yards or so are fine, but given the energy expenditure, it’s usually easier to just walk. There are mechanical conveyances in the larger settlements, but out here they’re as unreliable as traveling magics. The geography is... hmm. Wilder, I suppose. And the magic less forgiving of intrusion.”

“Why was the school built here, then?”

“A school full of adolescent magic-users learning to control their powers for the first time? Nobody would have permitted it to be built anywhere else.” She shrugged as she trudged along. “This way, even if we blow up the whole school, nobody else is in danger.”

They passed much of the next half-hour in companionable silence, Mycroft occasionally breaking in to point out a particular type of flower. In time, the colorful blooms became less dense, giving way to a long-leafed, blue-green grass of some sort. After a few minutes of that, the land began gently undulating, as if it was tired of having lain so still and flat through the great meadow. Before much longer, they came to a small town.

“Liginham,” Mycroft announced as they strode beneath a rough-hewn wooden arch. “Like the school, originally established by a Bavarian society of witches. It’s the closest settlement to the school. Hmm,” she murmured, looking up at the sky. The sun was at what Clara guessed to be its zenith, and her stomach gave a soft growl. “Yes, mine too,” the professor said absently. “We can stop for a quick bite. There’s an inn, the Brewing Storm, that I’ve always found to be quite satisfying.”

The little town seemed to consist of a main street, lined with squat, cozy-looking buildings made from more rough-hewn timbers, large stones, and carefully whitewashed plaster and cement. They sat cheek-to-jowl, as if gently pushing for the maximum amount of street frontage they could get. Behind them, Clara saw taller buildings constructed from the same style, where she presumed the residents lived. It reminded her of a storybook village from a particularly descriptive version of one of Grimm’s tales. Perhaps a place where Snow White could retire once she was tired of playing mother to a half dozen or so dwarves.

“Here we are,” Mycroft said, her voice eager.

“Here” was a somewhat larger building featuring a row of thick-glassed windows that bracketed a hefty wooden door. That door stood open, and above it hung a wooden sign pronouncing this to be the Brewing Storm. A wooden carving of a beer stein hung above that, further clarifying the intent of the place. They stepped through, and Clara was surprised at how cheery the establishment was inside. A long bar ran along the entire backside of the large open space, and worn trestle tables filled the rest. The floor was gray flagstone, chipped and dinged here and there but otherwise surprisingly clean.

“Sit here,” Mycroft motioned, indicating an empty table. Only about a third of the other tables were filled, and a few people looked up as they entered. A couple smiled and waved to Mycroft as they recognized her, and she nodded back.

A waitress bustled over. “Professor! So good to see you here during break. And who is this?”

“Clara... Thorn,” Mycroft said, stumbling for a moment over

Clara's surname. "She'll be a new student next term, and I'm accompanying her in."

"We heard some of the nearer Borders had some... trouble," the waitress said with a frown. "I hope nothing too dire?"

"Inconvenient at worst, I suspect, my dear," Mycroft said, waving the problem away with one hand. "I shall have a glass of that fine claret that I know your father has in the back. Clara will have... hmm. I don't suppose she's ever had fizzycider, so a mug of that. And we'll both have a lunch plate, please."

"Coming right up," the waitress said with a smile as she turned and headed to the bar.

"Fizzycider?" Clara asked, keeping her voice low.

"I suspect you'll adore it," Mycroft said with a smile. "Your classmates certainly do. Six- and seventh-years are permitted two trips per term to the village, and I know for a fact the proprietor here lays in extra barrels of the stuff for the occasion. As a ninth-year, you'll be permitted down every weekend, setting aside any special assignments or detentions."

"Ninth?" Clara asked, confused. She'd just finished *seventh* grade.

"We count it a bit differently. Your kindergarten is first year for us. Ah, thank you so much, dear." Mycroft beamed as the waitress returned. She first deposited two hefty plates filled with sliced sausage and sauerkraut, then a wine glass filled with an amber fluid, and then a frosty mug filled with a brown, fizzing beverage. The top of the mug was almost spilling over with a thick white foam. "On my account, please?"

"Of course, Professor," the waitress said as she deposited two rolled-up napkins and a handful of battered metal utensils. "Enjoy!"

"Try the wurst first, Clara. It's exceptional. The hogs are raised on a magically grown species of acorn, and it lends an absolutely unique flavor to the meat."

Clara picked up one of the forks and speared a slice of sausage. The professor was right: the taste was unlike anything she'd ever had, and she *loved* sausage. It was meaty, nutty, and slightly spicy.

The sauerkraut—which she’d honestly never been a big fan of—actually enhanced the flavor, the sharp tang of the cabbage bringing out a kind of dark saltiness in the meat.

The fizzycider was an entirely different experience. Although the foamy head looked thick as cream, it was in fact light as air, with faint notes of marshmallow and vanilla. Very faint, to the point where it didn’t seem sweet at all.

And then she got into the beverage itself.

It was an explosion of glorious flavors: apple, cinnamon, nutmeg, and even a hint of pumpkin. Flavors of Fall and Thanksgivings with her parents, but run all through with bubbles that tickled her tongue and lightened the flavors considerably, somehow turning it into a refreshing summery drink. It was like the apple seltzer that one of her classmates had let her sip at lunch one time, before casually and cruelly mentioning that *her* family provided such treats as a matter of routine. But it was also a pie in beverage form, the most unique soda Clara had ever had, and a reminder of comforting meals with the people who loved her.

“Is it everything I promised?” Mycroft asked with a small grin.

“And more,” Clara said happily.

They finished their lunch quickly and quietly, Mycroft tucking away the sausages with as much gusto as Clara. When they finished, the professor stood, gesturing for Clara to follow. “We’ve another half-hour perhaps, but we are at least fortified for the trip.”

“Thank you,” Clara said sincerely.

“You are quite welcome, my dear. I’m sure your time at the school will more than repay me.”

With that, they set out.

The terrain resumed its gently rolling grassy fields as they exited the far side of the village, and before long the forest began tentatively sidling up to the path. The oddly sculpted trees, with their branches and leaves twisted into spheres, pyramids, and other geometric shapes, never grew entirely thick, but they did provide welcome shade as the sun tipped over toward the far side of the sky.

. . .

THEN, as if they'd been purposely planted to hide the view until this exact moment, the trees stopped entirely. The sky opened up above them, and the school was revealed.

It sat atop an enormous mesa of gray stone, an improbably flat prominence that jutted straight up from the ground. Clara had played SimCity on a school computer a few years back, and this reminded her of how land moved in that game: a section was simply *raised*, leaving sheer, jagged cliff walls on all sides.

A tall, intricately detailed castle stood atop the mesa. Its upper stories were a pink fairytale confection, with crenellated light-gray walls and tall turrets that ended in brilliant blue cones.

Clara stopped, forcing Mycroft to turn and look back at her. She *knew* this castle, somehow. From a TV show?

Oh, she thought as it clicked in her memory. "Isn't this—"

"Disneyland, yes. Although they put the top bit on backwards for aesthetic reasons, I'm told. Technically, this is a recreation of Neuschwanstein, the castle of Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria." She paused and gave an offended sniff. "Ours is much larger than Disney's, as you can see."

Having never been to Disneyland in person, Clara simply smiled and continued walking. It took them only a few more minutes to reach the base of the mesa, and Clara began scanning the cliff walls for a path up—but she saw nothing. There was, however, a glint of something—metal?

"Here we are," Mycroft huffed as they came close to the cliff wall. An enormous brass sphere lay before them, assembled from precisely curved sheets of metal and riveted together. A heavy, curved door hung open on one side, and round glass windows pierced the upper circumference. The sphere rested in a cradle of wood and brass, and next to it stood an enormous contraption that looked like... a steam engine?

"Little sense wasting magic on something mechanisms can do,

I'm told," Mycroft said, almost apologetic. "Magic is used to heat the water into steam, but aside from that it's all... steam." She frowned. "One of the few mechanical marvels proven to be reliable in Underhill, actually, which meant the Bavarian builders made profligate use of it."

"So... it's driven by steam?" Clara asked dubiously.

"My dear, it's *blasted up* by steam. A giant blast of it."

"What keeps it from... just going off-course or something?"

"A bit of magic, I'm told. Frankly, the whole contraption terrifies me, but it's apparently the best anyone's come up with."

She shrugged and climbed into the sphere.

Clara followed nervously, taking a seat opposite Mycroft on the leather-covered bench that circled most of the sphere's interior.

"Not supposed to leave this hanging open," Mycroft grunted as she swung the heavy door shut. A quick spin of a brass wheel drove several latching pins home, securing the door in place. "The *feen* are in the habit of infesting the thing, and it takes simply forever to drive them out once they've settled." She pulled a lever that set next to the door, and a racket fit to wake a god took up outside. The engine, Clara supposed.

"That's the engine!" Mycroft shouted over the noise. "Hold on to that handle, girl, It'll just be a moment now before—oh!"

Clara barely grabbed the handle in time, echoing the professor's surprised cry as the sphere leapt upward at great speed. They both gripped tightly, although there was little chance of them moving, pressed into their seats by momentum as they were.

"It's worse when we stop!" Mycroft shouted, although the thundering noise of the engine was rapidly fading below them, replaced by a wash of heat and a hissing, rushing noise against the sphere's lower half. "Don't let go of the handle, or you'll—oh!"

The sphere *thudded* to a stop, momentum now lifting them out of their seats. They hovered inches above the padded bench for the barest fraction of a second before gravity caught up and dragged them back down with a *thump*.

“Bloody Bavarians,” Mycroft muttered as she worked the wheel that unlatched the door. “Completely taken up with Verne, never mind the basic comfort or safety of normal people.”

“You should install seat belts,” Clara suggested, willing her stomach to settle down.

“I’ve mentioned as much,” Mycroft said dourly.

“It’s really better than doing it with magic?” Clara asked as they stepped out of the sphere. A wooden dock of sorts led them to the safety of solid ground, and the sphere fell away behind them, presumably back to its cradle several hundred feet below.

“The mesa isn’t of fixed height,” Mycroft said, pointing back to the edge. Clara leaned over the railing that was there and saw that the ground was now *thousands* of feet below. “Nor is its surface, for that matter. The calculations to accurately get up here purely via magic would take time, and you’d run the risk of appearing just halfway up, or a hundred feet too high.” She shrugged. “Annoying, but the spheres are actually safer. A jet of steam can go as high as it needs to go, and it doesn’t stop until the sphere hits the dock on this end. So, safer. Even if it doesn’t *seem* so. This way,” she finished, indicating a flagstone path that led to the castle’s massive front doors.

If the castle’s exterior was straight from a fairytale, the interior strove to exceed even that. Clara and the professor entered into a great vaulted hall, and Clara couldn’t help but crane her neck back and ogle the glowing paintings—were they paintings?—of the night sky that covered the ceiling. White stone pillars descended from that sky to the smooth, white-and-gray marble floor. Enormous paintings covered the polished white walls. Even the paintings were glowing softly, as if they were backlit. Or televisions. Wait, were they actually moving? *No*, Clara decided. They were just paintings. The little flickers of movement were just a trick of the lighting.

Gray stone archways led from the main hall off to side rooms. “Kitchens, dining room, library,” Mycroft recited, barely looking as she strode with purpose down the middle of the grand hallway, her right hand outstretched. That hand fell, and her left rose. “That side,

offices, common rooms, another library.” Her hand now waved toward the second level, visible behind stout stone railings. “Classrooms off the galleries. Bigger inside than out, of course; borrowed that from the English.” Clara’s head swiveled back and forth, trying to keep up. “Originally an exact replica, but as you can imagine, the Bavarian witches, taken as they were with Verne, couldn’t leave well enough alone. Hence the plumbing.”

That, Clara could follow: interwoven webs of brass and copper tubing threaded their way through the hall, curving up to the ceiling before disappearing into the stonework. Valves, gauges, and unions dotted the entire shining mess, and a brief glimpse of leaking steam puffed out here and there as she struggled to take it all in.

“Still nigh-impossible to get a decent shower in the lower levels,” Mycroft muttered as they neared the back of the hall. “Good afternoon, Phoebe,” she added, nodding to a young, white-clad girl as they passed.

“Good afternoon, Professor,” Phoebe said primly. She gave Clara a hard look, and Clara swore she heard the girl mutter something. It sounded like “Sometimes it’s better to stay lost,” but they were moving so quickly she couldn’t be sure. Still, was it possible for a school of magic to have bullies? Clara hoped not.

“And now,” Mycroft announced, “the stairs.”

Clara felt the phrase should have been capitalized: *The Stairs*. For this was the most majestic, most elegant, most *sizable* staircase she had ever seen. It stood in the exact center of the hallway and rose in a broad spiral for what must have been dozens of stories. As she looked up, she saw another witch, this one clad in deep-blue robes, gliding upwards as if ascending took no effort whatsoever. “You watch these things,” Mycroft warned. “They’ve a mind of their own. Italian design.” She stepped on the first stair, taking Clara’s hand and helping her step up beside. “Headmaster’s,” Mycroft intoned.

Clara almost jumped as she and the professor began moving upward—without taking a single step further. She looked down and realized that the stairs themselves seemed to be moving, although

this was nothing like an escalator. Instead, the stairs seemed to *ooze* into one another. The stair they'd stepped onto remained completely flat and just seemed to sort of... flow up the staircase.

"Elegant, but deeply disturbing," Mycroft whispered. "But the Bavarian alternative is a bronzed platform that blasts you up into a copper tube. I've no truck with it. But still, best not to use these unless a member of the faculty has summoned you."

"What are you?" Clara asked as she peered over the staircase's railing.

"What *am* I?" Mycroft asked archly.

"I mean, what country are you from? You mentioned the French and the Italians and the Bavarians."

"Oh, mostly German extract, I believe. Likely some English. My family has been in North America since before the American Revolution."

"Were you born here?"

"Here? In Underhill? Heavens, no." The professor chuckled. "Nobody is born here. The children of Danann used up all of their creation magic when they made Underhill to begin with. The place won't support creation, now. Not something as miraculous as birth, at least. No, I was born just outside Philadelphia, and whisked Underhill as soon as it was safe for my parents to bring me. I've lived here ever since, mostly in a town called Newest Amsterdam, about as far from here as you can get without falling off the edge."

"The edge?"

"Underhill is flat."

The edges are unraveling, the little elf-creature had told her in her dream.

"Oh," Clara said quietly.

"You get used to it. Here we are." The stair slid sideways onto a landing, somehow merging with the marble of the floor until they were standing perfectly still. "If you must ever use this staircase, be sure you take a firm tone with it, and be clear if you've been summoned by someone. Even the faculty sometimes get carried off

to random corners of the castle. Fortunately, it's the only one of its kind. The rest are all perfectly mundane. This way."

Mycroft led Clara down a wide hallway decorated with white wainscot and more gently glowing paintings. The professor moved quickly, although Clara still kept trying to catch the paintings moving out of the corner of her eye. "They don't move," the older woman finally said. "It's a trick of the light."

"I wondered."

"We're here." *Professor Cecil Dimmick, Headmaster*, the brass plaque next to the door announced. Mycroft knocked once, opened the door, and strode through, Clara trailing closely in her wake.

"Ah, Professor Mycroft. You've returned." The deep, warm voice belonged to a tall, white-haired, dark-skinned man wearing a perfectly ordinary-looking gray business suit. He was clean-shaven, and one earlobe was stretched low by the weight of a dozen or more earrings threaded through it. "All is well, I trust?"

"Of course not," Mycroft grumbled. "If I'm taken to Talam, nothing is *well*. To say nothing of an hour's walk through the countryside."

"New Orleans?"

"Dank as ever," Mycroft sighed. "Headmaster Dimmick, this is Clara... Thorn." Again, Mycroft seemed to hesitate on Clara's surname.

"The Holdaways' child," Dimmick said carefully, eyeing Clara up and down.

"Just so," Mycroft answered.

"A Lost Witch, then."

"Found now," Mycroft countered.

"Mmm. Not yet, I suspect. Young woman, we've records of only one other Lost Witch. We're usually very careful about keeping track of our own. But then, we've Lost your parents as well."

"Do you know what happened to them?" Clara asked, an intense curiosity seizing her.

"I've suspicions, of course. But no, not definitively. They worked

in a dangerous trade, as counter-hunters. We've all assumed the paladins got to them, if not the Adversary himself."

"Adversary?"

"An unknown entity who commands the paladins. A topic for later discussion," Mycroft cut in, giving Dimmick a hard look. "She's to be enrolled in the ninth-year cohort."

"Mostly other Americans, yes?"

"Mostly, and she already knows the triplets."

"Hmm. Well, it is what it is, of course." Dimmick sighed. "Those three are a triple handful, but I expect they'll look after you. Idalia in particular has a weak spot for strays." He gave Clara a kind smile. "You were living with... relatives?"

"Adoptive parents," Mycroft clarified. "I'll check in on them. We had a bit of an... incident. With paladins. And *him*. They'd chained the house, but I pulled down an *amicus* construct as we left."

"I imagine that will have occupied their attention." Dimmick chuckled. "But yes, please do follow up on the parents. Thank you, Professor. And Clara, welcome to Liginbaum's School for Magic-Users."

"Thank you."

"'Witches' is considered a dated term," he added.

"'Magic-users' is considered a silly one," Mycroft countered easily, and Clara had the impression that this was a long-running and collegial dispute between the two.

"Welcome anyway, Clara." And his deep, sonorous voice made Clara feel as warm and safe as she'd always felt in her father's embrace. "Professor, I imagine you've plenty to occupy your time. I'll see Clara to the dorms and introduce her to everyone. We've a half dozen in residence over the break?"

"About that. Clara, good day. I'll see you soon." Mycroft whirled and hurried out of the office.

"Let's get you settled," Dimmick said, placing a hand on Clara's shoulder. "I'm sure you'll fit right in."

CHAPTER 13

THE CLASSMATES

“Ah, ladies,” Headmaster Dimmick said as he led Clara into one of the dorm halls. “I believe you know Miss Thorn?”

These were somehow on the castle’s third level. *“Bigger inside than out,” no kidding,* Clara thought. The great entry hall cut through the length of this floor, with a wide gallery on either side of that opening. Off those galleries, perpendicular to the entry hall, were the actual dorm halls, one per year. First through eighth on one side, which meant Clara had graduated to the “senior side,” housing the students in years nine through thirteen and the graduate students in years fourteen through sixteen.

Just inside the ninth-year hall entrance was a large common area, configured as a combined library, lounge, game room, and, from the looks of it, a place to have a quick afternoon nap. The triplets were there, gathered around a table with an enormous book opened between them, all dressed in a version of the school uniform that the older boy—the one who’d thrown her out of Underhill the first time—had worn: burgundy vests, gray ties, white shirts. Idalia and Johanna wore gray skirts, while Harriett wore gray trousers. They’d kept with their tradition on hair ribbons: Today, Harriett

wore a dark brick-red, Idalia a fire-engine hue, and Johanna a near-pink.

They all looked up as the headmaster spoke.

"Oh, hullo," Harriett said. "You finally made it." She sounded unimpressed.

"Oh stop, Harriett," Idalia chided her. "Welcome in." Then she frowned. "Did you bring any luggage?"

"Professor Mycroft took me out in a bit of a hurry," Clara said, just now realizing that she had *nothing* with her. Not even underwear.

"The school will provide everything you need, young lady," Dimmick said, his voice stern as he looked at Idalia. "Don't let these three worry you."

"We'd never," Harriett said with a sly smile. Clara couldn't tell if she was kidding or not.

"You had best not," Dimmick said, his voice softening a bit. "I leave her in your charge. Her room will already be marked." And with that, he turned and left the room.

"You'll have to tell us everything," Johanna said, pulling a fourth chair away from the table and patting its seat.

Clara sat down and scooted her knees under the table. She looked around. The common area seemed comfortable: book-lined walls, scuffed wood paneling, furniture that had clearly seen hard use but was holding up well. More of the ubiquitous brass pipes threaded their way across the ceiling, down a wall here and there, and even along the baseboards at one point. The overall effect was... disappointing? Clara wasn't sure what she'd expected from a school for magic. Cages full of owls, maybe. Black cats perched on tables.

Clara's eyes swept across one of the worn, mismatched throw pillows on the sofa, and her breath caught in her throat. It reminded her exactly of the ones on the sofa at home.

"Clara?" Idalia prompted.

"Oh, sorry." Clara dragged her attention back to the triplets, and took a moment to gather her thoughts. "At first, there wasn't much

to tell," she began. "But it got weird fast." She related most of what had happened over the past couple of days, focusing on the paladins and the scary, dark-suited man who seemed to lead them. She concluded with Mycroft's arrival and the exploding metal chain. "And here I am," she finished.

The triplets' eyes were gleaming with excitement. "Nothing like that ever happens to us," Johanna said enviously.

"Those are the exact same paladins that chased us," Harriett reminded her. "And we barely got away!" The sparkle in her eyes suggested she'd have been open to even more danger.

"Plenty of excitement for me," Idalia agreed, although her eager expression told a different story.

"And more than enough for me," Clara said, slumping back in her chair. "And now I'm here. Although honestly, I've no idea what *here* even is."

"Oh," Johanna said, pushing her chair back and standing. Her sisters followed suit. "A tour is in order!" She waved her hands in a grand gesture that encompassed the entire room. "This is the ninth-year common room. Through that door"—she gestured at the heavy wood-and-bronze door that stood opposite the one Clara had entered through—"are the actual rooms. One long hall, with sleeping rooms on each side. Yours will have your name on it, and it sounds like the dresser should be full of these lovely uniforms. Laundry goes in the bottom drawer—folded, if you please—and it'll reappear, clean, in the upper drawers. There's a shared bathroom every four to six sleeping rooms, depending on how many students are in that year. Should be every five for us, if the rooms haven't shuffled themselves again."

"They change?" Clara asked, standing to join them.

"Everything changes," Harriett said, rolling her eyes. "Length of the dorm. Number of sleeping rooms. Number of bathrooms. Even the floor—we're *usually* on the third, so the galleries outside overlook the great hall, but sometimes we end up on a different level, and

the view is just a stone wall instead of the railings. I'd say you get used to it, but you don't."

"At least you got here after the hall turned," Idalia said darkly. "I hate that."

"Turned?" Clara's brow furrowed in confusion.

"We've been in this same hall since first year," Johanna explained. "About four weeks before the start of each year, during the break, the halls all just... shift. All at once. You have to make sure anything fragile is tucked into a dresser amongst your clothes, because it's pretty rough. But this year—yesterday, in fact—our hall had to swing around from the junior side to the senior side. And it decided to do it at midnight, of course. Woke us all up with the grinding and shaking, and my favorite hand mirror fell off my dresser and shattered."

"You know better than to leave things out this time of year," Idalia scolded her.

"Yes, well, who knows when I'll be able to get another?" Johanna grouched. "But at least it's over for a year."

"The other floors don't shift as much," Harriett said, picking up the explanations. "The first and second levels never move. Faculty rooms are on the upper levels, and the spiral staircase is the only reliable way to get to them. They move a lot."

"Professor Mycroft took me up that staircase. It was amazing," Clara said.

"We hate it," Harriett said flatly. "It'll obey the faculty well enough, but it likes to play tricks on students and staff. They say the Italians hired the French to design the spells for it, and it never got over being incorporated into a Bavarian castle. But if you get summoned to Dimmick's office, or one of the other faculty offices, it's the only way."

"Just stay focused on your destination and try to act as guilty and remorseful as possible," Johanna advised. "C'mon, we'll show you the lower levels."

The triplets led Clara down the "reliable" stairs, as Johanna

called them: a set of straightforward steps that led to the second and ground floors. "They still work even when we're not on third," Idalia said with a sigh, "but how many flights you have to go is more or less random, we think."

They emerged into a hallway that ran parallel to the great entry hall. "Far easier to avoid the faculty here," Johanna said.

"Start on the other side," Idalia advised.

"Good idea," Johanna agreed. She led them all across the Great Hall to an identical, parallel hallway on the opposite side.

"This is the East Side," Harriett announced. "The Good Side, mostly. As you're walking into the Great Hall, you're facing north; always remember that. So our dorms are on the west side now. East has the kitchens and dining hall. We're a bit early for dinner, but they're flexible during breaks." She strode through a wide double doorway and into what was clearly the school's dining hall.

It was *enormous*. Even "bigger inside than out" struggled to explain its size, which at first glance seemed to exceed that of the castle's entire footprint. "It never gets full," Idalia assured her as they found a seat at one of the seemingly endless lines of trestle tables. "We think they do it to be impressive. Years usually sit close together, but there's plenty of room for everyone to spread out." They sat, the triplets opposite Clara.

Idalia reached to slap a brass medallion that was embedded into the tabletop; looking down the table, Clara saw similar medallions embedded every six or eight feet. "What's that?" Clara asked, reaching to touch the inlay.

"Keep your hands back," Harriett advised.

Clara's gaze flew upward as a cacophony of clanking and hissing erupted above them.

"Automated delivery system," Johanna said. "Cheaper than using magic, they say, but it'll take your arm off if you're not careful."

Clara noticed that the girls' hands were in their laps, and she hurried to copy them. And not a moment too soon: with a wrench of metal and a hiss of steam, a leather-covered trunk dropped from

above, suspended on brass chains. Clara thought it would simply crash into the table, but it managed to slow itself at the last moment and eased to the table with a relieved hiss. As it came to a rest, the long sides facing the girls slammed upward, revealing trays of food inside.

“Quickly,” Johanna said as the triplets reached in, grabbed a tray apiece, and pulled it toward them. Again, Clara rushed to mimic them, pulling a tray toward herself. As soon as the trunk was empty, its sides slammed back down, and the entire thing shot upwards and out of sight. Craning her head upward and peering into the gloom above, Clara thought she could make out a system of rails, chains, and trunks all sliding past one another at high speed.

“How’d it know how many trays we needed?” Clara asked as she picked up the utensils lying on the tray.

“That bit is magic,” Johanna said as she dug in. “Communications spells are cheap and easy. Moving things physically, expensive and difficult.”

“Also, bloody Bavarians,” Harriett muttered as she slathered butter on a steaming fresh roll. “But you can’t beat the food.”

“It’s all made here?” Clara asked, buttering her own roll. It had arrived with a deep bowl of steaming brown stew that smelled absolutely heavenly. She’d eaten lunch no more than—what, an hour ago? Two? She couldn’t pin down the time. But her stomach gurgled gently at the smell of the meal, and her mouth began to water.

“Every bit. The kitchens are just next door. And below, I think,” Idalia said, blowing on a large spoonful of stew. “The kitchen staff are all *Küchenelf*, and they’re the best cooks in all of Underhill.”

“*Küchenelf*?” Clara asked around a mouthful of stew. It was *glorious*, the meat tender and delicately seasoned, the broth both rich and ethereal.

“They’re supposedly the last of the Fae in Underhill,” Johanna explained. “They’re only happy if they’re running a kitchen. It’s why they let so many of us stay here over breaks—if we weren’t eating food, there’s a risk the *Küchenelf* would abandon the castle.”

"And who have we here?" a male voice with a lilting Irish accent asked just before a handsome boy wearing a soccer team jersey slid onto the bench next to Clara. He sported a dark shock of unruly, wavy hair, piercing blue eyes, and a broad, friendly smile. He reached for the medallion in the table.

"Finlay Addington, don't you dare!" Harriett snapped, causing the boy to snatch his hand back. "Use the next one. The last time, the trunk was off-center and it smashed into our trays."

"Aye, then," the boy said. He gave Clara a wink and a grin before sliding to the next medallion and slapping it. "Oh, Elsie will be here in a minute!" he shouted up at the nebulous ceiling. Moments later, another trunk all but crashed into the table, one side *clunking* upwards. Finlay withdrew two trays before the trunk slammed closed and ascended.

He slid the two trays back next to Clara. "Hi. I'm Finlay Addington."

At just that moment, she found his accent inexplicably charming. "Clara Thorn," she said, putting down her spoon long enough to shake his proffered hand. His handshake was firm but not overpowering, and she liked him immediately. "Where is your accent from?"

"Ireland," Finlay said, flashing another grin in between bites.

Clara gave him another once-over. "But your hair—"

Harriett sniggered while Johanna clamped her lips over a laugh.

"We're not all gingers," Finlay said easily. "So are you a transfer student?" he asked as he took another bite.

"Transfer from where?" This from a younger girl, who slid onto a bench in front of the second tray Finlay had ordered. "Hi, I'm Elsie Green." Her accent was British, Clara guessed, and no less charming than the boy's. Given her dark complexion, Clara assumed her hair was naturally as dark and curly as her own, but Elsie had straightened it and dyed it in stripes of pure white.

"She's not a transfer," Harriett said between bites. "She's a breakout."

“Ooooh, how exotic,” Elsie said. Clara thought she sounded disappointed. “So you’ll be skipping first through eighth, then?”

“What’s a breakout?” Clara asked.

“A witch who comes from a non-magic family,” Johanna replied, staring daggers at Harriett. “And she isn’t,” she added firmly, turning back to Elsie and Finlay. “We were there when Mycroft found out. She’s a *Holdaway*.”

The table fell silent for a moment, Elsie and Finlay’s spoons in mid-scoop or mid-bite. Their eyes locked onto Clara.

“As in, the Hunters Holdaway?” Finlay asked after a long moment, oblivious to the fact that his stew was sliding off his spoon and onto his tray. “I have collectible posters!”

“Alex and Jessamine,” Johanna confirmed. “They abandoned her when she was a baby. She was adopted by Ordinaries. That’s why her last name is Thorn.” Johanna smiled at Clara and gave her an encouraging nod. “She’s hardly a breakout.”

“The Holdaways disappeared—” Elsie began, but cut off and jumped slightly as if she’d been kicked.

“Twelve years ago,” Idalia said quietly, giving Clara a sympathetic look.

“Oh.” Elsie said nothing more, focusing on her stew as if nothing was happening. Finlay continued to stare but managed to get a spoonful of stew into his mouth.

“Hi.”

Clara sighed inside as another male voice introduced itself. Couldn’t her classmates just all show up at once and get it over with?

“Clara Thorn, Edmund Langsdale,” Finlay said, absentmindedly reaching for the table medallion again.

“Oh, I ate,” the new boy said, sitting down on Clara’s other side. “Hi. Call me Ed.” His voice had a light Southern twang, Clara thought. He was an inch or two shorter than her, and his expression was serious. His dark hair was cut close to his scalp, and a splash of freckles across his nose complemented his dark-brown eyes.

“Clara,” she said as she shook his hand. Less firm than Finlay’s, but still polite. “You’re from the South?”

“Kansas originally, but I’ve been attending Ordinary school in Slidell. It’s near New Orleans. It’s the accent, right? I think it kicked in a couple of years ago,” he added with a shy grin. “Nice to meet you.”

“We were just learning about Clara’s true parentage,” Finlay said. Clara looked back at him and wondered if he’d taken his eyes off her once.

Ed nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“This is Clara Holdaway,” Finlay announced in a reverent voice.

“Holda—wait, the counter-hunters?” Ed’s voice was now full of awe.

Clara nodded, looking down at the table. Everyone here seemed to know her birth parents, or at least know *of* them. What did she have to live up to, here? What is it about her parents that made them so famous here, even amongst teenagers?

Clara missed Mom and Dad.

“I thought they’d been Lost a dozen years—oh. *Oh*. Were you with... relatives?” he asked quietly, his eyes full of compassion.

“Friends of the family,” Clara said, placing her spoon back on her tray. Her appetite seemed to have vanished. “They adopted me. Honestly, until... a day ago?” It all seemed so fast. “I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t—wow,” Ed said, nodding slowly. “Well. My Mom passed when I was really little. My aunt helped raise me. So if you ever want to talk...”

“Thank you,” Clara said, determined to be polite to these new classmates, but unwilling to have this discussion with people she barely knew. “It doesn’t seem really real, yet,” she admitted.

“Wait, so were you raised... Ordinary?” Elsie asked as if thunder-struck. Clara nodded. “Elves and ogres,” she muttered. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I know I’m behind on magic and stuff, but—”

Finlay cut her off. “Actually, none of us have had more than the

most basics, and whatever our families have taught us. We just got our magic over the past year, aside from accidents. I mean... mine's still not all there. So you're not that far behind. We get mostly the same stuff as you, through eighth year. Letters, numbers, reading, that kind of thing."

"Not all there," he says," Harriett snorted. "Go on, tell her."

"I can show her," Finlay said with an embarrassed smile. "I still haven't gotten the hang of quickfire yet." He held his hand up in front of Clara and snapped his fingers. A thin trail of smoke rose from his fingertips, and a loud *pop* echoed through the dining hall. "We all have quirks. When my magic doesn't work, it pops. Even when it does work, sometimes."

"Sometimes," Harriett sneered sarcastically.

"Fire isn't a problem." Elsie never took her eyes off her meal, but she held her free hand up and snapped. A pillar of blue-green flame immediately roared into life on her fingertips.

"Elsie's problem is magic that *doesn't* include fire," Harriett said. "You tend to get a side of fire with anything."

"Beats Ed," Elsie shrugged, spooning up the last of her stew.

"I keep trying," Ed mumbled.

"What's that?" Harriett asked. Ed just shook his head and looked away. "When he misfires, half the people around him suddenly have to pee," she explained, giving Ed an evil grin. "Sometimes even when his magic works."

"And sometimes if your bladder is already full..." Idalia said almost apologetically.

"I've gotten better," Ed mumbled again, looking toward the front of the hall for a distraction.

"What's yours?" Clara asked Idalia. "Your quirk?"

All three triplets' faces fell slightly at that. Johanna answered. "Our magic doesn't work well unless we're together," she admitted. "It infuriates our parents. We... work on it."

"No, you don't," Elsie said.

"We try," Johanna said weakly. "We're just not apart that much."

"You'll find your quirk," Finlay told Clara confidently. "They say this is the year we work them out, though, so yours should be short lived."

"I can see magic," Clara ventured quietly.

Everyone fell silent.

"You mean," Harriett said very carefully, "that you can see auras? A soft glow, often somewhat more noticeable when someone is casting a spell?"

Clara shook her head. "I can see it all the time." She unfocused her eyes slightly, and bright lines of equations sprang into existence. "It's less obvious when I'm not looking for it, but it's always there. Bright lines." She hesitated for a moment and then said, "Someone do something."

Elsie raised her hand again and snapped. Just before the snap, Clara clearly saw a line of magic—a single equation, in a bright orange-red, spiral down Elsie's arm. It hit her fingers at the exact moment of the snap, and a small flame burst into life. "You saw that?" Elsie asked.

"Yeah," Clara replied, her voice full of wonder. "It was beautiful. Except..." She frowned slightly and chewed her lower lip. "Can you let it go out?"

The flame whiffed out of existence, and the equation that had been feeding it faded away. But the equation had never been perfectly balanced. Something about it was... off.

Then it clicked in her mind, and she said, "Can you do it one more time?"

Seemingly always happy to summon fire, Elsie snapped again. This time, Clara focused intently on the equation. It seemed to emanate from Elsie's shoulder, and Clara quickly concentrated. Two of the symbols in the equation shifted under her will, the orange-red line spiraling far more tightly as it raced toward Elsie's fingertips. In the moment of the snap, equation met fingertip, and a three-foot gout of flame leapt upwards.

“Crap!” Elsie shouted, and the flame died instantly. “What the... what did you do?”

Clara let the magic slip from her sight and saw that Elsie’s eyes were wide. Everyone’s eyebrows seemed to have climbed into their hair, and Johanna was leaning backwards as if they next flame might come directly for her.

“I... tweaked it a bit,” Clara stammered. “It wasn’t quite centered. I’m sorry.”

“You—wow,” Finlay said, shaking his head and smiling. “You *tweaked* it a bit. You okay, Elsie?”

“That somehow took less energy than it ever has,” Elsie said, her own gaze a bit unfocused as she seemed to concentrate on herself. “But I don’t think I could do it again. It felt... weird.”

The bench Clara was sitting on suddenly felt cold. How had she managed to repel these new classmates so quickly?

“Maybe that’s how it’s supposed to feel,” Ed offered, his voice soft. “Can you do me next?”

Clara’s heart lightened slightly. Maybe she hadn’t scared them off just yet? “Maybe not fire?” Clara suggested cautiously.

“I’ll show you the light spell,” Ed promised. “It’s an old one, called *éadrom*. First one we all learn.” He held one hand out, palm up, and stared at it. “You concentrate right in the middle of your palm, focusing on the spell’s name. And you feed it just a little of your power.” A small wisp of light kindled in his hand, quickly growing to a marble-sized orb that glowed a soft white.

Clara unfocused her eyes, watching the flow of magic into the orb.

“Ugh, Ed, now I have to pee,” Idalia complained. “I thought you had this one locked down.”

“It’s not balanced,” Clara said distractedly. “It’s... leaking, I guess. Here,” she added, stretching out a finger to point at an equation only she could see. She immediately realized what she was doing and dropped her hand. “Sorry. It’s beautiful, though. Can you hold it for a minute?”

“For hours,” Ed said. “This one’s easy.”

“Until we all pee ourselves,” Harriett muttered.

“No, it’s just this...” Clara trailed off, still intent on the flowing equation. It repeated over and over, a line of yellow-blue flowing from Ed’s heart in a gentle, swooping curve. The values on one side of the equation, what Clara now thought of as the input, were too large. They overbalanced the output, resulting in a series of thinner lines, each one a broken equation, drifting lazily away from Ed’s glowing orb. Clara concentrated, reshaping the symbols in her mind. She felt her own energy diminishing as she concentrated, but after just a moment, the magic streaming from Ed’s heart lost its blue tinge and became a purer yellow-white. The orb of light doubled in size and intensity, and stopped leaking broken equations.

“Oh,” Ed said softly. “That’s lovely.”

Clara refocused, and saw that it *was* lovely: the orb had shifted to the soft yellow of a glowing candle, with traces of brighter white swimming through its surface.

“How do you do that?” Idalia breathed, her eyes wide.

Clara shrugged. “I don’t know. Like I said, I can see the magic. It just looked... unbalanced. But if I concentrate, I can shape it a bit. Balance it.”

Ed slowly closed his hand, snuffing out the light and ending the spell. “Once you did, it absolutely felt effortless. But... like Elsie said. Weird.”

“Can you do it again without her?” Finlay asked.

Ed nodded slowly. “I think so.” He held his hand out again and rekindled the light. This time, it immediately grew to the size of a grapefruit, emitting a soft, steady, yellow glow. “Anyone have to pee?”

Nobody said anything. Clara checked the equations. “It’s still leaking a bit,” she said, “but only a tiny, tiny bit. It’s not enough to reach anyone else.”

“It feels... smoother,” Ed said, nodding slowly. “But... I swear, I can feel it in my bones now. I wonder if all the spells are meant to

feel this way. Maybe if I slow it down a bit?" His brow furrowed as he concentrated.

"That's it," Clara said as the input side of the equation distended slightly, balancing itself.

"So it's... hmm. I need to actually hold it back a bit. Interesting."

"This is so weird," Harriett muttered. "I've never heard of someone seeing magic. Let alone tweaking someone else's spell."

"That's not true," Finlay objected. "Mycroft does it. Or something like it. In class."

"She's a professor," Harriett said.

"So? If she can do it, anyone can, in theory."

"I guess." Harriett didn't seem convinced. "She mainly just yells at us."

"Oh!" Finlay said brightly, looking at his watch. "We're going to miss it!"

"You and your soccer," Idalia teased. She licked her spoon clean, while Johanna shot her an annoyed look.

"Soccer?" Clara asked, intrigued. She'd always enjoyed watching soccer with her parents.

"Football," Finlay corrected.

"That's the same thing, isn't it?" Clara asked.

Finlay nodded rapidly. "In the Ordinary, yes. But here? No, no, no! It's something of a whole different kind!"

"And he's off," Elsie sighed, standing. "Might as well go."

"To... watch soccer?" Clara asked, confused.

"Wizard's Rules Soccer!" Finlay announced proudly. "There's a practice starting basically right now. Let's go!"

"There's no point resisting," Ed said, echoing Elsie's sigh. "But it *is* fun."

"I guess I'm in," Clara said, happy to play along.

Finlay flashed her a bright grin. "Excellent! Right this way for the time of your life!"

CHAPTER 14

WIZARD'S RULES

They hurried out the castle's great front doors, down a short flight of marble steps, and around the building's west side. Even at the quick pace Finlay and the others were maintaining, it took them almost ten minutes to reach the field, which was situated toward one side of the immense mesa that contained the school grounds.

The weather, in Clara's opinion, couldn't have been more perfect. Summer Underhill brought plenty of gentle, warm sunshine, coupled with crisp breezes that kept it from being hot. The air smelled of flowers and cut grass, with hints of cinnamon and white pepper floating here and there. The walk from the castle to the game field felt relaxing and carefree.

The field itself occupied a large area, and would have been bathed in sunlight if it hadn't been for the enormous, multi-leveled, vertical viewing stands that surrounded it. Each stand was built like a tower, soaring ten stories into the air. Finlay led them to one tower, and then to a set of wooden stairs that switchbacked along the tower's back side. "It's tenth-years today, so they'll have the top

level. We get the level below, and so on, down to first years at the bottom.”

“Being that high up is a punishment, not a perk,” Elsie muttered as they ascended the nine flights of stairs.

“Each class can field one or more teams,” Johanna explained as they climbed. “First through fifth are considered juniors and only play each other. Sixth through eighth are another group, and ninth and up is where everyone gets pretty serious.”

“Practices aren’t crowded,” Finlay said as they emerged onto an empty level. Two rows of a few dozen chairs, the back row sitting a bit higher than the front, ran the width of this tower, promising a good view from nearly any seat. They took seven seats in the front row, and Finlay leaned over the edge and began explaining the game to Clara.

“You know football? I mean, soccer for you Americans?” he asked. She nodded—it had been a major pastime in a couple of cities they’d lived in. “So it’s like that, only obviously here there are three teams.” He pointed at the field, which Clara realized was arranged as a triangle rather than the more familiar rectangle. The corners of the triangle were flattened, and goal nets occupied those ends. “Three teams of six,” he continued, pointing to the players that were still warming up on the field. “A Center, two Wings, two Guards, and a Goalie. No hands except the goalie, just like in Ordinary football. But each position has a specific spell it can use.”

“And the games run forever,” Elsie muttered. This clearly wasn’t her favorite sport; she was slumped back in her seat, arms crossed in front of her.

“Three periods of only thirty-three minutes each, with short breaks of ten minutes between, so just shy of two hours,” Finlay said, clearly of the opinion that the game could run much longer and he’d be happy. “There are traps embedded in the field. The teams choose them in advance, but their locations are randomized. So you don’t know where they are or what’ll trigger them. And there’s a randomized trigger to launch the Ender.”

"The Ender?" Clara asked when Finlay stopped for breath.

"Oh, sorry—yeah. It's a special ball, in addition to the regular one. It flies around about chest height, bashing anyone in its way. It'll change directions when it hits the edge of the pitch or a person. If you can deflect it into a goal other than your own, you win. If you deflect it into your own goal, your team loses, and the other two keep playing."

"That sounds violent," Clara said dubiously.

"It's brilliant," Finlay repeated. "Look, they're getting started!"

"Why is it called Wizard's Rules," Clara asked, "if everyone is a witch?"

"Male witches used to call themselves 'wizards,' Idalia said as she stared down at the field. "That stopped about a century ago with the Declaration of Equality, but they never changed the name of the game."

"We're lucky it's not 'Magic-Users Rules,'" Harriett snarked.

"The original name of the game was *peil draíochta agus scile*," Elsie said, earning surprised looks from everyone. "But nobody could pronounce it. What?" she asked as everyone continued staring. "I read too, you know."

"What's it mean?" Clara asked as the others turned back to the field.

"Something like 'football game of magic and skill.' The druids invented it, and they weren't terribly creative with naming things, from what I can tell." She fell silent and slumped further into her chair, as if the game held no interest for her at all.

Just like the goths back home, Clara thought as she joined the others in leaning over the railing. The match was beginning.

"It's just a practice," Finlay reminded her as a whistle sounded, loudly enough to be heard all the way up the tower. "So they'll probably only run for fifteen minutes or so. Oh! Did you see that?"

"Yeah?" Clara said, uncertain of what, exactly, she'd seen. One team's Center—the team in green jerseys—had dashed forward, kicking the ball ahead of himself at improbable speed.

“That’s the Dash spell; only Centers can use it,” Finlay said. “Great move out of the gate, although he’ll be restricted for a few minutes. Cooling-off period,” he clarified as Clara opened her mouth to ask. “Position spells only work every few minutes. Oh! Location trigger!”

A flash of light briefly surrounded the fast-moving Center, and he collided with an enormous snake that had come boiling out of the ground.

“Baserpent,” Idalia filled in as Finlay clapped excitedly. “Not too dangerous, but it can break a limb if it catches you wrong.”

“Worst part about the Dash spell,” Johanna said. “You move fast, but only in a straight line, and only until something stops you.”

The unfortunate Center had abandoned the ball now, focused instead on avoiding the thrashing monster.

“Oh, one of the Wings is going for it!” Finlay crowed.

Clara watched as a blue-shirted player leapt straight into the air—easily fifty feet, rising almost to their level of the viewing stands—before flipping into a mad version of a high-dive and plummeting back toward the ball.

“Kick!” Finlay shouted as the player neared the ground, flipped heads-up again, and applied a magically enhanced kick to the ball. The ball blasted clear of the snake, but not before one of its coils managed to knock the Wing sideways. “Oh, that’ll leave a mark,” Finlay said, grimacing in sympathy. “That’s it for the baserpent, though,” he added as the snake vanished in a short-lived cloud of smoke.

“Blocked it anyways,” Idalia pointed out. The ball had plunged unerringly toward the yellow-shirted team’s goal, but its Goalie had been given more than enough notice to intercept the ball, and batted it away with oversized padded gloves. The ball flew a dozen feet or more, and players from all three teams began to converge on it.

“So it’s all running?” Clara asked, her tone slightly disappointed.

“It’s football,” Finlay said. “What else would it be?”

"I don't know. It's 'Wizard's Rules.' I guess I thought there'd be... flying, or something."

Finlay snorted.

"Flying is actually really hard," Idalia mused. "It's a twelfth-year elective. I was thinking about taking it."

"Mother won't let you," Johanna pointed out. "Abraham, Benjamin, and Carlton took it and they all broke at least two limbs apiece."

"It's *football*," Finlay repeated.

They watched the next few plays in a companionable silence. Curious as to what might happen, Clara unfocused her eyes, letting the field below her blur a bit. Lines of magic overlaid the field. Sturdy equations demarcated the field's edges, while looser lines flowed hither and yon within the field of play. Those lines occasionally knotted together, forming bright spots of tightly intertwined magic.

"Oh," Clara said as two players converged on one such knot, each intent on catching the rapidly moving ball. "There's a trigger," she added just before the two players hit it.

Instantly, a shockwave seemed to hit the field, spreading from the point where the players had triggered the trap. The wave knocked them all down and sent the ball spinning off in a new direction; even the players nearby wobbled on their feet, and a couple fell to their knees. Everyone quickly shook themselves, regained their balance, and returned to the game.

"You did not," Finlay said in disbelief. "You saw that? Before it happened, I mean?"

"Visual witch," Harriett said, some awe creeping into her voice.

"My aunt is a visual witch," Elsie said, staring at her fingernails and studiously ignoring the game. "She wasn't so bad. Most of the family didn't even mind."

Wait, it's a bad thing? Clara thought, her heart speeding up and her stomach starting to knot.

"If she can spot the traps," Finlay said thoughtfully, "absolutely nobody is going to think she's bad."

'She' is sitting right here, Clara thought. "There's another one, right next to—oh, there." She immediately clamped her mouth shut, wishing she hadn't spoken. If being a visual witch was somehow bad, the last thing she needed to do was continue drawing attention to herself.

As a player ran across the knot of magic, the game ball split into three, each heading off on a different tangent.

"Ball illusion," Finlay said, nodding approvingly. "One of my favorites. It'll continue until someone kicks the illusory ones." Each team had now split into three, each chasing a different ball until they figured out where the real one was. "Clara, can you tell?"

Clara sighed to herself. At least Finlay didn't seem to care. "It's the one nearest the green goal."

"Amazing," Finlay breathed. "Can you... *do* anything to it?"

"That would break the rules," Idalia warned. "No external magic can come to bear on the field, ball, or players."

"Yeah," Finlay sighed with disappointment. "Still."

The teams continued for another ten minutes, triggering four more spells and scoring one goal for the green team, before the whistle sounded again. Coaches and other players trotted out on the field and started discussing the scrimmage.

"This'll go on for a bit," Finlay said, suddenly bored. "Some of those are the second-string players; I know the regular ones aren't all back from break yet." He peered down at the field for a while longer before announcing, "Yeah, they're going to run drills now." He was right: the three teams had retreated to their respective corners of the field and were starting to run kicking and passing exercises. "The ref will take the traps down now. Let's just go."

