CLARA THORN

THE WITCH THAT WON

DON JONES

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For the nephews...
Nate
Asher
and James

If you can accept losing, you can't win.

— VINCE LOMBARDI

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PROLOGUE

The tiny village was quiet, save for the gentle hissing of the snow that swirled through its narrow streets. Its tiny homes, built from timber and mud, stood close to one another, as if the structures themselves were huddling for warmth and safety. The freezing temperatures had driven everyone indoors, and brief flickers of firelight could be seen between the slats of the shutters that were closed tight over every window. Streams of white smoke puffed up from every primitive stone chimney, only to be instantly blown away by the brisk wind.

The center of the village was a small, open square, surrounded on all sides by the quaint homes and buildings of its residents. In the center of the square stood a sturdy, one-room church with a tall spire reaching towards the dark winter sky. This was the heart of the village, where people came to gather for important events and meetings.

On this particular night, however, the square was deserted. Even the heavy wooden doors of the church were shut tight, with no sign of life inside.

At the back of the church, in a small living space attached to the

main building, lived the priest who served as spiritual leader for this tiny community. He was likely huddled close to his fire, trying to stay warm in his humble abode.

The only movement in the square came from a few stray cats darting between buildings in search of warmth or scraps of food. The snow-covered ground and empty benches gave off an eerie feeling in contrast to what would normally be a bustling area filled with life and activity.

But despite its current stillness, it was easy to imagine how this square would come alive during happier times - with children playing tag around its perimeter and adults chatting amiably as they went about their daily tasks. For now though, it remained quiet as if waiting for spring to bring back its usual lively atmosphere.

As night wore on and temperatures continued to drop, even these stray animals sought out shelter in abandoned corners or under porches. All that remained were footprints etched into the snow-covered ground from earlier activity before everyone retreated into their homes for warmth.

Deep within each home lay families huddled together under blankets or gathered around fires. They whispered words of comfort to one another as they waited for morning - knowing that once again they would face another harsh day ahead.

The square was deserted.

And then it was not.

A wizened old woman, the skin of her exposed face and hands dark and lined with wrinkles, was there. She did not appear in a rush of magic, nor did she step out of any of the barred doorways that lined the square. She was not there. . . and then she simply *was.* And once she *was,* it was as if she always had been.

In many ways, she had.

She was grossly underdressed for the weather. She wore a long-sleeved, flowing kaftan of sorts. Its hems would ordinarily have brushed the ground, but in the cold wind it whipped and snapped around her legs. It was made from brightly patterned cloth, covered

in broad flowers and whimsical bees, standing out in sharp contrast to the white-gray surroundings.

She looked around quickly, as if getting her bearings, and then marched up the shallow steps to the church's broad doors.

This little village, she knew, was not important today. It had never been conquered or even seriously raided. It had never produced a hero, and had never been the site of a miracle. No king had ever visited, and no armies had ever marched down its humble streets.

That would change, one day. From her perspective, it already had.

She stepped up to the door, reached into a pocket of her voluminous dress, and withdrew a large cross made of wrought iron. She held it against one of the church's doors as her other hand fumbled in another pocket. That hand drew out a hammer, which she banged twice, smartly, against the cross' upper arm. Then she stepped back, surveying her work.

She nodded in satisfaction, and the square was once again empty, save for the swirling snow. It was as if she'd never been there.

In many ways, she never had.

CHAPTER 1
BORDER ROT

Clara and Ed materialized in a burst of radiant light, at the base of the stairs leading to Linginbaum's School for Magic-Users.

Professor Herrera, the Headmaster, greeted them with a frown. "You know that's... not allowed," her voice was low and stern. Personal translocation magic had been prohibited in Underhill, once its geography had stabilized enough to make teleportation spells feasible.

Clara shrugged. "Your Sending said it was urgent. We'd have had to connect three times using the Anchor network." Aaron Witcher, a prominent figure in witch society, had advocated for the ban on translocation magic. He'd established a network of fixed-location Anchors across Underhill, claiming they could transport people and materials more safely and efficiently. Plus, he collected a fee each time an Anchor was used.

"What's the issue?" Ed asked.

"The Border." Herrera quickly descended the steps and rushed past them, leaving Ed and Clara to follow.