"Finally," Elsie sighed, hauling herself out of her seat. The others shuffled down the row until they came back to the stairs, and then started the long trip back down. "Anyone for chess?" she asked as they exited the viewing structure.

"Chess? I'm surprised you're not a checkers player, Elsie Green. Seems more your speed."

The owner of the voice was the pretty, prim-looking girl Clara had passed in the main hall when she first arrived: Phoebe. The one who she'd thought had made the barbed remark about "staying Lost."

Phoebe stood with a hand on one hip, her head cocked lazily to one side. She was accompanied by three other girls and one boy, all of whom wore slick, superior expressions.

"Crap," Elsie muttered.

CHAPTER 15

THERE'S ALWAYS A BAD BUNCH

“What do you want, Phoebe?” Harriett snapped. Johanna grabbed Clara’s arm and tugged her back, away from Phoebe and her friends. The walkway from the stadium to the castle split their group from Phoebe’s, and Clara suspected that was a line she shouldn’t cross.

“Oh, nothing,” Phoebe said in a falsely sweet voice. “We’re just so pleased to have all of you back from the wilds. So pleased that you survived. And you’ve brought back a pet!” That last was directed at Clara. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Clara,” Finlay said wearily. “This is Phoebe Witcher. She’s perfect in every way, except that her magic smells like farts.” Phoebe’s smile immediately twisted into an ugly snarl, but Finlay continued before she could interrupt. “This is Lucy Strout. Unlike Elsie, she can’t use any magic even remotely related to fire.” He continued, pointing to each person as he went. “Augustus Webb. Sinclair Hunt—incredibly rich family, incredibly poor grades—and Brinley Marsh. Her magic actually smells great, and nobody can figure out why she hangs out with this lot.” Brinley frowned slightly but said nothing. “Everyone, this is Clara Thorn.”

“What kind of name is *Thorn*?” Sinclair sneered.

He had the kind of effortless good looks that Clara knew could spell trouble, and his sneer lined up exactly with the other good-looking bullies she’d met in the past. “What kind of name is ‘Hunt?’” Clara shot back as she felt her face flush. “At least my parents actually *are* hunters.” Daria had, if nothing else, taught Clara that standing up right at the outset was the best policy.

Phoebe’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion, while her friends exchanged baffled glances. “Counter-hunters, that is. The Holdaways.”

Lucy frowned. “Then why is your name Thorn?” Lucy actually looked a lot like the triplets, although her complexion was a bit darker. She was the type of girl that could stand out or be overlooked, depending on her mood. Clara felt a twinge of jealousy at Lucy’s perfectly straight, shining black hair.

“Because her parents are dead, silly,” Phoebe said, taking the opportunity to seize the conversation. “Everyone knows the Holdaways were killed by paladins because they were out in the garbage world where nobody belongs.”

Clara’s face grew hotter, and she opened her mouth to fire off an insult, but Idalia interrupted her. “You’re just jealous because your parents are too scared to let you go out and have any fun.” Idalia’s statement sounded surprisingly matter-of-fact—she wasn’t insulting the other girl, just pointing out a truth.

But although Phoebe flushed a bit, she managed to push out a derisive laugh. “I wouldn’t be caught dead over there,” she said airily. “We’re firm supporters of the Oberherr Doctrine.”

“The what?” Clara whispered to Johanna, who was standing next to her.

“Later,” the triplet muttered, not taking her eyes off the other five.

Clara glanced at her and realized the wisps of magic that were always darting around had started to glow brighter and thicker around her classmates. They were summoning power for themselves

—but for what? She looked back to Phoebe and her gang and realized they were doing the same. “I thought we weren’t allowed to use magic outside of class.”

“Or approved activities,” Ed mumbled.

“What do you mean?” Phoebe said, her eyes narrowing.

“You’re all gathering power,” Clara said. “Why?”

“How can—no I’m not,” Phoebe said, and the magical equations flowing around her diminished slightly. “Magic is forbidden outside of classes or approved activities,” she recited, echoing Ed’s words.

“Then what’s your problem?” Clara asked. She noticed that while Phoebe and her friends had stopped gathering power, her own friends had continued to draw magic into themselves. Self-defense, Finlay had told her, was the other acceptable reason for students here to use magic.

“Our problem is *you*, all of you,” Phoebe said with some heat, taking a step toward them. “You Deniers. Wasting your time with Ordinary schools in an Ordinary world, instead of dedicating yourselves to magic and Underhill as we’re all meant to do. The Oberherr Doctrine states—“

“Just call him Aldworth,” Elsie spat. “That’s his name.”

Phoebe’s expression grew dark. “*Minister Oberherr* was looking out for all of us. For the good of all. His Doctrine called for us to protect the Homeland, to remain *here*. You endanger magic, you invite the paladins down on all of us, every time you and your kind step over *there*.” She clenched her fists and once again drew magic into herself. Phoebe’s friends stepped a bit closer to her and resumed drawing power as well.

“You Homelanders are just stuck-up cowards,” Elsie said.

“Are not!” Augustus protested.

“All you want is for everyone to listen to you and not think for themselves,” Harriett said. Clara had the distinct feeling that this argument was one the kids had inherited. They seemed to be repeating phrases someone else had given them. “Minister Huckle wants us to be free to make our own choices.”

“Huckle sucks eggs!” Augustus shouted.

“Wow, that’s all you’ve got?” Elsie smirked. “Eggs?”

Phoebe snapped a hand forward, and magic spiraled along her arm. The equations were simple, and Clara was sure this was some kind of attack. In fact, she could see it: the symbols in the equations were formed from bold, thick lines, and the equation seemed to be deliberately unbalanced, forcing the energy to blast toward Clara and her friends. In a moment, Clara’s mind grabbed the math and corrected it, adding a balancing symbol to one side of the equation. It took less than an eyeblink, and she concentrated, forcing her change to stick. The glowing symbols flowing around Phoebe’s arm picked up speed—

—and exploded.

The girl’s entire arm caught on fire, and she screamed, her eyes flying wide as the air filled with the smell of rotten eggs. Her friends leapt back in alarm, and Brinley quickly gestured toward Phoebe. A rush of magic darted up Brinley’s arm and closed the gap between her and Phoebe, and a moment later, Phoebe’s arm was drenched in water, steam and smoke quickly dissipating. Clara got a whiff of ivy and fresh-cut grass—Brinley’s magic did smell nice!

Sinclair’s fingers twitched in a quick, complex pattern, and a handful of small pebbles materialized in the air and came hurtling toward Clara’s group. Idalia countered, her magic already poised, and a blast of wind pushed the pebbles into the ground before they hit anyone. *Not that pebbles that small would have hurt*, Clara thought. *Who throws pebbles as an attack?*

“Nice one.” Harriett sneered at the boy as her own magic coiled around her chest. “I suppose your fancy tutors taught you that instead of the approved curriculum?”

“Stop it,” Finlay said quietly, his voice hard and commanding. “Everyone. Nobody needs detention. Or worse.” Clara looked at him. He was staring back toward the stadium. “That’s enough,” he added.

Sinclair followed Clara’s gaze. “Professor Beley,” he muttered. “And Coach McAndrew.”

"We should be going," Idalia said pointedly, and all three triplets immediately pivoted and began walking quickly back to the castle. Clara and her friends turned to follow, but Phoebe's group stayed where they were.

"We'll be seeing you," Phoebe called softly, her voice low and dangerous.

"They're in our year, aren't they?" Clara whispered to Johanna as they walked.

"More's the pity," the triplet growled.

"So aren't they going to the same dorm?"

"That lot? No. The Witchers have a private residence on the other side of the castle. Phoebe and her followers live there. They wouldn't be caught dead in a dorm."

"What was all that Homelander—"

"They wouldn't be caught dead in a dorm," Harriett repeated, cutting Clara off. "So let's wait until *we* are in a dorm to get into that." She kept her voice low as well, and Clara realized this might be a touchier subject than she'd originally picked up on. They walked in silence until they were safely back in the common room of their hall. The room was empty when they arrived, and it felt incredibly comfortable to Clara. Her eyes drank in new details that she'd missed before: the plush rugs laid haphazardly across the stone floor, the worn edges of the book shelves, the gentle patina on the table lamps, the scattered arrangement of stout furniture. Earlier, the room had seemed *worn*; now, it was starting to feel *loved*.

A quick stab of homesickness thrummed through her, but she set it aside.

"Now," Harriett said, plunking down into a worn easy chair, "we can bring you up to speed on the politics of witches." Clara dragged another chair over and eased herself into it. Ed and Idalia took up positions on opposite ends of a couch, while Elsie dropped cross-legged to the floor.

Idalia spoke first, falling into a sort of lecturing tone that reminded Clara of Professor Mycroft. "Homelanders—that's

Phoebe's bunch, and especially their parents—believe that magic originates here in Underhill and leaks into the Ordinary world through the Borders that we use to travel back and forth.”

“They think all witches should stay here, and never go over there,” Johanna added.

“Meaning that if they're right, they'd cut off all magic in the Ordinary world,” Finlay said, shaking his head sadly.

“Hang on. Magic comes from Underhill?” Clara asked.

“Nobody knows.” Finlay sighed. He'd plunked down on a sofa between Ed and Idalia. “Our parents—most witches, honestly—think magic originates in the Ordinary world, and it flows to Underhill through the Borders. Oberherr called us all ‘Deniers.’”

Ed cleared his throat and waited until everyone was looking at him before he spoke. “Minister Oberherr—his real name is Reginald Aldworth—ran a campaign to become Prime Minister—that's the head of the witch government here in Underhill—based on a ‘doctrine’ of strictly regulating passage to the Ordinary world, and reducing the number of Borders allowed to exist.”

“So I take it he didn't win?” Clara asked worriedly. She hated having to choose sides: doing so always meant alienating one group, and what if she chose wrong?

“He did not,” Johanna said. “His brother, Clayton Aldworth, won. What, eighteen years ago? It was before we were born.”

“Eighteen years,” Idalia confirmed. “Dad still won't talk about anything else during elections.” She rolled her eyes.

“Anyway,” Johanna continued, “the two hate each other, and all of their followers basically hate each other as well. Oberherr appeals to the rich families, like Phoebe's family. And her friends'.”

“Is it... a problem?” Clara asked. Her stomach was starting to get that first-day-of-school wobbly feeling. In town after town, she'd had to try and quickly figure out which group of kids in her new school was the right group to try and be nice to, which group was the one to avoid... for some reason, she hadn't considered that a school

of magic, existing in some kind of alternate dimension, would have the same challenge.

"We mostly keep away from them, and they keep away from us," Elsie said flatly. Clara gave her a curious glance; the expression on the other girl's face was pinched. Clara wondered if there *had* been problems at one point. "Since they're not in the dorm, we only have to see them in classes, and we all sit on one side and they sit on another."

"You'll see," Finlay said, rolling his eyes. "You can pick out the political spectrum just by the seating chart."

"But this was years ago," Clara said, her face confused.

"Oberherr wasn't the problem," Idalia said, still lecturing. "Dad says he was just an expression of the problem."

"Just... over where magic comes from?" Clara said, utterly bewildered. "That seems so... minor?"

"Phoebe and her friends want to tell everyone else what to do, how to live, where to go, where to live, what to think, you name it," Elsie snapped. "That's what it's about. And that's why if she ever gets in my—"

"Easy," Finlay said soothingly. "She won't. They won't. You know that." He turned back to Clara. "It's why we tend to go everywhere as a group, or at least in pairs. Phoebe's bunch aren't opposed to getting nasty if they catch you alone. Although after what you did..." He smiled. "They might think twice before they mess with *you*."

Fantastic, Clara thought, her nerves in a full jangle. *I haven't even seen my bedroom and I've made enemies. That must be a record for me.* She offered a wan smile to her new classmates, vowing to make sure *they* would appreciate it, at the very least. "So the paladins," she said, eager to move the conversation away from choosing sides. "Who exactly are they?" *Other than the people keeping me from going back to Mom and Dad*, she added to herself.

"Basic witch hunters," Idalia said. "They trace their families back to Salem, even back to the witch hunters in medieval Europe. 'God hates

magic,' 'suffer not a witch to live,' that kind of thing." She shrugged. "We mostly stay away from them and it's fine, but they've gotten better at finding us if we're in groups. It's been all over the news."

"More Homelander propaganda," Elsie sniffed. "Make people afraid, keep them in Underhill."

"So they're religious? The paladins?"

"Not really. Lip service, Mom says," Johanna answered. "Plenty of witches are religious. We're Catholic."

"Church of England," Elsie said, raising a hand.

"Protestant," Finlay said.

"Baptist," Ed said. "But not really. My family quit the church a bit after I was born."

"The paladins just use religion to get other people to play along, and to make themselves feel all righteous," Harriett said.

"Ladies. Gentlemen." Everyone jumped and looked toward the door. Professor Mycroft was standing there, hands on her hips, and she didn't look happy. "I am given to understand that you were in a *fight* with Phoebe Witcher and her... friends." It wasn't a question. "And that magic was used."

"Phoebe tried to cast a fireball at us," Idalia said quickly. "We didn't do anything. Her spell backfired and caught her own arm on fire."

"None of us cast anything," Johanna added. "Except in defense."

"Not that I wouldn't have," Elsie muttered, but she subsided when Idalia shot her a fierce look.

"Regardless, you know the rules. They have been restricted to their residence for the next forty-eight hours. I will take you at your word, given no evidence to the contrary, that you did nothing but defend yourselves, but you are all nonetheless restricted to this hall for the next twenty-four hours. Meals will be brought up from the kitchen."

"But that's—" Harriett started, heat rising in her voice.

"That's final," Mycroft snapped. "Professors McAndrew and Beley both witnessed the event, and they've insisted. The rules are

absolute, particularly here on campus. Clara, I realize you are new here, but...." The professor's frown deepened. "I'm disappointed, I'll just say that."

Heat rushed to Clara's face, and her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes.

"But we didn't—" Idalia protested.

"Avoid confrontations so there was no question," Mycroft interrupted, raising her voice. "That will be all. It is time for bed anyway."

She whirled and let the door slam shut behind her as she left the hall.

"Well that sucks," Finlay sighed.

"Stupid Phoebe and her stupid friends," Elsie growled. "Getting us in trouble when we didn't even do anything."

"I'm sorry," Clara said quietly, wiping her eyes. "I actually did use magic, I guess?"

"Wait, you did?" Finlay asked, confused.

"I kind of... I could see that Phoebe was about to do something."

"Visual witch," Idalia said solemnly.

The phrase made Clara twinge. She didn't *want* to be different or set apart. "I guess. So I kind of... I guess I twisted her magic, a bit. That's why it backfired."

Everyone stared at her silently for several heartbeats.

"What?" Clara's heart started pounding. What had she done?

"You modified *Phoebe's* magic?" Idalia asked, her eyes wide. "I mean, I know you did us, but... we had to let you, right?"

"I don't know. It... she was meaning to cast something *at* us," Clara stammered, her heart now slamming in her chest. "I just... I told it to stay where it was, is all. Sort of." *Please don't hate me. I'm not weird.*

"That's impossible," Harriett said flatly. "That's more than tweaking a spell that we're not doing right. That's... it's modifying someone else's magic. It doesn't work like that. Besides, you're too new at this. You must have just misunderstood." She set her jaw, shooting Clara a defiant look.

A cold hand clenched around Clara's stomach. "Yeah," she said softly. These kids had been nothing but friendly to her, and she wasn't about to alienate them—especially since she'd apparently already made enemies of Phoebe's clique. "You're probably right. Sorry."

The tears rose up in her eyes again anyway.

"Hey," Finlay said, rising from the sofa and crossing to where Clara was now huddled in her chair. "Hey," he repeated, leaning down to give her a friendly hug. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry," Clara said into his shirt front. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," Finlay said. He stood. "Harriett, you're scaring her. Stop it. You okay?" He looked intently at her. Clara sniffed and nodded. Finlay smelled nicer than she'd imagined. Comforting. Safe. She nodded again, this time more firmly. "Okay. Don't worry about it." He returned to the sofa. "Just tell us exactly what you saw."

Clara took a deep breath before she spoke, glancing at the others. Harriett's expression was still somewhere between annoyed and angry, but the others were leaning forward a bit, their expressions interested. She looked back to Finlay, who'd knelt in front of her. "I could see you all pulling magic into yourself. It kind of... it glows, I guess. Different colors. And I could see Phoebe and her gang doing the same thing. It all felt... really tense." Another deep breath. "And then Phoebe stuck her arm out, and her magic started spiraling down to her fingers. But it didn't look... balanced, I guess." Deep breath. Her heart was starting to slow a bit. Harriett's expression had softened. "So I just concentrated on it being balanced. And it changed. Just a little. But then her arm caught on fire."

"Balanced?" Ed asked softly.

"It's like in math, right? Basic algebra. Five plus x equals eight, so it only balances if x is three. If x is nine, it doesn't balance. Phoebe didn't... balance. It felt like an attack. Like..." Clara frowned. "It's hard to explain. But I concentrated on balancing it."

"You *changed* her spell," Idalia said. "Not just tweaking it, making it work better."

"I don't think so," Clara said defensively. "It *was* just a tweak."

"But her arm caught on fire," Harriett pointed out.

"I don't understand how all of it works," Clara said, glaring at Harriett. "It felt like... maybe the imbalance is what made it an attack?"

Finlay nodded slowly. "They actually teach us that, Harriett. The target is part of the spell, and if your target is out of reach or something, they spell won't complete. It'll backfire."

Idalia cut in. "So, wait. You say you balanced her magic." Clara nodded, her face starting to flush again. "No, don't get upset," Idalia told her. "I'm working through this. You balanced her magic. But that meant taking the target *out* of the spell. You think."

"Maybe?" Clara said softly. It made sense.

"It makes sense," Finlay echoed. "If the spell was balanced, it'd be something more like summoning flame in your palm, right? Aren't those basically the same spell?"

"Absolutely," Elsie said confidently. "Fire is my thing. It's just the focus of the spell. So you didn't really change the spell, you just tweaked the target, and Phoebe didn't have her palm in mind." She nodded approvingly. "I like it."

"That's incredible," Johanna breathed. "You're *weird*, Clara. I like it."

Clara's breath caught in her throat. It sounded like Johanna genuinely meant *weird* as a compliment, but Clara suddenly felt just inches from being pushed out of the group. Nobody liked *weird*.

"That's impossible?" Harriett repeated, but she didn't sound as certain.

"That's amazing," Idalia cooed. "And she did it before to Elsie and Ed, right? So we know it's possible. Can you do me? Like, now?"

Clara blinked away a tear. "What do you mean?"

"I'll do a light spell. Something easy. Can you change it? I'll do it white, maybe you can just change the color?"

Idalia had already raised her hand, palm up, and started directing magic to it. Clara unfocused her eyes slightly, and the equa-

tions sprang into life. As usual, they were everywhere, flitting through the walls, coursing around her classmates' feet, and even spinning here and there through the old furniture. But she focused on the bright symbols now darting up into Idalia's palm, where a tiny spark of white light was beginning to ignite.

But what part of those equations defined the hue?

"Can you change it to red, or something else? I need to see which part of it controls the color."

Idalia raised one eyebrow, and the equations shifted subtly as the spark of light turned a bright red.

There you are, Clara thought, leaning forward in her chair as she stared at Idalia's arm. One set of symbols had twisted into a new configuration. Clara concentrated, urging them back to their original pattern.

"Oh, that feels weird," Idalia said suddenly. "Like it tickles, only in my head. Oh!" she exclaimed as her spark of light shifted to white. Her eyebrows scrunched together as she concentrated, and Clara saw the equations shift back to the configuration for red just as the spark of light changed back as well. "So you can't force it if I'm concentrating," Idalia said. "Wow, that's hard to actually do."

Clara peered more closely at the equations. "You've got a leak, is why." Idalia's light equation wasn't fully unbalanced, but it put too large a value on one side, and an entirely separate equation, twirling around the first, compensated by absorbing the extra energy. Clara concentrated again, balancing the main equation and excising the second one.

"Oh," Idalia breathed. "Oh, that feels *very* weird, but... oh. I see." The spark of light in her palm grew to a full sphere that filled her entire hand. "Oh, oh, oh!" Her eyes grew wide. "I get it." She nodded slowly. "Stop what you're doing," she instructed Clara.

Clara let her eyes refocus as she sat back in her chair.

"Look, I can keep it going," Idalia said as the sphere of red light continued to shine steadily. "I know what it should feel like now."

“Hmmm,” Harriett murmured, staring closely at her sister’s sphere.

“That’s amazing,” Ed said quietly.

“You’re amazing, Clara,” Finlay said firmly. He was smiling, and happiness fluttered in Clara’s chest.

“I, for one, look forward to being locked up in here tomorrow,” Idalia said as she extinguished the light. “We are going to do some experiments!” The triplet’s voice was filled with delight.

“We’re going to go over Wizard’s Rules, too,” Finlay said brightly. “I have a feeling Clara is going to be a secret weapon.”

Clara returned her friends’ smiles. This was new: *Smiles*. Friends. People who liked a little *weird*. What a strange, happy concept!

“You know,” Harriett drawled, “Phoebe and her gang are never going to get over what we did.”

Clara’s smile fell.

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” Harriet said. “You’re clearly one of us now, because you’ll never be one of them.”

“Suits me fine,” Finlay said with a grin.

“Aaaand,” Elsie added thoughtfully, “they don’t actually know *who* set Phoebe’s arm on fire. Clara, you’re our secret weapon!”

Clara’s smile returned in full force.

CHAPTER 16

PRACTICE MAKES FRIENDS

Clara's friends hadn't been kidding: they all wanted a turn with whatever Clara was able to do. Johanna went next, calling up the same light spell that Idalia had and having Clara tweak it until she could summon a perfect, warm white sphere with just a thought. Harriett repeated the same trick, and once she got it perfect, the three triplets went off to another corner of the common room, whispering furiously to each other.

"Do me next, I guess," Elsie sighed, rising effortlessly from where she'd been sitting on the floor. "But not light spheres. Those are already easy."

"Nothing with fire again," Johanna warned. "That was a little much."

"Do the Illusory Orchestra," Finlay said. "Last time she tried it, she almost burned down the entire room," he added in an aside to Clara.

Clara's eyebrows drew together in concern. "Is that... safe? Like, we're still not supposed to be doing magic, right? Light spheres are one thing, but..."

"Actually, we can practice small stuff in here," Ed said quietly.

“It’s shielded. Illusory Orchestra would normally be allowed...” He trailed off as he eyed Elsie. His expression didn’t hold a lot of hope or trust.

“I guess that’s the point of this,” Elsie said with a shrug.

Clara unfocused her sight again, letting the magic in the room come into sharp focus as Elsie’s fingers began twitching in a complex pattern. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, and Clara immediately saw the problem: her equations were, like the triplets’, completely unbalanced—but in the opposite direction. Clara had begun to think of one side of each spell as the “power” side, and the other as the “effect” side. In this case, Elsie was feeding far more power into the construct than the effect called for.

“I’m not sure—“ Clara began, just as Elsie said, “*Ceolfhoireann de rud ar bith!*”

Clara’s eyes flew wide open as Elsie’s magic shifted and twisted, the “power” side of each equation now grossly overbalanced. All that energy had to go somewhere—and the only simple spell that Clara was now deeply familiar with was the one for the light sphere. Quick as she could, Clara’s mind twisted Elsie’s equations, splitting the “effect” side of each into two parts, one for whatever Elsie had been trying to do, and another for the light sphere.

“Ooooooh,” Finlay said, his voice full of wonder.

Clara blinked, refocusing her eyes, and looked around. Multicolored light spheres filled the common room, each one bobbing and weaving to the gentle, confident sounds of an unseen orchestra. “Pretty,” she breathed.

“How the...” Elsie said, looking around, her mouth agape.

“You were putting way too much power into it,” Clara said as her eyes followed a particular cluster of orbs around the room. “I added the light bubbles to take up the rest. I think you have, like, a default of some kind that channels extra power into fire.”

“I do like fire,” Elsie admitted.

““The rest’ must have been an awful lot,” Idalia said as she and her sisters rejoined the others.

“Apparently,” Johanna agreed. “Still, it’s very pretty.”

The spheres faded along with Elsie’s concentration, as she allowed the magic to stop flowing. The music died out as well, with one last crescendo of brass and a gentle susuruss of snare drums.

“Me next,” Finlay said excitedly. “I can never get simple levitation to work.”

“Not without making noises like a popcorn machine,” Elsie added.

Finlay immediately gestured to a throw pillow that Elsie had been leaning against. “*Sanftschweben!*”

The pillow leapt into the air, hovering about three feet up, while the common room filled with loud *pop!* noises that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Clara hurriedly refocused on the magic: The symbols in Finlay’s equations were so misshapen that they were running into one another. The “effect” side of the construct was especially mangled, and little sparks of magic flew off, each spark accompanied by a *pop* in the room. “I don’t actually know—” she began.

“Just fix it!” Finlay shouted with delight as the pops continued echoing around the room.

But Clara had no idea what the equation should look like. So she dove in and started wrenching the symbols this way and that. The pops grew louder and more frequent, and she wrenched them back the other way.

“That’s weird,” Finlay said, his voice suddenly sounding uncomfortable. “Oof, that hurts my stomach.” He let out a low moan and leaned over, pressing his palms into his thighs.

Clara wrenched the magic again, forcing the symbols apart. The pops subsided completely.

“Pillow fell,” Elsie pointed out.

“Oghm,” Finlay said, doubling over as he vomited onto the floor.

“Oh!” Clara said, releasing the magic. “Oh, Finlay! I’m sorry!”

“Mghfrm,” he assured her and retched once more before rocking

back on his heels. His face was pale and drawn, and he was obviously forcing himself to breath slowly.

“B *’fheàrr seo a bhith glan aig an aon àm,*” Ed said, pointing at the mess on the floor. It vanished immediately.

“Come again?” Harriett said.

“It’s an old Scots’ cleaning spell,” Ed muttered. “It’s in that workbook Professor Mycroft told us we could review for extra credit.”

“How did you even know how to pronounce all that?” Idalia asked.

“Four dictionaries and some help from Professor Habborlain.”

“That right there would be worth extra credit,” Johanna admitted. “Finlay, you okay?”

“Yeah, great,” Finlay said, still a little green. “I don’t think I want to do that again, though.”

“I’m sorry,” Clara repeated with a wince. “But I don’t know what that spell *should* look like, and you had it all—it looked mangled to me. All pressed together.”

“I don’t even know what mine must look like,” Idalia said. “But all I felt was a tickle.”

“I knew what I was looking at, though,” Clara reminded her. “You did it white and then red, so I knew what you were trying to do.”

“What about me?” Elsie asked.

“Yours was just... unbalanced. So I added the only thing I knew. The light spheres. I knew which part controlled color, so I just let that do what it wanted.”

“Interesting,” Idalia said thoughtfully. “We could try—“

“I’m out,” Finlay said firmly, heaving himself to his feet. The color was returning to his face. “Grand experiment and all that, but no.”

“Ed, you could—“

“Not tonight,” Ed said quickly, his face flushing bright red. “We did me. And it’s getting late, and Finlay wanted to go over Wizard’s Rules. Didn’t you?”

“Oh, sure. Yeah.” He levered himself off the sofa and stood for a moment as if checking his balance. “Idalia, could you pull the board out?”

The triplet let out a long-suffering sigh. “I hate that thing. Do you really need it?”

“I have to draw out the field, yeah,” Finlay said, bobbing up and down on his toes a bit. Seemingly satisfied that he wasn’t going to vomit again, he started walking to the far end of the common room. “C’mon, I’ll help, but it takes two.”

“What’s the board?” Clara asked Ed.

“Basically an Ordinary whiteboard, except it works entirely on Bavarian mechanics and French magic.” It sounded like none of that was a good thing. “We all wish they’d just buy whiteboards.”

“Or iPads,” Harriett muttered darkly as she followed Idalia. “I’ll hook it up,” she added with a sigh.

“You know electronics don’t work reliably here.” Johanna echoed her sister’s sigh. “I’ll run the lever.”

“This sounds like a production,” Clara said.

“You’ve no idea. C’mon,” Elsie added wearily as she began crossing the room toward the others. Clara fell in behind her.

The board itself was an immense, thick pane of bubbly green glass, surrounded by a heavy, riveted bronze frame. It moved—with much difficulty, based on how much Finlay and Idalia were struggling—on what appeared to be casters made from heavily patinated brass. A half dozen rubber hoses, each as thick as Clara’s forearm, trailed away from it toward the wall. Johanna and Harriett were attaching the far ends of these hoses to a set of copper fittings that protruded from the wood paneling on the wall, sliding each hose over a fitting and then screwing down a clamp of some kind to secure everything.

“How’s it work?” Clara asked, amazed at the amount of effort the board seemed to require.

“You draw on it with your finger. Easiest thing in the world with an iPad,” Elsie answered. “Except in the 1600s or whenever these

were built, at which time you drew in dirt. So the Bavarians invented this. It pumps enchanted steam in one end, which fills up the space between the two glass panes.”

Clara hadn’t realized there were two, but now that The Board had been pulled well away from the wall and she could see it end-on, she realized it was easily thick enough for two slabs of glass.

“As you draw, it lights up the steam. It’ll hold for hours, easily. Days, even, if you keep it pressurized. When you’re done, you pump that steam back out, pump in a neutralizing fog, pump *that* out, and start over.”

“What if you don’t do all of that?” Clara asked.

“Eventually the steam eats away at the glass, we’re told.”

“Cool.”

“No, because I imagine it’d eat away at *us* next,” Elsie said.

“Not cool.”

“No.”

“Okay, it’s ready,” Finlay said, breathing heavily from his exertion. “Pump it.”

Harriett threw a lever on the wall, and a shuddering hiss filled the common room. The board began rattling wildly, despite its size and obvious weight, and thick white steam began to fill the space between the two slabs of glass.

“There’s too much air in it,” Idalia called, peering at the top of the board. “Throw the bleed line.”

Harriett threw a second lever, and the hissing and clanking grew even louder. “Hope nobody else is sleeping yet,” she yelled over the noise.

The steam pushed into the board faster, and Clara watched it climb up and up and up, growing thicker until it was an almost opaque white.

“Close the bleed!” Idalia shouted. Harriett threw the second lever back while Idalia stared closely at the board. “Shut it!” she yelled suddenly. Harriett, who’d clearly been waiting for the order, slammed the first lever closed.

"The one in the second-year dorm exploded last year," Elsie explained as the noises died away. "Flaw in the glass, exacerbated by years of abuse. They warned us all not to over-pressurize them."

"Okay," Finlay said as he stepped in front of the board. "Wizard's Rules Football. Soccer, for you colonials," he added with a grin.

"I thought our football came first?" Ed asked as he joined them.

"1869, Ed," Finlay said with an even bigger grin. "Ours goes back to the mid-19th century!"

Ed blinked. "But that's—"

"Don't bother," Elsie said. "I've tried, it's no use."

"As you know, it's a three-team sport, played on a roughly triangular field." As he spoke, Finlay sketched the field on The Board with his finger, which left a glowing white line behind it. "Six members per team, usually starting out like this." He jabbed the board as he continued, leaving small white dots behind. "Center, two Wings, two Guards, one Goalie. The Goalie isn't permitted to leave the Home, which is the marked area right in front of the goal net. The Centers face off in the middle of the field, where the ball is dropped from the sky. Whoever kicks it first gains first possession for their team, and the game goes from there."

"Okay," Clara said with a nod.

"One point per goal, most points wins. Easy. Nothing like your so-called football," he added, another grin softening his words. "Centers can use the Dash spell; lets them move at double speed in a straight line, but they stop cold if they contact anything—even the ball.

"Wings can use Leap. Lets them jump straight up. Also Kick, which lets them hit the ball with two to three times the usual force. But that has a ten-minute cooldown, so it's really only useful once or twice in a game. They can't hold the ball, but if they can balance it on their foot or knee, they can take it with them on a Leap. It's rare, but a few professional players are really good at it.

"Guards have a whole book of spells, but they have to pick them in advance, and they can only pick four. One has to be air-related,

one earth-related, one for fire, and one for water. They're usually minor attacks or disruptions. They can use each one just once per period.

"Finally, Goalies can use Pop, which is a short-range teleport spell. Just like in Ordinary football, they can grab the ball with their hands. But Pop has a five-minute cooldown, so they have to be judicious with it.

"Anyone can use a variety of approved defensive spells, but in reality you don't see much of that. Things just move too fast."

"You mentioned an Ender?" Clara asked, taking a step toward the board.

"The best part. It's hidden like a trap. Once it's triggered—and the trigger is randomized, but it almost always winds up being proximity based—the Ender blasts out and starts slamming into people. Hurts a mess, I can tell you. But if you can get it into someone else's goal, you win."

"Which leaves the traps."

"Okay, maybe those are the best part," Finlay said, excitement building in his voice. "They're awesome. Triggers are totally randomized—they can be proximity, they can be based on the current score, on a particular team making a goal, a lot of things. And the locations of each trap are random, too. But the teams get to choose which traps there are—monsters, fire, blasts of wind, total darkness; the list is huge. Each team picks three traps per period, so that's nine per period, twenty-seven per game. And the traps roll over—if you don't set them all off in one period, they stay put until they're set off or the game is over."

"Wow," Clara said. "Impressive and terrifying."

"The best, like I said." Finlay nodded. "But here's where you can come in: there's no rule against communicating with the coaches, and the coaches are allowed to communicate with their team captain, who can obviously communicate with the other players."

"But I can't communicate directly with the players," Clara said.

"There's no rule. We all shout. But it's impractical, because

everyone is shouting. And you might wind up high in the stands, right? So no. And the players can't carry communications spells—only the captain, who usually plays Center, and that can only connect them to their coach. But when it comes to the coach? The rules are silent!" Finlay beamed as if he'd just discovered the most important loophole in the world.

"So I spot the traps and tell the coach?" Clara guessed. *They're including me*, she thought happily.

"Exactly. Like Elsie said, you're our secret weapon. And you spot the triggers as well, if you can figure out what they are."

"So which team do I do this for?"

"There's a team for each year in the school," Idalia said. "Even the littles, although their traps are more funny than dangerous, and their Ender moves pretty slowly. So I guess you'd help out the ninth-years during in-school matches. Sometimes, eleventh and twelfth can field two teams, and usually ninth and up have backup players. But yeah, for in-school matches, you'd help our team."

Wait, what? "In-school? There are others? Schools, I mean?" Clara asked.

"Oh, yeah," Finlay said. "Liginbaum's isn't the only school of magic. It's the oldest, and the most deeply rooted in Underhill. But the Eastern Europeans tend to go to Shkolamagii, which is only a few hundred years old. And there's also Mabeobhaggio, which gets mostly students from the Asian countries. And it's in China, not Underhill. My brother did an exchange semester there. Mashujaa wa Uchawi in South Africa, also in the Ordinary. So is Legatum Antiquum in South America, although that's a small school. But they all have football teams, and a few times a year, they'll have inter-school tournaments. There are some other smaller schools too, and they send teams sometimes."

"So I'd help out Liginbaum's in those matches."

"Obviously." Finlay nodded firmly. "All we need to do is explain our strategy to Professor McAndrew. He's the head coach."

"I think I'd prefer to go to another practice first," Clara said carefully. "Make sure I can actually do it, you know?"

"Fair enough," Finlay allowed with a smile. "But first, let me walk you through some of the major play formations so you'll know what to expect."

"I'm going to bed," Ed said with a sigh. "I've seen this before; he'll go on all night."

"We're with him," the triplets said in unison, and the four trooped out.

"You staying, Elsie?" Finlay asked, his tone a bit surprised.

"Are you kidding me? I love cheating," Elsie said, perking up with a mischievous smirk as she dragged a chair over to The Board. "Let's make this happen."

CHAPTER 17

SLEEP TIGHT

They didn't actually spend much more time on the game that night, as everyone started yawning despite Finlay's enthusiasm. Before long, they all headed to their rooms.

Clara's name was indeed already on her door, printed in an elegant, blocky hand that looked like it had been painted on years ago. Her room was second-closest to the common room, which Idalia proclaimed to be both blessing and curse: "You've less walking, and you're one door from a bathroom, but you'll hear everyone else tromping by."

Once she stepped into the room, Clara didn't care: although the room was small, it was cozier, and with a far sturdier bed, than she remembered ever having. A sense of guilt flooded the pit of her stomach. Mom and Dad had always given her the best they could—and she'd always had a room to herself, for as long as she could remember.

But this...

The bed, like the one she'd had in Las Vegas, was only a twin, but *this* was a stout, sturdy wooden bed. Nothing fancy, but it looked like it could withstand a few centuries of students.

It probably already had, come to think of it.

She put a hand on the footboard and shook. It barely budged.

One long side of the bed butted right up to the wall; the other side met a simple, worn nightstand made of heavy oak. It held a small lamp—which apparently operated on magic, as Clara couldn't see any cord and couldn't imagine it using batteries—and an analog alarm clock. The nightstand also included a drawer, which was empty, with a small nook beneath.

A hefty wooden armoire sat opposite the foot of the bed. Clara pulled open its doors and gasped. Inside were five complete sets of school uniforms: five trousers, five skirts, and five crisp shirts. A blazer and two vests completed the ensembles. A pair of sturdy, sensible black shoes and a pair of white sneakers rested beneath the hanging clothes.

The armoire also contained three drawers. The bottom one—for laundry, someone had mentioned—was empty. The next one up contained a selection of dark dress socks, ankle socks that would be appropriate with the skirts, and white athletic socks. The drawer also contained underwear articles, for which Clara was immensely grateful. The top drawer held athletic wear—shorts and shirts—and a pair of comfortable-looking pajamas.

Clara quickly changed into the PJs, which proved to be just as comfortable as they looked. She hesitated a moment staring at the bottom drawer. Obviously, her clothes weren't clean, but she wasn't sure if the school would clean them and return them or, because they weren't uniforms, simply... eat them or something. In the end, she folded everything carefully and placed it all in the bottom drawer, hoping for the best.

She climbed into bed, and found the mattress to be *perfect*, neither too firm nor too soft. The room had started getting chilly the moment she put the PJs on, which was absolutely fine with her: she preferred a cool room and snuggling under the covers, a habit she'd picked up in Des Moines. And these bedcovers were excellent for cuddling: crisp, soft sheets lay under a heavy quilted duvet.

Even the pillows might have been custom made for her, both of them sporting a firm core and a fluffy, cool exterior shell, all wrapped in pillowcases so soft she couldn't believe it.

I'm their secret weapon, she thought happily.

But the happiness ebbed a bit as she began to drift off to sleep. *Assuming I can keep it up.*

CHAPTER 18

TRAPSPOTTING

Clara awoke and pulled on one of her new uniforms. *I'll certainly fit in now*, she thought happily, smoothing the front of her skirt in the armoire's mirror. She made one last adjustment to her shirt collar and strode into the common area.

Given that they were stuck in the dorm all day, they had plenty of time to discuss game strategies, team formations, and more—enough to make Clara's head spin, in any event. There was also time to practice Clara's magic-tweaking abilities, although it didn't take long for them to run through the handful of spells that they all knew.

Breakfast and lunch were delivered through a dumbwaiter-style contraption, full of hissing steam and clanking gears as it brought up trays of food from the kitchen. The food here was truly wonderful: breakfast not only included eggs, thick-sliced bacon, and hash browns, but also pork and beans, grilled tomatoes, and a thin-sliced, fat-ringed piece of ham.

"I've never had beans for breakfast," Clara remarked.

"English thing," Finlay said as he dug in. "Irish too, really. It's the best."

Lunch was simpler if no less tasty: turkey sandwiches, the delicately sliced meat piled high on sourdough bread.

"Sourdough is definitely not Irish," Finlay remarked, making a face. "But I've gotten used to it. Kind of."

"Sourdough is everywhere, Finlay," Elsie said. "We've always had it in London."

"Beer bread for us," he said around a mouthful.

"Not that you've ever turned away food," Harriett pointed out. She'd set the bread aside and was eating the turkey with her fingers. Her hair ribbon today was a deep purple. *Eggplant*, Clara thought.

Idalia had gone with a primary purple, the color of grape soda. "What's that?" Clara asked, nodding toward the triplet's plate. The triplet had gotten a bowl of cooked grains for breakfast, and her sandwich filling was... green.

"Grilled zucchini," Idalia said happily. "I try to eat vegetarian."

"It's how we know she's actually a changeling," Johanna teased, taking a huge bite of her turkey sandwich. Her hair ribbon was the faintest lilac.

Their "detention" in the dorm ended just a few minutes before the next scheduled game—this one between the tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-year teams.

"Is this really allowed?" Clara asked doubtfully as they settled into their seats. They'd gotten a middle level in the stands this time, with the senior years stacked above them.

"It's just us," Finlay said easily. "We're not going to tell the teams anything. So, sure. You're just looking, not affecting players, the ball, or the field. That's all the rules say. Hurry up, they're about to start!"

Clara quickly focused—or rather, unfocused—on the field, tracing the flowing, darting equations that glowed their way across the grass. "There, there, and there," she said, pointing to the areas of the field where the equations bent and warped themselves around the hidden traps. "And there and there. Oh, and there, there, there, and there. That's all nine."

“And I have no idea where you pointed,” Finlay said. “We’ll have to figure out some kind of reference system. But can you tell what any of them are?”

Clara peered more closely as the teams took their places on the field. “That one’s a—what did you call it last time? A baz-serpent?”

“Baserpent,” Johanna corrected.

“That. But I don’t know what the rest of the symbols mean. I’ll have to see what comes out of them and then match it to what I can see.”

“What about the triggers?” Finlay asked.

“I don’t know what those look like, either. Oh!” Clara exclaimed as a player ran across one of the traps and it activated. “That one’s a location trigger then.”

A cloud of smoke poured out around the player, obscuring her just as a teammate kicked the ball toward her. “And that’s smoke. Got it. Two of the others are also smoke, and... it looks like all but one of the triggers are location based.”

“Which one isn’t?” Finlay asked, staring at the field as if trying to will the magic to become visible to him as well.

“Next to the red team’s goal. Right in front of it. The goalie keeps running over it.”

“That’ll be set to go off when someone kicks the ball over it, I bet,” Idalia said, leaning over the railing as if she too could will herself to see the magic as Clara did. “Is it a smoke trap too?”

“No, and it’s not the baserpent.”

“I think you’re about to find out,” Johanna said, pointing. The green team was lining up to make an attempt on the red goal. One of their Guards kicked the ball to a Wing, and Clara watched magic swirl up around him as he activated his Kick spell. His foot flew toward the ball, connecting with a *smack* they heard all the way up in the stands.

“The Kick spell is really simple,” Clara mused as the ball blasted toward the red goal.

"Has to be," Finlay said, not taking his eyes off the field. "You've got to cast it pretty—oh! Amazing!" He let out a loud cheer as the ball smashed past the red team's Goalie and into their goal.

"Didn't set off the trap, though," Clara pointed out.

"Yeah, you're right," Finlay said quizzically. "I wonder what—oh, there it is!"

A ripple spread out across the field, making the grass and earth undulate wildly, just as the red team's Goalie threw the ball back into play. Players fell down everywhere, including the red team Wing that the Goalie had tried to throw the ball toward.

"Earthshake!" Idalia said, clapping her hands. "Nobody ever picks that one."

"It's as likely to knock your own team down as anyone else's," Finlay agreed. "But look, the Blues managed to get possession."

"Wait, another trap just popped up," Clara said. "It's almost dead center of the field."

"That'll be the Ender," Finlay said confidently. "It's never set before the first goal, and sometimes doesn't get set until after a few. It's randomized, just like its location."

"Center field means it's almost sure to get triggered soon," Idalia said.

"Oh?" Harriett asked as she finally leaned forward over the railing as well. Clara glanced to her sides and saw Johanna and Ed leaning forward eagerly as well. Only Elsie remained slumped back in her seat, clearly uninterested in the game.

"Is it a location trigger?" Ed asked quietly.

"Always, for the Ender," Finlay said before Clara could answer.

"It looks like one, yeah," she added anyway. "And—"

"And there it goes!" Finlay cried, throwing his arms up in the air as a black ball burst forth from the ground. The displaced earth quickly flew back into place, leaving the field undamaged, and the Ender immediately flew sideways and bashed into the player who'd triggered it. She went down, rolling from the impact.

Three Wings immediately cast their Leap spells, flying into the air as the Ender came rushing toward them. The ball switched directions in mid-flight, careening directly toward the red team's goal. Clara saw the Goalie's eyes widen, and he used his Pop spell to appear directly in the Ender's path just as the ball arrived at the mouth of the goal. The ball smashed into the boy, sending him flying into the back of the goal, but he successfully diverted it—now toward the Green goal.

But the Green Center used her Dash spell to run toward the Ender at double speed. Clara could barely make her out, she was moving so fast, but she did see her curl up as she intersected the Ender's path so that she bashed the ball with her shoulder. She went down hard, rolling a few times before coming to a stop, but she'd successfully vectored the Ender toward the Blue goal.

The Blue players were arrayed on the wrong side of the field. Their Goalie set his jaw and prepared to try and catch the Ender, but none of the other players were in a position to do anything.

"He needs to jump *at it*," Finlay said urgently. "Otherwise it'll—"

But the Blue Goalie had simply set both feet firmly on the ground and braced himself. It wasn't enough: the Ender collided with his chest, pushing him well back into the goal netting. He apparently hadn't offered enough resistance, because rather than deflecting off of him, the Ender simply followed him into the net.

A horn blared as the Ender fell to the ground, lifeless.

"Well, that's it. Green wins," Finlay said with a sigh. "Are the traps dissipating?"

"They're gone," Clara said after a quick check of the field. "But I thought that simply meant Blue was out?"

"No, it deflected off a Green player and then flew a direct line into the Blue goal. So that's a win for Green."

"Excuse me," a voice said from behind them.

They all whirled to find an older girl standing behind them. She was wearing a game uniform with green chevrons on the shoulders.

Her hair was tied into a tight bun, and her expression was somewhere between curious and annoyed.

"Hello!" Finlay replied cheerfully.

"I'm Elma Burns, Captain for the eleventh-year team. Green, today. Did I overhear you say that you could *see* the traps on the field?"

"Why weren't you out with your team?" Finlay asked in a slight accusatory tone, pointing at the field.

"That was our backup Center. She's getting better, and we might have a good enough second bench to field a whole second team by the time the term starts. But they'll be super embarrassed, losing to tenths. I was up taking notes," she added, cocking a thumb back toward the stairs. She turned her gaze to Clara. "Did you say you could see the traps?"

Clara nodded, but said nothing around the sudden tightness in her throat.

"Visual witch," Johanna supplied.

"Ah. That's... *useful*. You planning to use that with your year's team?"

"We have one?" Clara asked, turning to Finlay, who nodded.

"Just one," Elma clarified. "Most years only field one team, until tenth. Tenth and up all have two each—three if we can get enough players. But tell me more about seeing the traps."

"I can pick out the location of the trap and the trigger. But I don't know what many of them are supposed to look like. I know smoke and baserpent," she added, stumbling slightly over the monster's name, "and I know location triggers and I think the ball-throw trigger, if that's what that was. And I know what the Ender looks like, now."

"Fascinating," Elma said, drawing the word out. She cocked her head to one side as she thought. "I think," she began slowly, "that I would very much like for you to come to our next practice, if you don't mind. We could show you some of the other traps and triggers. Could you point them out to the coach once the game starts?"

"If your'e *sure* it's allowed," Clara said cautiously.

"It's not *not* allowed," Elma laughed, echoing Finlay's words from the day before. "You're all ninths?" Everyone nodded. "I'll send the practice schedule to your dorm, along with a pass for all of you. We run closed practices, but the pass will let you in. I'll introduce you to our coach."

"Okay," Clara said. She glanced at Finlay, looking for confirmation.

"You know, we might want to do this with our own team, when they get back from break" Finlay pointed out.

"Same coach. He can decide if it's legal in a real game or not, but it'll at least be fun to see what you can see," Elma assured them.

"Okay," Clara repeated, this time with a smile and less hesitation. "I'll meet up with you then."

Elma bade them a good evening and clambered down the stairs. Clara and her friends followed more slowly, chatting about what she'd done and explaining finer points of the rules and game play as they went. They stopped in the dining hall for a snack—the lunch that had been sent up for them had been enormous, and nobody had room for a full meal just yet—and returned to their dorm for the night.

"You know, maybe tonight Ed can break out one of his spell books and—oh," Finlay said, stopping suddenly as he led the way into the common room.

"What? Move, you big oaf," Harriett said, pushing past the taller boy. "What's the—uh-oh." Her voice, suddenly subdued, set Clara's nerves on edge. Idalia flashed Johanna a concerned look before shoving past her sister, clearing room for everyone else to enter. As Clara entered, she gasped.

Someone had vandalized the room.

Chairs were tipped over everywhere. Books had been pulled off the shelves along the walls and strewn haphazardly about the room. Tables had been knocked over, papers scattered everywhere, and throw pillows tossed hither and yon.

Only one bookcase had been left untouched, and this one had been covered with graffiti: *DENIERS GO HOME* had been painted in crude letters across the spines of the books.

"Phoebe and her bunch did this," Harriett said angrily.

"You'll never prove it," Elsie muttered.

"I'm calling the Headmaster," Johanna announced, turning and slapping a spot next to the entry door. Clara had taken the fancifully engraved medallion mounted there as a mere decoration when she'd first seen it, but now it glowed with a soft, pulsing red light.

Popping sounds accompanied the arrival of Headmaster Dimmick and Professor Mycroft.

"Whatever is the matter?" Mycroft asked. "There had better be—ah." Her admonition trailed off as her gaze swept the room. "I see."

Dimmick cleared his throat. "Miriam, why don't you clean this up? Clara, may I speak with you in the hallway for a moment?"

"Certainly, Headmaster. Everyone, behind me, please," Mycroft said firmly. "This is a bit blustery."

Clara saw a mass of glowing equations swirl up around the professor before Dimmick pulled her gently into the hallway.

"Did the others tell you what that word means here?" he asked in a low voice.

Clara nodded.

"So you must imagine it is targeted at you."

Another nod.

"And so it may be. That said, Edmund's parents live in the Ordinary world full-time, and the triplets' parents keep an expansive home there as well. I believe Elsie's family maintains a flat in London, and even Finlay's parents own a space near Dublin. I myself have a small apartment in Berlin. So you see, it could refer to any of us. It's a common insult hurled by... well, I suppose you could call it a political faction."

"The Homelanders," Clara said.

Dimmick's eyebrows rose. "You've had quite the education in your short time here," he acknowledged. "You mustn't let this

frighten you. I've read how such... displays, I suppose, are used in the Ordinary world. They're much more common here at the school because they're so easily cleaned up." Indeed, Clara could hear the ruckus through the open doorway. "If we can identify the culprits, then they'll of course be—"

"It's Phoebe Witcher and her gang," Clara blurted out.

Dimmick's eyebrows fell into a frown. "You're certain of this?"

"They got in front of us yesterday," Clara said. "She—"

"I'm aware of the altercation," the headmaster said mildly. "But they're confined to the Witcher residence for another twenty-four hours. The entire faculty would know if they'd broken their house detention."

Clara's jaw worked for a moment as she tried to think of something to say, but Dimmick was right. She'd completely forgotten Mycroft's pronouncement from the evening before.

"So this is someone else," she finally managed.

"Clearly," Dimmick said. "There are some magics on the dormitories that monitor the comings and goings of students, particularly those who shouldn't be where they are. We'll review them."

"Thank you," Clara said quietly.

"I just wanted to let you know that you shouldn't regard this as a threat. It's a childish prank, nothing more."

"Thank you," Clara repeated a bit more loudly.

"I know this is all new to you, Clara. If at any time you need me to explain how things work here in the school, please don't hesitate to ask. My door is always open."

If I can find it, Clara thought. But she said nothing. The headmaster's words sounded rote, rather than like something he really meant. She'd heard similar words from enough school principals to know the difference. As in most of her life, school adults wouldn't provide a solution for her problems.

"It sounds like Professor Mycroft is finished," Dimmick said, gesturing to the still-open door into the common room.

Clara took the hint and edged back into the room. Mycroft had

indeed finished her work: the graffiti was gone, all the furniture was upright, and even the scattered books had been neatly re-shelved.

"Headmaster, is this, the Homelanders, all this, really just about where people think magic comes from?" Clara asked softly, leaning toward Dimmick as she spoke.

"Oh, it's a bit more complicated than that, of course," Dimmick said. He and Mycroft exchanged an odd glance, but the headmaster's voice remained distracted and unconcerned. "It's about where people should live and work, how safe people should be from the paladin threat—it's much more."

Well, that explains it all, Clara thought sarcastically? As always, adults were be extremely unclear. "What do you think, Headmaster? About where magic comes from? About where people should live?" Her classmates edged toward them, curious expressions on their faces. Idalia caught Clara's attention and raised an eyebrow.

Dimmick's gaze swept the group before he replied. "Hmm. I believe there's a balance. There are some legitimate needs for magic in the Ordinary, and some spell components that can only be obtained there." Clara turned to look up at the headmaster and found him maintaining eye contact with Mycroft. Clara looked back to Mycroft, who met Dimmick's gaze with no visible emotion. "And of course, the paladin threat is real."

"Clara's parents were counter-hunters, right?" Finlay broke in.

"Mmm? Yes, the Holdaways. Very effective. They'd become skilled at rooting out paladins' bolt-holes and such, and taking the fight to them."

"Some believed they sought out more trouble than was strictly necessary," Mycroft said evenly.

"Some did, yes," Dimmick acknowledged. "They didn't believe, as some do, that magic is diminished when witches leave Underhill."

"That's Homelander propaganda," Harriett said. "Dad says so."

"Everyone has an opinion on the subject," Dimmick said gently. "None have been proven right or wrong. I would caution you all to

avoid taking sides simply because your parents have done so. There is room to examine and understand before choosing.” He paused, breaking eye contact with Mycroft to give them all a quick, measuring glance. “With that, we will leave you to your own devices.”

Mycroft opened her mouth to add something, but never had a chance to say it: a whirl of wind—and, in Clara’s eyes, a burst of glowing equations—vanished the two adults from the room.

“That bit about ‘diminished magic is a conspiracy theory,’” Finlay said confidently. “It’s all the Homelander have: lies and conspiracy theories nobody can ever prove.”

“Like what?” Clara asked. They all moved to take seats, dragging chairs closer together as they had the night before. A ringing brass chime sounded, emanating from an apparently steam-drive clock mounted high on one wall.

“Hour to curfew,” Elsie noted.

“Not like we were going out,” Ed said.

“You were mentioning lies and conspiracies,” Clara reminded them.

“You know witches can’t have babies here?” Idalia asked.

“No.” Clara’s eyes widened. “I mean, yes, actually—Professor Mycroft said something about it when she brought me here. She said something about all the creation magic being used up when Underhill was created?”

“That’s the usual reason. But nobody knows for certain. Homelander say it’s because the government puts something in the water supply, contraceptives or something. But it’s been that way forever—people take honeymoon trips to the Ordinary when they want to have babies. They say it’s all to punish the Homeland faction, which is nonsense. Whatever prevents it from happening here affects everyone, and it always has.” Idalia sounded disgusted.

“Smart you didn’t choose their side,” Harriett said grimly.

The others nattered on, but Harriett’s words stuck in Clara’s

mind. *Did I choose a side?* She hadn't, really: she'd simply fallen in with this group because they were the first people she'd met. Although Phoebe and her crew clearly hadn't been as welcoming. *Obviously, sides have been chosen.*

What if she'd chosen wrong? Could she switch sides later? How would she ever find out where she fit in if she was already stuck on one "side"?

For a people who could seemingly change the world on a whim, witches seemed shockingly impervious to changing themselves. All these tricks and abilities, and the conversation still sounded exactly like all the ones she'd overheard back home.

"—isn't Lost anymore," Idalia said angrily, snapping Clara out of her thoughts and back to the conversation. Harriett looked as angry as Idalia sounded, and the two sisters were staring at each other, eyes wide and faces slightly flushed.

"What does that actually mean?" Clara said. "Lost? You all say it... like, with a capital 'L.'"

"It's a witch who has Lost their community. Their people," Idalia said, although she was still glaring at Harriett. "It's not supposed to be possible, because we can all sense each other to a degree. Especially in the Ordinary. But the Homelanders say losing your connection is a risk of staying in the Ordinary too long."

"Which is stupid," Finlay said. "You almost have to *try* to be Lost. Like, you want to be a hermit."

"It's not just hermits," Harriett said in a mocking tone as she returned Idalia's glare. "Clara never *had* any connection. She was truly Lost. And you still don't have it yet, do you?"

Clara suddenly felt trapped, and her palms went clammy. "You mean, can I sense you all?"

"Not just us. Everyone. Dimmick. Mycroft. Anyone."

Clara took a moment to think about it and to test her feelings. "I don't think so." Her voice was subdued. *So I'm not like them at all*, she thought miserably.

"She'll learn," Idalia insisted.

"And then she won't be Lost," Harriett pointed out. "But until then, she still is. That's what it means. To not have the connection."

"You can all sense each other?" Clara asked, her voice cracking at the end as her eyes grew wet.

Finlay nodded. "And Ma and Da, back home. Distantly, but they're there. And my brothers and sisters. All of you, if I focus on it."

"Oh."

"Don't worry about it, Clara; it'll come to you," Idalia assured her.

"I'd happily do without it," Elsie offered. "You can have my connection if you want. It'd keep my parents off my back." Clara gave Elsie a curious look as she sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"Elsie, you don't mean that," Johanna said, aghast. Elsie merely shrugged.

Clara looked at Ed, but he was hunched into his chair, looking at the walls and clearly trying to not be involved in the debate. She stood. "I'm tired," she said, trying to sound more weary than she felt. "I think I'll turn in. See you all tomorrow." She tried to say the last bit with some cheer, but she couldn't muster it, so it just came out heavy and dull.

After spending the day with her classmates, after the soccer game, after what had seem like a string of social successes... *I'm still not one of them, yet*. It was like going to a party where you thought you'd been charming, witty, and enjoyable, only to later find out you were the only one in the place who didn't have a nose.

Clara walked to the far side of the common room, through the door that led to their individual rooms. She let the door close softly behind her and drifted down the hall to the room that had her name hanging on the door.

Not *her* room. Just the one with her name on it. She didn't have a room to call her own. This room was just on loan to her. On loan until she *fit*.

She'd been stupid to think that she could be real friends with these people so quickly. They all *sensed* each other. And she...

DON JONES

Well, she'd find a way to prove that she belonged with them. Somehow.

She stepped into the little bedroom, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it, finally alone. But then, she'd been alone all day.

She just hadn't known it.

CHAPTER 19

BORDERS IN PERIL

Clara's eyes flew open as she jolted upright in her bed. The lamp on the nightstand flashed red, and a roaring, blaring siren assaulted her ears. It kept starting at a low rumble, quickly ramped up to a nails-on-chalkboard screech, and then wound down to a low growl again before taking a quick, silent breath and starting over.

She threw herself out of bed, wrenched her door open, and leapt into the hallway, clad only in her school-provided pajamas. "What's going on?" she yelled.

Elsie, whose room was much further down the hall, was just running up to Clara's door. "Emergency alarm! Come on!"

Clara took off after Elsie, hot on the English girl's heels, and they tore into the common room. The triplets and Ed were already there, and Johanna was tugging on the far door that led out of the common room and into the hallway that connected all the dorms.

"It's locked!" Johanna shouted over the blaring alarm.

Air raid, Clara thought suddenly. *That's an air raid alarm. They used them for tornado warnings.* The memory popped into her mind unbidden, a remembrance of a town she'd lived in several years back.

"It can't be locked; it doesn't even *have* a lock!" Harriett snapped, shouldering her sister aside to give the doorknob a futile tug of her own. "It's... just stuck!"

Clara realized that the room—the very air—was filled with glowing equations—not the usual soft reds, blues, and greens she was used to seeing, but angry, bright primary colors muddled with brown and black. They positively crowded into the room.

"Something's happening with the magic," she cried.

Finlay finally arrived, barreling into the common room so quickly that he almost bowled Elsie over. Clara blinked at his appearance: his hair was an unruly mess, and his pajama shirt was on backwards. Taken as a whole, it actually created a relaxed effect, as if he'd come running from his bedroom on a Christmas morning, mussed and ready to start opening presents.

Then the alarm sounded again.

"What *is* that?" Clara shouted.

"Emergency alarm," Idalia shouted back. "It means something's—"

A *whump*, as much a feeling as a sound, blasted through the common room. It caught Clara by her core, and she thudded to the floor, landing hard on her rear. The triplets staggered, holding themselves against the wall. Finlay managed to stay upright, but Ed and Elsie both tumbled to the carpet.

Clara saw all the angry magic in the room shatter for a brief moment, scattering broken symbols and twisted equations in every direction. Then it rebounded, swirling back together in an angry storm that was becoming increasingly difficult to *not* see.

"What was that?" Elsie moaned, rubbing her backside as she pulled herself upright.

"Magic," Idalia gasped, suddenly breathing heavily, as if whatever had happened had caught her in the stomach like a punch. "Something *broke*."

The door the triplets had been struggling with suddenly flew open, revealing an ashen-faced, rumpled-looking Professor Mycroft.

“Professor!” Johanna shouted before Mycroft could speak. “What’s happening?”

“There’s an attack,” the professor said, clearly struggling to accept the situation. “An attack on the Borders—they’re being collapsed!”

“That’s what that was?” Clara asked as she rolled to her knees. Finlay offered her a hand, and she managed to regain her feet. “That... blast?”

Mycroft nodded, her eyes wide with alarm. “I just wanted to check on you. You’re all fine, and you’re to stay here. Do *not* leave this common room, do you understand? Its shields should help diminish the effect.”

She pulled the door closed behind her.

Idalia immediately grabbed the doorknob and pulled. “Locked again,” she moaned.

The siren suddenly cut off in mid-screch, leaving their ears ringing in the unexpected silence.

“The Borders are collapsing?” Elsie asked—too loudly, as Clara’s ears readjusted.

“That’s what she said,” Finlay said, quickly moderating his own voice.

The triplets’ faces turned gray as their eyes widened further. “We’re trapped here?” Idalia said in a small voice.

“It’s the school,” Finlay said, clearly not understanding the problem. “Where else would we—“

“Our *parents* are in the Ordinary!” Harriett cried. “And all of our brothers! We were the only ones staying over the break this time!”

Clara’s heart clenched. *Her* parents were in the Ordinary too. And now, what? She was cut off? She’d never see them again?

Finlay shook his head, his eyes growing wide with panic. “I’m sure they’ll be fine—“

“What if it’s not just here?” Johanna asked, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. “What if it’s not just the school? What if it’s everywhere? What if all the Borders close, what if they can’t get here,

what if we can't go back, what if—" She stopped, her increasingly hysterical questions cut off when Idalia gently slapped her face.

Clara felt as if she was going to throw up.

"It's the Homelanders," Elsie said into the now-silent room.

"We have to get to a Border," Harriett said firmly. "There's one close to the castle that will take us straight to them."

"Mycroft said—" Ed began in his quietest voice.

"I don't care," Harriett snapped. All three triplets' faces were now set, their jaws clenched and their postures tense. "We're going there. *Now*. Who's with us?"

Clara's heart felt like someone was squeezing it. She knew she should follow the professor's instructions, but she'd only had these new friends—her first friends, really—for a few days. She needed to show that she was there for them, that she'd support them. But... "The door is still locked," she pointed out.

"Undo it," Idalia ordered. Her expression softened a bit. "I'm sorry. You don't know—our family doesn't do well when we're apart. Even being in school is difficult, but we know we're just a Border away." Tears were now running down her cheeks. "You can undo it. You can see the magic; you can change it."

"Oh," Clara said. Idalia was probably right. "Okay."

"Are you serious?" Finlay said, grabbing her arm. "Mycroft said—"

"You guys are my friends," Clara said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "I know what it's like to... I mean, family is important. I get it."

Finlay nodded, setting his own jaw. "You're right. I'm with you. My family's in the Ordinary, too. Where's your Border go, Idalia?"

"Hartford."

"My family has a safe house in New York. Close enough."

"I'm in, too," Elsie announced, brushing dust off her pajama bottoms.

"Where's your family?" Finlay asked as Clara started walking toward the door.

“Who cares?” Elsie said with a shrug. “But Clara’s right. One for all, all for one.”

Ed looked like he was struggling to make a decision, but finally said, “I’ll help.”

“Thanks, Ed.” Johanna gave him a quick hug.

Clara had unfocused her eyes to examine the magic swirling around the door. “It’s on the knob itself. It’s all twisted around the latch; it’s even disrupting the magic that’s normally here.”

“Can you fix it?” Harriett asked, her voice unusually subdued.

Clara nodded slowly. “I can break it, if that’s what you mean.” She concentrated on the equations spiraling around the doorknob. They looked hastily made, the symbols rough and the equations barely balanced. In fact, she realized, they *weren’t* balanced. Not at all—they were drawing power from the magic that was ordinarily on the door, which she’d assumed was part of the room’s basic shielding. Without that input, the magic on the knob would collapse.

She reached out with her mind, twisting one symbol on the construct’s input side, stopping it from drawing on the door’s magic.

The spiral collapsed.

With a loud *bang!* the doorknob shot out of the door, bounced off the back of a chair, and clattered to the floor. Idalia, who’d been standing closest, jumped back with a squeak.

The door swung open.

“Sorry,” Clara said. “I didn’t realize—”

“Mission accomplished,” Harriett interrupted. “Someone can fix that later. Let’s go.”

“In our PJs?” Finlay asked, looking down and apparently just realizing his shirt was on backwards. He quickly righted it.

“No time,” Harriett said as she hurried out the door, her sisters close behind.

“*Semelles dures*,” Elsie said, and Clara felt a wave of magic firm up beneath her feet just as a small fireball burst into life above Elsie’s head. “No sense getting our bare feet cut up,” Elsie added as she

pushed past Clara to follow the triplets. "That should hold for a few hours at least." The fireball guttered and died.

"Thanks," Clara said as she followed Elsie, quickly examining the equations that now encased her feet.

"None for me?" Finlay asked with a sigh as he followed them. "C'mon, Ed. *Boinn chrua*," he added, the words accompanied by a loud *pop*. "That'll only be good for an hour or so, mate. Sorry." Clara looked down and saw that Ed and Finlay's feet were covered in a shiny, gelatinous goo.

"Gross. But thanks," Ed said gratefully as he and Finlay trooped after the others.

"Idalia, do you remember the snitch spell Ben taught us?" Johanna whispered.

"I could never get it to work," Idalia whispered back.

"What if all three of us try it?" Harriett suggested.

Idalia thought about it for a moment as they crept more slowly down the gallery. "Sure. That could work. Remember, it goes like this..."

Clara heard the bustle of people running back and forth, calling to each other, in the main castle hall below. She was certain that, at any moment, someone would look up and see the seven of them. She moved close to the wall opposite the stone railing and heard Finlay and Ed do the same behind her.

"That's too much; I'll never get it out," Johanna protested.

"I'll do the verbal. You do the somatic. Harriett can do the focus," Idalia said.

"Okay," Johanna relented. From behind, Clara watched the girl's fingers start twitching in a fast, complex rhythm that seemed to involve twisting her fingers together in an almost impossible pattern.

Idalia's voice rose a notch in volume as she said, "*Ich schwöre feierlich, dass ich nichts Gutes vorhabe!*"

"Bloody Bavarians," Finlay muttered.

A cool shadow seemed to fall across all of them. The rest of the

castle dimmed slightly, as if they were covered in a fine black gauze.

"It'll brighten if anyone starts to look at us, or if any adult gets too close," Idalia whispered over her shoulder. "Just keep an eye out for that."

They made it to the end of the hallway and to the blessedly normal-looking staircase there. "This goes to the main hall," Elsie whispered back to Clara. "But what are we going to do once we're there? This doesn't make us actually invisible, does it?" That last was directed to the triplets.

"No. But we're on the classroom side," Idalia said, stopping for a moment to think about it. "We should be able to duck into a classroom and out the windows, so long as nobody sees us."

"Worth a shot," Elsie agreed.

They crept quickly down the stairs, falling within view of the main hall for only a moment as they rounded into the side hall that ran parallel. These were indeed classrooms, Clara saw, with doors spaced about every forty feet. The first one was locked, and she started unfocusing her eyes to work on it, but Idalia simply moved on to the next. This wasn't locked, and they all quickly filed in, Ed closing the door softly behind them.

There were no lights in the classroom, but the moonlight coming from outside provided enough light to see. The room was set up much like every other classroom Clara had been in: individual desks lined up in neat rows, all facing a massive teacher's desk, which sat in front of an equally massive glass board, clearly a bigger brother to the one in their common room.

The triplets ran directly for the tall, heavy-looking windows that lined the opposite wall. With a *click*, Johanna unlatched one, swinging it outward like an enormous glass door. "Let's go," she said, placing two hands on the window sill and vaulting herself out. "Bushes," she added unnecessarily as the sound of crunching foliage drifted into the classroom. "Be careful."

Harriett, Idalia, and Elsie followed. Finlay stepped up and offered to help Clara, but she declined, attempting to repeat the other girls'

vault maneuver. She came close, but one knee caught on the window sill. Finlay caught her before she fell back into the room, and he helped her balance until she could swing both legs outside and drop to the now-ravaged bushes below. Finally, Finlay heaved Ed through and then vaulted himself out.

The evening was cool, and it had the kind of heaviness about it that suggested an imminent thunderstorm. Clara's pajamas felt damp, and she shivered as the sweat running down her back chilled.

"Now where?" Elsie asked, dropping the whisper but keeping her voice low.

"Back of the castle, through the garden, down the stone steps," Johanna recited. The triplets took off at a jog, the other four falling in behind them.

"The magic's just as messed up out here," Clara noted as she scanned the grounds around them.

"We need to be careful then," Ed said, huffing along behind her. "It'll attract the—"

"Direbunny." A lance of flame shot out from Elsie's finger. Clara followed it until it impacted with a small, dark shape on the ground—a shape that immediately burst into flame, screeched like a cat whose tail had been pulled, and vaporized into nothingness.

"Another," Ed said, and Clara caught the dark, rabbit-shaped creature in the corner of her eye before it too was vaporized. Her bladder suddenly felt full.

"Dammit, Ed," Finlay moaned, but none of them stopped jogging.

"Crap." Idalia skidded to a halt. The gauzy shadow that had covered them all evaporated, and the night seemed just a bit brighter as a result. Everyone else stamped to a stop just behind the triplets, who'd linked arms at the front of the group.

Between their heads, Clara saw an enormous black cat, its head down, its tail straight out, and its hissing mouth full of fangs. "What is it?" No doubt the creature was another of Underhill's dangerous fauna, with a name like "Dreadpuss" or something.

"It's a cat," Idalia said through gritted teeth.

"Just a cat?"

"Just,' she says," Harriett muttered. "It'll be someone's familiar. Danny had that catnip spell..." she added.

"I know it," Johanna said. "Focus with me. *Xiǎo māo xiǎo māo!*" she said, her tone full of authority.

The cat immediately stopped hissing, sniffed at the air, and then rolled on its back and began to purr.

"Where in the world did Danny get that?" Idalia asked as everyone jogged past the cat.

"He did that exchange semester in Beijing, remember?"

"We were like, five, so no, I don't," Harriett said.

"I do. He brought back all those Chinese dolls for us," Idalia said.

"Right," Johanna said. "You broke yours in two days, Harriett."

"Whatever."

They scurried down a set of worn stone steps as quickly as they could, and Clara was grateful for whatever spell Elsie had cast on their feet. A wide, open circular area opened up at the bottom of the stairs, surrounded by fanciful topiaries and plantings. Clara had just a moment to admire the tall blooms—they were like oversized roses, and they glowed a gentle pink—before her eyes caught what they'd come for: A Border stood in the middle of the open space.

It reminded Clara of the one she'd been pushed through... just days ago, she realized. The Border was a huge, glowing oval of gold and silver, its edges made of shiny metallic filaments that twisted and intertwined, constantly in motion. The light reflected gently off the nearby foliage, creating the illusion of bright sparkles amongst the leaves and blooms.

"It's damaged," she realized aloud. And it was: although the Border looked fine in her normal sight, the equations that made it were flowing in fits and starts, banging into each other and coming loose at the edges. The loose equations unravelled quickly, their magic dissipating into the night.

"Can you fix it?" Idalia asked.

Clara shook her head. “No way. It’s too complicated, and I have no idea what it’s supposed to look like.”

“We read that book on Borders and construction techniques,” Johanna said, her tone lacking even the slightest hint of confidence.

“I’m pretty sure that was mostly fiction.” Idalia sounded equally uncertain.

“But it said stabilizing them was easier than making them,” Harriett argued. “Remember? It was all about focusing, and feeding it with the purest magic possible.”

“How will we know if it’s pure enough?” Idalia protested.

“Can’t we just run through it?” Elsie interrupted.

“Through an unstable Border? Absolutely not,” Finlay said flatly. “I won’t let you. You never know where you’ll come out, or even if all of you will come out anywhere. No.”

“Clara can tell us if it’s pure or not,” Johanna said. “Right, Clara?”

Clara’s eyes flew wide. “I mean... I guess I can see it, but I don’t know if—“

“Perfect,” Harriett said in her signature snappy voice. “Let’s do it. All three, full focus.”

“But—“

It was clear the triplets didn’t care: they’d already started directing magic at the shimmering Border.

Clara quickly let her vision slide into magic-mode, and she saw simple equations of almost pure white streaming from the triplets to the Border. A couple of symbols here and there were off, tinging the magic with yellow and pink, but she corrected those as quickly as she could. “Can you feel that?” she asked.

“I think so,” Idalia said, her eyes narrowed. “Like this?”

The triplets’ magic evened out, becoming an even purer white, the glowing constructs collapsing into simpler forms.

“Yes!” Clara said, almost shouting.

“Is it working?” Harriett asked. “We can’t do this forever!”

“Oh, right!” Clara had forgotten to monitor the Border itself. It *was* working: the edges of the Border’s magic were becoming more

sharply defined, and its equations now streamed smoothly around it. "Yes! Yes, I think that's it!"

The triplets fed another drop of power into the Border, and then stopped, panting. Idalia bent over and braced her palms on her knees. "Let's not do that again," she said between gasps.

"What is this?" a voice boomed.

Everyone turned to look behind them, just in time to catch Headmaster Dimmick pounding down the stone stairs. Above him floated a glowing cloud of... light? Mist? Clara blinked a few times, but whatever halo was casting light over the headmaster remained indistinct.

"What are you all doing out here?" Dimmick thundered. "What is—" He fell silent as he regarded the Border. "Did you do this?" he asked more gently, raising one eyebrow.

"We did," Idalia said before anyone else could speak up. "Did we get it right?"

Dimmick nodded slowly, his attention still on the Border. "Yes. Yes, largely. Just a quick stitch..." As Clara watched, an incredibly detailed, impossibly precise jet of white magic lanced from Dimmick's hands to the Border. It made an enormous difference: the light of the Border firmed up immensely, the filaments of silver and gold drawing more closely together. She watched the equations' symbols refine themselves, adopting delicate curves and firmer lines. The Border suddenly *felt* better as well, no longer giving off a subtle, unpleasant vibration that she hadn't even realized it was broadcasting until it stopped. "That should do it." His expression relaxed, a subtle tension around his mouth and eyes fading.

"What happened, Headmaster?" Finlay asked.

Dimmick sighed. "We don't know who, or even really how. But almost all of the Borders near the castle have been unravelled. They've collapsed." He gestured toward the glowing oval of light in front of them. "We've saved this one, in part thanks to you. And one other. Good work, even if you've disobeyed more rules than I can count right now." He again raised one eyebrow as he regarded them. "And in pajamas, no less." He shook his head. "I'll speak with

Professor Mycroft. You'll hear no more about this. Go back to your dorm. *Stay* there, this time, please. I've more than enough to occupy me well into the afternoon, and I'd prefer you not add to that burden."

"Our parents," Idalia said in a very small voice.

Dimmick blinked a few times before he made the connection. "Ah. Hartford." He nodded toward the Border. "I understand your concerns, but... girls, for right now, I feel you're far safer here." He lowered his voice a bit. "What if this was conducted from the other side? What if the paladins are shutting Borders down, by some means, so that they can more easily anticipate where we'll come out?" He shook his head. "Nobody will be traveling without safeguards in place, let alone a group of unaccompanied minors." He frowned. "Promise me that you won't try."

The triplets looked at each other before answering. "We promise." Clara thought they sounded a bit defiant, and wondered if they'd keep their oath.

"I won't ask you to bind that promise." *What?* Clara thought. "Don't make me regret my trust. Back to your dorm, all of you."

They all nodded and began walking past the headmaster toward the stone steps. Clara fell in last, behind Ed, and Dimmick caught her eye as she passed him. "I see you've chosen," he said, his voice low and approving. She blushed and nodded, and he gave her a small smile.

"Your shoe goop wore off," Ed mumbled to Finlay.

"I know," the bigger boy replied.

"Never rely on Irish magic for footwear," Johanna called back. "Go French every time."

Harriett snickered as Idalia led them around to the castle's main entrance.

I made a difference, Clara thought with pride as she followed the others back.

CHAPTER 20

A MESSAGE FROM UNDERHILL

Clara fell asleep faster than she'd expected after returning to her room, the night's excitement having washed away into exhaustion almost as soon as her head had touched her pillow. But her classmates' families were very much on her mind, with so many of them living in the Ordinary. *My parents are in the Ordinary world, too*, she'd thought, her subconscious mind twisting with worry even as her conscious mind reluctantly drifted off to sleep.

So she wasn't even surprised when the dream started.

"We're glad you're home."

Clara recognized the otherworldly landscape, with its elegantly sculpted trees, the glistening, sparkling grass, and the impossible number of stars in the sky. The small elf-creature had been waiting for her.

"This is home?" she asked. *Home* had always been wherever Mom and Dad were, no matter the house, the city, or anything else. Mom and Dad weren't here, and Clara still fretted that she'd never see them again.

“Home for many,” the elf amended. “Home for you,” it added firmly.

“So everything is okay?”

Its little face crinkled into a sneer. “Okay? She asks if everything is okay!” It turned its head and yelled that bit into the night, as if its friends were watching and listening just out of Clara’s view. For all she knew, that might be the case. “Not okay,” it said dourly, turning back to her. Its expression was pained, its oversized, almond-shaped eyes drawn wide. “Not okay.” It thought about it for a moment, and then added, “No difference.”

Clara’s heart fell, just as the air around her seemed to heat into what Mom had always called a “rolling boil,” ready to turn into a full-on froth at any moment. It was an unpleasant, tense torridity that seemed on the verge of breaking into a firestorm. “Wait, what’s the matter?” she asked, panic tinging her tone.

She was pretty sure she knew what was the matter, but in this dream state, she felt almost like she was reading from a script.

The creature spread its hands, the gesture encompassing all of Underhill. Then its arms dropped limply to its sides, as if robbed of all strength. “Everything,” it moaned. “Off-balance. Cut off. *Wrong*. Everything is wrong.” It shook its head. “You are supposed to fix it,” it said mournfully. Small, jewel-like tears welled up in its eyes, rolled down its face, and shattered softly in the dirt path.

“What do I need to fix?” Clara asked. “I’ll do it.” She didn’t feel as confident as she sounded, but she couldn’t bear this beautiful creature’s sadness. She could *feel* it, coming off in bitter waves and soaking into her soul.

“We are falling,” it said and then shook its head in frustration. “No words. Wrong words,” it corrected itself. “Difficult, with you.” It looked up again, its gaze boring into her. “Take hand?” It held out an elegant hand, its fingers slightly longer than they should be and its joints placed slightly off from a human’s.

Clara nodded and took the hand gently, afraid to break it. But the

elf-creature had more strength than its appearance suggested, and its hand held hers in an unbreakable grip.

For a brief, fleeting moment, Clara *was* Underhill. Still herself, but also... *this*.

She missed her parents, Arlene and Theo Thorn. She needed them, needed their connection more than she'd ever realized. Needed their anchor, their energy, their love. But she was trapped here, increasingly cut off from them. It was if all her feelings for them were being forced through an increasingly narrow tube, and it wouldn't be long before she wouldn't be able sense them at all. Wouldn't *feel* them at all. Even her memory of them, she could tell, would soon disappear.

Her heart began beating faster.

Clara became intensely aware of how few Borders remained after the night's devastating attack. The scene had been repeated all throughout Underhill: Borders unraveling, their magics dissipating into the ground, their elegant silver-and-gold threads unraveling and fading away. She had to push now to remember how she felt about her parents, to sense her own love for them. She was suddenly aware of a gossamer thread that connected her to them, that told her they still existed. *I am connected to someone*, she realized with a start. *Just not witches*. But that connection was being drawn thinner and thinner, and she knew it wouldn't take much to snap it. And when it did, she'd forget them, forget the Ordinary.

Clara snapped back into herself as the little elf released her hand. "You see?" it asked desperately. "You feel?"

Understanding dawned. "This is how you feel. You need the Ordinary world."

It nodded, never taking its eyes off hers.

"You need the Borders."

Nod.

"Something... magic? Is it magic that comes through? Magic comes from there, to here?"

More tears welled in its eyes as it nodded again. "And back

again,” it whispered. Clara’s heart almost broke at the pain in its voice.

“How do I fix it? Just more Borders? Bring them back?”

It lifted its shoulders in a small, pathetic shrug. It didn’t know. The connection to the Ordinary had been made in other ways, before. Something from her brief contact with the elf still lingered in Clara’s mind... Fairy rings. Stacked stones. Rabbit holes. All the ways Underhill had linked with the Ordinary world, once upon a time.

Borders were all that remained.

The few that did, anyway.

“I don’t know how,” Clara said sadly. “It’s... hard. I don’t know very much magic.”

The elf’s face twisted into frown. “You *must*,” it said flatly, sudden anger coloring its voice so fiercely that Clara took a step back. “You will. Or it all dies. Forever-ever.”

It swept its hand at her in a gesture of dismissal, and Clara woke, her heart pounding and her sweat soaking through her pajamas.

CHAPTER 21

SECRETS WITHIN SECRETS

“We’re all agreed that last night was the Homelanders, right?” Idalia had gathered them around a worn round table in the dorm’s common room, after a quiet and bleary-eyed breakfast in the dining hall. Despite yesterday’s chaos, the triplets had still managed to select coordinating hair ribbons. Idalia’s was cream-colored and covered in gray sparkles.

The common room seemed... *tired*, to Clara. The light from the various lamps was dimmer and more orange. The mismatched rugs felt flatter and more worn beneath her feet. Even the furniture seemed to creak wearily as they sat.

“Who else?” Johanna asked. “The ‘Oberherr Doctrine’ called for limiting and regulating passage to the Ordinary world, right?”

“But what if Dimmick was right?” Ed argued. “What if it was paladins, on the other side?”

“I’m not sure it’s possible to drop a Border from the Ordinary side,” Idalia said doubtfully, her eyebrows beetling together as she thought. “And he didn’t say that might have happened, exactly. He just... raised it as a possibility.”

Clara thought that sounded pretty much like the same thing, but

she didn't push it. "Say it was the Homelanders. What should we do?" It went without saying that they needed to do *something*: the triplets' misery at even the possibility of being cut off from their family was palpable. Even Clara had begun obsessively trying to sense the Thorns, her dream last night having made her keenly aware that even Underhill itself was afraid of the final Borders being closed.

She'd debated telling her new friends about the dream, but didn't want them thinking she was any weirder than they already did. Being a 'visual witch' was more than enough distinction for now.

"You guys are getting *me* worked up," Finlay said. "And... I mean, I'm sure Ma and Da are fine. And my brother."

You don't look sure, Clara thought. Finlay's face was uncharacteristically tense, his lower eyelids dark and puffy.

"Me too," Elsie said. "And I barely even *like* my parents."

"Too bad," Harriett said in a flat voice. "Family is family. We want to be with ours."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Finally, Finlay spoke up. "We need to learn more about him. Oberherr. He was exiled, right? But he left loyalists behind. Here, in Underhill. They could have done it."

"Do you think any of these books would help?" Johanna asked hopefully, looking at the rows upon rows of books that lined the common room's walls.

"We need newspapers, not books," Elsie said. "Most of these have been here for ages; they're not going to have anything on current events."

Ed cleared his throat, a soft, reluctant sound. "We have newspapers."

Everyone was quiet for a minute as they looked at the small boy. "Where?" Idalia asked.

Ed sighed, slid out of his chair, and walked to one of the bookcases. He grabbed one of its upright sides and tugged. The entire

section swung away from the wall, revealing additional shelves piled thick with newspapers. "Here."

"How long has *that* been there?" Idalia asked indignantly, sliding out of her own chair and walking over to Ed's side.

"Always," Ed said.

"And how do you know about it and we don't?" Johanna asked, joining her sister. Harriett stayed put, staring at Ed as if he'd grown another head.

"You guys were always going to the soccer games. Football, sorry." Clara noticed that Ed's Southern accent got more pronounced when he was nervous. Or upset. Was he upset right now? "I stayed here and studied." He shrugged. "The newspapers were interesting." Clara looked closely, and saw the redness in Ed's eyes, the drawn look on his face. He hadn't slept much last night.

"What's this?" Idalia asked, tapping a thick tube that protruded from the shelves' back wall and ended precisely at the edge of the shelf.

"You return papers in it," Ed said, grabbing a paper from the top of one pile, rolling it loosely, and shoving it into the tube. With a loud *thwurf!* the paper was sucked out of sight. "You can also ask it for specific issues. They're all either the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, or the *Underhill Times* out of Madrigal."

"Where's that?" Clara asked.

"'Where' is a difficult concept in Underhill," Idalia immediately said in her lecturing voice, "but Madrigal is generally at the center. It's said to have been the capital city of the Fae, when they were still here, and it's the largest settlement of witches in Underhill. All the government offices are there."

"Is there an issue that talks about Oberherr?" Clara asked.

"Let me make some room," Ed said, hurriedly rolling papers and stuffing them in the tube. After he'd cleared a shelf, he leaned into the tube and said, in a clear and deliberate voice, "We need an issue from around the time Minister Oberherr was running for Prime Minister."

The tube seemed to sigh, as if it was thinking. Then air started to push out of the tube's opening more forcefully.

"Careful," Ed said, standing to one side and motioning for the two triplets to do the same. A moment later, a tightly rolled newspaper shot out with a pop of air. Ed reached out and caught it and then handed it to Idalia.

"All this time," she said absently as she untied the twine that held the paper in a roll. It fell open, and she spread it out and carried it back to the table, Ed and Johanna trailing behind her. "Here," she said, tapping the front page.

OBHERHERR GAINING VOTES IN THE WOODLANDS, the headline roared. Beneath was a photo of a lean face. An older man, wearing a dark suit, with—

"I've seen him," Clara blurted out, half rising from her chair to get a better look. "He was at my house."

Everyone got very, very quiet as they slowly turned to look at Clara. She met their gazes evenly. "He was. I'm positive."

"Reginald Aldworth, Minister Oberherr, *was at your house?*" Elsie said in disbelief.

Clara nodded firmly. "He didn't give us a name, but it was him. Definitely." Clara's classmates exchanged glances full of awe and not a little trepidation. "What?" *Clara, can you be not weird for just a day? Even an hour?* she sighed to herself.

"When?" Harriett demanded.

"Three days ago. Right before Mycroft brought me here."

"Wait," Johanna said. "You said she brought you here because those paladins were at your house."

"He was with them."

Now everyone was staring at her with disbelief, half of them with their mouths agape.

"That means he's *with* the paladins," Johanna said.

Clara's mouth worked silently for a moment as she processed that. "You're right. I mean, of course. I just thought he was another one of them. I didn't know he was..." she gestured at the newspaper.

"That guy." She thought for a moment. "But why? If they're witch hunters, I mean? Isn't he a witch, still?"

"He is," Idalia nodded solemnly. "And that's why this is important. If Oberherr is in league with the paladins, then something much bigger is going on. He could be how they're finding Borders. He probably is, in fact. He could have helped collapse all the Borders last night. He was exiled, but he still has to have *some* magic."

"We should tell Headmaster Dimmick," Ed said quietly.

"Should we?" Harriett challenged. Ed blushed and look away. "Dimmick was... *off*, last night, don't you think?"

"Off how?" Clara asked, her eyebrows scrunching.

"He just seemed... not to care. About the Borders," Harriett said. She sounded less certain of herself now, but she plowed ahead anyway. "He didn't act all that upset."

"I mean, they'd just dropped, what, a dozen Borders in one night? More?" Elsie put in. "He seemed overwhelmed to me."

"You notice he never says anything bad about the Homelanders?" Harriett said.

"None of the faculty ever do," Elsie countered. "Even last year when we had Underhill Social Studies, Professor Beley never came down on one side or another."

"Ma says the school has to be careful to stay out of politics," Finlay said.

"I think we should tell Headmaster Dimmick about Oberherr," Idalia said. Clara's eyebrows raised—she'd never seen the triplets openly disagree so completely about something important.

"Seriously?" Harriett said, her expression betraying her surprise.

"We have to tell *someone*. Dimmick's never done anything wrong that we know of," Idalia said.

Johanna looked back and forth between her sisters, and then cautiously nodded. "Idalia's right. Nobody here knows Oberherr is helping the paladins. Someone has to be told. Who else would we go to?"

"Mom and Dad," Harriett said, glaring at her sister.

“Mom and Dad can’t do anything about it,” Idalia pointed out. “They’re not even Underhill. Dimmick could send a message to the government a lot easier.”

Harriett glared for another moment and then relented. “Fine. Are we all going?”

Everyone just looked at each other for a moment before Idalia said, “That’s probably overkill. Clara should go. She’s the one who saw Oberherr with the paladins.”

“I don’t want to go by myself,” Clara said quietly.

“I’ll go with you,” Finlay offered. “We can leave right now.”

Clara threw Finlay a look of deep gratitude as she stood.

“Back in a jiff,” he added to the others, flashing a brilliant smile that belied the fatigue in his eyes.

Clara followed him out of the common room. “Will we have to take the spiral staircase?”

He sighed. “It’s the best way to get there, if not the easiest. Or always fastest. The faculty offices move around a lot, and the spiral staircase is the only one that can always take you directly there. If it wants to. Otherwise, there’s this platform thing that shoots you up a brass tube—”

“Hard pass. Mycroft mentioned that one.”

“Spiral stairs it is.”

They hurried down three flights of normal stairs and exited into the Great Hall. It was fairly quiet this morning, with just a few tired-looking staff members hurrying between errands. Nobody questioned them as they made their way to the far end of the hall, where the spiral staircase stood waiting for them.

“It doesn’t like students much,” Finlay warned Clara as they stared at it. “The trick is to keep Dimmick’s office firmly in mind. Or Dimmick himself. Just picture his face, and try to feel... urgent about it.”

“I actually do feel pretty urgent,” Clara admitted.

“Keep that in the front of your mind, then. This is important:

people's lives could be in danger, and Dimmick needs to know as soon as possible."

"I agree."

"Let's hope the stairs do."

Clara clutched Finlay's forearm as they stepped onto the first stair. It immediately began moving, spiraling them around the staircase's central support column and speeding them upward.

"If Oberherr is working with the paladins, will they be able to come here? Underhill, I mean?" Clara asked as the staircase lifted them up, up, and up.

"Oberherr himself can't," Finlay said. "He's exiled." Clara didn't think he sounded all that confident. "But normal humans can come here, yeah, if someone brings them. You did, right?"

"But I didn't have the charm on me," Clara pointed out. "Kleiner-wolves showed up, and it was like Underhill was pushing me out. There was a horrible wind that nobody else could feel, pushing me back toward the Border. Won't that stop others who shouldn't be here?"

Finlay frowned. "I've never heard of a charm to let you be here."

"Professor Mycroft said you all had it put on you as babies."

"Really? I guess." He still didn't sound convinced. "I mean, if that's true, then yeah, I guess it would keep them out. But we were always taught that humans could come here. Witches are human, after all. Paladins carry all that iron, but if they left it behind... I don't know. I guess we can ask Dimmick."

The stairs deposited them in a short hallway that seemed to lead directly to Dimmick's door. "Thank you," Finlay said sincerely as they stepped off.

He and Clara raised their hands to knock on the door together and then realized that it was already open just a crack. Finlay put his hand on the doorknob to push the door the rest of the way open, but Clara stopped him. "Shouldn't we knock first anyway?"

"I don't—"

"I'm telling you Aldworth, I don't like it." Dimmick's voice came clearly through the partly open door, and Clara and Finlay froze.

Aldworth? Finlay mouthed silently.

Clara nodded, and the two moved their heads slightly closer to the door so they could hear better.

"Damned inconvenient at the least, all of them going like that."

Now they could make out another voice, deeper but quieter. They leaned in a tad more, but couldn't make out exactly what the other voice was saying. Clara was reminded of the *Peanuts* specials she and her parents had watched on TV—the other voice sounded like the adults in the shows: *Wah wah wah wah. Wah wah wah?*

"No, I don't think so. We haven't had a competent Border Witch in at least a decade."

Wah wah?

"No, she can't focus. It'd be dangerous."

Wah wah wah wah.

"That's hardly the same as creating a new one."

Wah wah wah, wah wah wah. Wah wah?

"Of course not. You know where my loyalties lie."

Wah wah wah. Wah, wah wah.

"Just one of them. Some students—ninth-years, if you can believe it—stabilized the other one."

Wah wah wah?

"The Ellingham girls."

Wah wah wah wah?

"Yes, Hartford. And I can't be sure, but I believe the Thorn girl helped them somehow."

Wah wah wah?

"The Holdaways, yes. And before you ask, no, she's had no formal education in magic. Not even the simple tricks the other children all know."

Wah wah wah, wah wah wah wah. Wah wah wah, wah wah?

"It's just a feeling."

Wah wah wah.

"I will."

Wah wah.

"Speak with you soon."

Clara and Finlay looked at each other, their mouths agape. Clara jerked her head back toward the staircase, and Finlay nodded. The two of them crept as quickly and as quietly as they could back to the spiral staircase, which seemed all too happy to deposit them back in the Great Hall with no tricks.

"Minister Aldworth," Clara said. "That's Oberherr's real name, right?"

"Right, but he had a brother, too. Reginald is the bad one, Clayton is the good one."

"But which one was that?"

Finlay chewed his lower lip before answering. "The good one?"

"Then why did we leave?"

Finlay's eyes flicked upward. "I don't know."

"What if Dimmick is a Homelander?"

"How could—"

"He's never said anything against them, right?"

"I guess not, but—"

"But we have to be sure. If we go in and tell him the bad Aldworth is working with the paladins, and he already knows, then he'll know *we* know—and that wouldn't be good."

Finlay shook his head. "No, not good at all. Should we go back to the dorm?"

Clara thought about it. "I think we should tell Professor Mycroft. Maybe she'll know what to do."

"Okay." Finlay didn't seem certain.

"Who else?"

"I don't know."

"Then take us to Mycroft," Clara said, frustration leaking into her voice.

Finlay nodded but said nothing as they turned back to the staircase. "I know this is a lot for one day," he told it as they approached,

“but it’s an emergency, I swear. We need to get to Professor Mycroft as quickly as—“

“Is this quickly enough?” The two whirled to see her standing behind them, arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Professor!” Finlay yelped.

“Professor, thank heaven,” Clara said, relief flooding her. Mycroft would know what to do. “We need to speak to you. In... private.”

“Oh?” The professor cocked an eyebrow.

“It’s an emergency. Truly,” Finlay added.

“It’s certainly been a morning for those.” Mycroft sighed. “Very well.” She waved one arm toward them, fingers dancing as she tucked her other arm behind her back. “*Bheir dhachaidh mi!*”

Their eyes filled with sparkling lights, and they blinked furiously. When their vision cleared, Finlay and Clara found themselves in a comfortable sitting room, filled with cozy, well-worn, chintz-upholstered furniture. Heavy tapestries covered the stone walls, and a narrow window admitted fresh light and a glimpse of blue sky. A teakettle sat steaming merrily on a side table, next to a small bowl of what looked to be cookies.

A cat sat below the side table, fixing Clara with an even stare.

She gulped.

“Be seated,” Mycroft said, perching on a red-upholstered chair. Finlay and Clara sat in two other chairs that the professor indicated. “Now, what’s the emergency?”

“It’s... we went to tell Dimmick,” Finlay began.

Mycroft raised a sharp eyebrow.

“*Headmaster* Dimmick, sorry, but he was having a conversation with... a Minister *Aldworth*.”

Mycroft didn’t even blink. “I should think so. The Dimmicks have been associated with the Aldworth family for three hundred years or more.”

“But after last night, with the Homelander attack—“

“We’ve no evidence that last night was perpetrated by any one

group,” Mycroft said sternly. “The government has already launched an investigation into that.”

“But the... *other* Minister Aldworth,” Clara stammered, her face flushing slightly.

“Reginald? He’s been exiled to the Ordinary. What of him?”

“But what if Dimmick—”

“Headmaster Dimmick could no more communicate with someone in the Ordinary than I could. Not without going there, and certainly not with the Borders in the state they are.”

“But Oberherr is working with the paladins!” Clara finally blurted out.

Mycroft grew very, very quiet, her attention now fully focused on Clara. “What did you say?” Her voice was very even and calm, but Clara sensed a hint of danger in it.