Clara's pulse quickened. This Border—a massive stone monolith

linking this part of Underhill to the Ordinary world—was her first creation. It exited Underhill into her hometown of Las Vegas, right outside The D casino hotel. "What's wrong with it?"

"You'll need to see it." Clara noted the tension in Herrera's voice.

They hurried around the school. The Border had originally been erected in the school's main athletic field, which had been used for Wizard's Rules Football. The presence of a huge stone pillar smack in the middle of the field was something of a deterrent to play, so the field had been relocated on the opposite side of the tall mesa that held the school grounds. The old field had been turned into something of a park, with the Border occupying a position of honor in the middle.

Herrera came to an abrupt halt, and Ed and Clara swerved to avoid running into her. But they too stopped suddenly when they saw the Border.

"What is that?" Ed whispered.

The Border, once a rough-textured pillar of ordinary-looking gray granite, was... damaged. Inky black pools oozed slowly over its surface, resembling thick, shiny oil. Except the edges of the "oil" crackled with an angry, dull red light, and where the "oil" dripped to the ground, it was slowly spreading out. Everything it touched died and vanished. As they watched, the once-green grass around the Border was fading to a withered brown, and right at the edge of the black pools, the dead grass was disintegrating.

"It looks like... the Border is rotting," Clara murmured. "When did this start?" As she spoke, a small chunk of gray stone cracked from the Border, dropping into the darkness and vanishing.

"One of the students noticed it less than half an hour ago. I cast the Sending immediately, and then went back to meet you."

Clara's vision shifted into what she called magic-mode. Most witches couldn't see magic, but Clara wasn't most witches. She was a mathemagician, a rare kind of witch who experienced magic visually. To Clara, all magic looked like complex math equations, glowing in a rainbow of colors and arranged in complex geometric shapes.

Only a mathemagician could raise new Borders, and when the last mathemagician's Borders had been forcibly taken down, it had fallen to Clara to raise new ones.

The once pristine Border that Clara had created was now marred by dark streaks that seemed to pulsate with an unknown energy. Deep cracks revealed a sickly magic seeping through. The streamers plunged into the ground like black daggers, reaching towards the Ordinary world. The ambient magic within the Border had lost its vibrancy and now appeared faded and lifeless. Even the carefully manicured garden was fading, with wilted plants and decaying leaves littering the previously perfect landscape. Clara's expression was tense as she took in the deteriorating state of her creation. "This is bad."

"How bad?" Ed asked.

"Really bad. It goes all the way through to the Ordinary."

"What's causing it?" Herrera asked.

Clara looked closer. Even halfway down through the tall mesa, her original equations seemed to be gone. The filthy... whatever it was seemed to be flowing upwards. Almost as if... "It's coming from the Ordinary side," she said as she realized. She looked even deeper, pushing her vision further into Underhill than she'd ever done when not actually creating a new Border. Her awareness of the world, of Herrera and Ed, of the grass beneath her feet, all began to fade. She started to feel the gentle prickling she associated with raw magic, but this was tainted by—



"HURTS!!!!"

Clara blinked rapidly. She was in the dream forest, and the tiny, blue creature standing in front of her was an avatar for Underhill itself. The creature she'd saved—along with all of Underhill—when she'd erected the Borders and let magic come streaming back in.

The elf was clearly in pain. Veins throbbed in its head, and its

eyes were wide with panic. Clara's eyes widened in sympathy when she noticed an inky black hole had appeared in its narrow chest.

"HELP!!!" it howled, falling to its knees.

"I'm trying," Clara snapped back. "This isn't helping, though. Let me work." She wrenched her attention away—the first time she'd ever taken herself out of the elf's vision—and the deep soil of Underhill once again wrapped tightly around her. There—



—IT WAS. The exact place where the Border pushed through whatever separated Underhill from the Ordinary. The place where the magic had latched onto the archway outside the casino, next to the awkward, giggle-inducing little statue in the fountain.

But now something had attached itself to the magic.

It was black—no, blacker than black. You never see actual black, the complete absence of light, but this was it. It pulled greedily at Clara's mental eyes, trying to pull her in. Stray wisps of magic slowly drifted into it, further compromising the Border's structure. Clara pushed at it with her mind, willing it to move as she did with magic, but it sat stubbornly at the Border's central nexus, refusing to budge. Magic continued to flow down from Underhill, tracing slowly through the dark, upward-reaching tentacles, disappearing into the endless, empty mouth of whatever this was.