“He was at my house. In the Ordinary, I mean. But you were there! You saw him! The man in the dark suit, he—”

“I can assure you that I caught not the slightest glimpse of Reginald Aldworth, or Minister Oberherr, or whatever he’s calling himself these days,” Mycroft said sharply. “There were paladins, yes, and a man in a dark suit—but the paladins have always had a large organization. That man was simply one of their superiors. Even Exiled as Reginald Aldworth is, no witch would willingly work with the paladins. It would be suicide.”

“But—” Finlay tried to interject.

“Yes?”

He opened his mouth, hesitated, and glanced at Clara. “Clara said...”

“Clara is new here. And your memory is far from faultless, if your performance on my quizzes are any indication. As for Headmaster Dimmick, I have no idea what his political leanings are, and I haven’t the slightest interest in knowing. Everyone is entitled to their opinions.”

“But only two Borders were saved,” Finlay objected. “If Dim— Headmaster Dimmick *is* a Homelander, he could have taken the

others down! He says he saved one, but what if he just never got to it?"

Mycroft frowned. "I'm aware of the Border your classmates had a role in stabilizing," she said. "And you may thank the Headmaster that I am overlooking your... *activities* last night. But the other Border that was saved was *my* doing, not Headmaster Dimmick's. In fact..." She trailed off, her expression now thoughtful. "Hmm. There *is* a legitimate concern about everyone's whereabouts last night. You all have an exceptionally poor alibi, having left the safety of your dorm, but your presence at the Hartford Border is... well-documented." She thought for a moment more. "Leave this with me," she said at last, her voice firm.

Clara and Finlay exchanged a quick look, and nodded. What else could they do?

"Thank you, Professor," Clara said, standing.

Finlay quickly joined her. "We appreciate you hearing us out."

They stepped toward the room's only door, which was behind them.

"Thank you for bringing this to me," Mycroft said, rising. "The staircase will be outside. I'll see that it takes you directly to the Great Hall," she called as they opened the door.

Before they stepped through, Clara turned back. "Professor, I'm sorry. I meant to ask—were you able to check in on my parents?"

"Oh yes, child, I'm so sorry—it's been such a chaos. Yes. I didn't speak with them, but they're both fine. It's as we suspected: once you and all the magic were gone, the paladins left them quite alone." Mycroft's expression softened a bit, and Clara caught just a touch of pity in her eyes.

"Thank you, Professor." Something inside Clara unclenched slightly, and she turned and closed the office door behind her.

She and Finlay said nothing on the trip down.

"Do you think—" Clara began, but Finlay shook his head. They walked silently through the Great Hall and back up the stairs to the

dorms. Once the common room door had closed behind them, Finlay sighed.

"How'd it go?" Idalia asked eagerly.

"Not good," Clara said.

"Dimmick was on a call with someone named Minister Aldworth," Finlay said. Everyone's faces showed immediate alarm: The triplets' eyes widened as one, and even Elsie's jaw dropped. "I know."

Idalia's mouth worked silently for a moment before she found her voice. "But that could have been—"

"We know; we took it to Mycroft, and she said the same thing," Clara said. "And she denies that Oberherr was at my house. She says it was someone else."

Johanna looked doubtful. "Could you be—"

Clara shook her head firmly. "No. The photo in the paper is the man who was at my house with the paladins. No question."

"Then why would Mycroft—"

"Harriett, I don't think we can trust any of them," Finlay interrupted. "Mycroft says *she* saved the other Border, not Dimmick."

"But that's not—no, don't you interrupt me, Clara Thorn," Idalia snapped. Clara's eyebrows rose—Idalia was usually the nice one. "Dimmick said *he* stabilized the other Border."

"Mycroft says she did," Clara said defensively.

"What's Mycroft's political history?" Ed spoke up. Harriett's head swiveled toward him, and Elsie sat up straighter and shot him a thoughtful frown. "I mean, everyone has one over here, you know. It's all in the papers."

"You and your papers," Idalia mused. "And I thought I was the bookworm of the group."

Ed shrugged. "They give me something to do, and I spent less time here as a kid than all of you. So they help me catch up."

"So we can just... what, look up Mycroft in the papers?" Clara asked.

"Sure. Although it'd be faster in the main library. That's where

they're kept. And if we keep asking for specific stuff up here, someone might notice."

"Library trip?" Idalia asked, looking around. Harriett sighed and nodded.

"What better way to spend an afternoon?" Elsie grumbled. "It's an hour to lunch. Can you at least promise we'll stop and eat?"

Ed opened his mouth to speak, but Clara cut him off. "You can eat. I'm not leaving that library until we have answers. That man knows where my parents live."

CHAPTER 22

NEWS OF THE DAY

“What is it?” Idalia asked, leaning so closely to the device that her nose almost touched it.

“The Library hates anything above a whisper,” Ed whispered. “So you can’t ask for things by name. Instead, you type them out here.”

Here, Clara saw, was a keyboard not unlike that of a laptop. Except in this case, the keys weren’t low-profile, flat squares; round brass ingots rose from a curved wooden frame, each ingot embossed with a single letter and attached to the end of a complicated, delicate armature.

“It’s based on a typewriter,” Ed added in a voice that was barely audible.

“Did you say ‘Library’ or ‘Librarian?’” Elsie asked.

“What’s the difference?” Ed asked, seeming genuinely unsure. Elsie just shrugged and looked around the room with a bland, incurious expression.

“I saw one of these in a museum,” Finlay said. “They stamped letters right onto paper, one at a time.” He moved to press one of the

device's keys, but Ed carefully slid in front of the keyboard, blocking him.

"This doesn't use paper," Ed whispered. Clara followed his fingers as he carefully typed out M-I-R-I-A-M-M-Y-C-R-O-F-T. Each key descended with absolute silence, far quieter than the laptops Clara's Ordinary classmates had used. Ed's pinkie finger gently touched the "RETURN" key, and the wall in front of the device sprung into action.

A brass shutter rolled upwards, so smoothly and so quietly that it might have been made from the lightest of silks rather than a heavy, clanky metal. Beyond the shutter was... a machine, stretching off into infinity.

The contraption reminded Clara of the machine at the local dry cleaner's, a complex helical rail that wound through the shop. Only instead of holding plastic-wrapped garments, these weaving, interlocking rails held newspapers, suspended by their folds from thin wooden rods. The rods stuck out at right angles from either side of the main rails, and those rails wound off into the darkness.

"How far back does it go?" Idalia breathed, clearly fascinated.

"The oldest issue is from around two hundred years ago. Witches got a late start on printing presses, but once they'd found—oh." Ed stopped when he caught Harriett's withering glare. "You mean distance." He shrugged. "Nobody knows. As far back as it needs to. Ah! Here comes ours."

The twisting, constantly moving rails had sped up, and a series of papers was now flowing toward them. As the papers slid past the counter where the typewriter device rested, wooden rails snapped open, dropping the papers to the counter with a *fwap*. One, two, three... soon, a dozen newspapers rested on the counter, neatly stacked one atop the other.

"Why can't the dining hall equipment be this quiet?" Finlay murmured.

"This was apparently the Victorian-age Bavarians' greatest accomplishment, but legend says they had to use forbidden magics

to keep it quiet. They used steam everywhere else, but the Library wouldn't accept anything that noisy." Ed's lecturing tone, Clara thought, was far less condescending than Idalia's.

"Library or Lib—" Elsie started to whisper.

"It doesn't matter," Ed hissed, cutting her off. "We can take these to a group room," he added, picking up the pile of papers and walking quickly back into the library's main room. Off that were several small chambers, like tiny conference rooms, walled in intricate stained glass. They were all empty, so Ed simply used his shoulder to push into the nearest one, and held the door with his foot until Clara, walking almost right behind him, caught it. They all filed in, and Clara let the door swing close. It shut and latched without making even the smallest of clicks.

The room featured a round table with six seats, and Finlay gestured for everyone else to sit. He placed his hands on the back of Clara's chair, looking over her head as Ed spread the papers out. Elsie seemed content to just watch as well, but the triplets each grabbed an issue and started thumbing through the broad pages.

"We can talk in here," Finlay assured Clara in a normal voice. "They're meant for study groups."

"So long as we're not rambunctious," Idalia amended. "Last year a group of third-years got a little overenthusiastic, and the Librarian kicked them out and gave them detention for a week."

"Here's something. Professor Mycroft was in a rally... twenty years ago," Johanna said after finding a relevant article. "She gave a talk on the importance of free movement between the realms."

"The realms?" Clara asked.

Johanna scanned the page a bit longer. "Underhill and the Ordinary world," she clarified.

"She wrote an opinion piece supporting the regulation of new Borders." Ed tapped an article in the issue he'd been scanning. His eyes darted back and forth. "But it's more about making sure they're not located anywhere dangerous," he added, his tone disappointed.

"This is a bit on the retirement of a Professor Malissa Risewell,

who taught advanced locational magic,” Idalia announced. “Mycroft gave a speech about the importance of locational magic...” She paused while her eyes caught up and then continued, “...and how she wanted to encourage young witches to consider the field as they pursued their advanced studies.”

“Locational magic?” Clara repeated. “As in Borders?”

“I assume.” Johanna shrugged. “They don’t teach that stuff now.”

“It’s not specifically in the curriculum, but we’ll get some of it in twelfth year,” Ed said. “Remember? Last year the graduating class all jumped off the mesa and had to teleport themselves before they hit the bottom.”

Finlay shuddered and kept flipping through newspapers.

Harriett refolded the paper she’d been reading. “This is just an announcement that Mycroft earned tenure,” she said. “So, as far as we know, Mycroft doesn’t buy into the Oberherr Doctrine.”

“She doesn’t seem to,” Idalia agreed. “She’s generally been about free movement. Just... really academic about it.”

“She’s a professor,” Clara pointed out. “And if she has tenure, that means they can’t fire her, right? So her political opinions don’t matter. She might not have any.”

“Have any what, children?”

Clara spun in her chair to see Phoebe Witcher standing in the doorway—she hadn’t even heard the door open. The other girl wore a smug, sanctimonious expression that Clara knew well: they’d been caught, Phoebe had caught them, and there’d be a price to pay.

“What do you want, Phoebe?” Finlay asked with an exasperated sigh.

“You all know the group rooms are off-limits during break unless you’re on a special assignment from a professor,” Phoebe said in her false-sweet, triumphant voice. “And you can only be in the main room during—”

“Then why, may I ask, are *you* here, Miss Witcher?”

It was Phoebe’s turn to whirl at a stern voice behind her. She

then took two backward steps into the group room as Professor Mycroft bore down on her.

"I'm... I'm a Proctor," Phoebe stammered.

"And I thank you for your diligence in that role," Mycroft said. Phoebe beamed. "However, I recall you being assigned that duty last term, and this is no longer last term, is it? Or has my sense of time escaped me?" Sarcasm dripped from the professor's voice.

"But they—" Phoebe began, her smile vanishing.

"*They* are on a special assignment from *me*," Mycroft said.

"Oh... I... didn't know," Phoebe said, all the triumph and sugar gone from her voice.

"My apologies, Miss Witcher," Mycroft said, sarcasm returning in full force. "I wasn't aware it was my duty to inform *you* of my assignments to other students." The older woman let that sink in a bit before asking, "Will that be all, Miss Witcher?"

Phoebe nodded but didn't move.

"*Thank you*, Miss Witcher," Mycroft over-enunciated.

Phoebe nodded again and scurried out, edging past Professor Mycroft to make her escape. As she did, she threw a mean look over her shoulder. *That'll come back to bite us*, Clara thought.

"Now," Mycroft said, stepping further into the room and eyeing the newspapers lying open on the table. "I believe that special assignment was no less than five thousand words on..." She paused, reaching down with one hand to turn a newspaper toward her. "Political rallies Underhill in the 1950s? Fascinating topic, to be sure," she finished dryly. "You will be particularly captivated by the tone of the rhetoric then, and the particulars that divided the opposing points of view."

They all blinked, not quite understanding.

"I shall expect that on the first day of the term, yes? As a group submission, with each of you sharing the same grade?"

Everyone nodded agreement, their faces falling.

The term hasn't even started and I'm being given a punishment, Clara moaned to herself. She'd never so much as gotten a talking-to from a

teacher, before. But at least this punishment was shared between them. *I'm part of the group.*

"Excellent. Good day." When the door shut silently behind her, everyone exhaled sharply, as if they'd all been holding their breath the entire time.

"I guess she's on our side," Elsie said. "Although five thousand words seems a bit much."

"It's the same punishment we'd have gotten either way," Harriett moaned. "At least we can work on it together."

"Why can't we use the group rooms during break?" Clara asked. It seemed like an odd rule for a school.

"I actually had standing permission from the Librarian," Ed mumbled as he gathered the newspapers together. "I just didn't think..."

"People come in here to make out," Johanna said matter-of-factly. "Without assigned Proctors to keep an eye on things, I guess it gets out of control sometimes."

Ed blushed furiously and ducked his head, pulling the stack of newspapers to his chest. "We should get back."

"Wait." Clara stood, blocking Ed from pushing through the door. "What do you think Mycroft meant about 'the particulars that divided them?'" Clara asked.

"Who knows?" Johanna sighed. "I guess we'll figure it out when we write the paper."

"She's really going to make us write it?" Clara asked.

"Mycroft is a stickler," Idalia said. "So yeah. She'll expect it. Ed, we can call some of those back up to the dorm, right? We've got a reason now."

"I know the specific issues to ask for, yeah," Ed said. "I can go back and—"

"I was promised lunch," Elsie reminded them.

"Were not," Harriett countered with a prim smile.

"It *is* time," Finlay said.

“Fine. Lunch it is.” Harriett stood and gave Ed a small push in the back. Clara opened the door and held it while everyone filed out.

They waited for Ed to return the papers, a task that involved draping them back over a set of wooden rods hanging near the counter, and then placing those rods into holes on the countertop itself. The brass shutter—which had rolled down in their absence—snapped open, and the rods were quickly drawn back into the infinite, looping machinery.

As they crossed the Great Hall toward the dining room, Mycroft was waiting for them. “A word,” she said in a low voice.

They gathered in front of her. Clara’s shoulders tensed immediately, and even the triplets looked concerned. Ed’s head was already ducked, his attention fixed on his shoes.

Only Elsie looked hopeful. “Canceling that paper?” She nodded vigorously. “Good idea. We—“

“Hardly. No, I wanted to warn you. The local fauna are riled after last night’s... events. Remain inside unless you’re with a staff member. We’ll be providing escorts to the football games and practices, but no other outside activities are to be permitted until the end of break, at least.”

“Oh.” Elsie’s face fell.

“I am understood, then?” she said sternly.

“Yes, Professor,” they all chanted in a ragged chorus.

“Enjoy your lunch.” They turned to go, and she called out, “I believe Miss Witcher is taking lunch with her roommates in their private residence.”

Clara turned and caught a glimpse of a hint of a smile on the professor’s lips before she waved them on.

CHAPTER 23

LUNCH AND CONVERSATION

They enjoyed a feast for lunch: roasted ham, crushed peas—“mushy peas,” everyone but Ed had assured her—mashed sweet potatoes, and warm, yeasty rolls. The hissing, clanking, crashing sounds of the dining hall had begun to feel familiar to Clara, and the light banter amongst her friends—as if their writing assignment had already been forgotten—was reassuring.

They took their time returning to the dorm, groaning their way up the stairs and feeling as if their bellies might burst. “It’ll be hot dogs and crisps for dinner,” Elsie assured them all. Everyone had expressed confidence in her prediction: nobody in the castle would be able to eat more than that, come dinner time.

With little else to do, they took up the common room’s largest table and sent Ed to summon newspapers through the tube behind the bookcase. While they waited, they flipped through a few old magazines that Elsie had dug up.

Her palms sweaty, Clara screwed up her courage and announced, “I had a dream last night. Well, early this morning, I guess.” She watched her classmates’ faces carefully, anxious for their reactions.

“A dream about what?” Johanna asked, looking up from a magazine.

“Underhill,” Clara said. A wave of embarrassment washed over her, not at all helped by the multiple pairs of eyes now staring at her in expectation. She bit her lip, half wishing she’d kept her mouth shut. “It was... well, I guess I wanted to ask you all. Where do you think magic comes from?”

“Ah, that’s a dozen stories,” Finlay said, leaning back in his chair and flashing her a broad smile. “Ma says the Fae were the first to bring magic to humans. They taught earth magic to the ancient druids of Ireland and England, and it spread from there. When the druids vanished, the witches took over. By that time, magic had been specialized in almost every country, so you’ve got Irish magic, Scottish magic, French magic, English magic, German magic, and all that.”

“No American magic?” Clara asked.

“We just copy Western Europe, for the most part,” Ed said, returning with an armload of newspapers. “French, German, and Irish, mostly. There’s a distinct Creole version though, that—”

“Fascinating, I’m sure,” Harriett snapped, grabbing a newspaper. Everyone else followed suit, pulling an issue to themselves and beginning to flip through it.

“Our Dad told us that even the Fae weren’t the first, that magic comes from all living things,” Idalia said as she flipped through the pages of her paper. “The Fae were born of that, because all the magic finally pooled up to the point where it had to do something.”

“So where did Underhill come from?” Glad to have somewhere else to point her eyes but relieved her classmates hadn’t immediately made fun of her, Clara flipped past a number of headlines before spotting one about civil rights protests.

“From the Fae,” Johanna said firmly. “Magic came from life, the Fae came from magic, and the Fae created Underhill as their home. The old legends say that they literally lived under hills, and you

could find them by listening closely at night. You could hear their celebrations under the hills where they lived.”

“So magic comes from the Ordinary world,” Clara mused. That seemed to align with what the elf-creature had said in her dream. At least she wouldn’t be opposed to her friends’ perspective.

“Obviously,” Finlay agreed. “Unless you’re a Homelander. But nothing they believe has any root in the old legends.”

“These protests in the Fifties were the first time Homelander philosophy really came out,” Ed said, tapping an article he’d found. “My Dad says, at the time everyone thought they were crackpots. But with all the isolationism in the US at the time, the idea of controlling who could and couldn’t go to Underhill and back fit the popular thinking.”

“So how does magic get from the Ordinary to Underhill?” Clara asked.

“Through the Borders, I guess,” Idalia said, although she sounded uncertain. “I mean, that’s what our parents always said.”

“So if the Borders are being cut off?” Clara asked.

“Then it would stand to reason that magic would be weaker here,” Finlay said, also sounding doubtful. “I don’t think the Homelander philosophy was about magic, though.”

“They think it originates Underhill,” Ed pointed out.

“In which case, closing the Borders is no big deal,” Clara said. “But in my dream... it was like Underhill was speaking to me. It doesn’t want the Borders closed. It feels it’ll be... bad for it. It’ll be pinched off.”

Harriett frowned. “Underhill spoke to you.”

“It was just a dream,” Clara mumbled, looking back at her newspaper.

“Still, it fits the popular thinking,” Elsie said.

Clara looked up in time to see Elsie give her a wink. *Does she believe me?*

“Well, no,” Ed corrected. “Popular thinking has less to do about the origin of magic, and more to do with freedom of movement

between the realms. The Homelanders want to control movement. Their whole stance on magic is to remove an objection to regulating the Borders. Back in the Fifties,” he repeated, again tapping the article he was scanning, “there was no talk about magic. It was all about regulating travel.”

“Meaning we can’t see our family,” Harriett grouched, flipping newspaper pages without looking at them.

“But if magic *does* originate in the Ordinary,” Clara persisted, “then closing the Borders will damage Underhill eventually. Right?”

Everyone thought for a moment.

“Sure?” Idalia guessed. “I never really thought about it.”

“But if nobody is thinking about the magic,” Clara said, trying to get them all around to the same point, “then the problem could be happening and nobody would notice. Right?”

Harriett’s frown deepened, but she looked thoughtful. Elsie tilted her head to one side, tapping a finger on the table as she regarded Clara.

“But I don’t feel like Mycroft is going to believe us,” Johanna said hesitatingly. She glanced at her sisters, but Harriett continued frowning and Idalia simply shrugged.

“I don’t think *anyone* is going to believe us,” Finlay said, his forehead wrinkling. “Everyone’s more concerned about the politics of it, right? Free travel or regulated travel. Allow witches to live where they like, or force them to stay Underhill. If you start talking about actual consequences—”

“That we can’t prove,” Ed put in.

“Aye, that we can’t prove... I know my own parents wouldn’t care, much, and they’re the furthest thing from Homelanders.”

“The Homelanders won’t listen to anything that doesn’t advance their own narrative,” Ed said.

“So who’ll save Underhill?” Clara asked.

Nobody had an answer for that.

CHAPTER 24

A CRY FOR HELP

Clara slept fitfully that night, and wasn't terribly surprised to find herself back in the dream.

The tiny blue elf stood in front of her—but it looked slightly gray around the edges. Its already narrow face had thinned, almost to the point of being gaunt, and its eyes looked somewhat manic, the pupils darting back and forth as it stared up at her.

“Chaos,” it croaked, its voice hoarse and scratchy. It scratched at the white stripe on its one arm.

“I know it's the Borders,” Clara said. “But... nobody is going to listen to us. To me. I'm... just a kid.”

It tilted its head back, opened its mouth wide, and let out a long, keening moan that tore at Clara's very soul. It was the sound of the dying, of someone suffering with no hope of salvation. The howls went on for what seemed like minutes.

When the creature had finally exhausted its cry, it lowered its gaze back to Clara. “Builders. Keepers. All gone. Where is our Missy? Missed Missy. We miss her.” It shook its head and looked away, and Clara had the distinct impression it was trying very hard to hold

itself together. “Look,” it said, listlessly lifting an arm to gesture off to Clara’s left.

She turned, and her breath caught in her throat. As always, the forest of elegant, beautiful blue-green trees stretched out for miles and miles—but now, they didn’t continue all the way to the horizon. In the distance, Clara saw a dull red glow rising just above the tree line, backlighting the forest. Yellow and orange sparks drifted lazily into the sky.

“Fire?” she asked.

“Chaos,” the elf whispered. “It eats the edges of us all. The magic is too little, too small, to hold it back. Too much to not eat.” It shook its head again, and another mournful whimper echoed in its chest.

“I don’t know how to fix the Borders,” Clara whispered. “I don’t know how to make more.” She could feel her skin tingling now, as if she was breaking out in a rash. She glanced at her arms but saw nothing wrong.

“Makers and Guards,” the elf said, its voice cracking with each word. Clara looked back at it. “Builders and Keepers,” it added sadly, shaking its head again. It let itself fall to the earth, thumping onto its rear, its legs splaying out before it and its arms flopping almost lifelessly at its sides. Its head hung low. “All the ground, lost and gone.”

“I don’t understand,” Clara whispered, kneeling in front of the pathetic creature. There seemed to be plenty of ground all around them.

It took a deep breath, like just speaking to her was requiring greater and greater effort. “Magic too small to stop. But too big not to start. Held in, no ground. No balance. So it eats us at the edges.” It groaned as it lifted its head, and its face was now wet with... sweat?

She hoped it was sweat.

“Miss the Missy,” the elf whispered. “Keepers of old. Bring balance,” it pleaded. It held her gaze for a long moment and then let its head fall back down. “Wouldn’t be here if you couldn’t be here,” it added.

“I don’t understand what to do,” she said, her own voice cracking on a sob.

“We know. But we don’t want to die,” it whimpered.

Clara woke to find her head lying on a tear-soaked pillow.

CHAPTER 25

BORDER MAGIC

They gathered in the common room after devouring a light breakfast in the dining hall. Well, everyone but Clara had devoured it: she'd picked at the fruit, and the bowl of yogurt and granola, and wished they were allowed to have coffee. Her parents had sworn by coffee, but never let her have any.

"Nothing else?" Clara asked, stifling a yawn as she riffled through the newspapers lying on the big table.

"No, those were the only articles I could find," Ed said.

"Did you not sleep well?" Finlay asked, a concerned expression on his face.

"No," Clara said, this time failing to stop a yawn. "I had another dream. It was... pretty intense."

Ed and Elsie were also flipping through old newspapers Ed had convinced the machinery to send up. They'd found a couple more mentions of Professor Mycroft, but they were all in the same context: advocating for free movement. Ed had started asking the machine for *anything* mentioning Mycroft, but they'd found little aside from the occasional mention in relation to the school.

"We might as well trust her," Johanna sighed. She and the other

triplets had scattered around the room, taking over some of the more comfortable furniture. Clara idly inventoried their hair bands: Harriett wore a somber black, Idalia a subdued gray, and Johanna a soft off-white.

At least they've got their thing.

Clara sat at the table with Ed and Elsie, her chin resting on her hands as she tried to stay awake. Finlay wandered around the room, poking at the bookshelves.

"Yeah," Elsie said, sounding almost disappointed. "I'd wanted something juicy."

"I didn't know Mycroft had a son," Finlay said.

"What?" Ed asked, looking up from his paper. Finlay was looking over Clara's head at a newspaper article on the table?. "Where?"

"Here," Finlay said, tapping the article. "Merritt Mycroft."

Ed turned the paper around so he could read it. "That's an obituary, Finlay," he said with a scowl. "Merritt Mycroft, aged 52, missing and presumed deceased. Survived by his mother, Miriam Mycroft, a professor at Liginbaum's School for Witches."

"Missing and presumed deceased?" Elsie asked, perking up.

Ed flipped ahead a few pages in the paper. "There's another story here." He read for a few moments. "There was a rash of disappearances that year." He flipped back to the newspaper's front page for a moment. "A while ago. Well before any of us were born." He flipped back to the article. "The disappearances were attributed to paladins. Several paladins were captured... by the Holdaways and their team."

Everyone looked at Clara. She shrugged. "You all knew they were counter-hunters."

"This was a year after the last mention I can find of Professor Mycroft speaking about free movement," Ed said thoughtfully. "I wonder if her politics changed when her son died."

"Who's Professor Risewell?" Elsie asked suddenly.

"Risewell..." Ed repeated slowly. "That sounds familiar." He thought for a moment and then got up and went to one of the bookshelves along the nearest wall. "Risewell, Risewell..." he murmured,

running a finger along the books' spines. "Yeah, here." He pulled a book down and flipped to the author's biography at the back. "Professor Malissa Risewell, Professor Emeritus of Group Magics at Liginbaum's School for Witches." He flipped to the front of the book. "This was written a decade ago."

"They don't teach Group magics anymore," Idalia said, looking up from the book she'd been reading.

"Didn't Franklin take it?" Johanna asked. "I seem to remember him going on and on about it when we were little."

"No, that was Abraham," Harriett corrected her. "Remember, he was telling us about it last Thanksgiving? He took it in eighth and said it was a shame none of the rest of us had gotten to."

"Why'd they stop?" Elsie asked.

"How old is Abraham?" Ed asked at the same moment.

"He just turned twenty-one," Idalia answered.

"So... seven or eight years ago. A couple of years after this book was published. That rings a bell, too." He thought for a long moment. "Oh! I think I know. Remember, Professor Beley was telling us about the Government Education Reform?"

"Was that eight years ago?" Idalia asked, frowning as she tried to recall.

"No, the legislation passed a decade ago, but they phased it in. Let me see if I can get it." He opened the bookcase that hid the newspaper retrieval mechanism and said, "Anything from ten years ago on the Education Reform legislation."

The machine hummed to itself for a moment, and then a blast of air announced the arrival of another paper. Ed unrolled it, pushing the bookcase closed with one hip. "Here it is," he said as he flipped the paper open. "Several topics were taken off the standard curriculum across the entire witch community. Not to be taught once the legislation went into full effect. Group magics, any potion making that used anything other than entirely natural ingredients—there's a whole list."

Clara sighed to herself, closing her eyes for a moment. Every time

she started to feel like this world was starting to make sense, and that she had a feel for it, something new came along. Now there was some kind of censorship in magic schools. Her tired brain just couldn't process it all.

At least she and her new friends were in the same place, doing the same thing. She'd never felt like such a... a *part* of something. Something important: they were going to save Underhill.

If Harriett would stop throwing her those mean glances.

And being so snarky.

Although her glances were significantly offset by the kind, genuine smiles Finlay kept firing her way.

She shivered happily.

"Clara?" Ed prompted.

Her eyes snapped open. "Yes."

"Um. I asked if you wanted to read anything about Professor Risewell," Ed said gently, holding the book out to her.

"Oh." She flushed as she heard Harriett snort. "You said she taught Group Magics?"

"Yes, until that was taken off the curriculum."

"Does she still teach anything else?" Clara asked.

"Noooo," Johanna said, drawing out the word. "But if she was a Professor Emeritus, wouldn't she still have rooms here in the school? Isn't that the whole deal—it's like a retirement position?"

Group Magics sounded like exactly the kind of thing they'd attempted in repairing the Border, Clara thought. How could it not be useful to try and learn more? A sense of surety flooded Clara's heart. "We have to find her, if she's here." She suddenly felt completely awake, and her heart started beating faster in anticipation. Group Magics could be the solution to the problem. If Clara couldn't save Underhill on her own, then she and her friends *must* be able to!

"What, now?" Elsie said, leaning back in her chair and cocking one eyebrow.

"Right now." Clara had never felt so sure of anything in her entire

life. "This is the answer. To the dreams I've been having. Group Magics, guys! That means all of us working together, right?" Her eyes were wide with excitement. "Will the spiral staircase take us to her?"

"If it wants to," Finlay sighed. "It'll be harder if we all go."

"Why?" Clara asked.

"It's just how it is."

"We'll stay," Johanna said, looking at her sisters for confirmation.

"I have good luck with it usually," Finlay said. "I'll go."

"I want to meet this Professor of Forbidden Topics," Elsie announced, standing up.

"I'd like to," Ed offered.

"Four should be okay," Finlay said after a moment's thought. "So long as we all stay focused on the destination."

Clara stood. Ed laid the book on the table as they followed Finlay out of the common room.

Nobody said anything until they were standing in front of the spiral staircase. "Remember," Finlay told them, "stay focused on her name. Especially since we don't know what she looks like. And try to feel urgent about it." They stepped onto the staircase, Clara on the same step as Finlay and Ed and Elsie one step behind them. "Professor Emeritus Malissa Risewell," Finlay announced in a firm voice. Clara held the name in her mind, repeating it to herself over and over.

The stairs began to slide upwards, but then stopped. They seemed to shudder slightly and slipped backwards an inch or two.

"Professor Risewell," Finlay repeated.

They drifted upwards a foot before the stopping again. This time, the stairs definitely shuddered a bit before quickly backsliding a couple of inches.

"Professor Malissa Risewell," Clara said in the firmest voice she could muster.

With a groaning noise that attracted odd looks from the other people in the Great Hall, the stairs slowly lurched into motion.

Backwards.

Clara's eyed widened in alarm. "Wait—"

Finlay grabbed her wrist. "Let it," he whispered. "Remember, focus!"

Clara resumed her silent mantra of Risewell's name.

The stairs picked up speed, the scraping and shuddering sensation fading and the groaning noise dying off as they slid *through* the floor.

"Oh," Elsie said with surprise. "They go down as well."

The four turned around, with Ed and Elsie now in the front. The edges of the stone floor slipped up past them as they descended into darkness. The stairs themselves began to glow with a soft blue light that provided a gentle illumination as they spiraled down inside a column of worn, smooth stone.

"Is this one of the tricks you keep telling me about?" Clara whispered to Finlay.

"Risewell, Risewell, Risewell," he repeated, reminding her to stay focused.

"Risewell, Risewell, Risewell," Clara echoed aloud. *Even though we're sinking, not rising*, she thought, and then scolded herself. *Risewell, Risewell, Risewell!*

She kept it up for almost five minutes as they continued to descend. "So... how long do we think this goes?" she finally ventured.

"It's like falling down a well in slow motion," Elsie grouched. "Sorry. Risewell, Risewell, Risewell."

"Are the walls... fuzzy?" Finlay asked.

Clara turned and saw him running a hand gently along the wall as it rose up past them. She turned to her other side. The wall did seem to be... *textured*.

Elsie reached out, grabbed hold of some of it, and pulled away a handful of something stiff and crackly. "It's wheat. Why is the wall covered in wheat?"

Ed took a few pieces from her. "It's not wheat," he said slowly,

turning a stalk back and forth between his fingers. "Wheat's fuzzier, I think. This looks like rye."

"What's the difference?" Finlay asked.

Clara's eyes flew open as she got it. "Falling down a well. With the walls covered in rye. Well, rye, Rye, well. Rye's well. Risewell."

The stairs stopped. Before them, the shadows retreated, and the long stalks of grain parted, revealing an archway.

"That's terrible." Elsie giggled.

"Go, before it changes its mind," Finlay urged them, stepping down and gently pushing the other three forward.

The archway led to a short hallway that ended in an intricately carved wooden door. Elsie reached for the brass doorknob set into the center of the door, turned it, and pushed the door inward. "Hello?" she called as she stepped inside.

"Oh, hello!" a cheery voice chirped back. "Come in, come in; haven't had visitors in ever so long."

Clara's eyes widened in amazement as she followed the others into the room. It was *huge*. A vaulted ceiling soared at least twenty feet overhead, spanning two end walls that were clad in shelves and bookcases, all made of a warm, honey-colored wood. Books, mementos, and knickknacks packed every shelf, somehow making the room seem cozy rather than cluttered. The highlight of the room was facing them as they entered: enormous floor-to-ceiling picture windows that overlooked a rolling green meadow dotted with wildflowers in every color imaginable. Conspicuously missing were the brass pipes that seemed to pervade the rest of the school.

"Hello, hello. I'm Professor Risewell. How are you all today?"

The speaker was a plump old woman with gray hair bundled into a neat bun. She was smiling, and the deep wrinkles around her eyes and mouth made her look all the more charming. She tottered toward them, one hand extended.

"I'm Clara Thorn," Clara said, taking the older woman's hand.

. . .

RISEWELL GAVE IT A GENTLE SHAKE. "Lovely, dear, just lovely." She beamed.

"Elsie Green."

"Aren't you just, my dear?"

"Ed Langsdale"

"Who's a charming little accent, then! Such a delight!"

"Finlay Addington."

Elsie caught Clara's eye as Risewell was nattering something at Finlay, and quickly circled one finger around an ear in a "she's nuts" gesture. Clara gave a quick shake of her head, and Elsie stopped before Risewell released Finlay's hand.

"So what brings a group of fine... hmm... rising ninth-years, if I don't miss my guess? What brings you all the way up here? Are they out of tea in the kitchens? Those *Küchenelf* can be such pranksters."

"No, we—wait, up?" Elsie asked with a frown. "We came down like a hundred stories."

"Up, down, it's all much the same," Risewell said, bobbing her head and smiling. "I taught locational magic, you know." Her expression fell a bit. "Until they told me I couldn't. Switched topics, and then they took that away as well. Would you all like some tea?"

Locational magic? Ed mouthed as Risewell bustled over to a sideboard that sat next to the entry door.

"Tea, then! *Thé pour cinq, s'il vous plaît,*" she chirped, and Clara saw a burst of glowing equations swirl toward the sideboard, spinning around until a steaming teapot and five sets of cups and saucers had appeared. "It's not fashionable to say so, but I've always loved French magic for when you're just feeling a bit lazy," Risewell confided. She poured tea into each of the cups, and then passed them around. "Now, let's... oh. Well that won't do."

The old professor seemed to realize she only had two easy chairs, each sitting on either side of a small table and angled toward the picture windows.

"*Mettons tout le monde à l'aise, d'accord ?*" she said, wiggling the fingers on her free hand. In Clara's vision, streams of glowing equa-

tions leapt out, and in just a moment, three armchairs scooted into sight from a doorway off to one side, arranging themselves in an arc in front of the windows, facing the first two chairs.

“French magic, as I said,” Risewell said cheerfully, settling herself into one of the easy chairs. “So refined, especially for life’s little comforts.” Clara took the other easy chair, and her classmates sat in the newly arrived armchairs. “Now, how can an old witch help you fine young people?”

“We found your book on Group magic,” Ed began.

“Oh? I’m quite surprised,” Risewell said with a mild frown. “Thought they’d have burned them all or some such. In the main library?”

“No, in our dorm’s common room.”

“Still. Who is your professor? Anyone I might know?”

“Professor Mycroft,” Clara answered.

Risewell’s frown deepened. “I’m even more surprised. Miriam... well, I suppose I won’t speak ill of your professor. So you came to ask about Group magic?” They all nodded. “I don’t know how much I’m allowed to tell you.” Her face broke into a wide smile. “Or how much I even remember! Although they can’t fire me, can they? But I don’t know how much you *need* to know, poppets. It’s all in the book, if you’ve managed to find a copy. And it’s not like any of you could actually *do* Group magic, right?” She smiled, as if that was the best news in the world.

“It’s just that we were told you needed Group magic to create Borders,” Clara said.

“And why can’t we?” Elsie protested.

“Of course you do, yes,” Risewell said, nodding rapidly and giving them all a wide smile. “And because, my dear, you have to be able to see, of course.” She gave one last nod as if that explained everything.

Elsie was right, Clara thought sadly. She’s a bit past her prime.

“Did you know that most of the Borders around the castle, probably all over Underhill, were collapsed?” Finlay asked.

Risewell's smile faded. "No." She heaved a deep sigh and shook her head sadly. "So much work, so much of my time, all for naught. Nothing for it, though; my eyesight's not what it used to be. Couldn't put them back even if they asked. Which they won't."

The classmates blinked. "Wait," Elsie said slowly. "You created the Borders?"

"Most of them, of course, dear. You have to *see* the magic to coordinate it and get it woven together, don't you? As I said."

Clara sat bolt upright in her seat. "*See*. You're a visual witch?"

"Me? Heavens no," Risewell chuckled. "Oh, couldn't you just imagine?" Her voice dropped into a mock-mysterious tone, and she waved her hands vaguely in front of her. "Oooo, I'm a visual witch, I can see hues and auras! Ooooo!" She giggled and took a sip of her tea. "Lot of good colored lights and fog do when you're trying to weave the magic of a group of witches," she said, shaking her head at the ridiculousness of it. "A visual witch couldn't even stabilize a Border." She grew thoughtful. "I wonder how they've been managing *that* all these years."

"You mean keeping them stable?" Ed asked, his forehead wrinkling.

"Of course, my sunshine! Not like they'll keep themselves from falling to pieces."

"They... won't?"

"Dear me, no. Borders simply *hate* being. Nothing like the old fairy rings, but that magic was lost with the Fae. No, it felt like I was always running around, fixing a thread here, balancing an energy flow there. A decade at most you'd get before one needed fixing." She cocked her head a bit as she thought. "I suppose that's about how long I've been down here," she said. "So it's no surprise they all came tumbling down! Well overdue for a mending, I expect. It'd be different if Underhill wasn't so *shifty*, of course, but here we are."

"So if you're not a visual witch," Clara asked carefully, the word *balancing* having caught her attention, "what kind of witch are you?"

"A kitchen witch!" Risewell said with delight, clapping her hands

as if she'd been waiting for that very question. "A kitchen witch is the witch which is in the kitchen!" she added in singsong. Then she sighed, calming herself. "No, of course not. I'm a mathemagician. I can't even cook very well."

The classmates tried to process that.

"Sorry, what?" Ed asked.

"I can't cook well."

"No, the other thing."

"A mathemagician. A trigonomawitch." Blank stares from the classmates. "Magicien de l'algèbre? Meister der Geometrie? Wielder de calculus draoidheil? No?"

The other three shook their heads, but Clara's heart was suddenly racing. "What is a mathemagician?"

"A witch who can see magic, little angel," Risewell said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Not just hazy auras and such, but actually *see* the magic. The math in it, the balance of input and output. It lets us weave magic more precisely, and it's the key to truly advanced Group magics. If your eyes are still sharp, of course." She clucked her tongue and shook her head sadly. "Mine's gone all blurry, these past years, sad to say. But that's the trick with Borders, of course. You have to adapt them to each location, and to do that, you must be able to see the magic. Quite detailed work, if not that difficult."

"Are there... other mathemagicians?" Clara asked.

"One per generation at most, is the rule. I'm sure there's one out there somewhere. Goodness knows I've been around a generation or two!" She thought for a moment. "Odd the faculty wouldn't have put tried to put them back up, though. The Borders, that is. You'd think the fauna would be getting out of hand."

"Actually, it is," Finlay said. "We're not to go outside without a faculty escort."

"Well, there you have it," Risewell said with a sage nod. "Borders are like fenceposts, you see. The wild fauna won't come near them. That's why the castle had so many. Out here in the middle of the

Wildland and all. Oh, they love to have their creatures around to study and show off, but the Borders keep them under control.”

“Can you show us how to do Group magic?” Elsie asked suddenly. Clara saw a hunger in the other girl’s eyes and an eagerness drawn over her expression.

“Hah! Silly bunny, that’d be right naughty, now, wouldn’t it? After they forbade it in the curriculum and all. Still,” Risewell said, clearly rolling the idea around in her mind, “it’s not like I’m a teaching professor anymore. And, it’s not like they can fire me again. Hmm.” She sipped her tea. “Certainly. Why not?”

She set her teacup down and stood. “All rise; up you go. Now look, I’ll coordinate this, but we’ll need to keep it simple. Blurry vision and all that. You’re all just going to concentrate on me, send me your energy. Gather it to yourself as if you were preparing a major casting, but concentrate on directing all that to me, instead of keeping it inside. Understand?”

Everyone but Clara nodded. Elsie gave Clara a hard look, and Clara quickly added a nod of her own.

“Excellent. Hmm. You know, we’ll just grow a tree, right out in the meadow,” Risewell declared. “I’ve wanted a nice, mature tree for years now, but you can’t very well spring them up on your own. Begin.”

Clara watched her three friends start to gather magic, glowing equations swirling up around their feet, criss-crossing their legs, and flowing up their torsos and into their arms. Those glowing streams—all simple symbols, none of them yet formed into equations with intent and focus—streamed out to Professor Risewell and spiraled around her.

Clara looked closely at the old professor and realized *she* wasn’t gathering anything. She was simply taking the magic being sent to her—“A bit slower, dear,” Risewell said, waving a hand at Elsie, “I’m no spring chicken”—and changing the symbols. Arranging them into a complex set of nested, intertwining equations. She seemed to do it almost effortlessly, using her hands to direct the equations here and

there, forming them into a single, incredibly elegant mass. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she sent the whole arrangement darting out, through the window, and into the ground.

A moment later, a sapling burst forth, rapidly thickening as it grew and grew and grew. In moments, a mature oak tree stood in the meadow, leaves fluttering gently in an unseen breeze.

“Well,” Risewell said, huffing a bit and sinking back into her easy chair. “That’s much better.” She tilted her head. “Although a maple might have been nice. Still, beggars can’t be choosers, I suppose.”

“You didn’t gather any magic of your own,” Clara said quietly, still staring at the oak tree.

Risewell gave her an odd look. “How do you know?”

“Clara is a visual witch,” Finlay said proudly.

Risewell pursed her lips for a moment, staring into Clara’s eyes. “No, of course not,” she said, suddenly more focused than she’d been since they arrived. “Mathemagicians don’t need to gather magic. We can see it as it is, change it as we need it to be.” She gave Clara a small, deliberate nod before turning back to the others. “But you all see how it feels? How it’s done? The rest is in my book, of course.” She leaned back in her chair, her expression going blank. Clara felt like they were being dismissed.

Elsie clearly thought the same. “Yes, it was wonderful,” she said, nodding and stepping forward to shake Risewell’s hand again. “We should be going, leave you to... your oak tree. Thank you ever so much. Sorry it wasn’t a maple.”

Risewell waved a hand in dismissal, her attention on the new tree. “See yourselves out, there’s a good dear.” She paused a moment as the four friends moved toward the exit. “*De retour là où tu étais,*” she said softly, flicking her fingers at the extra chairs she’d summoned. They slid off, single-file, back to wherever they’d come from.

Clara was the last out and turned to give the old woman another look. Her head was nestled into the back of her easy chair, and a soft snore announced that she’d fallen asleep. Clara turned—

—and found herself in the second-floor gallery of the Great Hall.

“What?” she asked.

The others seemed just as confused, turning back only to find themselves facing a blank wall.

“Advanced locational magic,” Ed murmured, running a hand over the smooth stone of the wall. “Fascinating.”

Not taking her eyes from the wall, Clara said, “You all want to try putting the Borders back, don’t you?”

“Yup,” Finlay said.

“I’m a mathematician,” Clara said more softly. “I can see the magic, exactly how she described.”

“I thought as much, once she’d said it,” Elsie said, patting Clara on the shoulder. “It felt just like when you modify our magic.”

“Only less vomitous,” Finlay said. Clara examined his expression, but he didn’t seem to be joking.

“That isn’t how magic is supposed to work, you know,” Ed said, keeping his voice low as well.

“Well, not how *we’ve* been taught,” Elsie countered. “Seems pretty clear they’ve been hiding stuff.”

“Seems... wrong,” Finlay said.

Clara looked at him, and he gave her a quick smile, but it was nothing like the broad, generous smiles he’d flashed in the past. “Finlay,” she said, but he shook his head and looked away.

She fell silent, her heart sinking.

“No, not wrong,” Ed corrected, missing Finlay’s reaction. “I actually meant this makes more sense. Magic as a whole does not. Now we know there *is* a science to it. We just can’t all see it.” He gave Clara a solemn, approving nod. “I’m glad you know now. What you are.”

“We need to tell the triplets,” Elsie announced. She marched off to the nearest staircase, and Ed quickly fell in behind her.

Clara waited a moment until Finlay started following as well. “You okay?” she asked softly.

“It’s... just weird,” Finlay said in an equally low voice. “My family’s been magical for centuries. I grew up watching my Da do...

everything, really, with magic. It's part of us, part of our home, part of our *souls*. But you... I mean, a mathemagician... you can just reach in and... *manipulate* that?" He shook his head. "I don't know." He'd gone a bit pale, and Clara knew he was remembering when she'd tried to "correct" his magic. "I'll be fine," he assured her as they caught up with the others.

I hope so, Clara thought as she fell a step behind him, her heart aching.

They arrived at the dorm to find the triplets just settling down. "You missed lunch," Johanna said.

"We had tea," Elsie said, and then she filled them in on what they'd learned.

"And our Clara is one of them?" Idalia asked excitedly. "A mathemagician? Oooh, that makes *so* much sense now!"

"So we can recreate the Borders?" Harriet asked, her voice more hopeful than Clara had ever heard.

"I need to learn how," Clara said, "but Professor Risewell implied that it wasn't difficult. You just need a lot of people."

"Here's her book," Ed said, quickly thumbing through the table of contents. "There's a chapter on... wow, that's a mouthful. *Trans-realm locational displacement effects*. 'Border magic,' for short." He looked up. "It's all in here."

"We should send a message to Mom and Dad," Johanna said. "Let them know we may have found a solution."

"I want to send one, too," Ed agreed. "Clara?"

"Send a... how do we even do that? To the Ordinary? Without Borders?"

"The mail room," Harriett said, rolling her eyes. "C'mon, they don't stay open long after lunch during breaks." She led the way out of the common room, everyone else trooping along behind her.

CHAPTER 26

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

The mailroom turned out to be in a little nook off the second-floor gallery, just above the dining hall. The seven of them barely fit into its little lobby, and the young man behind the desk raised his eyebrows as they all crowded in.

"I'll warn you now, mail has been slow," he said, holding up his hands before they could speak. "With so many Borders down, the wisps are having to reroute, and everything is taking longer. We think a few have been eaten by fauna on the way in and out, too—we've had more than a couple of messages go missing." His warning done, he took a deep breath and asked, "How can I help you?"

"So it really is Borders everywhere?" Ed asked. "Not just here?" His expression fell a bit, and Clara wondered if he'd been holding onto some kind of hope that the problem was just here at the school.

The man nodded. "All over. There's even a special plan to get the returning students here." He leaned over the counter and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "You guys are lucky you stayed over the break. It's going to be *mad* getting here from the Ordinary this term."

"How so?" Elsie asked, just as Clara opened her mouth to ask the same thing.

He looked over their heads, as if checking to see if anyone else was listening. "They're fortifying the remaining Borders," he whispered excitedly. "Everyone's to travel in the Ordinary as much as they can. We've got the Hartford Border and the one to San Francisco still standing on the castle mesa, so it'll mean flights or some expensive teleportation magic for a lot of people, but they'll get here." He nodded confidently.

"What about traveling in Underhill? Magic's easier," Idalia pointed out.

"I thought travel magics weren't reliable here?" Clara asked.

"Out *here*, but you can get pretty far before it breaks down," Johanna said.

"Oh, you hadn't heard," the man said, his voice dropping even lower, a gleeful smile on his face.

"Heard what?" Finlay said with a frown.

"The Prime Minister's party lost a vote of no confidence!" Everyone but Clara gasped. "I know! He's out, and their coalition fell apart. Nobody has a majority now. But the Party for Freedom and the Justice Party are looking to form a new coalition. That'll give them a slight majority."