It'll suck in all of Underhill, Clara saw with alarm. She looked quickly about, taking in what was left of the Border's original structure. *There,* she thought grimly, spotting the remains of the Border's original core. Its edges were sparking purple-gray as it seemed to fight whatever void trying to consume it. *But I don't have long.*

With a deep breath, she let go of her focus and the world of Underhill materialized around her once more. "Ed," she called urgently, pushing through the wave of dizziness that washed over her, "get in touch with the triplets. Tell them to come here as soon as possible." Ed nodded and moved away to send a message. "Profes-

sor," Clara said, trying to steady herself, "we need to evacuate the mesa immediately."

Herrera's eyes widened in fear. "Is it—"

"It's bad," Clara confirmed. "I can stop it but we need to move quickly. I'm not sure what it'll do but... there's a good chance I'm going to have to rip it out. The Border, I mean. Out of the mesa itself. I don't know—"

"I'm on it," Herrera said, rushing away. A moment later, alarms began blaring from the direction of the school. Clara saw spirals of magic begin to form in the sky, quickly spinning down into the castle before darting away. *Translocation magic,* she thought. Herrera wasn't wasting time. Clara's lips twitched in a wry grin. *Witcher will be furious.*

"I've messaged them," Ed said, stepping back to Clara's side. "They should be here in—"

The triplets materialized behind her. "The Witchers are going to be incensed," Harriett said with glee. "What's the emergency—whoa."

"It's bad," Clara repeated. "I'm going to need to tear it out. Sever its connection."

"You can't just... pull the plug?" Idalia asked, still staring at the sickly-looking splotches on the Border.

Clara shook her head grimly. "It's too deep. Something on the other side is doing this."

"Paladins," Johanna breathed.

"Likely," Clara agreed. "And... Ed, I need to see the other side."

He frowned. "This is the one they absolutely know about, Clara."

"Obviously," Johanna said.

"I need to see it," Clara insisted.

"I'll come with you," Ed sighed. "But we're obviously not using this one. Where do you want to go?"

"Sydney," Clara stated with determination. "It's the farthest location from Vegas we can go to. We'll use translocation from there."

"Where's that on this side?" Idalia asked.

"In the Hinterlands," Clara answered. "About as far from here as possible."

Johanna grinned with glee. "Witcher is going to be pissed."

"Excellent," Clara said flatly as she and Ed vanished in another swirl of light.



The translocation ripped through the air, depositing them in the arid expanse of the Hinterlands in a heartbeat. Clara couldn't help but smirk; she'd mastered the art of magical travel. Learning translocation magic had been the trickiest for her, because the usual tricks for casting magic—words, hand movements, and other spell components—simply didn't work for her. She had to *see* someone perform the spell, and only half of translocation magic actually appeared on the "departure" side. She'd had to wait for her friends to master the spell and then repeatedly appear and disappear in front of her until she finally picked up what they were doing.

The trip through the Hinterlands Border and into Sydney was uneventful, exhibiting nothing more than the usual slight resistance, as if stepping through a gauze curtain. They emerged near the Sydney Aquarium, which was usually a sufficiently bustling area that newly arrived witches could quickly blend in. But Clara had lost track of the time zones, and they stepped out into the middle of the night. "At least there's nobody here," she remarked as she began twisting the ambient magic into another translocation spell.

"Wait," Ed said quickly. "Where are you taking us?"

Clara considered. "It's midday in Vegas. We have to assume someone's watching that end of the Border to at least see what happens."

"Exactly."

"How about my parents' condo building?"

Ed frowned. "We'd be pretty easy to spot, and I'm not comfort-

able with you taking us inside." The building was a high-rise, made of concrete and steel rebar, and all that metal made it decidedly unfriendly to magic.

"Mmm. Point." She ran through the options in her mind. "Outside on Fremont Street, then," she decided. "It won't be packed this time of day, but it'll be busy enough. I can use the corner right at the Fremont, on Third. That way we can just step around the corner."

Ed took a moment to visualize it, then nodded. "Okay."

"Here we go."