Clara opened her mouth to ask what that meant, but Idalia cut in first. "Those are both Homelander parties."

The man nodded, again looking over the classmates' heads to make sure they were alone. "There's a lot of unrest in the bigger towns in Underhill. There've even been a couple of riots! So everyone's expecting that most families will travel in the Ordinary, where it's safer, so they can return directly here. The Border fortifications will extend into the Ordinary to deal with any paladin attacks."

Although the man shook his head sadly, Clara thought he sounded excited about it all.

"Which are all the more likely with so few Borders for them to monitor," Ed groaned.

The triplets looked at each other. "Mom and Dad are fine, but the boys are all in Europe," Johanna said. "They'd planned to come back through the London Border."

"Closest to London is probably in the Madrigal, assuming it's still up," the man behind the counter mused.

"What if they can't get back?" Idalia asked, panic rising in her voice.

"What if *we* can't go back?" Harriett countered.

"Hartford is still up," Clara reminded her.

"And are we allowed to use the Border, if we want?" Harriett demanded of the mail clerk.

He raised his hands again, as if warding off an attack. "Hey, I don't make the rules. But no—no unaccompanied minors going out."

"My sister's in Sydney," Ed mumbled. He'd gone pale. "It was already a long haul through Underhill for her. Now she might be trapped. She's not strong enough to teleport herself off the continent."

"It'll be okay," Clara said, patting his arm in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. "I'm cut off from Mom and Dad, too. They're a long way from Hartford."

"They're Ordinary," Harriett snapped. Clara's eyes widened as Idalia poked her sister's shoulder. "Sorry," Harriett muttered.

"We want to send a message to our parents," Johanna said to the clerk. "They're in Hartford. Can we do that?"

"Sure thing," he said, pulling a piece of parchment and a pen out from under his counter. He slid it across to Johanna, who grabbed the pen and scribbled out a quick message. She folded the parchment in half, wrote their parent's names on the outside, and pushed it back to the clerk.

The clerk looked at the names and whistled a quick, complex string of notes. A glowing blue sprite darted out from a tiny window in the wall behind the clerk.

Clara was captivated. The tiny azure creature was like a minia-

ture human, with delicately crafted features and four gossamer wings buzzing from its back.

“Hartford,” the clerk said, tapping the folded parchment.

The tiny blue figure descended to the counter, landing on the letter. It looked up at Clara and gave her a cheeky wave. The parchment glowed for a moment, and then vanished.

“Off you go,” the clerk ordered.

The glowing creature darted off out the main door, giving Clara a grin as it zipped past her head.

“If they’re there, they should get it tonight,” the man said. “If not, the wisp will probably bring it back as undeliverable. Check back tomorrow?”

“We will,” Johanna said. “Anyone else?”

“Not close enough,” Finlay said mournfully.

“Wouldn’t even bother,” Elsie said.

“Too far,” Ed said, his voice sick with worry.

Clara opened her mouth to say something, but closed it. No sense giving Harriett something else to snap about.

“Let’s go,” Ed muttered. He pushed through the others and made for the stairs. “We’ve got a spell to learn.”

CHAPTER 27

WE NEED A LITTLE MORE

“But I thought you said Risewell’s book already had the Border spell,” Clara said. They’d returned to the dorm, where Ed was scouring the bookcases for a specific title.

“I wish someone would organize these,” he muttered. Then, more loudly, “Not exactly. Idalia, read what it says. Page two hundred and ninety, or nearly.”

“Um,” Idalia said as she picked up the book and flipped through the pages. “Oh, here. Two ninety-one. ‘Typically, four to six witches, referred to as catalysts, are required, plus the orchestrating mathemagician. Unlike lower Group spells, the catalysts must pre-shape the magic into a generalized form suitable for translocational magic, as described in Swadling. The orchestrator must then weave those generalized forms into one specific for the present locale, the companion locale, and the intervening weft.’” She snorted. “Clear as mud.”

“Swaddling?” Johanna asked. “As in diapers?”

“No, Swadling, as in an author,” Ed said.

“What’s a weft?” Clara asked.

“Weft and warp,” Idalia said. “They refer to how cloth is made on

a traditional loom. The warp are the main threads you're weaving together, and the weft is run over and under them to bind them together." She considered that for a moment. "So you're looking at the fabric of the realms?"

"That's how I read it," Ed said. He stopped scanning books for a moment and turned to Clara. "When you were doing the things with lights, you said you needed Idalia to do red first, so you could see a color other than white. You meant... you meant that literally, right? You needed to see... I guess, what the magic looked like?"

Clara nodded. "The symbol for red is different than the one for white. But I didn't know what it was until I saw it."

"So you'd have no idea if we were producing the right 'generalized form,' or what you were expected to weave it into."

"Nope."

"That's what we need to find. Harriett, you're taller. You too, Finlay. Help me track down a book by Jacob Swadling."

Harriett was uncharacteristically eager to help, likely moved by the thought of her parents and siblings being stuck. Finlay seemed less motivated, but nonetheless took another section of books and began scanning their spines. "Here," he said after a minute. "Is this it?"

Ed scanned the book's table of contents for a moment, then shook his head. "No, it's not." Then he flipped the cover closed and read it. "This is *Swodling*, Finlay." He pronounced it with a long O. "We need *Swadling*."

"Swodling, Swadling, whatever," Finlay muttered as he took the book back and re-shelved it.

"Isn't there a spell to summon the book you want?" Clara asked.

"Absolutely," Ed assured her. "They haven't taught it to us yet."

"If it's not in here, we'll have to go the main library," Johanna said with a shrug. "Shouldn't be hard."

Ed looked around at all the shelves in the common room. "Honestly, that might be easier. These aren't very organized. At least in the library they'll be alphabetized."

“I’ll stay here and keep looking,” Finlay offered. “The library... it’s not so much my thing.”

Clara frowned. She *loved* libraries. How could a place full of books not be someone’s “thing?”

“Off we go.” Elsie sighed, standing and walking toward the common room’s exit. “Let’s just hope this trip doesn’t result in another essay.”

CHAPTER 28

BOOK SEARCH

“I wish witches would invent card catalogs,” Ed muttered as he scanned what must have been the twentieth shelf.

“Isn’t there a device or something?” Clara whispered. “Like for the newspapers?”

“No,” Ed scowled. “For books, you have to go to a librarian or find it yourself. And all but *the* Librarian are on break. And you only go to *the* Librarian if you’re asking for trouble or have a call slip from a professor.”

“Harsh,” Clara agreed.

“I dunno,” Elsie whispered lightly, one finger tracing across the spines of books. “I’m not in love with this place, but so long as you’re not too particular, I’ve always found the Librarian to be pretty accommodating.”

“Not me. This is the right section, isn’t it?” Idalia asked.

“It should be,” Ed said, pointing to the faded sign at the end of the row. “General magics, eighteenth century, L through T. It should be right here, between Swacze and Swirrin.”

“Maybe someone has it checked out?” Clara suggested.

“That book? During break? Hardly,” Harriett scoffed. “More likely—”

“And what might you all be doing here?”

Clara’s heart sank as she saw Phoebe Witcher, accompanied by Lucy Strout. Phoebe was wearing an especially smug expression, her arms crossed and one foot gently tapping the stone floor. Lucy stood a half-step behind Phoebe, her expression flatter but her posture no less triumphant.

“Ugh, Phoebe, we’re allowed to be in the Library,” Elsie whispered. “And you’re not in charge, remember?”

“But you little meddlers are up to something, I know it,” Phoebe hissed. “Word’s spread about your little escapade with the Border. You know, under the new government, people like you—”

“Wss shhs bmf nsh nsh krmph,” Elsie muttered, speaking so low even Clara, standing right next to her couldn’t make out the words.

“What?” Phoebe asked, her whisper slightly louder and harsher as her eyebrows bunched together in confusion.

“Ysd und lts yen bfrsmt pens,” Elsie said. Clara almost giggled: Elsie’s face looked as if she was having a perfectly normal conversation, only more animated than usual.

“Speak up!” Phoebe ordered, speaking at a normal volume.

“*QUIET.*” a voice ordered. A powerful, deep presence surrounded them, blanketing them in a cool, reserved regard. A regard that felt slightly irritated; Clara felt as if she’d been caught walking on carpet with muddy shoes. She looked around but didn’t see anyone—although the feeling that *something* was with them was absolutely unmistakable. “*NO DISTURBANCES.*”

“Follow my lead,” Elsie whispered quickly, just as Phoebe said, “They’re up to no good, Librarian” in a fairly loud, accusatory voice.

“1930s pulp fiction?” Elsie said in a clear, low voice that was just above a whisper.

After a beat, the voice answered, “*aisle fifteen, second stack.*”

Finlay caught on next, just as Elsie dashed away. “Histories of Underhill?” he asked.

“SECTION SEVEN, AISLE TWENTY, STACKS EIGHT THROUGH FOURTEEN.” It paused before adding, *“DEVERUS IS CONSIDERED CANONICAL.”*

“Algebra primers?” Idalia asked as Finlay scurried off.

“YOU’RE A NINTH-YEAR. FRONT SHELVES, LEFT INSIDE THE ENTRY.” The triplets dashed off.

Clara’s mind was whirling, trying to come up with something plausible, but the others had spoken so quickly she hadn’t had time to... “Anything on counter-hunters,” she blurted.

Whatever presence was speaking to them seemed to press down upon her then. The air grew thicker, and Clara struggled to inhale. The sensation lasted only a moment before the voice—markedly softer, now—replied, *“AISLE TEN. STACK FOUR, SHELF TWO.”* Clara held her breath as everything in the Library seemed to pause. *“THERE ISN’T MUCH, I’M AFRAID.”* The pressure eased a bit, and Clara turned and walked as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. She had no idea where aisle ten was, and instead turned directly toward the exit. She caught Finlay and the triplets out of the corner of her eye, each moving toward the exit.”

“THAT’S RESTRICTED. YOU NEED TO OBTAIN A CALL SLIP FROM A PROFESSOR,” she heard behind her. Ed must have asked for something diff—oh, right. Probably the book they’d come here for in the first place.

“AND YOU, MISS WITCHER?” the Librarian said, the voice fading as Clara moved away.

It sounded irritated.

Finlay ducked out the Library exit, Clara hot on his heels. Elsie was already outside in the hallway, and the triplets all but pushed Clara aside as they exited. Ed was last, although he was strolling more casually, a look of disappointment clouding his face.

“That was close,” Elsie said, huffing slightly.

“Good job distracting it,” Idalia said, sounding very sincere.

"That was the Librarian?" Clara asked, realizing her heart was pounding.

"The Library," Finlay corrected.

"Same thing," Johanna said. "Ed, what did you ask for? I've never heard—"

"Oh, no," Ed moaned softly. "No, no, no, no!"

"What?" Elsie asked. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. But Risewell's book was supposed to have been removed. Remember? She was surprised we had a copy, and they probably only missed it because it was in the dorm. What do you want to bet they went after the Swadling, too?"

"So... it's gone?" Clara asked, her face falling.

"Apparently not," Ed said, shaking his head. "But—"

"It won't be *gone* gone," Elsie interrupted. "You know they'll have kept one copy."

Ed nodded, his face a portrait of fear. "Yeah."

Elsie shrugged. "Why not?"

Finlay frowned, clearly not following. "Someone else want to clue in the rest of us?"

"She means the Restricted Section," Idalia breathed. "She's right. They always keep a copy in there, no matter what. You asked for it, didn't you?"

Ed nodded miserably.

"What's the Restricted Section?" Clara asked.

"That," Ed said, opening the Library door and pointing to the back of the room. Nestled between bookshelves was a heavy-looking wooden door, bound in brass straps.

Clara let her eyes unfocus, and brilliant equations blazed to life. They swirled across the door's surface in a complex spiral, slowly crawling toward the doorknob that was mounted in the dead center of the old slab of wood. "Wow." She looked more closely, marveling at the density of the magic. "Yikes."

"Good yikes?" Elsie asked hopefully.

Clara shook her head. "Bad yikes. This is a bad, bad idea."

CHAPTER 29

THE RESTRICTED SECTION

“Is everyone clear on the plan?”
“Elsie, I don’t know if I’m impressed or afraid that you’ve thought this hard about this,” Idalia sighed. “But yes, I’m clear.”

“It pays to be prepared,” Elsie said firmly. “Everyone else?”

“I still don’t think I am,” Clara whispered.

“This,” Elsie said, holding out a small rectangle of paper, “is a call slip. You fill it out, get a professor to sign it, and take it to the Restricted Section. It spits out whatever’s on the call slip.”

“We don’t actually know the title of the book,” Ed pointed out.

Elsie handed the slip to him. “Just write ‘Swadling.’ It’ll bring back everything. Hopefully he wasn’t too prolific.”

“How do you know all this?” Harriett asked. “You don’t even like the Library.”

“I keep my ears open. I don’t have to like a thing to hack that thing. Now, Clara’s going to twist the magic on the slip so that it works with one of our signatures. Triplets, you’re going to set up distractions so that none of the staff—or the Library—are focused on us. Ed and I will use the slip to get the book. Clara, once you’ve

modified the slip, you can just hang back and watch. Got it?" Everyone nodded. "Ed, are you done?"

Ed handed her the slip. "I signed Risewell's name."

Elsie examined the forgery. "Shouldn't matter. Here, Clara."

Clara took the paper and looked at it, allowing her eyes to slip out of focus. There *was* magic on the little scrap, and it was... angry. The equations flowed in smooth, glowing blue lines, mimicking the curves of Ed's handwriting around the author's name but bunching up in an angry red knot of unbalanced symbols around his forged signature.

Hmmm, she thought. She focused on the red and tried to work her way through the bunched-up equations. *It's going wrong right here*, she thought at last, finally spotting the place where the equations first changed color. *That's a reference, though, not a variable... hmm*. The symbol in question wasn't one she'd learned in math class, and so she suspected it was something specific to witches and magic. *No reason it can't be a variable now, I guess*. She squinted a bit as she narrowed her attention, and the symbol twisted and spun until it was a simple x . The equations around "Risewell's" signature dimmed to a deep purple and began flowing again, albeit in a herky-jerky way.

Her change had a cascading effect on the remainder of the math, and she slowly worked through it, updating symbols, simplifying portions of the equation, and unkinking the logic. At long last, after what felt like hours but in reality had only been a few minutes, the slip was covered in smoothly flowing, light-blue magic. She handed it back to Elsie.

"It's done?" Elsie asked doubtfully. "It doesn't look any different."

"It does to me," Clara assured her.

"Okay. C'mon, Ed. Clara, stay near the entrance. The rest of you, fan out."

They all stepped back into the Library, its massive doors silently swinging shut behind them. Elsie and Ed nodded to each other and

slowly made their way toward the Restricted Section door, stopping at shelves along the way to point at books. At one stop, Ed pulled a volume off its shelf and flipped through it quickly before replacing it.

Meanwhile, the triplets moved to different corners of the library. Harriett began speaking loudly to a younger student sitting alone at a study table. Clara looked at the walls, and watched the equations everywhere else dim as the ones near Harriett brightened, as if the magic's attention was being drawn by her noise. *SHHHHH*, a fierce, ominous whisper echoed in that corner as the equations momentarily brightened to white. At this distance, Clara couldn't tell if it was the same intense presence that they'd felt earlier.

Clara's head swiveled in the opposite direction as a crashing and clattering arose from another corner. This was Johanna: she'd "accidentally" knocked a pencil holder off a desk, and the pencils were now rolling everywhere. "Sorry, sorry," she said loudly. The magic's attention shifted at once, Johanna's corner now brightening as the girl clumsily tried to gather the pencils back up.

Clara looked to Ed and Elsie as they made their final approach to the Restricted Section.

"These don't belong here," she heard Idalia announce from the other side of the room, accompanied by the sound of books being rapidly pulled off shelves. Again, the magic's attention seemed to shift, although Clara didn't hear any more admonitions.

Elsie slapped the call slip up against the Restricted Section door, just above the doorknob. The swirling magic paused, as if considering the little piece of paper. Elsie withdrew her hand, but the call slip stayed plastered against the door. She put her hand on the brass doorknob and twisted.

With a single *ka-chunk*, a section in the middle of the door flipped downward so that the doorknob was pointing at Elsie's feet. That section formed a sort of shelf or counter, and the space behind revealed nothing but darkness beyond. Her ears straining, Clara made out a slight hissing and a delicate *srss-srss* of fine pieces of metal sliding against one another, reminding her of the expensive

shears that hairdressers used. Within moments, a single book slid onto the lowered section of door.

Clara saw Elsie's lips move.

Ed grabbed the book and scanned the cover before nodding vigorously.

"Excuse me."

Clara blinked. An incredibly thin, improbably tall man was standing directly behind Ed and Elsie, trapping them between him and the Restricted Section door—which was already closing itself. The man wore a suit of coal black, contrasting sharply with the impossibly white skin of his bald head.

He'd appeared out of nowhere.

"May I help you?" he asked, his voice deep and gravelly. His hands, complete with long, spindly fingers, spread in what might have been a gesture of politeness or an attempt to corral Ed and Elsie—Clara couldn't be sure.

"Oh," Elsie said, all bravado suddenly gone. "No, no, we've got what we need," she stammered, forgetting to whisper.

"I see. And may I also see your call slip?" The man spoke slowly and deliberately, his voice seeming to grind itself out.

Clara frowned. His height, build, and coloring aside, there was something... *off* about him, as if his skeleton had been assembled according to a slightly different plan than other people's.

Without thinking about it, Clara began walking quickly to the back of the room.

"Um, the door ate it," Ed said, pointing to the Restricted Section door. And indeed it had: the slip was gone.

"Hmmm," the man said, stooping down and leaning between Ed and Elsie. His head came so close to the doorknob that his long, hooked nose almost touched the brass. "So it has. How... odd."

Clara quickly moved within earshot. "You're not a witch."

The man jerked upright and turned, his head inclining down to meet Clara's gaze. "No, I am not. And who are you?"

"Clara Thorn. Who are you?"

"I am a Gaunt. We do not share our names so easily."

"What's a Gaunt?"

"Young ladies, that is quite enough," the Gaunt called, his deep voice carrying to the far corners of the room without actually seeming loud. Clara turned and saw the triplets begin making their way back.

"Gaunts are part of the old Fae. Uneelie Court, right?" Ed asked.

"*Unseleigh*," the man corrected him with a long-suffering sigh. He turned to face Ed. "Autumn Court, to be specific. And yes. Which is why we are more... hmm. *Careful* with our names. And what volume have we received permission to read today?"

Ed looked at the cover. "*A Studie of the Stars and Planets, and their Moons, with Respecte to their Effects on the Cafting of Magicke*. By Jacob Swadling."

"It's *respect* and *crafting*," the Gaunt corrected. "That's a labial 's,' not an 'f.' That is quite an... *old* tome. One not normally recalled from the Restricted Section. Which professor assigned this to you?"

"Risewell," Ed said boldly, meeting the Gaunt's gaze.

The creature was quiet for a long moment. "Ah," it said at last. "I see. And... this has something to do with the Borders?"

Ed nodded.

"I see. Hmm." The Gaunt fell silent, regarding them coolly.

"Your kind still uses the Borders, don't you?" Ed whispered.

The Gaunt remained silent for a long moment and then nodded. "We draw sustenance from Talam, yes. From the Ordinary world. We chose to enter service here," he added, waving one long arm to indicate the library, "rather than face extermination as so many others of our kind did. And we are permitted the excursions we require." It paused and looked back to Clara. "The other night was distressful indeed."

"We saved one," Clara said softly, looking into its flat, all-black eyes. "We think we know how we can recreate the others. But we need that book."

He nodded. "Yes, you would. And Professor Risewell's assistance,

although I had thought she was—well. Never mind. Yes, as you’ve presented a proper call slip to the Restricted Section, you are free to go. See that you create no further... disturbances... as you leave.”

Ed frowned. “We can take the book with us?” Their plan had been to read it here in the library.

The Gaunt shrugged. “It will find its way back when it needs to. Disturb the Library no further.”

Clara blinked again, for the creature was suddenly gone. Not so much as a wisp of breeze followed its departure.

“Man, they’re creepy,” Johanna muttered as they all moved toward the exit. “Main reason not to upset the Library. It *calls* them.”

“They only work here? In the Library, I mean?” Clara asked.

“As far as we’ve ever seen,” Idalia answered. “But they come and go... well, you saw.”

“Let’s get this puppy back to the dorm and make some magic,” Elsie said, tapping the book in Ed’s hands.

CHAPTER 30

WAIT, ASTROLOGY?

They returned to the dorm, and Ed sat at the large table and opened the book. He flipped through several pages, a deepening frown stealing over his face as everyone watched. “It’s gibberish.”

“Let me see,” Idalia said, taking the book from Ed and scanning it herself. “It’s astrology,” she said after a moment, her voice echoing Ed’s groan. “I hate astrology.”

“Astrology is real?” Clara had always assumed it was made-up nonsense.

“No, it’s made-up nonsense,” Harriett said, taking the book from Idalia. She examined the first few pages. “This thing was written by Edwardians,” she said in a disgusted voice. “They tried to explain *everything* with astrology. Remember that book on low-order elves Professor McAndrew had us read last year?”

It was Johanna’s turn to groan. “It was all about alignment of the stars and moons to determine the elves’ willingness to help you.”

“But... it’s all still math, right?” Elsie chimed in. Harriett looked at her as if she was mad. “I’m not saying the outcome actually affects

anything, but isn't astrology basically math? Alignments, arcs in the sky, that kind of thing?"

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Idalia broke the silence. "I think you might be a genius."

"She's off her rocker," Finlay said, slouching back into a chair.

"No, think about it. She's right: astrologists do a ton of math to calculate their stuff. It doesn't *mean* anything, but what if the *math* actually does? Clara is a mathematician. Johanna, turn the board on."

Idalia took the book over to the Board, Ed trailing closely behind her. Johanna manipulated the levers on the wall. "We left it pressurized," she said, sounding a bit contrite. "Shouldn't have done that. But it'll start up faster."

In fact, The Board was already glowing.

"We didn't show you this before, Clara, but this is really why they keep these instead of bringing in whiteboards." Idalia quickly sketched out a series of circles and arcs while referring to the book she held open in one hand. She jotted a few numbers here and there, copying them carefully from the book. Then she tapped one corner of The Board's massive frame.

Clara gasped as the board sprang into action. Idalia's hastily drawn lines and arcs neaten themselves into precise shapes, and the figures she'd scrawled became clearer and more regular. Additional figures appeared, denoting interim points that Idalia hadn't even drawn.

"Oh...." Clara breathed. "That's almost what I see. When you all do magic, I mean."

"The generalized form," Ed said softly. "Idalia, you're brilliant. Clara, can you show us how to do this?"

Clara scanned the symbols for a few minutes and then nodded. "Can I...?" she asked, moving an outstretched finger toward the board.

"Be my guest," Idalia said, stepping aside to make room.

Clara began sketching, surrounding portions of the glowing equations with parentheses, scratching out others, and drawing new figures here and there. "These cancel each other out. This goes over here... and that one there. These simplify down to... this. And these two... no, that's the wrong order; they must be using Polish notation. Yeah, that works better. And then this over here..." Her commentary trailed off as she scribbled faster and faster. "That's it," she said at last.

Idalia tapped the frame again, and the board cleaned up Clara's notations, the previous lines and arcs and figures all fading away.

"It's basically the light spell," Clara said, recognizing a portion of the resulting equation. "This half, at least. The other half is what I'm meant to weave it into, I think."

"It's that simple?" Johanna asked, staring at the board and clearly failing to comprehend a single bit of it.

"Doesn't look simple at all," Harriett said.

"But if it's just the light spell..." Elsie said.

"I said, 'basically,'" Clara corrected her. "It's a little more complex. But I think if you all do the light spell, I can fix it into this."

"Ugh," Finlay groaned from the other side of the room.

"I won't be trying to change it as much, or as fast," Clara said, suddenly irritated at him. "You pushed me that first time, and I was trying to do it on the fly without even knowing what you were trying to do. Be fair."

Finlay didn't reply.

"We need to do this outside," Ed said. "Preferably someplace near where a Border already was."

"But we can't *go* outside," Harriett pointed out. "Not without an escort. And I don't think Mycroft is just going to accompany us on a mission to raise a new Border right near the castle."

"She'll take us outside, though," Finlay said.

Everyone turned to look at him. He'd gotten up from the sofa, and he flashed them one of his famous grins.

DON JONES

“How?” Harriett asked suspiciously.

“Football practice starts in an hour.” His grin widened. “It’s outside, and it’s time Clara met one of the coaches.”

CHAPTER 31

YOU'RE SURE THIS DOESN'T BREAK THE RULES?

Members of the staff and faculty stood guard while anyone interested in attending the practice walked from the castle to the field. Finlay and Idalia led Clara to the ninth-year team's bench, which sat just to one side of their goal.

"This is Coach McAndrew," Finlay said. "Coach, this is Clara."

McAndrew was garbed in the most prosaic outfit Clara had seen since she'd arrived Underhill: a team jersey, blue jeans, grass-stained white sneakers, and a battered ball cap.

"Also *Professor* McAndrew," Idalia added.

"Oh!" Clara said. "The one you mentioned? Magical animals?"

"Fauna," McAndrew corrected her with a smile. "But yeah, that's me. I technically coach seventh through ninth years. Right now, each is only fielding one team apiece, so they tend to play each other. A couple of the staff joined on as assistant coaches, so I mainly handle your year. Have you met the team?"

"No," Clara said, shaking her head. "Are they not in the dorm?"

"We have separate barracks for the teams," McAndrew explained. "I know that probably seems like a luxury, but trust me,

it's not. They're up before dawn for their workouts. Consider it a blessing they're not in your dorm. But here, let me introduce you."

He walked Clara over to where the team was doing stretches and light calisthenics. "Gather up, everyone," he said in a loud voice. As the players drew nearer, he said, "Everyone, this is Clara Thorn. She's just joined ninth year, so make her welcome. Clara, this is Darrell Cook, our Center and team captain. Our Guards are Abram Tarkhnishvili and Bernice Broderib, Wings Selma Connor and Roman Fitzsimons, and our Goalie, Darcie Keegan."

Everyone waved and smiled. Clara smiled back, immediately forgetting everyone's names.

"Call me Tark," Abram said. "Everyone does."

"Thanks," Clara said, a bit embarrassed by all the attention.

"Finlay, here, as you all know, is a huge fan of the team," McAndrew continued. "And he tells us that Clara may have a special talent to give us a bit of an edge. Clara?"

"I, ah..." she stammered, not sure what to say.

"She's a visual witch," Finlay said, saving her. "She can see the traps. We've been working on decoding the triggers."

"I can do a few of them," Clara said, blushing.

One or two of the team members' jaws slowly fell open as they began to imagine what that would mean for them.

"That has to be against a rule," Darrell said, his voice hopeful.

"Nope," their coach said cheerfully. "I checked and talked to the other coaches. The rules just haven't caught up with Clara. They've asked that we keep her out of any real games for the time being, but they're eager to see how it changes the game here in practice. So," he said, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing a small, amethyst-colored crystal, "I've prepared a little communications spell." He handed the crystal to Clara, and she took it, turning it over in her fingers. "Just give it a good squeeze and speak, and I'll hear what you say. It's one-way; I won't be able to respond."

"When we watched last time," Clara said, looking up at the team,

"I couldn't figure out how to explain *where* each trap was. I mean, I can see them, but—"

"I had an idea for that," Finlay broke in. "If we take the Red goal as twelve o'clock, you can count around to indicate which section of the field it's in. And then just eyeball how many meters it is from the outside edge. So one o'clock and two would be just to the right of the red goal, and two meters in."

"How long's a meter?" Clara asked.

"Americans," Finlay said, rolling his eyes. "About a yard."

Clara's eyes tracked across the field as she counted off the hours. She nodded slowly. "I can try that. I think it'll be easier from higher up."

"We don't need a high level of precision," McAndrew assured her. "If we can get an idea for where the traps are, which ones are which, and what might set them off, it'll let us work that into a strategy. Darrell, that'll mainly be up to you to communicate."

"Aye," the Center said in a thick English accent, nodding thoughtfully. "I've some ideas already."

The other team members looked at each other with a variety of expressions. Clara noted that at least a couple of them were shooting her uncomfortable-looking glares. She felt herself shrink a bit inside. *Great, now I'm alienating them as well.* But Finlay seemed happier now that she was doing this. *Seeing* magic didn't bother him.

"Okay. You two head up to your stand, then. Whistle blows in ten."

Finlay led Clara up to the level reserved for ninth-years—one of the uppermost sections, this time—where their classmates were waiting. Clara settled into a front-row seat, right on the railing, holding McAndrew's crystal in one hand. She let her eyes slip slightly out of focus, and the magic on the field swirled into life. She clenched the crystal.

"Twelve and... um, maybe three, there's a baserpent," she said, recognizing the equations. "Proximity trigger." She continued scanning. "Another, a bit before two and... maybe one, it's right on the

edge of the field. It's a proximity trigger, but I don't recognize the trap." She continued around the field, naming all nine of the traps. "The Ender is right at the corner of the blue goal," she added. "Um, like four o'clock, a bit less." She released her grip on the crystal. "You think he got all that?"

"Let's hope so," Finlay said, leaning over the railing as the whistle blew. "Cook was listening sharp the whole time, so Coach relayed it."

"This still feels vaguely like cheating," Johanna said. She sounded slightly unsure.

"I know," Harriett agreed gleefully.

"Just knowing where they are is only a small piece of the pie," Finlay insisted. "It's not like they can just avoid the proximity triggers the whole game."

But they could, Clara saw, maneuver the other teams into triggering them. One of the red-shirted ninth-year Guards managed to kick the ball directly across a sprite-swarm trigger, drawing in one of the blue-clad seventh-year players, who immediately set off the trap.

Brightly glowing sprites burst forth from the field, swarming all over the poor player and attacking anyone nearby. Clara had seen this trap in the last practice, and had asked Finlay about it. "They hate being cooped up," he'd said of the magical little creatures. "Their bites aren't as bad as mosquitoes back in the Ordinary, and once they've lashed out a bit, they'll fly on." True to his word, the sprites dispersed quickly, but not before a red team Wing—carefully timing their approach—ran in, kicking the ball while activating their Kick spell. The ball drove forward into the Green goal, scoring a point for the ninth-years.

"Yeah!" Finlay shouted, pumping one fist into the air. "That's how to do it!" He settled back, his face a picture of excitement. "Let's see if Cook can pull off another one like that."

On balance, Clara realized, Finlay was right: simply knowing what trap was where didn't seem to convey a tremendous advantage. The Red players set off almost as many traps themselves,

although since they knew what some of them were, they were clearly able to mitigate the risks a bit.

“Goal!” Finlay cried again as the ninth-years scored another point.

“Three, two, two,” Johanna said. “I guess you’re right. Knowing is only a piece of the pie.” She sounded more confident now.

“Oh! There’s the Ender,” Finlay said, pointing to the field. He was right: the Blue Goalie had finally stumbled too far to one side of her goal and set off the bludgeoning black ball. Clara wondered how it had managed to take this long, and then winced as the ball collided off that Goalie as she used one shoulder to deflect it away from her goal.

A crash reverberated through the stadium, and the sound of people yelling began to filter up to their lofty perch.

“What the—” Idalia started, leaning over the rail to try and see.

A dragon burst onto the field.

CHAPTER 32

DANGEROUS FAUNA

“**I**s that a *dragon*?” Elsie exclaimed, leaning over the railing and showing the first sign of interest since the game had begun.

The creature was double the size of a horse, and four or five times as long, including its sinuous tail. Oily-looking black scales covered its body, and bony spikes ran from the crown of its head, down its back, and right to the tip of that constantly moving tail. It crawled on four legs, the rear ones thick and powerful, and the front ones spindly and shorter. Its wings were thick and leathery, but stubby, and Clara didn’t think they could possibly support it in flight.

“That’s an Oilliphéist,” Finlay said, alarm evident in his voice. “Fae lake creature. Dark Fae.” He looked for a moment longer. “We need to go.”

“Aren’t we safer up—oh!” Johanna cried.

Clara couldn’t tear her eyes off the field, where the dragon—or Oilliphéist, or whatever—had just swiped its tail through the supports of a towering viewing stand. That stand was now leaning precariously to one side, and Clara could make out the students who’d been seated in it rushing for the stairs.

Professor Mycroft appeared in a burst of equations, quickly assessed the situation, and directed magic at the compromised stand. Pillars of stone shot up from the earth, stabilizing the stand while the students evacuated.

“Clara, *now*,” Finlay said, grabbing her arm.

Instead of allowing him to drag her out of her seat, she shook him off. Coach McAndrew had caught her eye: he’d run from the ninth-year bench area and attracted the dragon’s attention. Its head, perched at the end of a short neck, swayed back and forth, punctuated by the occasional thrust forward as it tried to swallow the coach. But McAndrew held it off with bursts of magic directed at its eyes, all the while screaming something Clara couldn’t make out.

“A little more, a little more,” she whispered as Idalia joined Finlay in trying to drag her to the stairs. “Not yet!” she snapped at them.

McAndrew’s magic detonated directly in front of the dragon’s snout, forcing it to turn away. Its head rose in interest as it spotted another target: the stand Clara and her friends were in.

“*NOW, CLARA!*” Idalia shouted in panic.

But Clara remained focused on the field, where two adults she didn’t recognize had joined McAndrew. All three planted themselves behind the dragon as it began lumbering toward the stand Clara was in. Quickly, Clara unfocused her eyes, swept her gaze across the field, and began concentrating.

Her vision snapped back to normal as she triggered one of the traps.

“Oh, a Tangler,” Finlay said, suddenly distracted as a huge thatch of thick, bone-white vines erupted from the field and entangled the dragon’s forequarters. The creature’s head plowed into the field as the vines suddenly checked its forward momentum.

That was all McAndrew and his companions needed. All three of them simultaneously cast a spell, and a set of golden, glowing lances of light blasted into the dragon’s side.

The creature's head reared back as it roared in defiance. Its tail whipped around, catching one of the witches square in the side and flinging them a dozen yards away, where they crashed and lay still. But McAndrew and the remaining witch launched two more golden bolts into the dragon just as it tore itself free from the white vines.

The attack was sufficient: the dragon began glowing gold all over as the magic they'd cast overwhelmed its defenses. Brighter... brighter... brighter... and then, with a sound like a peal of thunder, it exploded.

Clara and the others crunched their eyes shut and turned away from the brilliant burst of light. By the time their vision cleared and they turned back, the dragon was gone. Only a broad, black swath of scorched grass remained.

"C'mon," Finlay said, this time not bothering to try and get Clara to follow. But she did anyway, hurrying behind the others as they clambered down the stairs at the back of the stands.

On the field, Mycroft was tending to the fallen staff member—one of the other coaches, judging from their blue shirt—and other staff and faculty members were arriving quickly, teleporting or simply running from the castle.

Finlay ran directly to McAndrew, who was bent over and breathing heavily. "Coach! Are you okay?"

"Aye," the coach said, standing and taking one last deep breath. He exhaled sharply. "Smart thinking, Clara," he said, nodding at her.

"Was that a loch glainne?" Finlay asked.

"Aye, it was. Nasty creatures, attracted to magic. It's likely been on the move from Lake Glass since the Borders went down."

"Why won't they put them back up?" Idalia demanded. "Especially if they can stop *that* from happening!"

The coach shook his head. "I don't know. We're told there's a fear Oberherr took them down from the other side, and bringing them back up runs a risk of him getting back into Underhill. Although frankly I'm betting they don't know *how* to bring them back. It's a

specialized magic, you know. Used to be a professor here who taught the magic and maintained them all, but she aged out. Doubt she could create a Border even if someone knew where she'd gone."

The classmates exchanged glances. So Professor Risewell's presence in the castle wasn't well-known even amongst the faculty. Clara wondered briefly if Dimmick was trying to hide the old professor—or keep her prisoner.

"Is the team okay?" Elsie asked, looking around.

"Everyone will live," McAndrew said, scanning the field. "Most of them got to the far side when it burst through the fencing. I think Jephcots and Harrington may have gotten whacked by its tail." He looked more closely at the people still on the field. "Yeah, they're over there. They're being helped, and Jephcots is sitting up, at least." He sighed and wiped his forehead. "You lot should get back to the castle. Don't wait for an escort. That's all out the window now, I'd think. Just move fast and stay together."

"Okay," Finlay said.

McAndrew gave them a nod and turned to see where he could be useful.

"C'mon," Finlay said to the others.

"Isn't this the exit?" Clara asked, pointing in the direction opposite where Finlay was heading.

"There's a back gate this way," he said, picking up his pace.

"Finlay, what are you doing?" Idalia asked, hurrying to keep up.

"You're all right: We need Borders. Clara can apparently cast them. Book said we're just enough to provide the magic. Can't do it indoors. I have any of that wrong?"

"You do not," Elsie said eagerly. "Where are you thinking?"

"Used to be a Border in a little garden a bit out the back gate. Might as well start there; it was the closest one to the stadium. Maybe keep this from happening again."

"You seriously think they'll play more games, after all that?" Harriett asked.

Finlay stopped and whirled so fast that the others almost bowled him over. "Football is what matters *most* at school," he growled. "*Nothing* stops that." Without another word, he whirled and began making for the back gate at an even faster clip.

"I cannot believe a *game* is what got him worked up," Clara muttered as they all laid on more speed, moving now at a jog.

"Finlay's brother was a soccer—football—star here, years ago. Went professional after school. Golden boy of the family. Finlay worships him, but couldn't get on a team," Ed said, huffing as he worked to keep up. "Football's everything to him. And," he added after a bit of thought, "he probably misses his family more than he's letting on."

"Whatever it takes," Harriett said through gritted teeth as she ran. "Hope everyone's ready for this."

"Hey!"

They all skidded to a stop as a male voice hailed them from off to one side. The older boy that belong to the voice jogged up, three friends in tow. He looked familiar.

"Do I know you?" Clara asked.

"Christopher Cook," he said. "And yeah, kind of. I tossed you back into the Ordinary the first time you were here." He grinned. "Welcome back. This is Theo, Basina, and Gabe," he added, gesturing to his friends. "Where are you all hurrying off to?"

"Don't you guys play for the eleventh-year blue team?" Finlay asked, his eyes narrowing.

"We do. Our coach had us out to watch; told us about your secret weapon." Christopher shrugged. "Not sure it made a huge difference, but we didn't exactly get to see the finish. Was it you that triggered the Tangler?" he asked, nodding at Clara.

"Yeah." Clara felt herself blushing under the attention.

"Nice move," he said approvingly. "So, again: where are you lot off to?"

"We're going to raise a Border," Idalia said matter-of-factly.

“They’re not just connections between the realms, they act as fence-posts and—“

“And repel the more dangerous fauna, yeah, we know. Professor McAndrew mentioned it. But... don’t take this wrong, but you lot? Borders are specialized magic.”

“We’ve got it,” Harriett snapped.

Cook shrugged. “Anything to keep the game going. Need any help?”

Clara and her friends simply blinked, not comprehending.

“I mean, you’re all ninth-years, right? You can’t have that much magic yet.”

“We’ve plenty,” Finlay said with some heat in his voice. “We—“

“It doesn’t take much,” Clara interrupted. “It’s actually a simple spell, once you know it. But it takes a group. So yes, we could use your help.” She felt her friends eyeing her with uncertainty. “What? If nothing else, we’ll need someone to hold off whatever critters decide we look like a good midafternoon snack.”

“How is it that *you* know the spell when nobody else seems to?” Theo asked.

“The spell’s easy. It’s just that Border magic requires a special kind of witch,” Ed put in. “A mathemagician, they’re called. They’re the ones who weave the group magic into the proper form and connect it to the land.”

“O-kaaay,” Basina drawled. “And which one of you is a... what did you call it?”

“Mathemagician,” Ed enunciated. “She is,” he added, pointing at Clara. “It’s why she can see the traps and the triggers and everything. She can *see* magic.”

Christopher tilted his head to one side. “You mean like a visual—“

“Not like a visual witch,” Idalia jumped in. “She can see the *specifics* of it. And she can change your magic as you cast it.” She obviously realized how “change your magic” must have sounded,

because she started downplaying it immediately. “Just a little. Just to shape it. But it’s true. And it works.”

Christopher glanced at his friends, all of whom shrugged. “We’re in,” he announced. “Lead the way.”

“This had better work,” Finlay muttered as he set off at an even faster jog.

CHAPTER 33

CONNECTING WORLDS

The attacks began as soon as they passed through the stadium's back gate, starting with a flock of birds that glowed an ominous iridescent black.

"Cassowaries!" Basina yelled. "Hit 'em with fire flechettes!"

The other eleventh-years raised their hands to the sky and ducked their heads between their shoulders as incredibly thin bolts of fire blasted from their fingertips.

"We don't know that one!" Harriett shrieked as a cassowary dive-bombed her head. It grabbed a hank of hair, which was immediately shorn off by its razor-sharp claws.

"Then keep low!" Gabe grunted, another round of glowing needles launching from his fingertips.

"Screw this!" Elsie shouted, suddenly stopping and raising her hands to the sky. Clara, who'd been running close behind, almost bowled the English girl over, and barely managed to dive to one side. "*Flos flammae!*" Elsie shouted, hunching her shoulders a bit as her hands erupted in shining flames. The fire billowed upward, spreading out as it rose. It caught the flock of cassowaries dead in the

middle, and several of the birds burst into glowing dust while the others wheeled away, crowing in anger.

“That is *not* legal for a ninth-year,” Theo panted, lowering his arms and resuming a quick jog.

“It’s the one thing I’m best at,” Elsie growled, shaking her hands free of crow dust and helping Clara back to her feet. “Let’s go.”

“Careful, there are nightmice up here,” Finlay called, suddenly slowing and mincing carefully through the turf.

“They’re fine unless you step on them,” Elsie advised Clara as she too slowed and began watching her steps very carefully. “Then they—”

She was interrupted by an explosion of noxious gas under Ed’s feet. “Ugh!” he shouted as the oily green cloud began settling onto his clothes and skin. “*Nettoyez—*”

“Ed, don’t you dare!” Harriett shouted.

“—*instantanément!*” he finished. The cloud dissipated instantly, the smell faded, and his clothes and skin were clean.

“Ed!” Johanna shouted angrily. Clara almost echoed her cry as her own bladder felt suddenly, urgently, full.

“What the heck, dude?” Basina yelped. “Theo, didn’t you pick up that bladder spell in survival?”

“Yeah,” the older boy yelled back as they continued jogging. “But there’s a—”

“C’mon, man!” Gabe shouted.

“*Pustoy mochevoy puzyr’, sukhiye shtany!*” Theo shouted back.

“Oh, thank—wait, why is the ground soft?” Johanna’s jog slowed to a fast walk. “Why does—oh, no, is this our—”

“I told you there was a cost,” Theo said, his own jog slowing to a squelching walk.

“There’s no way I had this much in me,” Elsie grumbled.

“It’s multiplicative,” Theo said, finally clearing the now-marshy area. “It’s a Russian specialty.”

“Gross,” Clara said, although it *did* feel better to not have to pee so urgently.

"Just a bit further," Finlay yelled back, again picking up the pace.

The ten students skidded to a halt in the small, now-empty garden that sat just behind the stadium. The location of the former Border was readily apparent: bushes, decorative rocks, and stone pavers all surrounded a circular grassy area that was now conspicuously empty.

"Okay," Christopher said as they all spread out along the edge of the circle. "What do we do now?"

"We need to push magic into a generalized form and then send that to Clara," Idalia said. "So..." She paused for a minute, struggling to put it into words the others would understand. "It's basically the light-sphere spell. You just—"

"*Sféar solais?*" Theo interrupted. "That's it?"

"To start, yes," Idalia said, giving the older boy a glare. Clara hadn't known Idalia long, but she knew the other girl hated being interrupted in the middle of a lecture. "Clara will help us shape it from there. But you're not going to *cast* it. I think it's more like... like when you're gathering magic, and you're visualizing, but you haven't triggered it yet."

The eleventh-years nodded slowly. "I think I got it," Christopher said.

"Really?" Theo said mockingly. "I think they're making it up as they go."

"Just roll with it, Theo," Christopher ordered.

"But Clara's going to tweak it a bit as you do it," Johanna added. "It'll feel like a tickle. Don't fight it. Just pay attention to whatever she's doing and try to hold whatever new feeling that is, okay?"

The four older students glanced at each other uncertainly.

"It doesn't hurt," Harriett said in a condescending tone. "C'mon, let's just get started." She started pulling magic into herself.

"Seriously, don't fight it," Finlay muttered as he too started gathering power. "Trust me."

The beginning of the light spell started to form around Harriett's hands. It was *very* close to what they'd come up with on the board,

and Clara just needed to tweak one portion of the equation—just one symbol, really—to get it into shape.

“Oh,” Harriett mused. “Kind of a blue-y yellow light. But dim. And intense at the same time.” She nodded. “I can do that.”

And she could: Clara withdrew her effort and saw that Harriett was holding the generalized form perfectly.

They went clockwise around the circle: Idalia was next, followed by Johanna, then Elsie—who struggled to keep the power flowing smoothly and not bursting into flame—and then Ed.

Finally, it was Finlay’s turn.

“You okay?” Clara asked, looking at his eyes with concern. He’d gone a bit pale.

Finlay nodded. “Yeah. I’ll go slow.”

Clara nodded and watched as his magic formed in his hands, just short of an actual spell. “Actually, you’ve got it,” Clara said. “Just hold that exactly.”

He nodded, relief evident on his face, and narrowed his eyes in concentration.

“It’s like doing magic with gloves on,” Elsie said, sounding content.

“It’s fascinating,” Ed put in.

“I’m ready,” Theo said. He was next in the circle.

Clara concentrated as the boy began forming the spell in his hands. He was much faster and much more confident, and had obviously taken Harriett’s comments to heart. Clara tweaked the equation just a bit, bringing it down to about the same power level as the others.

“Oh,” Theo breathed. “That is deeply weird. Not bad,” he assured them all, “but super weird. Okay. I got it.”

Basina and Gabe went next, with Christopher last. He was the toughest: Clara kept making gentle corrections to his magic, but he kept wrenching it back.

“I know, I know,” he said, frustration filling his voice. “This was really hard for me to master when I started, and I kept drifting off-

track. It's hard to not keep pulling it back." He took a deep breath. "One more time?"

Clara nodded and tweaked his magic once more. It wasn't even that far off, just a matter of the spacing between the symbols more than anything else, a way of bringing the intensity under tighter control. She held her breath as she pulled her focus back, and this time his magic stayed.

"Okay, got it," Christopher said, sweat beading on his forehead. "Boy, that feels different." Then his magic slipped. "Dang it!" he cried.

"Look," Idalia said, still concentrating on her own magic. "Nine of us should be plenty. Why don't you play guard instead? I'm sure some direbunnies or something will have caught wind of all this power."

Christopher exhaled hard and nodded. "Yeah, I'll do that." He stepped back out of the circle, and everyone else adjusted their spacing to make up for the gap.

"Okay," Clara said, nervously clenching and unclenching her hands. "Here we go."

The others' magic began streaming toward her—fitfully at first, but then more smoothly as everyone got the hang of it. She caught the energy up in her mind and began twisting it into the form they'd devised on the board.

Two threads of equations *there*, flowing like golden and silver light. An anchoring construct, complex and full of variables, at the bottom. She started filling in the variables based on the locale: the ground at *this* angle, the clearing about *that* many feet wide. A questing tendril of equations pushed out through the middle, its variables populated with the values Clara knew best: the Art Alley back home. Vertical surface for the terminus, gently sloping asphalt for the ground plane, everything filled in.

A Border snapped into existence.

Delicate threads of silver and gold wove a tall, oval opening in front of Clara. Thicker threads caressed the ground, anchoring the

Border in place. And in the center of it all stood a wavering, rippling blackness like water at midnight, leading to—

“It’s wobbly!” Ed shouted, and Clara realized that the magical construct was putting off enough vibrations to be physically heard. Her chest thrummed with uneven bass tones, and a crescendo of high-pitched noise started to cut through it all.

Ed was right: the shimmering threads forming the Border’s edge were starting to thrash, twisting and untwisting from one another instead of flowing evenly. Clara concentrated, clenching her jaw so hard she felt something pop.

With a sympathetic *bang*, the Border froze, the rippling center settling into a clear, glasslike surface.

A dark-suited man stood on the other side.

Clara was struck by the familiar face. “Oberherr,” she whispered. The man smiled and shook a finger at her.

Clara’s mental focus collapsed, and the Border mirrored her inattention: it grounded itself in a burst of violet light and a crescendo of bass noise. Threads of metallic light whipped about as if they were being sucked into the earth itself. The students flinched, turning away to protect their eyes.

Within moments, it was over. The Border was gone, leaving scorched earth and grass in its place. Clara blinked as her eyes readjusted to the sudden return of darkness. They were all breathing heavily, and Theo sank to his knees, wiping his eyes.

“I got a direbunny,” Christopher said in a small voice behind them.

CHAPTER 34

MOTIVES

Clara and her friends walked back to the castle with the eleventh-years. The fauna—perhaps pushed back at least a bit by the short-lived Border—mostly left them alone for the return trip, with only another direbunny and something called a catwere attempting to take a bite out of them.

Clara found the direbunnies to be a difficult contradiction. At first, they were adorable-looking: soft white and brown fur, velvety ears, almost cartoon-like eyes, and cute, twitchy pink noses. But then they'd open their mouths, revealing not one but *two* rows of sharp, glistening white fangs. Then they'd peel their lips back even further, revealing just how long and vicious those fangs really were.

And *then* they'd jump at you.

"We'll not risk another frontal assault," Theo remarked as he blasted one of the little creatures. Ed and Elsie had both giggled, but Clara didn't get the joke.

Christopher and his teammates took out the rest of them, but otherwise hung back a bit, following the ninth-years and speaking to each other in low voices.

"Weird," Clara caught from one of them in a brief moment when

the breeze shifted and carried their voices further than they'd intended. "Dangerous," said another—Theo, Clara thought—before a hissed "Shhh!" ended the conversation entirely.

The eleventh-years were two dorms further down the third-floor gallery, so Clara and her friends bid them good night as they turned into their own common room.

"I guess dinner is off?" Finlay said, his voice dull with disappointment.

"Not really in the mood," Johanna said. She'd sat at the large table, still covered in the last batch of newspapers they'd been reading.

"We can get sandwiches sent up," Idalia offered.

"Whatever," Elsie said, collapsing into a sofa. "I just want to sleep for a week. Why am I so tired?"

"We funneled more magic than we ever have," Ed said, sinking into an easy chair. "We didn't *do* anything with it, but it's a lot of effort regardless." That short speech seemed to exhaust him; he settled into the chair, closed his eyes, and began breathing more slowly as he drifted off to sleep.

"We have to tell someone," Clara said, easing herself into a chair.

"Who?" Finlay groaned. "We can't tell Dimmick, not if he's connected to... the other Aldworth. Mycroft? Clara, you're sure it was Oberherr?"

"I saw him," Idalia confirmed. "Remember, I was standing right behind Clara. Unmistakable." She sighed. "And I'd vote for Mycroft. She's the closest we've got to an ally." Her stomach growled. "Do we want those sandwiches or not?"

"Sure," Clara said. "I could eat. And you're right, I guess. Telling Risewell wouldn't do any good, even assuming we could find her again. What about Coach McAndrew? He seemed upset about the Borders being left down."

"Maybe," Finlay said doubtfully. "He may still be at the stadium doing cleanup. I guess we could look for him." He didn't sound

enthused. Their failure had hit him harder than she'd expected: his face looked like someone had kicked his puppy.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it work, Finlay," Clara apologized. Finlay's sudden depression, along with the remarks she'd overheard from the eleventh-years, landed on her shoulders. She curled up against the chair, and its rough brocade brushed against her skin like sandpaper. Maybe she should just pack it in, find a way home, and let the paladins have her.

"Don't be ridiculous," Harriett said in a flat voice. "You didn't do anything wrong. It looked like it worked, right up until Oberherr appeared. He collapsed it, didn't he?"

Clara wasn't sure herself. "I don't know. It didn't feel... entirely stable, I guess. Then when he showed up, I think I just lost it. But I was close. Really, really close. If we'd had a few more minutes, I think I could have stabilized it."

"I'd have collapsed," Elsie groaned. "Maybe next time we—"

She stopped as the door to the common room slammed open. Mycroft strode in, her face a mix of anxiety and anger. She scanned the room, obviously making sure they were all there. "Oh good," she said, her shoulders slumping and some of the anxiety, at least, fading from her expression. "Have you all been in here the whole time?"

"We went to the football practice," Finlay said carefully, his voice still tired.

"Yes, yes, I know that," Mycroft said testily. "But *after*? You all came straight here?"

Even Ed opened his eyes as the classmates exchanged glances. "Why?" Idalia asked innocently. "What's happened?"

"We can't be sure, but it *felt* like someone tried to create a new Border, right near the stadium itself. Professor McAndrew spotted the aftereffects when it collapsed. With all the chaos of the attack, we'd lost track of the students. We've contacted the government, and they're sending inspectors to look into the Border."

Another round of exchanged glances, and Clara decided to come clean. "That, uh, that was us," she said in a very quiet voice.

“*What* was you?” Mycroft asked, her voice gaining a sharp edge.

“The Border,” Clara whispered, her heart beginning to beat faster. Maybe Mycroft would simply expel her and save everyone the trouble.

The professor walked slowly around pieces of furniture until she was standing directly in front of Clara’s chair, staring down at the girl. “Pretend,” Mycroft said very slowly and very deliberately, “that I am extremely, extremely stupid. Explain to me, in small and simple words, what you mean by ‘that was us’ and ‘the Border.’”

“We found the technique for standing up a new Border and decided to give it a try,” Harriett said tiredly. Mycroft whirled and stare at her. “Mostly to help keep the fauna away from the stadium.” Mycroft’s eyes grew wide. “Almost had it, too,” Harriett ended in a mutter.

“You... *children* walked out of a stadium, immediately following an attack from a class-four inimical creature, and you took it upon yourselves to cast an advanced, fixed-anchor translocational spell *because you found the technique?*”

“We’d have had it, too, if Ober—” Johanna bit off the last word.

Now Mycroft turned to her. “Had it? Had it if not for what, exactly?” When Johanna simply stared at her and said nothing, Mycroft leaned in. “*Finish your sentence,*” the professor hissed.

“Oberherr!” Clara shouted, leaning forward in her chair and suddenly exasperated with the professor. She knew her face would be reddening, and she could feel the adrenaline starting to flood her body. Her anger at Mycroft, at the entire situation, came pouring out all at once. “We almost had it—it stabilized—but Minister Oberherr appeared. The man who was *at my house*. You saw him, and I don’t care what you say: *it was him*. And he was in the Border, and then we waved his finger at us, and it collapsed.”

Idalia’s eyes flew open, Elsie covered her mouth with a hand, and Ed looked down at his stomach. Harriett grinned.

“If...” Mycroft started. She blinked furiously at Clara for a couple of moments before trying again. “We shall...” More blinking. Finally,

she pulled herself upright, eyes flashing. “If we assume that the man at your house *was* Minister Oberherr, and *if* you lot—uneducated teenagers barely able to create a light without some sort of quirky side effect—did manage to raise a Border, and *if* that same Minister Oberherr then appeared in said Border before it collapsed...” Her jaw worked a bit as she summoned her next words. “Then we can only see that the government is *correct* in wishing the Borders to be more carefully protected, regulated, and controlled!” Her chest heaving, Mycroft swiveled her head, fixing them each with a baleful glare.

“But what about freedom of movement?” Idalia asked quietly. “You used to protest for it.”

“Oh? Perhaps I was young,” Mycroft snapped. “And perhaps foolish, although faced with you, my own foolishness was but a pebble in the ocean, it seems.”

“But our families,” Johanna whispered.

“Most of our returning students are already safely in Underhill, a fact you would have learned at dinner tonight, had you bothered to attend. Parties are being organized to bring them across the wild-lands in the coming days. School will resume as usual, and on time, the Border situation notwithstanding.” She huffed for a moment, looking between their faces. “I do not know whether or not to believe anything you’ve said,” she told them at last. “That seven ninth-years could even *begin* to conjure the kind of magic needed to raise a Border—it defies the imagination.”

“The spell isn’t hard,” Elsie pointed out.

Not helping, Clara thought, shooting her a hard look. She simply shrugged.

“It is not about the *difficulty*, it is about the *nuance* and *precision*. Only one or two in a generation can cast them properly, and—“

“You don’t know how, do you?” Ed asked quietly.

Mycroft’s face turned such a deep red that Clara thought she might die on the spot from a burst heart.

“What I do or do not know is *no* business of *yours*,” Mycroft growled in a low, dangerous voice. “Was it just the seven of you,

then? You're claiming it was just you that ventured out of the stadium, made it through the wild fauna attracted by the attack, and made an abortive attempt to *conjure a Border*? No-one... *assisted* you in this endeavor?"

Nobody so much as glanced in each other's direction.

"I see. Well. Since I do not for one moment believe you capable of even *speaking* a Border spell, let alone attempting one—"

"Actually, there's no verbal component," Ed interrupted. He sounded noticeably less tired, and Clara suddenly suspected he was deliberately antagonizing Mycroft.

"*Be silent!* As I was saying, since you *did not* create a Border, I have nothing for which to punish you, unless you wish to keep speaking, in which case I am certain I can find a reason! In fact, you are all confined to this dorm until at least tomorrow morning. I will advise if your... detention is to continue beyond." Mycroft pursed her lips, but the twitches in her face gave away her anger and frustration. "Good night."

She whirled, stalked out the door, and slammed it behind her.

"That went well," Elsie said. "Think we can still get sandwiches?" she asked Idalia.

"I'll send an order down," the triplet answered.

"Thanks for not telling her," Clara said quietly.

"About the eleventh-years?" Finlay asked, confused.

"About me."

"Oh."

"It's the new government orchestrating this," Ed said.

"What do you mean?" Harriett asked. "Why would they want us all separated from our families?"

"They don't. They want us all here. In Underhill. Everyone, all the witches. If we're here, they can control everything, control everyone. If they regulate who can go back and forth, they control us. It's like building a wall around Underhill. Sure, the paladins can't come in, but we can't go out, either."

"But it's not just the paladins. Aldworth can't come in, either," Elsie pointed out.

"He was Exiled," Ed reminded them. "He shouldn't be able to return regardless of how many Borders there are."

"I'm betting he has a plan," Johanna said.

"I'm worried about my parents," Clara said. "They're not even witches."

"I'm worried about ours. Are they in Underhill? Are our brothers?" Idalia's voice was filled with concern.

"I'm sorry about your parents," Ed said to Clara.

"What do you mean?"

"My Dad passed when I was really young. So I know a little of what it's like. And with your other parents not even being witches... it must be hard."

All of Clara's anxiety, fear, and loneliness welled up in her all of a sudden. Her chest felt tight, and she knew that if she tried to speak, she'd just burst into tears. Instead, she simply nodded, squeezing her eyes to keep the hot tears inside.

"Guys," Johanna said, her voice suddenly sharp. "Come here."

They all looked to see Johanna reading one of the newspapers. They walked over, and she tapped a headline: *PALADINS SUSPECTED IN DISAPPEARANCE OF FAMILY LIVING IN ORDINARY*, it said.

"So?" Finlay asked, his voice still dull and uninterested.

"So, this exact article used to be about a speech Mycroft gave in favor of freedom of movement."

"Huh?" Harriett asked, turning the paper toward her so she could read it better.

Ed started flipping through some of the others. "They're... they're all gone. All the articles about Mycroft."

"How?" Idalia asked, quickly grabbing a paper and turning its pages. "That's impossible."

Clara laughed, a sound that she immediately recognized as very near to hysteria. "You all travel between realms, you conjure light in

your fingers, you blast fire out of your hands, and you think something it *impossible?*”

Idalia’s eyebrows beetled in confusion. Ed tilted his head to one side, and even Elsie looked befuddled.

“Someone used magic. On the newspapers,” Clara explained.

“But why...” Ed started to ask. Then he nodded. “That’s the only explanation. Mycroft was there in the library the whole time. It’s why she wasn’t upset about the Borders coming down. It’s why she got so bent out of shape about a new Border being created.”

Idalia’s mouth made an “O” of comprehension. “She’s one of them.”

Clara sank into a chair next to Johanna. “So now who do we trust?”

CHAPTER 35

THIS ISN'T HELPING

Clara found herself back in the dream world. The colors were muted: shining violet trees were now rendered in dull eggplant. Twinkling amber lights had faded to ugly sepia.

The elf-creature was there, staring angrily at her through eyes shot through with green-yellow veins. “NOT HELPING!” it shouted. Lowering its voice to a hiss, it added, “Supposed to balance the magic, not bring it all here. Too heavy! Too... much.” That last was delivered with an exhausted sigh, and the little creature’s shoulders drooped.

“What do you mean?” Clara asked.

“Witches,” it replied, shaking its head sadly. “All coming back. All coming here. Bringing their magic. Pooling, sloshing, heavy, soaking, squishing!” Its voice grew more strident with each word. “Pushing, tearing, stomping, sitting, stepping, punching, hurting!” it ended in another shout.

“They’re—it’s the Borders,” Clara realized aloud. “They’ve all been coming back. Coming home.”

The elf shook its head again. “Not home. Not *their* home. Visit,

stay awhile, but then *leave*. Balance, not all jumbled together.” It looked imploringly at Clara. “Must stop them.”

“I’m trying. I think I have it figured out. We’re going to try—“

“Do anything,” it moaned. It flicked its hand at Clara in an exasperated, exhausted, dismissive gesture. The world zoomed out into darkness.

CHAPTER 36

LOCKDOWN

“**G**ood morning. Thank you all for attending.” Headmaster Dimmick stood at one end of the vast dining hall, dressed in a deep purple business suit. Students had begun trickling into the castle the night before, but the hall was still far from full. The staff had directed students to sit as close to one end as possible for an announcement. Mycroft, McAndrew, and several other faculty members, all clad in formal black professorial robes, stood alongside the headmaster.

Clara yawned. She’d slept fitfully after her vision, alternating between moments of dreamless sleep and periods of tossing and turning in which her eyes had refused to close.

“I have some difficult news,” Dimmick continued, his voice grave as he looked around the room. “As you all know, a rare Oilliphéist attacked the football stadium during practice yesterday. Several students received minor injuries before the creature was dispatched. We believe it migrated from Lake Glass, drawn by the lack of Border magic around the castle.”

Mycroft cleared her throat and opened her mouth to say something, but Dimmick continued talking.

“On the advice of the government, the start of school will be postponed, pending the deployment of effective fauna wards on the castle mesa and around the main roads leading here. Those of you who arrived last night will doubtless appreciate the wisdom of this decision.” Dimmick himself didn’t sound convinced, but Clara saw a small group of younger students nodding emphatically.

“Further, all outdoor activities are hereby cancelled. That includes football practices and games.”

Clara looked at Finlay, sitting across the table from her. His face fell, and she could have sworn she saw tears welling up in his eyes. *This boy loves him some soccer*, she thought. How could such a simple game could hold so much for him?

“All students are to remain indoors unless escorted by a faculty member. That said, there should be no reason for anyone to be outside. Additional spaces within the castle will be opened to support indoor activities. In fact, the grand ballroom is being repurposed as an indoor tennis court, and Professor Saxon will be forming leagues and organizing a tournament. I encourage everyone to consider participating.

“Further student arrivals will be delayed until the roads can be secured. Our best information tells us that nearly all students have arrived safely in Underhill, and they will remain in the town of their arrival until the school is prepared to receive them.”

The triplets exchanged hopeful glances. Clara noticed that their hair ribbons—rust, tangerine, and marigold—looked wrinkled and rumpled this morning.

“Anyone wishing to return to the Ordinary world may apply for permission. At this time, that will require the use of the remaining Borders here on the castle mesa, and you will have to provide details on who will be meeting you and arranging for your travel, if any, in the Ordinary. I am told all requests will be considered... expeditiously.”

Should I just try to head home to Mom and Dad? Clara considered. *Although he doesn’t exactly sound convinced they’ll let us.*

“Anyone wishing to join their families elsewhere in Underhill will be... considered as well, I am told. Although I cannot recommend it, and the expense will be high.

“I will also note that the mailroom is closed until further notice.” This announcement was met by a wave of grumbling from the students. “I know, I know,” Dimmick said, holding up a hand for silence. “But the wisps cannot be safely dispatched at this time. I’m sure you all share our concern for their safety,” he added, leveling an admonishing glare at the room.

“Finally, for those of you living in residences here on the mesa: the football team residences will be closed this afternoon, and any players residing in them will transfer to the appropriate dormitory hall. For those living in private residences, you will need to make a choice: move into the main castle dorms, remain in your residence at all times, or provide a qualified private escort team to move you between your residence and the castle at need. Those logistics will be registered with the professor overseeing your dorm.

“I realize you will have many questions, and we may not have more answers than I have provided here. Please work with your dorm professor on any further information you require. Please enjoy your breakfast.”

With that, Dimmick and the other faculty members simply sat down, chairs sliding up from behind them to catch them. A long table slid from the wall to their side and came to a stop, already loaded with their breakfasts.

Clara and her friends shoveled their food down, saying nothing and keeping an eye on the faculty at the front of the hall. Everyone except Finlay: he picked at his food, pushing it around his plate and eating very little.

After finishing two pieces of toast and half a banana, Dimmick rose, nodded to his colleagues, and made his way through the student tables to the dining hall entrance.

Clara shoveled a last forkful of eggs into her mouth and stood. “Can you guys push that on the plank?” she asked, not bothering to

see if anyone agreed. She hurried out after Dimmick and caught him in the Great Hall.

"Headmaster?" she said, her voice quiet and urgent.

He turned. "Ah, Miss Thorn. Misses Ellingham, Miss Green. Mister Langsdale. How can I help you?"

Clara glanced behind her and saw that everyone but Finlay had accompanied her out. She idly wondered if Finlay would stir himself to clear the table, and then decided she didn't care.

"Headmaster, why can't we just put up more Borders?" Clara began. "We know the—"

He held up a hand, forestalling her argument as he glanced around the Great Hall. "This is a poor venue for discussion," he said quietly. "Come to my office." His fingers twitched, a rush of wind blew up around them, and they found themselves standing in Dimmick's office.

I have to catch the equations for that, Clara thought.

The decor was entirely different than her last visit. Now, the office was decked out like something from *Arabian Nights*, with colorful silks covering the walls. In lieu of a desk and chairs, the center of the room featured several large cushions, surrounding a low table.

"Sir," Clara said, "we know the—"

Dimmick waved her to silence as he settled onto a cushion. "Please, sit." They all selected a cushion to sink into. "Now, look. The new government has absolutely forbidden the creation of new Borders without their approval. Mind you, they're relying on the fact that nobody living—that we know of—is actually capable of raising a Border, but regardless, it's their policy."

"So there *is* a new government?" Idalia asked.

Dimmick nodded. "Yes, the Party for Freedom and the Justice Party were joined by the Cauldron Party, giving them a clear majority coalition. The Cauldrons have always been a bit unpredictable in their loyalties, but they'd have had a slim majority even without them. Their new Prime Minister was appointed last night."

“So that’s it, then?” Ed said disgustedly. Clara was surprised—first him speaking up to Mycroft last night, and now this? Where had this Ed been hiding? “Just no more Borders?”

Dimmick shrugged. “As I said, it’s not like anyone is able to create them anyway.”

“And not like you care,” Ed snapped.

Clara’s eyebrows rose almost as quickly as the headmaster’s. “I beg your pardon?” Dimmick asked in a dangerous tone.

“They heard you talking to Aldworth,” Elsie said with some heat in her voice.

“Talking to—what?” Dimmick said, his voice suddenly confused. “Overheard when?”

“The other day,” Clara sighed.

Sudden comprehension settled on Dimmick’s face. “And you think it was *Reginald* I was talking to.”

The classmates nodded as one.

“But you know that can’t be true,” Dimmick said with a rueful grin. “He’s Exiled. There’s no known way to communicate between Underhill and the Ordinary world, save for wisps physically carrying a message. I was speaking to his brother, Clayton.”

Clara looked at her friends for confirmation, and the triplets’ simultaneous blushes was all she needed.

Ed moaned. “I didn’t think.”

“You weren’t there,” Clara said. “It’s my fault. Finlay and I—I mean, I didn’t know, and all we heard—”

Dimmick was holding his hands up, gently requesting silence. “I understand. I don’t approve, and this is why eavesdropping never ends well. But I understand.”

“So you don’t disapprove of the Borders?” Elsie asked suspiciously.

“Of course not. I’m not even sure most Homelanders do. They just advocate for stronger... controls. But of course now... well, as I said, we can’t easily replace lost Borders.”

“But we—” Ed began, but Dimmick shook his head.

"I'm aware of what transpired between you and Professor Mycroft last evening," the headmaster said. He sighed. "She is your dorm professor; I would advise you to avoid antagonizing her if at all possible. But frankly, to suggest that you were able—"

"We *were*," Harriett snapped. "It isn't a difficult spell."

"No," Dimmick said sternly, fixing Harriett with a glare, "it is not. That is well known. What is also well known is that it requires a special... hmm, knack with the magic, you could say. A knack that comes along at most—"

"Once a generation, yes, everyone keeps saying," Clara interrupted.

Dimmick raised an eyebrow. "Everyone? With whom have you been speaking on the subject?"

Clara decided to play all their cards. "Professor Risewell, for one."

Both of Dimmick's eyebrows climbed up his bald head as his eyes opened wide in surprise. "I will need to have words with that staircase," he said after a moment.

"We found a copy of her book in the dorm library," Ed said. "And a copy of Swadling."

"Did you?" Dimmick said softly. "Those were meant to have been... collected. Go on."

"Swadling expressed it in astrological terms because he didn't have the math for it," Ed continued. "But we worked out the math behind it."

"Math, you say," Dimmick breathed.

"I'm a mathemagician," Clara announced. "That's what Professor Risewell called it."

Dimmick stared for several long moments. "You were believed to be a visual witch," he said slowly.

"I don't even know what that is," Clara said.

"Visual witches have a form of synesthesia. Whereas most of us experience magic through a partly emotional sort of sixth sense, visual witches experience it through the visual cortex of their brain."

It's considered something of an ailment, as they're usually incapable of the same level of precision as a witch not so afflicted."

"That's not me."

"So you *do* see magic?"

"As glowing equations. I can tweak them. Balance them."

"My word." He rocked back on his cushion and regarded Clara with... awe?

"We *are* the ones who tried to raise the Border behind the stadium yesterday. They fed me the magic, and I shaped it based on what we figured out from the Swadling book." Clara spoke quickly now, certain she could convince the headmaster. "It stabilized—for just a second. And then someone appeared."

"Appeared?" Dimmick frowned. "Professor Mycroft said nothing about someone *using* the Border."

"They didn't exactly *use* it," Ed said. "But we saw Minister Oberherr. Reginald Aldworth. He... waved a finger at us, like we were being naughty. And the Border collapsed."

"We know it was him. He was at my house, I've seen him before. With paladins. And we found his photo in the papers." Clara was speaking faster now, eager to get all the facts out before Dimmick shut them down like Mycroft had.

"Wait," Dimmick said, leaning forward. "Oberherr—Aldworth—was *at your house*? In the Ordinary, you mean, with your adoptive parents?"

Now Clara frowned. "Yes. Mycroft saw him. He was with a group of paladins who tried to break through the protective magic she'd put on the house. She didn't tell you?"

Dimmick leaned back, regarding Clara carefully. "She did not." He steepled his fingers in front of his face, but continued staring at Clara.

Suddenly, Clara remembered who they'd overheard Dimmick talking to. She felt herself sweating, and glanced at her friends. They were all looking at her incredulously. *Oh, crap*, she thought.

"I believe," Dimmick said slowly, tapping his fingertips against

each other, “that you would all do best if restricted to your dormitory for the time being. We will arrange for your meals to be brought up. Consider this... a protective detention, rather than a punishment. I will have Professor Mycroft raise the dampers in your dorm, just to ensure you do not engage in any... excess magical experimentation, shall we say.”

“But—“ Clara started to protest.

“It will give Professor Mycroft a certain peace of mind, I’m sure,” Dimmick continued, now speaking more slowly and deliberately. “And I’m also sure you all can *see* the value of it, yes?”

Clara blinked a bit, not quite understanding. “But—“

“Got it,” Ed interrupted. He poked Clara in the shoulder and she fell silent.

Dimmick nodded gravely. “That will be all. The door is just there behind you.”

They all stood, filed out of the headmaster’s office, and let the spiral staircase carry them back to the Great Hall.

“That sucks,” Elsie grumbled.

“Does it?” Ed asked lightly. “Mmm. Not like there’s much else to do anyway. I mean, tennis? Indoors?”

“A fine English tradition,” Idalia sighed. “Hey, isn’t that Theo?” She pointed at a harried-looking student rushing through the hall. “Theo!” Idalia called.

The boy stopped and blinked at them as if he hadn’t seen them in the hall to begin with. “Oh, hullo,” he said. “What do you want?”

“I guess... weren’t you at breakfast?” Johanna asked.

“No, but McAndrew told us this morning. Eleventh-years and up have been out all morning trying to raise fauna wards.”

“How’s it going?” Ed asked curiously.

“Badly,” Theo said, shaking his head and grimacing. “We can keep the basic rodents away from the castle itself, but not off the mesa. They just tunnel under whatever we put up. And the bigger ones—that’s why I’m here. McAndrew thinks Professor Saxon has some feli-bane in her greenhouse. Nothing else has worked.”

"Do you think—" Idalia began.

Theo shook his head again. "I'm sorry, I really need to get going." He gave them a small wave and rushed off.

"Doesn't bode well for us ever going outside again," Harriett groused.

"We'll *see*," Ed said, giving them a happy smile.

"You're being weird," Harriett told him.

"C'mon, let's just go up," Elsie said with a defeated sigh.

Professor Mycroft was waiting for them on the stairs. "Directly to your dorm, if you please," she said, a satisfied smile on her face. "I've just received word from Headmaster Dimmick. And rest assured, your dorm's dampening magic will be enhanced by this evening."

"Won't that affect the other people moving in?" Idalia asked.

Mycroft blinked a couple of times, clearly not having considered it. "I'm sure we can come up with something appropriate," she said at last, her smile diminishing just a little. "Up you go. You'll find Mister Addington already inside."

The professor stood aside as the six of them clomped reluctantly up the stairs and finally emerged onto the third-level gallery. They stepped into the common room and let the door click shut behind them.

"Oh. That was quick," Elsie said quietly.

The common room was a near-hubbub: the six ninth-year football players had arrived, their large bags of gear and trunks of clothes scattered everywhere. The players themselves were sitting around the large table, which they'd cleared of newspapers. They waved at their classmates.

"I don't trust her," Johanna said quietly.

"Mycroft, you mean?" Harriett asked. "Nor I."

"Just because her politics are different?" Ed asked.

"Because she's mean," Elsie muttered. "And conniving."

"Conniving?" Clara asked.

Elsie shrugged. "I'm sticking with it. Where's Finlay?"

The boy was nowhere to be seen. "Maybe he's in his room?" Clara suggested.

"On the bright side, Phoebe and her lot aren't here," Elsie said hopefully.

"Her parents will spring for the professional escort," Harriett said confidently. "No way that group would bunk down with the likes of us."

"So we're basically trapped in our dorm," Johanna sighed, stepping over a battered-looking trunk and collapsing onto a sofa.

"How do you think?" Ed asked, obviously confused.

Harriett gave him a withering glare. "Because they basically *said* we were."

"Did you not hear Dimmick? And Mycroft?" Johanna grouched. "Dorm arrest. Magic dampers. Can't leave, can't do anything."

"Did *you* not hear him?" Ed shot back. "That was a show to make Mycroft comfortable. She'll forget about us now. He said we'd '*see*' it that way. Like Clara can see magic. She can take the dampers apart, and we can get out."

Everyone, including Clara, stared at Ed as if he'd grown a third arm. "Wait," Elsie said, giving him a hard look. "You think?"

"Obviously."

"But he's... he's on our side?" Johanna asked slowly, trying to process this new information.

Ed shrugged. "He's not *not* on our side, I'd guess."

"So Clara can just break us out," Elsie said thoughtfully.

"You can do that? No, of course you can; you can *do* that!" Idalia chirped, her voice filled with sudden delight. Johanna quickly shushed her, nodding toward the football players.

"There's still the problem of getting out without being noticed," Ed pointed out. "Mycroft will have someone watching us."

"We need a teleport spell," Harriett said.

"Eleventh-years and above," Idalia countered.

"Fortunately," Clara said slowly, "we know some eleventh-years."

"Who are apparently all engaged trying to put up fauna wards," Johanna reminded her.

"Still," Elsie said, "it's worth a try. Think one of us can sneak down to their dorm?"

"Whose dorm? For what?" Finlay said. He'd entered the common room from the bedroom side.

"Hey, Finlay," Darrell said, standing up from the table the football team had gathered around. "You thinking of doing the tennis thing?"

"I might," Finlay answered hesitantly, looking back and forth between the football players and his other classmates. "Just a sec, guys." He strode over to Clara's group, and in a low voice asked, "What are you trying to do now? We're already grounded indefinitely, and they've jacked up the magic dampers."

"Probably not yet," Ed said. "Mycroft said by tonight. I think she wants to see if she can dampen just us without affecting everyone else."

"Can she do that?" Idalia asked.

"I don't think so."

"Beside the point," Finlay said, heat rising in his voice. "We're *all* in trouble over this."

"I don't think we are," Clara said. "We went to see Dimmick—"

"Which is how we got this punishment," Finlay hissed. "Mycroft told me."

"How in the world did it get around that fast?" Johanna wondered.

"Magic," Clara reminded her. *How am I the only one who can remember that magic is a thing?* "But Finlay, Dimmick didn't *mean* it. It's just to placate Mycroft. He knows I can get us out of it. He *wants* us to."

"Wants us to what?" the Irish boy demanded. "Fix the Borders? Put them all back? Because that didn't work out."

Idalia snorted. "You know it almost—"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Finlay practically spat. He gave

them all one last baleful look, and then turned to the football team. "Yeah, I might try the tennis thing." He walked over to their table. "You guys going to try out?" The seven of them fell into quiet conversation.

"I'm game for trying the other dorm," Elsie said, pointedly ignoring Finlay now. "Clara, can you unlock the door?"

Clara shifted the door's equations as she had before, this time managing to not blow the doorknob off. Elsie darted out into the hallway. She was back just minutes later with Elma Burns, captain of an eleventh-year team, in tow.

Elma was dressed in a baggy sweatshirt, faded blue jeans, and thick socks. "The others told me what you guys tried to do," Elma said quietly as she joined the others. "And Elsie said you needed a teleport spell. I'm best in the class at it. Where do you need to go?"

"Can anyone tell if you use that?" Idalia asked.

Elma considered it. "Maybe. They call it a 'leaky' spell, which means it has some residual energies that you can pick up on if you're looking for it."

"Mycroft will be," Harriett predicted.

"Just a second." Clara unfocused her eyes, this time looking at the magic that swirled around the common room's walls, floor, and ceiling. The damping and protection equations were easy to spot: they were designed to draw off excess magical energy and funnel it into themselves, creating a feedback loop to contain runaway magic. The damping modification simply lowered the level at which the spell would begin drawing off power. Right now, it wasn't set that high, but Clara quickly lowered it further, to draw off zero ambient energy.

"Oooh," Elma said immediately. "That's interesting. The room doesn't feel as echo-y anymore. What did you do?"

Clara explained the modification. "And I can look at your teleport spell as well. If you can envision it, but not actually cast it?"

"Of course. It has a somatic trigger, so you can bring it all the way

up and activate it separately.” She concentrated, and Clara saw the equations of magic swirling around her.

It was the most complicated spell Clara had seen to date. The inputs were clear enough, but the actual working mechanism of the spell was a series of interlocked equations, each with three variables on—

“Oh,” she said, suddenly seeing the pattern. “They’re quadratic equations. And you’ve a bit here—it’s a great circle equation.” She fell silent as she studied the math more closely. “I think I see it,” she said at last. “It’s actually very efficient, but it looks like there’s a whole section specifically designed to throw off a trace.”

“What is she talking about?” Elma whispered to the others.

“She’s a mathemagician,” Ed explained with a smile. “She can see how the magic works, and even modify it.”

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, the guys said something like that, it just didn’t make any sense. So... is it going to hurt?”

“I’ll go slow,” Clara promised. “Just pay attention to the difference in how it feels, okay?”

“Will do.”

“And don’t fight me.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you start to feel like you’re going to hurl,” Harriett supplied in a falsely sweet tone, “try less hard.”

“Oh. Okay.” Elma sounded worried, but her magic stayed steady.

Clara began carefully extracting the trace-producing equation from the rest, delicately rebalancing the power flow. She worried that there’d still be more input than strictly necessary, but she didn’t know how to regulate it. The input portion of the construct was *huge*, absolutely ginormous compared to the rest of it. If Elma filled it to the brim, Clara wasn’t sure where the excess power would go. *Wait, I know what to do about that!* She incorporated the light magic in place of the trace-production portion of Elma’s spell.

“That is deeply weird,” Elma said, grimacing a bit as Clara

worked. “But I can feel what you’re doing. So this won’t leave a trace?”

“It’ll be a light show,” Clara said. “But it shouldn’t leave any residue outside this room.”

“I think I’ve got it. It *does* feel slightly different. That is a very unsettling feeling, I don’t mind telling you.”

“I thought it tickled,” Idalia offered.

“Yeah, I guess, if someone could tickle the inside of your brain,” Elma agreed with a grin. “Don’t get me wrong, Clara, this is incredibly cool, especially if it means old lady Mycroft won’t be able to track us.”

Clara smiled shyly, warmed by the older girl’s comment.

“So where do you kids need to go?” Elma asked.

“Let me look at it all again, just to be sure,” Clara said.

Elma nodded, and Clara let her eyes slide out of focus again. This time, the magic caught her up completely. Glowing equations ran together in her mind, twisting and turning until they finally blew away like autumn leaves, revealing a cool, evening landscape of carefully sculpted trees and a sky full of brilliant, jewel-like stars.



“WE DIE,” the little blue elf-creature said mournfully.

“How are you here?” Clara said, startled to find herself in her dreamscape.

“We die,” it insisted. “Look.”

It turned its head to one side, and Clara followed along. She took a sharp breath and a step backwards as she realized what she was looking at.

She and the elf were standing on a hard-packed dirt path, as they always had been in her dreams. Long blades of blue-green grass marched away from the path. At least, they did on one side of the path. On the other...

The grass on Clara’s left continued for no more than a foot or two

before it started breaking down. It reminded her of watching a video over a poor internet connection: the grass seemed blurry and blocky, with black spots scattered here and there as if pieces of the world had simply gone missing. That went on for a foot or so, and after that, there was simply... nothing.

“What is this?” Clara asked softly.

“The Edge,” the elf answered mournfully. “The End. And it creeps closer, so much closer.”

Indeed, as Clara watched, the black void seemed to nudge nearer and nearer to the path she stood on, devouring the grass slowly, one pixel at a time.

“We felt you bringing balance. Just for a moment,” the elf said, looking away from the void. Its face was drawn and haggard, with deep purple bags under its eyes. It had gone from being thin and lean to almost emaciated; delicate blood vessels stood out prominently beneath its papery skin.

“It almost worked,” Clara said. “We’re going to try again.”

“When?”

“Soon. Now. We needed help. She’s going to get us out so we can try again.”

It nodded. “Hurry.”



“I THINK IT’LL BE FINE,” Clara said, blinking as the vision gave way to reality.

“You sure? You were awfully quiet for a minute there,” Elma said.

“Yeah, I just... I wanted to double-check. Teleportation... is a little scary.”

“It’s not like *Star Trek*,” Elma reassured her with a grin. “The magic handles most of the calculations, so it really doesn’t go wrong. I just have to hold the destination firmly in my mind.”

Clara nodded. She’d seen that much in the equations. “Can I ask you something?”

"Sure."

"The fauna. The dangerous ones. They said that... dragon-thing, whatever it was, came from a lake? Somewhere far away?"

"Glass Lake," Elma said, suddenly looking curious. "Traditionally, Loch Glainne. Why?"

"Has anyone... been there? Recently, I mean?"

Elma nodded slowly. "McAndrew teleported there to see if something had driven the Oilliphéist out, or if it had been attracted to something here." She paused. "That is, he tried."

Clara's heart clenched. "What happened?"

"As near as we can tell," Elma said, her voice dropping into a whisper, "Glass Lake doesn't exist anymore."

"The lake is gone?" Idalia asked, confused.

"No," Elma said, shaking her head slowly. "That part of *Underhill* is gone. You can't go there, because it doesn't exist. The Oilliphéist must have gotten out just before... whatever happened."

Clara nodded. "Underhill is collapsing. It's coming apart at the edges. I keep having... visions. Dreams. It's telling me I have to fix it. Reconnect it to the Ordinary, I think. Restore some kind of balance."

Elma's eyebrows rose. "You're a little young to be a chosen one." But her tone wasn't mean, not like if Harriett had said it. She seemed to be simply stating a fact.

"She's our secret weapon," Harriett replied before Clara could say anything. Clara looked at the triplet, and her heart bloomed with joy when saw no malice, no sarcasm in the other girl's expression.

"How far away was this Glass Lake?" Elsie asked.

"Distances are different here," Elma said, "but think of it as a couple days' walk."

"That's awfully close," Johanna pointed out.

"The school was built near the Edge on purpose," Elma replied. "But yeah. If you're saying the Edge is moving..."

"It is," Clara confirmed with absolute certainty in her voice. "And we have to stop it."

"And fast. If you're right, we have next to no time left."

CHAPTER 37

LET'S DO THIS

After a quick discussion, they decided to wait until the earliest hours of morning. “Right now, everyone’s out trying to ward off the fauna,” Elma pointed out, “and there’s no way we get out without someone seeing us, teleport or no. But when the sun goes down, they’re going to be exhausted. Let Mycroft check on you guys one more time—you’ll all be here. We can get some sleep and head out when everyone else is dead to the world.”

They all acknowledged the wisdom of that, and stayed in the common room all day to work on the details of their plan. Lunch and dinner were brought to their common room as promised, and they all ate dinner together.

All but Finlay. He’d spent the rest of the morning with the football team, but when they’d all headed down to the tennis tournament, Finlay had returned alone just minutes later. “Mycroft says I’m confined as well,” he said bitterly. Sullen and distant, he’d spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in his bedroom.

“This *can’t* just be about soccer,” Clara said.

“He was always a loner, even when we were really young,” Idalia

mused. "He was always on the football teams. In first year, the traps are milder and they make the field a bit smaller. Eighth year is when they start to take the game really seriously, and he didn't make the team. That's when he finally started opening up to the rest of us." She shrugged. "It's all he cares about."

Clara shook her head, unable to comprehend a game being that important. After dinner—warm sandwiches and soup—she made the short walk to her room, hoping she could get some rest. But sleep eluded her.

Around one o'clock in the morning, according to the clock in her room, she finally pulled herself out of bed and walked back to the common room.

Ed was already there, poking through the bookshelves. "Couldn't sleep either?" he asked as she walked in.

"Tried," she said with a yawn.

"There's tea." He pointed to a small sideboard where a large pot of water was hissing merrily away. "You ever decide on the last two details?"

"Where to build it and where it'll go? Kind of, I guess. It'll have to go to Las Vegas," she said as she poured hot water over a tea bag. "I need to be able to visualize it really clearly, and that's where most of my strongest memories are. But as for where we build it, do you think it could be indoors?" There were a couple of abandoned buildings she thought might be perfect.

"I don't think so," Ed said after a moment's thought. "I've never run across one that's indoors, at least. There has to be a reason."

"Hmm. So you think a quieter area of town?" The old neighborhood-turned-law-offices might be perfect.

"The danger there is a group of people suddenly coming and going. It's easier to notice in a quiet area."

"Oh. Right." So much for that. "Well, I don't want to use the Art Alley again." She considered it. Low foot traffic. Outdoors. Preferably a wall, since she knew the pattern the magic would need for that. Downtown, someplace she'd been a few times and knew well—"Oh,

I know!" It was a perfect spot: another alley, but this one had been decorated as an outdoor dining area, and it sat next to a small space that housed pop-up restaurants. There were a couple of little nooks where it wouldn't be obvious that someone had stepped out of a concrete wall, and with a little magic, the padlock on the chain-link gate at the alley's entrance wouldn't be a problem.

"Where do you think we should put this end?"

"I don't even know where they all were," Clara reminded him. "So I guess just wherever."

"I mean, it doesn't have to be where a Border *was*. I think we should keep it on the mesa, and there were only ever a half dozen or so up here anyway. But if part of the goal is to keep the fauna away..."

Clara nodded and blew on her tea to cool it. "Yeah, that's true. So what about halfway between the castle and maybe the houses the soccer teams use?"

Ed nodded slowly. "That'd make sense. And it'd help secure a good area. Hmm." He thought for a moment. "Yeah. You know, since those houses are all empty right now, that's even better. Nobody will be out there. And there's a little garden running along—well, you'll see. It should be perfect."

Clara sipped her tea, enjoying the moment of silence in the room. Ed continued running his fingers along the shelves of books, as if touching them brought him comfort. For all she knew, maybe it did.

"Hey, Ed?" she asked, setting her tea down on the sideboard.

"Yeah?" He turned to look at her.

"You were so quiet when I first got here."

He nodded. "I'm the quiet kid," he said. "I guess I always have been. My Dad died, I told you. Mom... she kept to herself. And it wasn't practical for me to go back and forth between here and home in the early years, so I just stayed here."

"So you've known these other kids your whole life?" Clara could barely imagine what that would be like.

"Yeah. But they're all... I mean, half the kids here play soccer when they're little. I was never any good at it. The European kids

tend to be day students in the early years; there are a lot more Borders in Europe they can use to go back and forth. I guess I just preferred to keep to myself and read.”

“You’re talking more now,” Clara pointed out.

Ed blushed. “Yeah. There’s something about you that... Like, the triplets would never have given me the time of day. They’re not mean or anything—“

“Except Harriett.”

Ed chuckled. “Yeah, she’s a lot. But they’re not *mean*. We just didn’t have anything in common. But you... kind of made everyone open up. You’re new, so you’re something new to talk about, someone new to talk to. And you’re different. Your magic is different. That’s interesting.”

Clara’s mind was blown. It had never occurred to her that *she* was someone other people would find intriguing.

Not everyone, of course. “I don’t think Finlay thinks I’m as interesting,” she said sadly.

“Idalia was right: he’s always been a loner. Always part of the popular group, but a loner, if that makes any sense. He worships his brother, thought soccer—football—was the only reason to be here.”

“The players seem to like him okay.”

“They *all* worship his brother. But when the formal teams started forming last year, they all moved to the team residence. So he didn’t have anyone. He basically just started sitting with us during meals—Phoebe and her crew didn’t need another sycophant, and him not making the team made him *persona non grata* in their eyes.” Ed paused for a moment, weighing his next words. “You obviously freaked him out.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Finlay had started distancing himself from her the minute she’d made him vomit by tweaking his magic too fast and too hard.

“Remember, he’s Irish. They have *very* traditional ideas about magic. It’s... almost a religion to them, in a way. So you kind of messed with the basis for his worldview.”

“But not yours?”

He laughed. “I’ve been Ordinary-schooled in Slidell, remember. The witch community in Louisiana has a strong cultural identity and their own peculiar approach to magic. So I never fit in. My worldview probably isn’t informed enough to be messed with. In the South, witches are for burning.” He saw Clara’s alarmed look and quickly added, “Not that they ever do; we don’t get caught, obviously. But it’s not like there’s an existing magical tradition for me to fit into.”

“Ah.” She’d never had one either, given that she hadn’t realized magic was even a thing.

“You’re both early,” Idalia yawned as the triplets walked into the common room. Elsie was right behind them. “Elma here yet?”

“Not yet—” Clara started to say as the common room’s main door quietly swung open. Elma ducked in, and gently closed the door behind her.

“You guys ready?” the older girl asked.

“Clara was thinking that row-garden between the team houses and the castle,” Ed said.

Elma considered it and then nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good one. We’ll get a bit of light if the porch lights have been left on, and the trees screen it pretty well from the castle windows. Where to?”

“Vegas,” Clara said with a shrug. “It’s what I know best.”

“And it’s more about having a Border than where it goes, at this point.” Idalia agreed with a nod. “Everyone feeling all charged up?”

“As much as possible after lying awake in bed for six hours,” Elsie sighed. “Might as well do it.”

“Okay. Now look, there are likely to be fauna. Do you think it’ll take all six of us to power this?”

Clara hadn’t considered that. Her heart sank. “Probably,” she said slowly. “And I don’t think you can do this and protect us.” Now what would they do?

Johanna said, “Maybe we—”

“I’ll help.” Finlay eased into the room. “I caught enough of what you were all talking about last night.” He looked at Clara. “You *do*

weird me out. But... we need the Borders to keep the fauna back. And apparently to protect everything. So I'll help. Just... be gentle."

"You got it right the first time, last time," Clara reminded him.

He gave her a small grin. "Yeah, and no popping noises."

"Let's definitely avoid popping noises," Elma said with a smile. "Okay, guys. Gather 'round." She held her hands out, and Clara and Idalia each took one in their own. Ed and Johanna were next, followed by Harriett and Elsie, with Finlay closing the circle. "I should probably take guard duty," Elma cautioned.

"Yeah, you know more than any of us," Johanna agreed. "We'll be Clara's magic batteries."

Elma nodded. "Okay. Off we go."

A bright flash of light all but blinded them as Elma engaged her teleport spell. For Clara, the light was compounded by the onslaught of glowing equations that seemed to close in on their circle from every direction, swirl around Elma, and then hurl themselves back out, transforming everyone into light and energy and carrying them to their destination.

Clara knew they'd arrived once the cool night air settled on her skin, but it was several seconds before her eyes recovered and the darkness of night began to resolve into the dim forms of her friends. Elma had been right: the porch lights from the nearby team houses helped a bit, turning the starry but moonless night into a series of long shadows that stretched toward a dense line of trees.

"Okay," Elma said, breathing a bit heavily, "I clearly need to practice that with more people more often. Phew." She took one last deep breath and then nodded, letting go of Clara and Idalia's hands and stepping out of the circle. Everyone else released hands, but they stayed in their loose formation. "I'll keep an eye out for critters. You guys... make a Border. *Nachtsicht*," she whispered, and Clara saw a quick glitter of green equations settle around the older girl's head as she stepped back into the trees.

"Everyone remember the generalized form?" Clara asked.

Everyone nodded. "Go ahead and start. I'll keep an eye on you and tweak a bit?"

"Sure thing, boss," Elsie said with a grin.

Equations starting forming up around Clara's friends, blues and pinks and greens swirling in big loops around their arms and torsos as they summoned their magic. Clara watched them closely.

"Not so big, Elsie," Clara said, focusing to push Elsie's symbols closer together. "Think intensity more than quantity. Keep it tight." Elsie nodded, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Finlay, you're a bit off," Clara cautioned. She waited a moment, but his equations didn't correct themselves.

"Just do it," he said through a clenched jaw.

Clara focused tightly on a single figure in his equation, drawing an overly looped "2" into a tighter shape, gently thickening its lines. "That's it," she said softly. "Feel the difference?"

Finlay nodded. "I do." He sounded surprised. "I got it now."

Clara made small adjustments to Johanna's equations, and marveled as her sisters quickly picked up those tweaks. Even standing a bit apart as they were, their magic seemed to want to combine. "Do you three mind if I try something?" Clara asked, seeing an opportunity.

"Go for it," Idalia said.

Clara concentrated, carefully redirecting the looping flow of symbols that swirled slowly around Idalia. She found a break in the line of math, a natural border between the end of one equation and the beginning of another, and broke the loop. She directed it to Harriett, inserting it gently into the magic already floating around the other triplet. Then she picked up the end of Harriett's chain, connected it to Johanna, and pushed Johanna's magic to Idalia. When she was done, all three girls were part of a single mass of equations, now glowing more brightly cycling through intense shades of cerulean, rose, and maize.

"Wow," Johanna breathed.

"I think this is how your magic is *meant* to work," Clara said, watching the new construct carefully for any sign of instability.

"It's... easier," Harriett said, sounding surprised.

"But it's more powerful than the three of you put together," Clara said, noting how the colors of their magic continued to deepen, without the magic showing any signs of wavering.

"Synergy," Ed said, nodding. "I'm jealous."

"Ed, your magic looks perfect," Clara told him.

"Still."

"Okay, everyone." Clara took a deep breath. "Give it to me."

Four streams of magic darted forward, the triplets' remaining combined into a single mega-stream. The extra power from the triplets was immediately apparent: whereas on her first attempt, Clara had had to concentrate intently to cajole the magic together, this time she was able to simply push it into the shape she wanted. Thick, sturdy ropes of gold and silver formed the Border's outer oval, and questing tendrils of white and blue magic dove deep into the ground and extended far off into the night.

The visible effects on the triplets were even more pronounced. Their hair blew upward as if a hurricane was roiling beneath them. Their eyes glowed white, and even their pale skin seemed to be holding in some kind of internal light. "*IS THIS IT?*" the three asked, their voices joining in an eerie harmonic unity.

"THAT IS SO COOL!" Elsie yelled. "This should be in a movie!"

"That's it!" Clara shouted as she wove the triplets' energy into and around everyone else's. "Just keep doing that!"

The threads of magic digging into the ground were seeking a connection *here*, in Underhill, and Clara quickly filled in the variables of their equations: *this* earth, in *this* place, near *these* trees and within sight of *those* houses. The magic wavered and then took hold, leaving more power free to push the other set of threads into the Ordinary.

Clara realized that the magic itself didn't distinguish between Underhill and Ordinary; to it, they were faces of the same coin or text written on either side of a single page. She liked the latter

analogy better as the magic continued to look for the location she was holding in her mind. The text of Underhill was all flowing, spidery cursive, written by an ancient, sure hand; the text of the Ordinary was firm copperplate, printed with structure and force onto the page. But it was the same page regardless, and it wasn't long before the searching magic latched onto her destination: the alley next to the historic bar not far from Clara's home. Atomic Liquors had stood in that place for decades, and its connection to the earth and the locale was as firm as anything in that constantly changing town. The magic connected quickly, eager to share a sense of time and place, of history and weight, with the establishment.

The center of the Border snapped into place, its dark, rippling surface steadying into a translucent window overlooking the alley.

"I think I've got—" Clara started to say.

Something intruded.

A power outside of herself, outside of her friends, lanced into the Border. Immediately, its center once again became a roiling, oily ocean. The elegantly intertwined border of gold and silver separated, each bright rope thinning into a glistening line of floss before whipping independently into the ground. A flash of light and heat accompanied the Border's dissolution, and all seven children were shoved backward, their circle breaking as they landed on their backs in the dewy grass.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Johanna, pulling herself into a sitting position opposite Clara, looked alarmed. "Professor Mycroft," she stammered.

The others levered themselves to their feet or knees, turning to see a furious Professor Mycroft, her eyes blazing with anger, glaring at them all. Clara's eyes, still half-focused, saw the remnants of silver-and-black equations just beginning to fade from Mycroft's fingertips. "You did that?" Clara asked, bewildered. Something about the lingering magic in the area seemed... familiar.

"Of course I did," Mycroft snapped. "Just as I did last time."

“But we thought Oberherr—” Idalia began, her expression one of confusion and betrayal.

“Don’t be stupid, girl. Minister Oberherr has been exiled all this time. Borders can only be taken down from *this* side.”

Finlay frowned. “But you—”

“I?” Mycroft sneered. “Let’s focus on *you*. You have disobeyed your elders. You have failed to follow even the simplest instructions, meant to protect you from your own folly. You have tampered with magic far beyond your capabilities.”

“The Borders—” Harriett started.

“What of the Borders? You think you have all the answers because, what, you have read a book or two?” The professor snorted. “There’s a history here, children, which is not captured in books or in newspapers. History is something you *live* through, as I have done.”

“But you used to support free movement!” Johanna protested.

“Oh, did I? You know me so well, do you, child?” Mycroft said, a sly smile playing around her lips.

“We read the articles, about the—”

“You magicked the papers,” Ed interrupted.

I figured as much, Clara thought.

“You should have focused on your actual studies,” Mycroft said. “But yes. Easily enough, when you’re already willing to rely on the lies and misinformation published in those rags. What are a few more?”

“But the Borders,” Clara said, her voice pleading. “Underhill needs them. It needs the balance of the Ordinary. That’s why that dragon attacked—its lake is gone. Underhill is fading at the edges.”

“Yes, we knew there’d be some changes,” Mycroft acknowledged. “But the mesa can be held, and we’ll leave a sufficient number of Borders—carefully regulated and controlled—to sustain a smaller Underhill. Magic begins here, dear child, and we will always have all the magic we need.”

“Magic comes from life,” Clara said sadly, picturing the little elf-creature that spoke for Underhill.

“And there will be ample life here. Almost every family of witches with children in a school are here now, and here they’ll remain.”

“You’re a horrible woman,” Idalia said coldly.

Mycroft shrugged. “You’re a child. You’ve all been a hindrance at best. Except you, Clara. You’ve been ever so helpful.”

“Me?” Clara said, suddenly confused. What could she possibly have done?

“Oh, yes. You recall how Underhill was trying to push you out when first you came?”

Clara nodded. “You said a charm...”

“No. No, my dear, you had the same Exile magic on you as Minister Oberherr himself. Being able to study you, even briefly, while you were here was the clue I needed. Novel magic, you understand—something invented by two witches working together, and until now, something only they knew the key to.”

“My... parents?” Clara asked.

“The Hunters Holdaway, yes. Ancients alone know why they applied the magic to you, but it was the opportunity we needed. Now, since I was able to drain the spell from you, I’ll be able to drain it from him as well. With the Borders under control, he’ll be able to save us. Only he can save us as a people, you know. From the filth of that other world.”

“What makes the Ordinary world so bad?” Ed asked. *He’s prodding her again*, Clara realized. She began looking around, seeking an opportunity to... do something. Anything.

“Bad? It’s filthy. Filled with filthy beings. And you all bring a bit of that filth with you every time you return. The government should have controlled the Borders decades ago. Centuries. But now *he* can return and set our government right. It is merely ironic that I have you to thank for it.”

“Not welcome,” Clara muttered, still casting around for some kind of trick she could pull.

Mycroft snorted. “Now to the punishments. Who did this?”

Clara’s eyes snapped back to Mycroft, speechless.

"Who did... what?" Elsie asked.

"This," Mycroft said, waving her hand where the Border had stood. "Establishing a Border. Who's helping you do this? Where are they?"

Clara's jaw worked silently.

"We did this," Harriett said, as if explaining something to an especially slow child.

"Nonsense."

"You saw us," Johanna pointed out.

"I *saw* seven children standing in a circle around an unstable Border, exactly the same as last time. Children who, as I have previously mentioned, can barely cast a simple light smell without some unwanted side effect. You? Create a *Border*? Impossible. Who is helping you?"

"You... didn't see them?" Clara asked, finally recovering her voice.

"That fact is implicit in the question."

"They... teleported," Ed said, catching on.

"I surmised as much. *Who was it?*"

"We aren't telling you who he is," Clara said and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Ah. That narrows it down only slightly. You *will* tell me."

"No we won't," Finlay growled, taking a step toward the professor and clenching his fists.

"Don't be ridiculous, child," Mycroft said, flinging a hand at him. Bright lines of light sprang forth, wrapping around Finlay and carrying him to the ground. "Now—" Mycroft started, but she stopped and tilted her head to one side as if listening to something only she could hear. "Ah. Perhaps a discussion for later, then. I've one more chore this evening, children. Try not to let the fauna eat you."

The professor's fingers danced, and she vanished in a swirl of sparks.

CHAPTER 38

THE SHATTERING

“Guys, I’m really sorry,” Elma said.

They were trudging back to the castle, a trip that would normally take twenty minutes at most—but they’d already been at it for half an hour. Elma was exhausted and didn’t feel confident in teleporting them. She was covered in minor scratches, and they had to stop every few steps to fend off local fauna that had started running away from the nascent Border but gotten caught in the semi-effective fauna wards around the castle.

“At least Mycroft didn’t get you,” Finlay muttered.

“Yeah, but the razards did,” Elma retorted.

Ten minutes into their walk home, they’d stopped under the relative shelter of a broolly-tree so that Elma could teach them how to use defensive lancets—thin blades of pure energy that were generally effective at deterring smaller critters. Elsie, Harriett, and Finlay had picked up the new spell immediately, while they’d ultimately asked Ed to stop trying before their bladders burst. Idalia and Johanna were slowly getting it, thanks to Harriett’s coaching.

Clara had shown no interest in even trying.

“It’s the vorcelbats we need to watch out for,” Elma warned as

they marched along. "If they manage to get their claws into your hair, they'll stab a hole right through your skull."

"Charming," Elsie grumbled, firing off a lancet into the grass.

"What was that?" Finlay asked, peering into the darkness.

"It moved," Elsie answered. "You move, you get shot. C'mon, keep up the pace."

Their progress was slowed significantly by the need to have someone watching in every direction, meaning they had to cluster up in a circle, facing outward with Clara in the center. It made for an awkward procession, but it kept the growing variety of small, inimical creatures from catching them unawares.

Halfway to the castle, they all stopped as the ground, then the air, and then their very bodies, rumbled for a moment. Clara saw an expanding ring of shattered magic wash toward and over them, trailing the rumbling by an eye blink.

"What was that?" Johanna asked.

"It felt like... magic?" Ed said uncertainly.

"It was a Border coming down," Clara said dully. "Pretty familiar with it by now."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. "It felt close," Idalia said.

"It was on the mesa," Clara said.

"So... we're down to one," Elma said quietly.

"Probably Mycroft," Finlay said in a low growl.

"Let's just get inside," Clara sighed. "Apparently, there's nothing we can do."

"Back!" Finlay shouted, startled. He was covering their rear at the moment, and they all heard the sizzle as he fired a lancet. "Huh," he said after the noise died down. "That one seemed weaker."

"The fauna?" Elma asked. She had the lead and was peering ahead into the darkness.

"No, the spell. The rest of them were slicing right through. That one... sizzled."

"Did it stop the creature?"

"Yeah, it dissolved... but not as fast."

"It's the magic," Clara told them flatly. "Less Borders, less magic."

The air seemed to thicken as they all grew tense. "Will that mean the fauna get weaker as well?" Harriett asked.

"Probably," Clara said with a shrug nobody could see. "I mean, at some point everything out here will just dissolve into nothingness, including the fauna. So same thing, in the end."

"Jeez, Clara," Harriett said chidingly.

"We tried twice. Mycroft stopped us both times. She probably just took down another Border. Not much to be positive about."

Everyone fell silent as they edged back to the castle's main entrance. Their circle broke up as they walked inside.

"I suspected as much," Headmaster Dimmick said in a low, gravelly voice as they stepped inside the main entrance. He was waiting there in a red business suit, hands crossed over his chest, staring down at them with an inscrutable expression on his face. "I felt two Borders die tonight. Can I assume one of them, at least, was another ill-advised attempt at creation?"

"Yup," Clara said. She continued walking, clearly intended to trudge right past him. He held out a hand to stop her.

"I'm disappointed, of course," he said softly, "but that does not exclude me also being somewhat impressed." Clara stopped and looked up at him. His expression had relaxed, and his eyes were kind. "I know you tried," he added.

"Mycroft took them down," Clara said, her voice still flat and dull. "You know she's a Homelander, right?"

Dimmick raised an eyebrow. "We try to pride ourselves on allowing for a variety of perspectives here. Still," he added, shaking his head sadly, "I know their rhetoric is... strong... but I never thought they would take it this far." He peered at Clara. "Can you really create new Borders?"

Clara nodded. "But Mycroft keeps tearing them down."

The headmaster sighed. "Miriam Mycroft has always had a... *particular*, I suppose is the polite word, worldview. She is not

actually a Homelander per se, but her views align well with theirs.”

“So help us!” Clara cried, tears welling up in her eyes.

“At the very least, sir,” Elma added, “we should consider evacuating the castle. The wards aren’t proving effective, and... magic is weakening. It’s getting strange out there.”

“Or get the rest of the faculty to help! If we can just hold them off, I know I can raise Borders!” Clara insisted. “If we can raise one, maybe two, it’ll stabilize Underhill, at least here. Then we can—” She stopped as a glowing mote of blue light drifted past her head. It seemed... wobbly. It drifted back and forth for a moment, as if caught in a breeze, and then landed on Dimmick’s shoulder. Its glow faded, and Clara realized it was a tiny, glowing person with wings.

“There’s a wisp on your shoulder,” Elsie pointed out unnecessarily.

Dimmick frowned as the wisp’s light pulsed a few times before fading out almost entirely. He gently scooped the tiny creature from his shoulder into the palm of his hand. “Let’s get you something to eat,” he said softly. “*Amach go dtí an seomra poist,*” he added, the fingers on his other hand flicking through a complex pattern. The wisp vanished in a shower of sparks.

“What is it?” Elma said, watching the headmaster’s face.

“Ill news,” he sighed. “Reginald Aldworth—Minister Oberherr—has returned to Underhill. The coalition government has elected him Prime Minister by acclaim. Members of the opposition parties are being confined in their homes as we speak. All remaining Borders are being fortified and placed under government control. We’re to expect a team to arrive here within the day.” He shook his head sadly.

Clara—already exhausted, sad, and defeated—found her knees buckling beneath her. Everything around her seemed to spin, and then grew dark.



SHE CAME to in her dreamscape, the little elf-creature standing in front of her. Its skin had faded to more of a gray than blue. Its blood-shot eyes locked onto her.

"Weak," it croaked. "Cold."

"I know," Clara replied, tears spilling down her face. "But—"



"CLARA?"

Clara shook herself and realized she was sitting on the floor in the castle's Great Hall.

"Are you okay?" Ed was kneeling next to her, supporting her back.

"I'm okay," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "But Underhill is dying."

"What do you mean?" Dimmick asked, lowering himself into a crouch.

"Underhill is *alive*," Clara said. "And being cut off from the Ordinary is killing it."

Dimmick nodded slowly. He stood and said, "Unfortunately, any influential faculty members will have received their own wisps. Given a government mandate, few, if any, would support any contrary actions." He fell silent, considering.

"I should go," Clara whispered, pushing herself back to her feet.

"Go? Where?" Ed asked, rising with her.

"Back. Back home, to my parents. To the Ordinary. Everything was fine before I came here. I wasn't causing anyone any problems." She blinked a few times as her vision swam. "Head rush," she muttered, putting one of her hands on Ed's forearm for support.

"Clara, things were not *fine* before you came," Elsie told her. "Things were—"

"I don't feel good," Clara said, falling to her knees, and she blacked out again.

CHAPTER 39

UNDERHILL UNHINGED

Clara wasn't surprised when she found herself back in the dreamscape.

"I know, I know!" she all but yelled at the little elf-creature. It looked positively wizened now, and she could see its spindly legs shaking as they tried to keep it upright. "I tried! We all did! We tried *twice!*" She shook her head in frustration. "But a professor stopped us, both times!"

"Stopped...?" it croaked, tilting its head to one side.

"Yes, stopped us! Her magic—she knows more than we do. I'm just a kid!" Tears were forming in her eyes. "And I'm tired," she admitted.

It stared at her for a moment and then fell to the ground. Clara's eyes widened—it had landed on its rear again, its legs splayed out before it, but as frail as it looked, she worried it had damaged itself. "Sit," it wheezed, one finger twitching toward her.

Clara slowly lowered herself to the path. This was a different one than in her last vision—the grass here stretched away to both sides, with no sign of the crumbling edge from before.

The elf took a deep breath and spoke slowly. She heard the rattling in its chest as it ground out its next thought. "Words, so difficult," it said as it stared mournfully at her. "Perceptions change. Ideas. Concepts. But must try."

It took another deep breath. "Magic is everywhere. Here, there, everywhere. But most connect... fuzzy. Gauze over their eyes, or cotton in their ears. They know magic only as a shape, or a single note." It summoned the energy to let out a low whistle. "Magic, but vague, yes?"

Clara nodded. That exactly described her understanding of her friends' magic: they *felt* it, but only in a vague sense. They had to memorize what something felt like in order to repeat it.

"But you see clearly," the elf said, its voice clearing for a moment. "You hear the entire melody, yes?"

"I don't hear anything," Clara said. "But I see it, yes. It's all clear."

"But not just the shapes, not just the flows. You see all of it, yes? And you can *touch* it. Mold it, like... clay, yes?"

She nodded.

"Yes," it said, its voice again growing exhausted as its shoulders slumped. "Clay. Someone throws clay at you, what do you do?"

"Duck?"

It wheezed a laugh. "Yes, or catch?"

"Sure."

"If catch, what do you do with it?"

"Throw it back?" Clara didn't see where this was going.

"Just as is? Mmm, maybe. But maybe, mold it into something else? Something stronger. No?"

Clara blinked. "Are you saying I could throw Mycroft's magic back at her?"

It shook its head, tired and frustrated. "No. Words! Words always fail. No, not throw. To throw, must *have*." It thought for a second, clearly searching for better words. "River. River flows, yes?"

"Okay."

"How to change where river flows? Pick up water, pick up in hands? Maybe bucket? Move water, here to there?"

"No, that'd never work. You'd have to... cut a channel, I guess. Give it someplace else to flow." Clara frowned. What was the creature telling her? What was its point?

"Yes... change river *bed*, not river. See?"

Clara shook her head.

"Magic *everywhere*," it insisted.

"I know. I can see it. It's glowing equations, all math. I know that. I can change them, at least a little. I get what you said about clay, shaping it—"

"Math?" it asked, its brow wrinkling in confusion.

"Yeah, math. One plus one equals two. Two times two equals four." Clara illustrated on her fingers as she spoke.

"Math..." It mused for a moment. "Réalteolaíocht?"

Clara shook her head. "I don't know that word."

The elf waved its hands listlessly above its head. "Stars, planets, moving?"

"Sort of, I guess. Math can describe... but yeah, sure. Astronomy."

"One, two three, four?" it asked, raising fingers as it counted. Clara realized that it only had three fingers and a thumb on each hand.

"Yes."

"Yes," it breathed, a smile spreading across its face.

It stretched both hands out, palms up, and the sky ignited. Glowing lines connected the thousands of stars strewn across the canopy of night, drawing pictures of fanciful creatures that walked, ran, galloped, and swam. The lines shifted, turning into arcs that traced the stars' movement, lines and numbers appearing to name them and their relationships to each other.

The elf's hands lowered, slowly this time, and the glowing lines and numbers replicated themselves in the landscape. Tall vertical lines denoted the trees, their angles indicating their relationship to the ground. More lines glowed beneath the earth, which had become

darkly translucent, tracing the networks of roots that connected the trees to the earth and to each other.

"This?" it asked. "This math?"

Clara nodded. "Yes."

"Not math," it whispered, as it let the glowing lines and numerals fade from sight. "*Magic*. How everything *fits*."

"Are you... saying that magic is... just math?" Having thought for a moment that she got where the creature was going, Clara again felt off-track. "But math is... it's science. One and one are always two. Two by two is always four. Magic is... different."

"Close eyes," it said. Clara complied. "How many fingers?"

"I can't see."

"Open eyes."

"Three."

"One and one and one?"

"Yes, of course."

"Couldn't tell with eyes closed?"

"Of course not."

"Still science?"

"Of—wait." Something tingled in Clara's brain, a moment of realization. "Magic is science, but the others can't *see* the science. So it's... different, for them. But I can see it. Can I... is it like the river? I can change it by..." She lost the thread of the analogy.

"New place to flow," the elf said, nodding encouragingly.

"Even... Professor Mycroft?"

"All magic," it said, waving a hand to take in everything around them. "Others stand in the river. Splash around. Get wet, get others wet. Same river." The elf had her now. "*You change river*."

"I've been... it's been equations. I see two and three equals four. I change the three to a two, and it balances." The creature shrugged, but she plowed ahead. "But I can change the *equation*. Two squared equals four."

The elf blinked, not understanding.

Clara stood. "I've got it now. I think." She considered. "No, I've

got it. You said something before—about Builders and Keepers. What did the Builders do?”

“Dug the riverbeds,” the elf said encouragingly.

“And the Keepers?”

“Minded the banks.”

Clara nodded. “Send me back. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 40

DEEP BREATHS

“C lara!”

She recognized Dimmick’s voice, and realized she was still lying on the cold floor of the Great Hall.

“Ed,” she whispered, her throat suddenly dry and raw. She coughed and pushed herself into a sitting position. “Ed,” she repeated more clearly.

“I’m right here, Clara.”

“I need to see that book again.”

CHAPTER 41

MATHEMAGIC

“**T**his! This part here,” Clara said excitedly, jabbing her finger at the book. “This is what I don’t get.”

They’d returned to the dorm’s common room, and Ed had retrieved the Risewell and Swadling books. Clara had starting flipping through them, occasionally referring to the drawings and equations they still had on the board.

“We really need to depressurize this thing,” Harriett mused, looking at the gauges that sat above the board’s control levels in the wall. Clara blinked. Harriett was still wearing the same rust-colored hair ribbon.

That can’t be good.

“Later,” Idalia said, her fingers idly plucking at her own medium-orange ribbon. “Clara, what’s the problem with it?”

Clara sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. “Okay. You guys all operate by... feel, right? With magic, I mean.”

“Well, no,” Idalia corrected her. “I mean, you have to focus on your intent, and a lot of spells have certain images and mnemonics—“

"Yeah, I got that when Elma was showing you how to do those little fire-blades—"

"Lancets," Ed said.

"Lancets, fine, earlier. But all she said was stuff like, 'Hold a thin, fiery scalpel in your mind and think these sounds.'"

"Well sure, that's... how you do it," Harriett said.

"And sometimes you have, like, finger motions."

"A somatic element, yeah," Johanna said. "But sometimes it's your whole hand, or a whole arm, or something. Some spells require additional shaping so your magic knows what you want."

"And sometimes words," Clara persisted.

"Mainly the older European spells," Ed said. "They were big on using aural components to shape the magic."

"And yet none of you get it right the first time," Clara pointed out. "That's where your quirks come from." There was an embarrassed silence. "But *I* don't *feel* magic."

"You're a mathemagician," Finlay said. "You just... modify it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But now... now I don't think that's true. Look, this diagram, right here. It's all about calculating the angles and horizons and all that, right?"

"That's how they're expressing the math that you see," Ed said. "Isn't it?"

"Again, I thought so. But..." She decided to try the elf's analogy. "What if magic is like water?"

Everyone blinked at her. "Like... water," Idalia said, clearly not understanding.

"Yeah. You guys jump in the river, and you're moving the water around with your hands. You splash. You could do it blindfolded. People get wet, of course, but you're just dipping into the water, right? You're not *moving* it." She was butchering it, she realized. "Never mind. Look at the board."

Clara got up and hurried over, pointing at the various equations they'd created the last time. "Look, all of this describes the *shape* that I'm supposed to put the magic into, right? You guys get it into a

general form, which makes it easier for me to shape it. And that's what I did."

"And Mycroft tore it down," Finlay said darkly. "Twice."

"Yeah, I was there," Clara snapped.

Ed gave her a sharp look.

"Ugh, sorry." *Mom always said that lashing out meant something else was up. Something with me.* "I'm tired. I'm frustrated. Sorry."

"It's okay," Ed said, smiling gently.

Clara took a deep breath before continuing. "Look, even in these forms, there are all these variables I have to fill in. I have to look at the magic in the land itself and fill in the variables so that the Border connects to the land. And then again on the other side, which is even harder, because all I have is an image in my head."

"Which is how spells work," Harriett insisted.

"No!" Clara said, stomping her foot in frustration and earning another look from Ed. "I don't work that way. I don't know how. I've tried, you guys have shown me your spells, but I have to see the equations, to see the math, and then I can push the magic into that same equation."

"Isn't that what you did with the two Borders?" Elsie asked softly.

"Yes, but it was so easy for her to tear them down. All she did was... push more power into it. That unbalanced everything, and it all unraveled. Instead of moving the water with my hands..." Clara whispered to herself, staring at the board. "I need to dig a new channel. A new channel..."

"What's that mean?" Ed asked quietly.

"Underhill has always had connections to the Ordinary, right?" Clara asked slowly, piecing her thoughts together.

"Sure," Idalia said. "Just not always Borders."

"Right, right. Standing stones. Fairy rings. Other things," Clara said, waving one hand distractedly. "But how long have *Borders* been in use?"

That stumped them. "At least as long as my parents," Finlay said.

“But... Seanmháthair, my grandmother, she used to talk about the fairy rings. I mean, I don’t think she ever saw one, but she said her mother used to play in them.”

“So... what, eighty years? A hundred?” Clara guessed.

“In there,” Finlay agreed.

“And how old would you say Risewell is?”

“Witches can live a long time,” Idalia said very slowly. “She could—“

“It’s in her bio,” Ed said, grabbing the book and flipping to the back. “She taught here at Liginbaum’s for fifty years alone. And that wasn’t her first job—she used to work for the Ministry—oh. Oh, that makes sense.”

“Sharing is caring,” Elsie muttered.

“Sorry. She worked for the Ministry of Travel.”

“Standing up Borders,” Clara said with a nod.

“I would imagine.”

“For how long?” Idalia asked.

“It doesn’t say,” Ed said, running a finger along the tiny print. “But she completed her post-graduate studies...” He paused while he did the math. “She must be pushing a hundred and fifty,” he said at last, amazement coloring his voice.

“So Borders, as we know them, may be a relatively new invention,” Clara said.

“Fairy rings were always created by the Fae, and the last of them disappeared in the late 1800s,” Idalia said. “So that... that kind of fits.”

“Standing stones were the druids. Stonehenge alone is four or five thousand years old,” Elsie said.

“So not a lot of innovation for a while,” Clara said, nodding again. “But then we get Borders. Easily created if you know how, except only an incredibly small number of people actually *can*. The Fae are gone, so no more fairy rings. Does Stonehenge still actually work?”

Elsie's eyebrows rose. "I actually have no idea. But it's a historic site now; you can't get within a hundred feet of it."

"Convenient," Clara said. "So we're left with easily-constructed Borders that are just as easily destroyed, which are conveniently constrained by a very limited supply."

"You think—" Ed started.

"I think this has been going on for longer than Oberherr has been around. And I think it's time for a change."

"What do you mean?" Johanna asked.

"No more Borders. No more trying to move water with my hands. If we want to change the course of the river, we have to dig a new riverbed."

"I'm not following," Elsie said.

"Meaning *I'm* going to have to cast a spell," Clara said, her heart fluttering as she said it.

"But you've already—"

"No, Finlay, I haven't. I've shaped *your* magic. Everyone's. I haven't made my own." She paused, and looked into each of their eyes. "We're going to need a lot of help."

"We need to get out of the castle," Ed said, "but I think Dimmick will let us."

"The rest of the faculty might not," Johanna pointed out.

"Still tapped out," Elma announced. She'd slumped into a chair the moment they'd walked in, explaining she was too tired to even make it to her own dorm. "But I bet I can get one of the guys to do it."

Clara thought about it. "Can you get... *all* of the guys?"

"Like, the whole team?"

"Yeah."

"Don't see why not. They're always up for bending the rules a little. Gimme a minute." She groaned as she pushed herself out of the chair. "Maybe five." She slowly walked out of the common room, turning left down the hall toward her own dorm.

"Good idea," Elsie said approvingly. "We're going to need serious cover."

“And having two more people who can teleport us will be handy if we need to escape,” Ed agreed. “But... Clara, I’m not exactly clear on what we’re supposed to be doing.”

Clara sighed. “I’m not either, Ed. But I have an idea.”

“You think you can anchor a Border more firmly or something?” Finlay asked.

“Sure.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I’m not, Finlay. I only know that a little blue elf told me to dig a new riverbed instead of trying to move the water with my hands.”

“You’re *really* tired, aren’t you?” Idalia asked.

“Beyond. If it wasn’t—“

“They’re in,” Elma announced, pushing her way back into the common room. Christopher, Theo, Basina, and Gabe followed, along with another boy Clara hadn’t met. “This is Martin. Martin, this is everyone. So, what’s the plan?”

Clara held up a finger. “Teleport us out.” She raised another finger. “Stand guard while I construct a new Border of some kind. One Mycroft hopefully can’t tear down.” A third finger. “Teleport us out, especially if it all goes wrong.” She lowered her hand. “That’s all. Any questions?”

“So many,” Martin said, nodding eagerly. “First of all—“

“Cool,” Clara said. “All of you guys,” she said, nodding to her classmates, “will feed me magic. I think. We’re going to play that a bit by ear.”

Martin tried again. “When you say—“

“Who’ll be doing the teleport?” Clara interrupted.

“I got it,” Christopher said. “I’ve done the whole team before, and it wasn’t too bad. Worst case, I can do us in two trips. But two is my max without a nap.”

“I’ll handle return,” Theo said.

“I’ll back you up,” Basina offered. “I know I can’t do more than eight.”

“Look at you guys, practicing and stuff,” Elma mumbled.

"So just one—" Martin said.

"Can you guys show me that spell?" Ed chimed in.

"Teleport? Yeah, but you won't be able to get it to work," Christopher said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?" Ed asked, flushing a bit. "I'm perfectly—"

"No, it's not that," Christopher said, shaking his head. "You could *learn* it, for sure. But ninth-year is all about conquering your quirks, right?"

Ed nodded, opening his mouth to protest.

"Wait, wait. Hear me out. Right now, you're all trying to do your spells by the book, even though the book isn't all that specific, right? And you all have your little side effects."

"Sure," Elsie acknowledged.

"So they're going to spend this year getting you to do those spells without the quirks, but it isn't going to mean doing them by the book."

Idalia frowned. "You can't use your own rules when it comes to magic. That's the whole problem with our quirks—they're *not* by the book."

"Not exactly. There *is* no book. Magic is... personal. What you'll learn this year is to make your magic your own. Your quirks will go away, because all of your magic will be..." He stopped, searching for a word.

"Quirky," Elma said.

"Yeah," Christopher grinned. "But the teleport spell isn't in a book. It's more... I guess a state of mind. You have to become one with your magic, really comfortable in it, before it'll work. You can learn the process and the mnemonic, but it just won't do anything."

"Wait," Clara broke in. "I've been tweaking their magic. Those spells, like the light spell... they *are* uniform."

"Who else thinks the magic feels weird when she does that?" Theo asked. Finlay's hand shot in the air. "Exactly. Because that's *your* magic, Clara. You're using them to do it, but it's not *them*. I mean, I appreciate what you can do, but it's flat-out weird."

“And a little intrusive,” Basina admitted. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Clara said thoughtfully. “That... kind of makes sense. A little. I guess.”

Martin tried one more time. “So—“

ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS.

A deep, loud, reverberating voice echoed in the room. Everyone clapped their hands over their ears.

AHEM. SORRY. Ah, there we go. Attention all students. All students, staff, and faculty are to report to the dining hall immediately. We will receive an address from the new Prime Minister. Report to the dining hall immediately. That is all.

“Ah, crap,” Harriett said.

CHAPTER 42

OBERHERR TAKES OVER

“Good afternoon everyone,” Minister Oberherr said, his voice easily carrying to fill the room. “I apologize for the abruptness of the summons, of course, but it seemed important to address our premier school for young witches at the earliest possible opportunity.”

Clara and her friends had mixed in with the faculty, staff, and other students who’d been summoned to the dining hall, which had been emptied of its usual tables. While it was far from full, Clara was surprised to see how many people there actually were. Most were younger than her, meaning their parents had managed to get them to school before the lockdowns started. She and her group had remained standing at the back of the room, along with a decent number of other last-minute arrivals.

Oberherr was in his dark suit, his hair slicked back tightly to his head. Headmaster Dimmick stood a step behind him to his left. Clara craned her head and finally spotted Mycroft, standing to one side at the front of the room, looking insufferably smug.

“I know most of you have been made aware of the new precautions that we are asking you all to follow. Movement to and from the

school, throughout Underhill, and to and from the Ordinary world is now restricted and requires advanced permission. This is, of course, for your own safety, as the fauna in particular have become quite aggressive in recent days.

“The start of school will be postponed, but only about a week, we expect. Teams are already being formed to escort the remaining students here over the next days, and the last couple of faculty members who’d been, ah, vacationing in the Ordinary have been located and are being repatriated.

“One Border remains here at the school, on the castle mesa. We already have a team securing and fortifying that position to ensure it can’t be reused. Many of you know that I have... hmm, spent the last few years in the Ordinary. I can tell you that the paladin threat is very real, and very present. They’ve been able to detect our Borders with increasing accuracy, and it was only a matter of time before they used them to attack us here, in our homeland. By reducing and fortifying our Border positions, we will ensure we are prepared to defend ourselves when that time comes.”

He paused, surveying the crowd. A few small groups were muttering to each other, but they stopped when they realized Oberherr had fallen silent.

“There is one more thing. Some among you—one, at least—has been gifted with a rare and special magical talent. A once-in-a-generation treasure, in fact. That person might not even be aware of the tremendous, unique value of their gift, or the beauty to which it can be put. So over the next few hours, we will be conducting simple tests to find that person. Easy, painless, and absolutely simple, I promise you. Professor Mycroft has agreed to help with these tests.

“Let me be clear: this person has the ability to help us further stabilize Underhill, protect ourselves from the paladin menace, and get Liginbaum’s operating normally again. Tests aside, anyone who can share information about this special, special person will find themselves handsomely rewarded.”

Oberherr continued droning on about how “beautiful” and

“amazing” this person would find life once identified, but Clara lost sight of him as the eleventh-year team members closed in around her group.

“We need to get out of here,” Ed muttered.

“No kidding,” Elma whispered, her eyes still on Oberherr.

The eleventh-years began gradually stepping backwards, moving toward the dining hall entrance. Clara and her friends, caught up in the middle of them, shuffled along.

“They’re going to notice this,” Elsie pointed out. “There’s like thirteen of us.”

“Crap,” Elma said, but they stopped shuffling. “We need a distraction.”

Finlay held a palm up, and a small sphere of light illuminated in it.

A loud *pop* came from somewhere across the room.

He clenched his hand into a fist, extinguishing the light, then reopened it and kindled another.

Pop.

“Who is doing that, please?” Oberherr said, clearly annoyed.

“I had no idea it moved around the room,” Ed said, eyes wide.

“Takes a big space,” Finlay said with a grin. Squeeze, open, *pop*.

“I can try the shadow,” Basina said.

“No, too well-lit in here,” Christopher said. “Let’s keep it simple. *Confettis!*” he whispered fiercely. A shower of brightly colored bits of paper began raining down.

“Enough of this!” Oberherr said, raising his voice. “Headmaster, control your pupils!”

“Students, please respect school rules regarding the use of magic,” Dimmick’s deep voice boomed.

“Fine for self-defense,” Theo said quietly. “Dad brought this one back from a trip to China: *Fángjiān zhōuwéi de yānhuā!*”

Fireworks shot around the room, exploding into small bursts of light and filling the space with shrieking sirens and the smell of gunpowder.

"No way!" Christopher said in awe. "You *have* to show me that!"

"They're going to need a scapegoat," Theo said. He stepped away from their group, raised both arms, and shouted, "Viva la resistance! *Huǎyào yānwù!*" More black smoke began pouring from his fingertips.

"He's right," Finlay said, pushing his way through the remaining eleventh-years. He began throwing balls of light into the air, each one accompanied by a loud, distant *pop* from somewhere in the room.

"Finlay!" Clara hissed.

"No, he's right," Elsie said. "We need to get you out of here especially. Christopher, can you still teleport? Just you and her?"

"Top-notch," the older boy answered. "Where to?"

"Give me a minute," Clara said, thinking furiously, distracted by her friends' willingness to sacrifice themselves. "You can't all stay. I need... at least four of you."

"I can do five," Christopher said confidently.

"Ed and the triplets," Clara said. "He's the most logical, and they have the whole synergy thing."

"Clara, have you ever noticed the sconces on the walls?" Elsie said, poking Clara in the shoulder. "They're real fire!"

"Sure, I—Elsie no!"

Elsie shrugged. "Happens every time. *Báisteach!*"

A few people screamed as the sconces flared up, scorching the walls. Two people who'd been standing too close to the walls began running around as their clothes caught on fire; a third—*That's someone who went to Ordinary school*, Clara thought—dropped on the floor and began rolling over the flames on their back. At the same time, a light drizzle of water began falling here and there throughout the hall, eliciting more cries and a few laughs.

"Elsie Green," a sharp voice came from behind them.

"Uh, Professor Habborlain?"

"Excellent trick," the professor side, smiling broadly. "But you go

with your friends. I got this.” His smile widened. “Let’s show them how a pro handles it.”

“Party of five,” Christopher said, gathering all of them in his arms. “Where to, Clara?”

“The red team locker room!” Ed shouted. “*Les pâtisseries apparaissent!*” he added, a moment before Christopher’s spell whisked them away.

“Why is there a croissant on your head?” Idalia asked, reaching up to pick the pastry from Clara’s hair.

“It was all I could think of in the moment,” Ed said, breathing heavily but smiling like Clara had never seen before. “It’ll have caught everyone in the dining hall, I think.”

“I have to pee,” Christopher complained. “Why did you have me bring us... oh. Right. Be right back.” He dashed off down a hallway.

“Girls’ is this way,” Idalia said, lightly knocking her knees together as she danced in place. “Right back, Ed.”

After everyone’s bladders were empty, they regrouped outside the locker room.

“We can do this anywhere,” Clara said, “but doing it someplace that already has a lot of magic in the ground would be best.”

“Professor Saxon has a garden of magical plants, but it’s on the other side of the castle,” Christopher said. “I can teleport us there, but that’ll be it for me for a while.”

“There’s the little outdoor theater,” Johanna offered. “They use magic for the props and stuff.”

“It’s way in back of the castle,” Idalia pointed out.

“What about the—” Harriett began.

“Guys,” Ed said. They all looked at him. He simply pointed to the playfield.

“Oh, right,” Clara said. “Like I said, Ed. Logical.” She smiled and gave one of his hands a quick squeeze in her own. “Circle up, everyone.”

“Wait!” Christopher said. “I almost forgot!” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a handful of small, glittering rocks.

“Crystals?” Idalia asked. “Are these charged?”

“No, they’re affinity crystals. I’ve been doing work for Professor Fitzgerald, helping her get her classroom back in order after last year’s disaster, and she told me to help myself to a few. When Elma dragged us out of the dorm earlier, I remembered to snatch these.” He passed them out. “They’re mostly quartz,” he said apologetically, handing one apiece to Ed and the triplets. “But this one’s pure amethyst, Clara.” He placed it into her palm with a smile. “I looked it up—supposed to be great for locational magic.”

“What do I do with it?” Clara asked, staring at the small shard in her hand.

“Run your magic through it,” Idalia advised. “It’ll amplify it, take off rough edges, that kind of thing.”

“Okay,” Clara said, looking dubiously at the tiny crystal.

“Let’s go to it.” Christopher took the lead and jogged to the middle of the field. “I’ll keep watch again,” he added as they reached their target. “I’m assuming we’ll have some fauna out here at some point.”

“Safe bet,” Ed agreed. The five classmates arranged themselves in a loose circle.

Clara shook her hands and rolled her shoulders to loosen up. “I have no idea what I’m doing. This is entirely seat-of-my-pants. Everyone good with that?”

The other four nodded.

“And it might not work at all,” she added.

“Make it personal, Clara,” Christopher called from behind her. “Remember: magic is personal.”

“Personal. Right. Save Underhill. Stop Oberherr. But *personally*. Got it.”

She took a deep breath and let her eyes slide out of focus.

“Here we go.”

CHAPTER 43

BATTLE FOR THE BORDERS

Clara focused on the ground as her classmates began gathering magic into themselves. The earth here was replete with power, the equations fat with energy, wandering lazily just beneath the grass. Ages of traps, triggers, and player spells had left their marks on the field.

“This is... *rich*,” Idalia breathed. “We should come here to practice.”

“No shields,” Ed reminded her. “But yeah... I’ve never gathered magic this easily. Wow.”

“Let us know when you’re ready, Clara,” Johanna said dreamily, caught up in the sheer heft of the magic she was drawing into herself.

Clara nodded, giving her complete attention on the earth. She forced herself to keep the lines of magic in focus, but to look at the spaces between them. At the general ebb and flow, rather than the details. *Show me the riverbed*, she told her mind, *not the river*.

A pattern started to emerge. Take in just a piece of the field, and you saw magic moving in random eddies; pull back and take in the

field as a whole, and you began to make out a vast vortex, gently circling up from somewhere very, very deep.

Clara's connection with reality began to uncouple, and her consciousness seemed to drift higher and higher into the air. She could envision the entire field, including the stands. Now she could take in the castle, and soon, she'd be able to see the entire mesa.

Interesting. The concentration of magic in the field wasn't common to the entire mesa. In fact, it—

"I suspected we'd find you here." Clara's eyes snapped open and she whirled, grimacing as she saw Phoebe Witcher and her friends, satisfied smirks plastered across their faces. Their chests were moving heavily, although they were pretending otherwise. They'd clearly run here at full speed. "I told you the little one screamed for the locker rooms before they vanished. Lucy, run back inside and tell Minister Oberherr we've found some strays."

Lucy's smirk grew even wider as she turned to go.

"That'll do, Lucy Strout," Christopher said. Clara's eyes darted toward him—she'd forgotten he was there.

"You'll be in trouble as well, Cook," Phoebe sneered. "Sinclair, bind them."

Phoebe's too-pretty boyfriend raised his arms, pointing at Clara and her classmates. Magic began spiraling up his arms, and Clara started concentrating, looking for a way to disrupt whatever he was—

"*Fíniúnacha teangtha!* " Christopher shouted. Instantly, thick white vines erupted from the field, directly under Phoebe and her gang. They quickly entangled the five of them and pulled them to the ground. "You forget, I help set the traps out here," Christopher said, a look of immense satisfaction on his face. "And was that a *Knechtschaft* spell, Sinclair? Naughty, naughty. You know those are forbidden on school grounds, and definitely a no-no for a ninth-year. Headmaster Dimmick will be speaking to you."

"Dimmick's done!" Augustus yelled, struggling with vines that seemed to cinch tighter the more he struggled.

“Lie still and it’ll be better,” Christopher advised. “And we’ll see. Clara, these will hold for hours, if needed. Go on.”

“Go on?” Phoebe said, her voice shrill. “What do you mean, ‘go—
““

“I know silencing spells as well, Phoebe,” Christopher said. “I suggest you shut up.”

Phoebe fell silent.

Clara turned back to her friends, and her eyes flew wide when she saw they’d already shaped their magic into the most offensive spells they knew. Lancets, mostly, but Ed also seemed to have a half-formed stream-of-fire spell at the ready. “It’s good, guys,” she said gratefully. “Let’s go with the light balls. Just as a general form. I think I see the pattern.” She took a deep breath, exhaled, and forced herself to feel calm. “Ready when you are.”

Two streams of magic—a precisely formed one from Ed and an almost as accurate but far more powerful synergistic one from the triplets—flowed gently and evenly to Clara. She gathered them up, and sent them plunging deep into the mesa.

Pushing Phoebe’s gang out of her mind, she once again sent her focus deep, deep into Underhill, searching for the place where the vortex of magic she’d seen originated. Down, down, down she went, passing through layers of earth that felt thousands and thousands of years old. Something gently tugged at her attention, and she let it guide her to one side, still diving deeper and deeper. The foundations of the world seemed to resist, but she formed her friends’ magic into a plow, pushing through the resistance to descend even further.

There, she thought, knowing it as soon as she saw it. This was the place where magic wanted to enter Underhill, where it wanted to be. She reached out with her friends’ magic, shaping the equations to fit precisely in this location, at this time, carving a new—

“CLARA!”

Christopher’s shout snapped her out of it, the others’ magic flying wild as she lost her grip. But the warning didn’t come quickly enough: Something solid slammed into Clara’s back, almost like

she'd been tackled, and she went sprawling to the ground in the middle of the loose circle.

"What are you up to, Clara Thorn?" Mycroft's voice came from behind her. Clara twisted on the ground, her back still aching from whatever the professor had hit her with. Mycroft had a look of fury on her face, and she was sending quick blasts of magic at the vines that were still tangling Phoebe's gang. Christopher was fighting her, though, and new vines were already sprouting to replace each one Mycroft managed to shred. "Stop it, Cook! I'll have you expelled for this!"

"Leave us alone!" the triplets shouted in an eerie, resonating, three-in-one voice. A swarm of lancets darted over Clara, striking Mycroft. The older woman was suddenly bleeding from a handful of thin cuts on her face, although her heavy robes took the brunt of the damage that had been aimed at her body.

"You... you *creatures!*" Mycroft spat, clearly aghast at having been attacked by students. Her mouth worked in anger, but she seemed to find no words. Instead, her expression grew dark and hateful, and she drew her hands up over her head.

Complex equations began to form around Mycroft's arms, and Clara struggled to find a weakness. She recognized portions of the equation: these would cut, and those would burn. But they were delicately and perfectly balanced, clear evidence of Mycroft's long experience and expertise. Clara reached out, still off-center from whatever had knocked her down, and tried to unravel at least a portion of the professor's magic, to blunt the force of it or divert some of its—

Mycroft screamed and whirled, and Clara blinked in confusion as two small, furry white forms latched onto the professor's robes. No, not the robes—Clara realized that the little creatures had somehow managed to bite through them. Her panicked mind babbled, *Wow, those must be long teeth.*

Christopher paled, but he'd managed to keep Phoebe and her friends entangled in thick vines. If anything, the five were more

buried in the heavy white vegetation than they'd been before Mycroft arrived.

Mycroft was still screaming and whirling, trying to get the dire-bunnies off her back. Clara pulled herself to her feet as the professor released a burst of magic, emanating from her entire body, that evaporated the two creatures. Her look, when she turned back to the five ninth-years, was one of pure hatred. "You will pay for that," she said in a low, dangerous voice. Her hands came up, swirling with magic, and—

A bright blast of power from the sky slammed into her, knocking her unconscious to the ground.

"Enough, Miriam," Headmaster Dimmick said belatedly. He stood with Elsie and Finlay beside him, the magic of a teleport spell and whatever he'd done to Mycroft still dissipating around him.

Another swirl of magic brought the rest of the eleventh-year team to the field.

"We don't have long," Theo called. "It's chaos in there, but once he notices we're all gone, it won't take him long to find us."

"Get over here!" Ed shouted, a look of relieved joy on his face, and Elsie and Finlay ran to join their classmates.

They kept their circle the same size, standing more closely together. The six of them gathered magic, shaping it into the generalized form they'd practiced and sending it flowing easily and firmly toward Clara.

"We've got you, Clara," Dimmick promised with a nod while the eleventh-years fanned out around them.

Clara nodded, accepting the magic and once again diving deep into the earth.

This time, she felt Underhill itself guiding her unerringly toward her goal, the place where magic was spiraling up from the depths of the universe. *This* is the place where magic would naturally enter from the Ordinary world, the place where a new Border *ached* to be. Risewell might have been able to place them wherever she wanted, but—

Not at the time, she heard the elf-creature's voice. *At the time, right place. Time changes.*

Which is why Borders need constant maintenance, Clara realized. *Underhill shifts; everyone says so. The Borders should have been shifting with it. This is why they were so easy to bring down.* She felt the elf—Underhill—nodding weakly as she drew more of her friends' magic to dive deeper.

There: the exact point where the slow, calm vortex originated. She planted her friends' power as an anchor, swiftly shaping the equations into a complex formula that reflected the here and the now. The magic latched in place, and Clara, for the first time, *felt* it pulsing through her and through the land. She felt the Ordinary world on the other side, felt the place she'd selected in Las Vegas for this Border to exist.

I'm finally part of something, she thought, perfectly connected and perfectly home in a way she'd never felt before. *I'm part of Underhill. This is where I belong.*

Underhill part of you, the elf's voice corrected her, a small measure of strength welling up inside the statement.

But then the equations began to unravel.

Clara fought to put them back into shape, to create the new riverbed she'd envisioned, but the land resisted her. She tweaked the equations anew, and the magic again settled—but then Underhill shifted slightly, and the magic lost its hold. Clara panicked, pulling down more of her friends' magic and trying to *force* it to take root, to—

No, the elf's voice called softly. *Not like this. Not fitting you into me. Fitting me into you.*

Magic is personal, Christopher had told them.

Clara let go, abandoned her attempts to force the magic into a particular form. Instead, she let it flow gently for a moment, watching how it interacted with the magic swirling up from the land. Then she spotted it: the ambient magic itself wasn't balanced, its equations distended and its formulae incomplete. She'd assumed

that was because it was natural, undirected, but no, it was simply... unpurposed.

She would give it purpose.

Again, she dove back in, weaving her friends' magic in with the land's, changing both to form a single, cohesive equation that solved for X , with X being the goal of creating a connection to the Ordinary—

"That's quite enough," a deep, calm voice said. A shudder ran through the earth, scattering Clara's math, knocking her body to the ground again, and snapping her out of her trance.

Her vision recovered, and she saw her friends lying on the ground as well, only now starting to pull themselves back up. She craned her neck. Dimmick was down, too, lying next to Mycroft. Phoebe and her friends remained tangled in vines, and a couple of the eleventh-years lay scattered across the grass, apparently unconscious.

The dark-suited form of Minister Oberherr stood over them all.

"What are you even attempting, young woman?" he asked, a small, condescending smile playing across his features.

Clara scowled defiantly. "We're making a new Border."

"Yes, I felt as much," Oberherr said calmly. "Can't allow that."

"But magic comes from the Ordinary!" Clara cried, managing to regain her feet as she spoke. "Without it, Underhill is dying! We need to—"

"Nonsense, girl," Oberherr snapped. "You've no idea what you're talking about!"

"I do!" Clara shouted. "I've seen it, I've talked to it, I've—"

"Ah," Oberherr interrupted, nodding with sudden comprehension. "You are the one, then."

"The what?" Clara asked, suddenly confused.

"The one-in-a-generation. Our Risewell. You're a mathemagician.." Clara nodded. "So you actually *were* trying to raise a Border. Fascinating." He paused, examining her in a new light. "I suspected you were special in some way, you know. Back at your home. That

little trick on the sidewalk—that’s not something most witches would think to try. You were experimenting, weren’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “And there I was, thinking a far more experienced practitioner was lying in wait for me. Another Holdaway, even! But no, it was just you. Just a little girl.”

“You knew my parents?” Clara blurted out, and immediately clamped her jaw shut while mentally cursing herself, regret slicing into her like one of the lancets.

Oberherr’s eyes flew wide, his expression one of unguarded surprise. He quickly schooled his features back to stony-faced calm. “I had no idea,” he breathed. “You... oh my, how rich this is.” He nodded, as if he suddenly understood everything. “This makes so much sense, the little Ordinary couple in a house so clearly covered with magic. They adopted you, didn’t they?”

Clara didn’t move.

“I should have killed them. Well, always time to correct that once I’m done with you. Ah, ah,” he added, looking past Clara. A bolt of lightning lanced out from his eyes, and Clara *felt* a body thud into the earth behind her. “You’re a liability,” Oberherr said, his voice still cool. “You’ll have to go.”

Another fork of lightning blasted from his eyes and toward her, blinding Clara. It moved so fast, so surely, that she knew there was no—

The lightning collided with Ed, who’d leapt over Clara and caught the bolt in his chest. It pushed him back, into the middle of their circle. Horror struck Clara when she turned and saw the tendril of smoke rising from his still form.

“Ed!” she croaked, tears filling her eyes.

Finlay knelt beside him and began murmuring, his fingers twitching in a complex pattern. Magic flowed into Ed, but with Clara’s eyes clouded by tears, she couldn’t make out the equations.

“Magic,” Clara ordered, her throat so tight she could barely speak. She stood as Elsie and the triplets funneled an immense amount of power into her.

She didn't hesitate, didn't even bother sending her consciousness below. She already knew where the magic needed to go, already knew the form the equations needed to take. It was now a simple matter of sending the magic there, a task she accomplished in less than an eyeblink.

"What are you—" Oberherr asked, his voice almost curious.

A towering stone pillar erupted from the ground, radiating so much magic that it glowed. It rose feet into the sky, twice Clara's height... now triple, a monolith easily three feet thick. *That's about a meter*, something giggled in the back of Clara's brain.

The new Border, something new and uniquely *Clara*, had pushed its way out of the earth directly beneath Minister Oberherr.

Who was nowhere to be seen.

"What..." Idalia whispered in exhaustion, "Is that it? The new Border?"

"Yeah," Clara nodded, or tried to. Fatigue slowed her movements. "Although we probably need to rope it off."

"Ow."

"Ed!" Clara cried, whirling and kneeling in a single motion. Ed was blinking slowly. His shirt had been burned through, but the skin underneath looked whole. "Are you okay?"

"I said 'ow,'" he repeated, giving her a weak grin.

"That's old healing magic," Finlay said, falling back onto his rear and wiping sweat from his forehead. "Gran taught it to me, but it takes a wallop out of you." He yawned. "I could use a nap."

"Clara, what... what is this?"

Clara turned again, pulling herself back to her feet as Dimmick did the same.

"Ughmf," Mycroft said, stirring. Dimmick gestured, and another blast of magic slammed into the professor, knocking her out again.

"It's a new Border, Headmaster," Clara said, her voice proud through its weariness. "My kind of Border."

Dimmick appraised the huge pillar, noting the rough, hand-

shaped impression in the stone at about chest-height. "Is this..." he asked, gesturing toward the depression but not touching it.

"I think that's how you use it, yeah. But... we should probably rope this one off."

"Oh?"

"I set it to the most distant place I could think of."

Dimmick raised an eyebrow in question.

"It should come out on the cliffs next to Hoover Dam."

"I'm not familiar with the reference," the headmaster said.

"Giant dam near Las Vegas. It's all desert. My parents took me when we moved there."

Dimmick's eyes widened. "Ah. And this," he said, gesturing to the pillar, "appeared directly where..."

"Oberherr was standing." Clara finished.

"So... he's... splatted?" Johanna asked.

"Probably not," Clara said, easing herself to the ground. "Sorry, I'm a bit lightheaded. No, he's just going to have a long, long walk to anywhere useful."

Harriett spoke up. "You could have set it a few hundred feet up. In the air."

Clara hadn't considered that, but she did now, and then slowly shook her head. "No. Mom and Dad wouldn't have liked that."

"Indeed." Dimmick said, some of the tension draining from his voice. He peered closely at Clara, as if seeing something new in her. "You... There's something different about you, Clara."

Clara blinked. She looked down at herself, and aside from some dirt and grass stains on her school uniform, she couldn't see anything.

"Heh," Ed coughed weakly, still lying behind her. "I got it. Clara... can you *sense* us?"

Clara's heart skipped a beat as she looked within.

Each of her friends, every member of the faculty—they all glowed inside her, bright stars that were part of an enormous, spin-

ning constellation. She sensed each of them, individually. Not their locations, she realized, but their presence in the world.

Her *Connection*.

Harriett walked up to Clara and gently tapped her nose.

“Boop,” the triplet said, giving Clara a tired smile. “Found you.”

CHAPTER 44

THAT NIGHT

Clara blinked as the dream formed around her. It was familiar enough now that she wasn't even surprised when the little blue elf-creature walked up to her.

"Thank you," it said.

"You're welcome. I'm glad all of that's over."

"Over? No." It shook its head sadly.

"But I thought... the Borders are stable, again. I thought that's what—"

"It was," it said reassuringly. "Healing, now. But not over."

"What do you mean?"

It sighed, and looked around at the brilliantly colored trees, the swirling sky, and the sparkling stream that flowed nearby. "Much is amiss," it said thoughtfully. "The Builders and Keepers have been gone for so long. *Too* long." It sighed again. "Much is amiss," it repeated. "Many have taken advantage of their absence."

The creature took another step toward Clara, looking up at her with deep, intense eyes. "You must grow quickly, Clara. And you must gather your allies, as the Keepers of old did."

DON JONES

It took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “There is much to be done.”

EPILOGUE: ONE WEEK LATER

“**A**nd how has the first week been?” Dimmick asked.

“Good,” Clara said. The Headmaster had summoned her to his office after the last period on Friday. “I appreciate you giving me those free periods this week.”

He chuckled. “You were using them to remotely raise new Borders across half of Underhill,” he said. “Excusing you from a portion of your classes was the least we could do.”

“Is the government finally settled?”

Dimmick nodded. “The coalition dissolved, yes, and the remaining parties have managed to form a new majority.”

“With the Homelander?”

“No, thank magic. The two hardline Homelander parties have dissolved entirely. Their constituencies held recall votes. I suspect that demagoguery—” he paused as Clara frowned at the unfamiliar word—“that philosophy, will be quite unpopular for some time.”

“So who’s in charge?”

“Clayton Aldworth has agreed to step in as Prime Minister for the time being—Huckley says he’s had enough of politics.”

“I’m surprised people will give an Aldworth the time of day.”

Dimmick chuckled. “You may find, Clara, that people will lean on something familiar no matter what the situation. It’s an emotional reaction.”

Clara paused before her next question. “And Professor Mycroft?”

“A professor no longer,” Dimmick said, heat rising in his voice. He took a deep breath to calm himself. “I apologize again for her, Clara. I’m all for freedom of speech and thought, especially in an academic institution, but I had no idea her... beliefs, her hatreds, ran so close to the surface. But she is bound and awaiting trial. Bindings don’t last forever here, but she’s likely to face Exile.”

“So I can keep making Borders?”

“Well, yes, although if things are stabilizing on the edges—and they seem to be, as you’ve said—we may cut back and let you focus on your studies.”

A light, spicy scent drifted into the room, tingling Clara’s nose and recalling one of her oldest memories.

“They’d have had you running all over Underhill raising them, but I objected,” a voice said.

Clara turned in her chair. The woman who’d entered Dimmick’s office looked... familiar. Her eyes widened as Clara recognized her own face, her own eyes, her own nose, her—

“Hello, baby,” Jessamine Holdaway said, holding out her arms.

HOW TO MAKE FIZZYCIDER

When made in Underhill, this is an incredibly easy beverage to make: the apples in Underhill do all the work. After crushing baskets of them into a juicy pulp, witches simply leave it sit, skins and all, for a few days, creating the signature flavors that everyone loves so much. They then strain the juice out and age it in Cyantree barrels, which impart additional subtle flavors and create the fizziness.

There's nothing exactly like Fizzycider in the Ordinary world, but if you haven't found a Border to Underhill, you can still create a close approximation!

This recipe makes two 8-ounce servings. Each serving contains approximately 230 calories. Allow 48 hours to make everything, since you'll have two overnight infusions to make.

CAUTION: Pressurized chargers can make quite the mess if you're not careful. Be sure a responsible person with experience in using the charger is around to help out.

Ingredients:

- 2 cinnamon sticks

- 16 whole cloves
- 1 whole nutmeg, cracked
- 2 cardamom pods, cracked (or 1 teaspoon cardamom seeds)
- 8oz water
- 8oz apple cider or unfiltered apple juice
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon egg white powder

Tools:

- A charger (whipped cream maker) and at least 4 NO2 cartridges. A 16oz or slightly larger charger is recommended.
- An 8oz or larger container for liquid, with a sealing lid.
- A small bowl—only needs to hold a couple of tablespoons of powder.
- Two 10oz or larger glasses for serving. Frosted mugs are a great choice!

Preparation:

- Make the infused water by adding cinnamon sticks, half the cloves, nutmeg, half the cardamom, and the water to the charger.
- Pressurize the charger. This may require you to empty one cartridge and then add a second and empty it as well.
- Refrigerate the charger for at least 24 hours to infuse the flavors.
- Depressurize the charger, strain the water into a container, seal on the container's lid, and refrigerate.
- Be sure to thoroughly clean the charger!

- In a small bowl, mix the egg white powder and sugar together.
- In your clean charger, bring together the apple juice or cider, honey, vanilla, remaining cloves, and remaining cardamom. Add in the egg white powder and sugar mixture.
- Be sure to attach the charger's strainer screen, so that the solid ingredients don't clog the nozzle.
- Once the charger is sealed, shake it vigorously to blend everything.
- Pressurize the charger. This may require you to empty one cartridge and then add a second and empty it as well.
- Refrigerate the charger for at least 24 hours to infuse the flavors.

Serving:

- Evenly divide the infused water from the refrigerator between two mugs.
- From the charger, release 4oz of the apple cider mix into each mug. Be sure to leave about an inch and a half at the top of the glass—it'll foam up!
- Let sit until the foam rises to the top (2-3 minutes). While you wait, depressurize the charger and rinse it out.

Tips:

- For larger batches, you can make more of the infused water in advance. However, the fizziness comes from the charged apple juice/cider mix, so either use a larger charger or use multiple chargers. Simply double the ingredients to make double the servings.

DON JONES

- You can “level up” the marshmallow flavor of the foamy head by sprinkling on a pinch of vanilla powder before drinking.

Share your creation on social media using hash tags #ClaraThorn and #Fizzycider!

BESTIARY

This information is excerpted, with permission, from “*The Fauna of Underhill: Delights and Dangers*” by Professor Ona Maltby, Dean of Magical Fauna Studies at Liginbaum’s.

The Fae who created Underhill populated it with a diverse range of flora and fauna. Over the centuries, many of the animal species evolved, often echoing the changing legends and myths of the Ordinary world. This is a selection of the most common fauna found in the wilds near Liginbaum’s.

Baserpents are oversized snakes that can grow up to sixty feet in length and as big around as a large car. Distantly related to basilisks, baserpents aren’t able to freeze their prey with a single glance, instead requiring sustained eye contact for several minutes if they want to paralyze their prey. As few prey are willing to hold eye contact for that long, baserpents rely more on their ability to simply encircle and crush their prey.

Cassowaries are iridescent black birds with razor-sharp claws and feathers, similar to—but deadlier than—Ordinary crows. They travel and attack almost exclusively in large flocks.

Direbunnies are a kind of fuzzy rabbit, standing a bit taller than

an ordinary rabbit. They come in all colors: white, brown, gray, blue, green, violet, and more. They have tall ears, cotton-ball tails, and wide, innocent eyes. All four feet feature retractable claws that can extend to an inch or more. Their large, sharp front teeth are also retractable, capable of extending to a couple of inches in larger specimens. Although herbivores, they are incredibly territorial and will attack almost any creature that comes too close to an area they consider to be theirs. They live and travel in packs of up to a dozen.

Feen are tiny, fairy-like creatures of limited intelligence. They're basically the pollinators of Underhill, and they tend to nest in large hives. They prefer enclosed spaces for their hives, and are especially attracted to base metals such as brass and copper.

Kleinerwolves are the guardians of Underhill, originally bred as pets and hunters by the ancient Fae. They are larger than Ordinary wolves, and much more intelligent. Their fur ranges from light to dark gray, and they have yellow-green eyes and wicked teeth and claws.

Oilliphéist are lake-dragons. Mature specimens can grow to the size of a house, although horse-sized juveniles are more common. They can be four to five times longer than they are tall, and are covered in slick black scales. Bony spikes protrude from their spines, running from the crowns of their heads, down their sinuous necks, and to the tip of their tails. They are incapable of flight and use their short wings primarily for underwater propulsion.

Nightmice are tiny mouse-like creatures that are generally harmless. Until you step on them, triggering an emission of oily green, noxious gas.

Razor Lizards, also called **Razards**, are tiny, scaly, chameleon-like lizards. Their scales change colors to help them blend in with their environment, and they use their curved, razor-sharp claws to climb, attack prey, and defend themselves. They're typically loners, but when one is attacked, it will emit a powerful scent that attracts other razor lizards to come to its defense.

Vorcelbats are leathery-winged flying creatures. Their two

webbed feet end in viciously long claws, and rather than the tooth-filled mouth one might expect from an Ordinary bat, they have a long, sharp beak. They hunt in packs and prefer to dive down, latch onto their prey's fur or hair, and then stab their beaks into their prey to slurp out the juicy insides. Their favorite prey are direbunnies.

Wisps are tiny glowing creatures that look like miniature humans with wings. They can fly incredibly quickly and are one of the few Underhill fauna able to navigate Borders and survive, albeit briefly, in the Ordinary world. They are easily trained to carry messages and can find their recipient using inborn locator magic. When pressured, they can also perform short-range teleportation magic, although they always prefer to fly "the long way" when possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed novels now span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters. He lives in Las Vegas (and sometimes in Southern Utah).

Connect, get five (!) free novels and a collection of short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by joining the author newsletter at DonJones.com.



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SAMPLE OF “THE NEVER: A TALE OF PETER AND THE FAE”

" **M**y queen."

The Elven knight knelt on the cool, white marble floor, keeping his gaze down. His iridium armor was dented, the shimmering surface pitted and tarnished. *He's been touched by the Rot*, the queen thought, her nostrils flaring at the lingering odor of burned metal. She noticed that his sword was missing and mourned the loss of magic. The knights' swords were ancient, and the secrets of their making had been lost since the last Druids passed hundreds of years earlier. *So much loss*, she mused. "What news?" she said aloud.

"Ill, my queen," the knight said. He paused.

"Out with it," she ordered in a flat voice. There'd been no good news in years, so why should today be any different?

"King Oberon, my queen. He--" the knight paused again, and Queen Mab could hear the choke in his voice.

"Gone?" she asked softly. The knight nodded, never looking up. "And his company?" she asked even more quietly. The knight shook his head. *All lost, then*, she thought. She rose from her throne and stepped off of the low dais it sat upon. She walked to the knight and

placed a hand on his helmet, saying nothing. After a moment, she turned and walked to one of the tall, graceful windows set into the walls of her throne hall. Her castle, a delicate confection of tall towers, thin causeways, ornate turrets, and grand windows, sat atop a low hill and overlooked a vast meadow. Beyond stood an ancient forest, cut by a river of the purest, deep blue water. And soon, she knew, all too soon, it would be gone. "Is there anything else?" she asked without turning from the window. Hearing nothing, she said, "you may go. All of you," she added, turning back to the room, "may go. Kex, you stay." Her loyal seneschal, an Elf so old he was beginning to look like a shrunken Human, nodded deeply.

"What, then?" Mab asked after the room had cleared. "Oberon had all of our forces save the Home Guard. We're left with a scant handful of warrior-fairies, a company of brownies, and a foul-tempered banshee or two."

"And the leprechauns, my lady," Kex added.

She snorted. "I was counting useful creatures," she muttered. "I'd no more count the river-sprites or garden-fairies."

Kex shrugged. "It wouldn't matter," he said dourly. "The Rot has proven impervious to force. It is not a *thing* we fight. It is merely an event that has happened to us. Even as Humans cut us off from their world, they poison ours."

Mab frowned. It was true enough, but a delicate reminder that the Fae had likely brought this on themselves, were truth to be told. Over the Human centuries, more than a few of the Fair Folk had helped the Humans in their pointless battles, healed them with fairy magic, and blessed their homes and fields. But just as many had played trickster games with the Humans, making them angry and fearful. And if there was one thing Queen Mab had learned, it was that a fearful Human was a very dangerous animal indeed.

Once the Humans had discovered how to dig Cold Iron out of the Earth's body, how to heat it to molten slag, and how to cast that slag into sharp weapons, the Fae's time amongst Humans had dwindled. Just the proximity of Cold Iron would diminish the magic of any Fae

creature; the actual touch of the stuff would poison their blood and slowly kill them. Humans began using Cold Iron as a defense against the more wicked Fae, heedless of the fact that they were also driving off the more companionable creatures. Wooden doors gained iron nails, hinges, and locks. Iron bars blocked windows. And iron swords and spear-heads cut and killed.

It was the spears in particular that started it all, she remembered. Humans had long recognized the fairy rings that acted as portals between their world and the Fae home of Under Hill, but that recognition had only encouraged them to avoid such rings. The few Humans who'd ventured to Under Hill uninvited were allowed to live mainly so that they could return a proper message to their people: Keep Out. Few were invited to the domain of Oberon and Mab, and those were always escorted and cautioned to remain on their best behavior. Even though the last such honoree had been admitted over a century ago, Mab's nose wrinkled involuntarily at the memory of its stench. She had never been able to abide the smell of Humans.

But with the advent of iron-tipped spears, the Humans had become bold. With their homes protected by iron, they ventured out to secure their fields, their woods, and their lands. One brave soul had thought to stab a spear of Cold Iron into the middle of a fairy ring and had been astonished to see its border mushrooms immediately wither and crumble to dust. Excitedly, the queen imagined, he had spread the word, and that's when it had truly begun. Parties of Humans, armed with iron, started actively hunting for fairy rings, stabbing them with spears and closing the portals to Under Hill.

Humans probably would have been satisfied with confining the Fae to their own world, and Mab would have been happy to let them believe it. Her tinker-fairies could, with little work, open a new fairy ring anytime she wished it. But what the Humans never realized is that each destroyed portal manifested in Under Hill as a pool of thick, black, foul-smelling slime. A slime that did not remain in place, but instead slowly oozed outward, enrobing everything it touched. It dissolved grass and flowers. It toppled trees. It consumed

entire buildings. And it never, ever quit spreading. The Fae called it the Rot.

Born of Cold Iron, the Rot carried the poison of Cold Iron with it. Nearby magic flickered and failed, and Fae, who stayed too long in its presence, became weak and sick. It was as if the iron spear tips had punctured the fabric of Under Hill itself, dissolving the deep, ancient magic that formed the place, consigning it to a grim, tarry death.

Oberon had first set forth with a significant company of magic-weavers and warriors, hoping to either beat back the Rot, or confine it. They erected pillars of pure Elvensteel, which slowed the Rot only slightly as it ate its way, hissing and spitting, through the strongest material the Fae knew. They cast wards capable of holding back Balor himself, and the Rot merely oozed onward, as if nothing had happened. Oberon himself had invoked Arawn, the god of the underworld, who had sent a company of Sluagh flying in from the west. They had flung themselves into the Rot, hoping to steal whatever power it contained, and had vanished instantly. Oberon and a few others had barely survived, retreating to the castle to regroup and plan anew.

Efforts to raise the other Tuatha De Danaan, the gods of the Fae, had been fruitless. It was as if the Rot had cut them off, or the gods had abandoned them. *Or, Mab thought wryly, the gods bet against us and stayed on Earth.* The Human Celts, she knew, had always been mighty worshippers of the Tuatha De Danaan. Now, even the other powerful Fae had proven powerless against the Rot. The Carman, the most powerful and evil enemy of the Tuatha De Danaan, and a recognized goddess of black magic, was missing. Her cave home had been discovered flooded with the Rot, and her three sons were nowhere to be found.

Oberon's last, fatal attempt had been to call down the Bright Light, a task requiring no less than twenty of the realm's thirty Elven knights, a full complement of warrior-fairies, and nearly every magic-weaver in the land. All but one, apparently, were now dead.

"And so we die," she said flatly.

"Not necessarily," Kex said carefully. "We are many," he reminded her, "and we are not without escape. The tinker-fairies are holding one last portal open, here on the castle grounds." As the Rot had spread, fairy rings had started to die spontaneously. The tinkers must be using all their might to keep one open, even with the castle's considerable magic to reinforce them.

"To Earth," Mab said, disgust in her voice. "We retreat to our enemy's stronghold."

"Humans are not the enemy," Kex said sternly. "They are an animal provoked. If you kick a bane-wolf, do you not expect him to bite? Yet he is not your enemy."

"Exile, then," Mab said.

Kex shrugged. "If you like. *Life*, regardless. Survival."

"They'll destroy us," she said.

"We will hide," he countered. "The portal will diminish us, make us smaller. It will make us harder to see, if we abide."

"We cower in the dark, then, and you call that survival?" Mab's pride flared inside her.

"We *live*, my queen. We gain time to find another answer. Perhaps we can make a home on Earth, away from the Humans. Perhaps we find a door to another world. But we do not merely give up and let the Rot consume us."

She mumbled something under her breath and fell silent. She turned to look back out the window. Green grass, ancient trees---all of which would be gone soon enough. "How long?" she asked.

He paused a moment. "Oberon led his company to Evendom Rise, scarcely a day's ride from here. We will likely see the edge of the Rot tomorrow or the next day at the latest. It will be upon us a day after that, at most."

"Two days," she said.

"Give or take," he said.

She fell silent again, thinking. It was within her power to hide any of the Fae within her range of influence, a power uniquely given to her by the great goddess Danu in the First Days. Her other skills

aside, she was first and foremost the protector of her people, the trickster who could spirit them away when no different path was available. This, then, would be the ultimate expression of her power and Danu's purpose for her. Not her Greater Magics. Not her ability to enter men's dreams and influence their thoughts. Not her unsurpassed beauty. Her purpose would be to hide her people, to lurk amongst the filthy Humans. To diminish herself to the size of a sprite, to lead them to a world where magic had all but died, and to bury them there. They would be paupers, living in fear and blight, she knew.

But Kex was right. They would be alive.

She sighed and lowered her head. "Send word," she said quietly, defeat creeping into her sonorous voice. "Summon the Host. We leave at the next daybreak. The great wolf of the Fae shall be as a winter-mouse in his hole."



KEX WAS NOT JESTING, Mab thought, looking at the dozen tinker-fairies struggling to keep the last small portal open. She smelled the sharp tang of ozone as the fairies used raw magic to hold the portal open by force. *They're losing this battle*. The Rot had been spotted moving through the wood beyond the meadow, and would indeed be upon the castle before the next sunrise. The Host of the Fae, the last survivors of her kingdom, had gathered on the meadow behind her. They carried only the barest essentials, slung in packs over their backs. Even the fearsome bane-sidhe, floating wispily in the unaccustomed sunlight, seemed subdued.

Mab opened her mouth to say something stirring, to rally her people. But then she closed it. Everyone knew what was happening here today. There was no lovely glamour to cast upon it. Passing one last glance across the assembled, pitifully small crowd, she turned her back on them and walked sedately to the last portal. It's blue light twisted and bucked before her, trying to close itself despite the

tinkers' magical anchors. The tinker-fairies looked at her, and she saw the exhaustion in their eyes. Another dozen of their number had already gone ahead to prepare the way. She nodded at them and stepped through.

Time ran differently on Earth than Under Hill. On Earth, she remembered, Time was shackled to a strict schedule, always proceeding apace, and ever forward. Humans placed great stock in Time, ordering their lives completely against its measure. The folk of Under Hill, on the other hand, had a more casual relationship with Time. He was undoubtedly welcome Under Hill and was often present. But he was not forced to march always forward, and at one exact speed. He could linger on a pleasant moment, or revisit a particularly memorable month. He could speed through a series of dull days, or skip some small intervals entirely. A year Under Hill could pass while no time passed at all on Earth, while sometimes a single day Under Hill could represent a century of Human time.

It had been daybreak Under Hill when Mab stepped through the fairy ring, and it was nigh sunset on Earth. *Easier for hiding*, she admitted, casting her senses wide to find the tinker-fairies that had preceded her. They knew what they were about, and knew how to not be seen, but she still needed to prepare herself for what was to come. And they came almost immediately, almost bowling her over in their eagerness to escape the Rot. She stepped to one side as gracefully as possible, watching her people spill before her. The sight was almost ridiculous, as the portal had shrunk each of them down to no more than a human's hand-span in height. She herself was standing in grass that came up to her knees. *Thus our fate*, she said, realizing that this was her new reality, and feeling her dislike of Humanity deepen instantly into hatred.

She watched her people spill out before her. She could smell cut grass, tame flowers, and fresh water, all nearby. She could also smell the fear of her people, their nerves wound to a breaking point. The tinker-fairies flitted to and fro, directing the arriving Fae to the shelters already prepared. A river ran nearby, perfect for the water-

nymphs and other wet folk. A stand of tall, stately trees would provide an evening of protection for the fairies and their kin. The ground-folk, including the few remaining brownies, burrowed into soft, loamy patches that Mab realized were Human flower beds. She frowned because those beds meant that they'd not been able to arrive in an isolated area as she'd hoped. The darker Fae melted gratefully into the long shadows cast by the setting sun. Within minutes--_too few minutes,_ she thought, *for there are too few of us--* the exodus had completed, and the remaining tinker-fairies jetted through. The last had barely cleared when the mushrooms marking the edge of the fairy ring blackened and withered to dust.

She slowly looked around her, casting her most subtle magics of concealment and invisibility across them all. Time enough tomorrow to learn what Humans called this place, and how safe the Fae would be. Time enough ahead to plot their path, and try to shape their future. *Time enough*, she thought grimly, and with no little relish, *to decide how these Humans will be repaid.*



THE NEVER: A Tale of Peter and the Fae is also available as an audiobook on Audible.

SAMPLE OF “DANIEL SCRATCH, A STORY OF WITCHKIND”

"Here you go, Master Daniel," Abbygail said, sliding a plate of eggs and sausage onto the rickety table before clambering back down her worn wooden step stool. The house's formal dining room table was far grander—and sturdier—but the room was also dark and foreboding. I preferred the little servant's nook in the kitchen. It couldn't exactly be called *sunnier*, given the grimed-over condition of the thick, warped windows, but it felt less like a mausoleum.

And yes, I know what a mausoleum feels like.

The whole house, in fact, had something of a mausoleum feel. To begin with, it was *old*. Two centuries old, at least, and very probably more. The walls told its history, with wallpaper layered over paint, layered over plaster, layered over the old wood lath. The current wallpaper—probably not the first these walls had seen—was faded and peeling in places. The stout wooden floorboards were time-worn, with the nicks and scratches that are earned only through decades of service. The threadbare round rug that lay under the table—the only floor covering in the kitchen, and one of very few rugs in

the entire house—had probably been around since before my parents were born. Probably before *their* parents had been born.

I picked up a fork, smiled, and nodded, careful not to offer thanks. Abbygail was a brownie, and the knee-high, white-haired, blue-skinned little creature had been with the family for decades. After Mother and Father died, more brownies had arrived. Abbygail said her kind simply sensed the need and showed up. They were the house's only servants now, cleaning up what they could and keeping me fed. They were also, frankly, my only friends. But a single word of thanks to any of them would see them all vanish before nightfall, never to return. Mother had taught me that much before... well. Before.

I quickly finished my breakfast as Abbygail bustled quietly about the ancient kitchen, climbing up to the sink to wipe the heavy cast-iron skillet, scurrying down to bank the fire in the ancient wood-burning stove, and then peering through the pantry cabinets, scratching one of her long, pointed ears and trying to decide what she'd make for lunch. The pantry was never full, but also never empty, through some magic of the house itself. It made for a lot of repetitive meals, but at least nobody starved. Mother had always supplemented the pantry's unvarying stock with fresh produce and treats that she conjured from the market in the village.

I especially missed the crisp, tart obuolys-fruit, but I'd never quite caught the runes Mother had used to summon the food, and I wasn't even sure how she paid for it. I supposed she could have sent coins the same way she brought the food.

I was just starting to wonder what I'd do with myself all day. Even before my parents had gone, I'd been a solitary boy, keeping to myself and largely keeping myself amused all day. With no siblings, I had turned to the many books in the house for companionship. With no school—I would learn later that I was unusual in that respect—those books were also my education. If I grew bored of reading and the weather seemed nice, our expansive estate gave me plenty of room to wander. I could visit the dilapidated outbuildings, throw

pebbles into the pond, or walk through the abandoned and overgrown horse pastures. If the weather was poor, I might even help the brownies keep the house clean.

I'd almost decided it would be a reading day when an insistent, loud clanging rang from the attic, echoing down through the walls and plumbing. Abbygail froze, looking anxiously at me. "I'm going," I said, resignation coloring my voice.

Great-Great-Grandmother had called.

The house itself was devoid of any living beings other than myself, the brownies, and the kobolds who dropped by almost weekly to handle heavier tasks, like the seemingly continual repairs the creaking old building required. I'd never even seen a spider, although I'd read about them and seen a few sketches of them in some of my books. Great-Great-Grandmother was something... else. Certainly not a "living being." She'd grown up in this house, following at least half a dozen generations before her. But unlike her forebears she'd declined to leave the house simply because she'd died. Instead she'd moved into the attic and made it her domain. When she wanted something from the living—meaning me—she'd make a racket until someone showed up. I always showed up quickly, too: I'd once made her wait almost ten minutes and it had put her in an even colder mood than usual.

I hadn't known about her when Mother and Father were alive; they'd simply forbidden me to wander higher than the second floor where our bedrooms were. It wasn't until Mother was gone that Great-Great-Grandmother had first summoned me, banging and scratching until I'd finally overcome my fear and ascended to discover her. As far as I knew, she never left the attic, although I had no idea what she did up there to while away the days.

But she had called, so I once again trudged up the four flights of massive, creaking stairs, running my hand along the smooth, worn handrails all the way. I'd learned early on that the stairs liked to play tricks. Not so much with the family, although with no other opportunities they'd occasionally get bored and try to trip me up. The

handrails never tried such things though, and were always firm and steady under my grip. The handrails were yet another sign of the house's grand past, carved into a comfortable shape and featuring intricate, delicate engravings of flowers, birds, and woodland creatures along the sides. When I was younger, I'd spent hours looking at the little carvings, running my fingers over them and inventing stories about the animals' lives.

As I passed the landing for the second floor, I brushed my fingers over the portrait of Mother that hung there. She'd been much younger when the painting had been made, still unmarried, with the rare, pale skin that she'd gifted me, and the straight, honey-colored hair that she'd always kept in braids when I knew her. My eyes were my father's though, gray and sharp; Mother's were the bright, lush purple that was so common amongst the women in her family. I didn't linger any longer over her picture, though: one didn't keep the matriarch waiting.

Great-Great-Grandmother always heard me coming of course, and the stout wooden attic door flew open as soon as I'd stepped onto the landing in front of it, swinging silently despite its obvious weight. The room beyond the door was dark and murky, and Great-Great-Grandmother sort of *oozed* out of that darkness. She was every inch a witch from human stories: a long, full dress of embroidered black material, including a black knitted shawl that she clutched around her thin, bony torso. Her back was hunched with age. Even her nose, a bit bulbous, attempted a slight hook at its end. Her face was at least not colored green, although it was deeply lined, especially around her eyes. Those still retained their purple color, although they'd darkened and faded to a dull, dim shade. A black mole, complete with two stiff bristles of pure white hair, decorated one cheek. She smelled horrific, an aged combination of butterscotch and rotten flowers. I held my ground on the landing: she'd never once let a single part of her body extend beyond the attic doorframe, and so I kept a good three feet between us.

It goes without saying that I'd never ventured beyond the door-

frame into the attic itself. In my imagination, the attic wasn't even a room. It was another dimension, one inhabited solely by Great-Great-Grandmother and whoever or whatever she'd captured.

She sniffed. "You're thirteen today," she said, as if there was a particular odor associated with that age. Her raspy voice was like two pieces of thick, worn leather twisting around each other. "You're to go and be Tested," she added. That last word was uttered with such weight that I knew at once I was to be *Tested*, not merely *tested*. Whatever that meant.

But then I blinked. Thirteen?

I'd been alone in the house since Mother had been dragged off to Witchhold—two years ago? Three?—to be tried and interned. The prison had sent word scant months later that she'd died, still screaming the curses and epithets of whatever madness had taken her. The official letter expressed regret at failing to discover a cure for her ailment, let alone identifying its cause.

It didn't matter, Great-Great-Grandmother had said. *She served her purpose.*

I'D REMAINED in the house, the last living member of a once-proud family. Looking back, I wonder that nobody thought to do *something*. I mean, even the Proctors who'd taken Mother must have known they were leaving a ten year-old alone in the house. *Must* have known, no? And yet I'd been undisturbed for three years. I'm sure now that Great-Great-Grandmother had something to do with it. But with no living adults around to remind me, I'd quite given up on observing birthdays and was mildly surprised to learn I was now a teenager.

I nodded to Great-Great-Grandmother because once she'd made a proclamation, it was far easier, and safer, to go along with it. I'd left the great house only a handful of times since my parents' passing, every time at Great-Great-Grandmother's whim on some errand or another. "Where do I go?"

She extended a frail, bony finger toward me, holding it just short of the doorframe that bounded her world. I stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and leaned my head into the doorframe. Her long, thick yellow fingernail brushed my forehead, she muttered an arcane phrase, and I suddenly *knew* where I was to go. I stepped back quickly, and she retreated back into the inky darkness just as fast. The attic door flew shut, *clicking* closed with surprising gentleness given the force of its swing.

"Abbygail," I called as I trudged down the stairs. "Could you fetch my coat?" I was to go into the village, but I didn't ask if the brownie wanted me to fetch anything for her or the house. When one was on one of Great-Great-Grandmother's errands, one didn't deviate for any creature or reason.

But a short delay wouldn't be noticed. I stopped on the third floor, where the tiny, empty bedrooms intended for the house's staff nestled closely together, lining both sides of a short, narrow hallway. I stepped into the hallway and placed my back against the wall next to the first door. That door had stopped closing properly decades ago, and even now its warped surface leaned slightly inward. Dim sunlight crept through the opening, but there was no reason for me to go in. Instead, I slid down the wall and came to rest on the battered wooden floor.

"Father," I said quietly. "Grandmother says I'm to be Tested."

I waited. Father had died in the vast basement three levels down, but for some reason his restless spirit had taken up residence here. I sometimes told myself that he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his only child alone in this enormous, empty house, but it was just as likely that death had held no more interest for him than his family had. All my life, he'd been more interested in tinkering with his experiments and machines than in engaging with my mother and me.

A scratching sound came from inside the wall. "Don't eat the food," a gruff, hollow voice said, echoing behind the plaster and lathing. The scratching faded, and I stood.

Don't eat the food.



OUR OLD HOUSE sat on the very outskirts of town, mandating an hour-long walk to make it into the center of our little village. Mother had made the trip with me in just a few minutes by using her magic, but she'd never shown me the trick of it, so I was stuck doing it the slow way.

A wrought-iron gate—surprisingly sturdy for its age—provided egress from the estate. A single dusty road stretched from that gate through empty meadows and little copses of trees. There were no other houses on this side of the village; Mother had said the family had once owned all the land leading up the village itself. I didn't know if that land was now all mine or not, but even if the family had sold it, nobody had bothered to build any closer. There was only the house, overgrown remains of farmlands, quiet meadows, and the village. The occasional bird would let out a soft *cheep*, but I'd never seen one. I'd never seen *any* other creatures on the land, for that matter.

It was a clear day, the second moon still stubbornly clinging to its place in the sky even as the sun threatened to blot it out. The weather was mild, as it was for much of the year, and the breeze blew gently through the leafy branches of the trees that lined the road.

As I neared the village, the packed-earth lane gained a cover of fine gravel. This is where the humans' buildings began, starting with rickety wooden farm-cottages and slowly improving into sturdy homes. I passed chicken-coops full of clucking, pecking hens. There were small vegetable gardens, tended by sturdy-looking men and women in simple, homespun clothes. There were children frolicking in front of their homes, dogs running around and barking, and adults' voices calling to each other across their properties. Notably,

this far from the house, there were even birds and the occasional insect, all flitting through the air.

The road then transitioned to tightly placed cobblestones as the old stone buildings of the village proper began. These buildings were worn and crumbling around the edges, but they remained sturdy, hunkered closely to one another as if for protection from the outside world.

The villagers ignored me: I was just one more child dressed in black slacks, sturdy (if dusty) black shoes, and a long black coat. I seemed to warrant no special attention on their part, although it couldn't have been common for a child my age to be wandering into the village alone. I cast sidelong glances at them: I'd had few opportunities to see humans up close, but as far as I could tell they were physically indistinguishable from witchkind. Perhaps they dressed a bit plainer, and perhaps they moved with a bit more of a trudge in their step, but then again perhaps that was simply this village's way of doing things.

The village wasn't especially bustling, but it wasn't empty either. I passed the market where Mother had somehow summoned her groceries from, and a small banker's office where two or three people waited to conduct their business. Further down the cobbled street, I knew, was a tiny smithy, a spacious courthouse, and the village's ancient church. I could hear the rattling, clanking sounds of a carriage rolling over the uneven streets, likely carrying goods to some shop or other. This village was far removed from the humans' iron roadway, Father had told me, and relied on carts and carriages to haul in whatever goods the villagers might need.

I made my way to the narrow alleyway that ran between a busy general store and the sleepy post office. Two steps into the alleyway led me to the ancient lead pipe that carried rainwater down from the rooftop gutters. I'd never seen it before, but Great-Great-Grandmother's magic had placed its location and image firmly into my mind.

Witchkind couldn't afford to live cheek-to-jowl with humanity;

we'd learned that ages and ages ago. And so when we couldn't have a secluded place to ourselves far from the humans, we crept around in the nooks and crannies they ignored. My heart pounding lightly in anticipation, and my nerves giving a slight jitter to my hand, I gave the old pipe two gentle knocks with my knuckles, on the exact spot where a small rune was carved into the soft metal. It echoed ringingly for a moment, and then fell silent. Then with a *pop*, a small section of the pipe swung open, like a tiny lead door, and I was sucked inside.

* * *

I emerged into a small, crowded office. Great-Great-Grandmother had sent me on a few errands into the village before, and if there was one common attribute of witchkind, it was that we seemed to enjoy clutter. The walls of the office were lined with shelves and cubbies, and each was precariously overstuffed with books, knick-knacks, trinkets, piles of paper, and more. Glistening little sprites flitted between it all, stirring up eddies of dust that then meandered independently around the room. Presiding over it all was a prim, matronly woman whose pewter hair had been gathered into an elaborately coiffed up-do. Her burgundy-colored dress reminded me of Great-Great-Grandmother's: a slim bodice, high collar, and a dress that presumably descended to within a scant whisk of the floor. She even had a knitted ivory shawl wrapped round her shoulders. Her face was less lined than Great-Great-Grandmother's, and she appeared to be fully alive. Oh, she also lacked Great-Great-Grandmother's distinguishing wart. She sat at an imposing oaken desk that easily occupied three-quarters of the room's floor space. The desk was a stark contrast to the rest of the room, its uncluttered top occupied by a broad leather blotter, two neat piles of paper, and a large, well-worn wooden box full of small, neatly stacked cards.

She looked up as I appeared, peering over half-rimmed glasses that were secured to her neck by a thin gold chain. "May I help you, dear?" she asked, her voice absolutely neutral and devoid of interest or emotion.

"Yes," I answered hesitantly. "I'm here to be tested. *Tested*," I amended, emphasizing the word the way Great-Great-Grandmother had.

Her eyebrows rose. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by the *ding* of a bell. She immediately swiveled her chair around to face the wall as a small wooden panel slid upward, revealing a nook of some kind. She reached in and pulled something out, and then swiveled back to me. "Lunchtime," she said with a tight smile, setting her burden down on her immense wooden desk. "Be just a tic."

The panel behind her slid closed. I looked down at her desk, and saw a large china bowl filled with broth and what appeared to be some kind of cooked shellfish. Incongruously balanced atop it all was a cheeseburger. I *loved* cheeseburgers, although I hadn't had one since Mother had been taken away. The house's pantry didn't ordinarily stock ground meat. The woman smiled at me and said, "Meal selection number two." She licked her lips, revealing teeth that were perfectly white and straight. "My favorite. Just a quick bite and I'll be with you, dear." With that, she wrapped her hands around the cheeseburger, and the shellfish immediately started moving about in their broth. As she lifted the sandwich clear, I saw that several of the shellfish had clamped their shells to the bottom bun, as if in a race to see whether they could devour the burger faster than the woman could. The other shellfish were snapping their shells and attempting to jump clear of the broth and get their own hold on the burger.

The woman took a small, tidy bite of the burger and, closing her eyes, chewed slowly. "Mmmm." Her voice at last betrayed some kind of emotion. Swallowing, she opened her eyes, replaced the burger and its attendant shellfish in the bowl, and once again leveled her gaze at me. "What's your name, dear?" she asked, her voice again flat. One hand poised over the wooden box and its little cards.

"Daniel Scratch." Not my real surname, of course; my family's True name was so old, so infamous, and so powerful, Great-Great-Grandmother said I must never use it with outsiders. I had faith that

whatever arcane mechanisms witchkind used for keeping track of each other would be fine with the alias, though.

Never taking her eyes off me, the woman nimbly flipped through the stack of cards as if her fingers had a mind of their own. She stopped suddenly on a particular card and, without breaking eye contact recited, "Mother Beatrice and father Neville." Her eyebrows rose again. "Both deceased. No guardian of record listed." *Interesting*, I thought. Not that Great-Great-Grandmother would permit herself to be *listed* as anything so mundane. "There's a fee, dear."

My own eyebrows rose, as Great-Great-Grandmother hadn't mentioned anything of the sort. Then again... I dipped my hand into my coat-pocket, and found two coins lying there. I pulled them out and held them out over the woman's desk. She presented her hand—*never place your coin anywhere but in the hand you mean to have it*, Great-Great-Grandmother always insisted—and I dropped the coins gently into her palm. Not once breaking eye contact with me, she laid the coins on her desk, letting them *clink* softly, one atop the other.

"A meal is included, of course," she said. She tapped a small button that was embedded into her desk-top. "Another number two, I should think." Within seconds, the bell dinged again, and the woman swiveled around to retrieve another burger-and-shellfish lunch from the nook behind her. She laid it gently on her desk, in front of her own meal. "Join me?" she asked, once again reaching for her cheeseburger.

Don't eat the food, Father's words echoed in my mind. "No thank you," I said as graciously as possible. I hardly needed Father's warning to avoid this particular dish.

The woman froze, her eyebrows beetling down and almost meeting in the middle of her brow. She abandoned her cheeseburger, picked up the plate that had been intended for me, and unceremoniously dumped it in a bin next to her chair. I listened carefully, but didn't ever hear it hit bottom. "The kitchen isn't pleased," she said, voice still flat and void of emotion. "You've failed their test." She

leaned back a bit in her chair, folded her hands on her lap, and stared at me. "You may go."

Shopkeepers had tried to dismiss me on past errands, and I knew to hold my ground. My family's coin couldn't be accepted without obligation, Great-Great-Grandmother had taught me. "I've paid for the Test," I reminded her, once again emphasizing the last word.

She lowered one hand to her desk, covering the two coins that still sat there. She made to push them toward me, but they wouldn't budge from their position. Looking confused, she finally broke eye contact with me and looked down at her hand. She once again attempted to push the coins, and they once again remained stubbornly in place. She lifted her hand and, for the first time, looked closely at the coins. Her eyebrows climbed nearly to her hairline, and her head snapped up as she skewered me with a sharp gaze. "I see," she said carefully, her voice no longer flat but instead tinged with a mix of curiosity and respect. "Then the Test you shall have, young Mr. Scratch."

Once again holding my gaze, she reached down and opened a desk drawer. From it, she plucked a thin piece of ash-colored wood, perhaps the size of a playing card. "Take this." She gripped it by one corner and held it out to me.

I reached for the small piece of wood, but as soon as my fingers touched it, it began to blacken and dissolve. Within moments, it had transformed into a fine dust, joining the rest of the office's ample supply. The woman had never released it and now held, pinched between her fingers, what looked like a slim glass rod, no more than two inches long. With a twitch of her fingers, the rod flipped upright, pointing toward the office's moldy ceiling. She leaned forward, extending the rod closer to me. "Blow gently across it," she instructed, her voice growing soft. "Like blowing out a candle."

I bent down slightly until my lips were just a few inches from the rod's tip, and blew gently. The rod-end immediately erupted into an inch-long hot blue flame that blew away from me and toward the woman. I pulled back instinctively, but the flame

continued to burn, flickering away from me as if I were still blowing on it. Tilting her head slightly, the woman stared at it for a moment, and then dipped the flaming end of the rod into her broth. The shellfish immediately started tossing themselves furiously around, only the weight of the cheeseburger keeping them in the bowl. Within seconds, the broth itself was boiling, and within a few more seconds, the shellfish had stopped moving. *Finally cooked*, I thought to myself.

"Well." She released the end of the rod she'd been holding and stared forlornly at the sandwich. "Number two, as I said." She pushed the entire bowl off the side of her desk and into her trash-bin. Like the one meant for me, this dish seemed to fall endlessly, never striking the bottom.

Then, in what seemed like a single sudden movement, she swiveled ninety degrees to her right and stood, reaching for one of the many boxes on the office's walls. The box she pulled down was a lacquered black cube, perhaps four inches to a side, with a key-hole occupying almost the entirety of one side. She withdrew a large bronze key from her dress-pocket, inserted it into the key-hole, and twisted. With a *click*, the box's lid snapped open. Releasing the key, she withdrew a small, irregularly shaped glass medallion that was suspended on a length of green ribbon. She flicked her wrist and the box-lid snapped shut again. She replaced the box on its shelf, extracted the key, and dropped the key back into her pocket. Then she turned to me.

"Lean forward," she instructed. I did so. She draped the ribbon over my head, sliding it so that the glass medallion hung over my sternum, then stepped back and resumed her place in her chair. "I shall tell my sisters of this strange and eventful day," she said, stepping back and resuming her place in her chair.

I looked down at the medallion, and saw the green ribbon slowly turning to black before my eyes. Small threads frayed away at the edges, but once the entire ribbon was a dark, glossy black, the change seemed to stop. The medallion itself changed next, turning

from a crystal-clear, irregularly shaped shard into a flat diamond shape swirled throughout with deep red.

I looked up at her, and she made a flicking motion toward me with her fingers. I felt a rushing wind, and found myself back in the alley.



I KNEW ENOUGH to head directly to Great-Great-Grandmother's attic when I got home—there was no way she'd send me to be Tested and then take no interest in the results. Once again, I trudged up the four flights and stood on the landing as the attic door swung open. She drifted forward out of her darkness, and I saw her eyes immediately widen. She sniffed at the air—a short, sharp inhalation first, followed by a longer, deeper draught. Never taking her eyes from me, she nodded slowly. "Finally," she whispered in her rough, grating voice.

Her hand stretched out to me, but rather than extending a finger toward my forehead, this time her bony claws clutched a thick book by one corner. She held it out to me, spine down, the book never protruding past the doorframe. It looked to be quite heavy, but her old arm didn't waver.

I stepped forward hesitantly: Great-Great-Grandmother had never handed me anything tangible before. The book was easily three inches thick, bound in sturdy covers whose cloth was faded, but not frayed. I held a hand out, palm up, extending it almost past the doorframe and into the attic—the furthest any part of me had ever ventured into her domain. She dropped the book into my hand, her mouth quirking in—a smile? Impossible. I caught it, my arm drooping slightly from its heft. It felt like a box of rocks, and I couldn't understand how Great-Great Grandmother had held it so easily.

Suddenly, the house vanished from around me.