Clara used a different translocation spell this time. It took more energy, which wasn't a concern for her since she was directly controlling the local ambient magic, and it required a lot more precision. But it was far less showy, lacking the swirling lights of the "cheaper" spell she'd used before. With little more than a quick rush of air, she and Ed vanished from Sydney and appeared on Las Vegas' Fremont Street Experience.

As planned, they quickly stepped around the corner of the Fremont Casino, out of sight of anyone who'd seen them pop into existence. The D casino was across the pedestrian walkway, and they took their time strolling to it and through its doors. "Did I tell you the last time I came to visit Mom and Dad, they were checking IDs?"

"No!" Ed exclaimed softly. "What'd you do?"

"I had to walk around the long way. You know I'm no good at glamours."

"Glad they're not doing that today."

"I think it's mainly a nighttime thing."

"We'll be able to get adult IDs in a year, at least," Ed mused.

"That's the plan," Clara agreed.

The two stepped into the casino, careful to stay in the wide, carpeted walkways so they wouldn't attract undue attention from the security staff. They made their way past the blinking, blaring slot machines, the almost comically long bar, and the hotel's small front desk. They slowed as they approached the

doors to the *porte cochere,* scanning for signs of Paladins. Ed murmured, "Glamour?" A faint blue shimmer danced around his fingertips.

Clara grimaced. "It won't matter if they're wearing goggles," she pointed out. Most field Paladins were equipped with heavy, steampunk-esque goggles that let them see the glow of magic. Nowhere near as precisely as Clara could see magic, but enough to let them spot witches.

"Yeah, but they look super conspicuous. And if they're using them, they'll see me anyway."

Clara took only a moment to think about it. "Yeah, okay."

The cool, somewhat slippery sensation of a glamour slid over her skin. She looked at Ed, but saw nothing more than hazy, dun-colored equations drifting slowly across his features. *This is why I have trouble with glamours,* she sighed. *I can't actually see the magic.*

They stepped cautiously through the doors. A number of cars were parked in the drive, with guests unloading luggage, bellmen darting around with carts, and valets attempting to direct traffic through the crowded area.

Perfect for us, Clara thought as she and Ed slipped through the chaos toward the street exit. Here, a tiny courtyard featured a tall fountain, topped by a smiling concrete cherub who was "urinating" into the fountain. Clara hadn't been able to stop giggling when she'd first seen it, but Dad assured her it was a well-known joke. A replica, in fact, of the more famous original in Europe.

Just past the fountain was a tall, squared-off archway that served as the casino's street entrance on this side. Clara's Border had been connected here.

Emphasis on *had.*

She and Ed slowed as they approached the fountain, and Clara's jaw dropped as she saw what they'd done.

Three, maybe four dozen thick nails had been hammered into the side of the arch where the Border had connected.

Ed's voice dropped to a whisper. "Nail gun? Surely the hotel

wouldn't miss someone hammering all those in by hand, would they?"

Clara's eyes were scanning the magic, and it was just as rotten and twisted as it had been in Underhill—if not more. "We knew this worked for Anchors," she said just as softly. "I didn't think. . . no wonder it's having that effect on the other side." In Clara's eyes, sparks of magic were cascading out of the nail heads, evidence of the power they were drawing out of Underhill. "Okay. Let's go back." She turned and began walking back toward the hotel.

"Sydney?" Ed asked.

Clara shook her head. "No. This is freaking me out. We need to be careful. What's the most obscure one on this side?"

Ed quickly ran down the list in his mind. "You did that one in Johannesburg, it's clear outside town."

"That one, then." She waited until they'd pulled open the hotel doors before wrapping them in magic.



Clara relayed what they'd seen to the triplets and Herrera, who assured her they were now the only people on the castle mesa.

"I didn't think a *Border* could be spiked so easily," the older woman said, her voice filled with concern.

"It was hardly *easy,"* Ed said. "They put like a whole box of nails into it."

"Yeah, but that's probably one of the most visible and protected locations," Clara countered. "I mean, it's the entrance to a *casino,* for pity's sake. They had to work fast."

"Nail guns?" Idalia asked.

Clara nodded. "That's what Ed said. But I'm thinking more than one." She stared at the tall Border stone. The Borders were very personal for her, involving a great deal of very intimate effort and an immense amount of magic. It hurt, a little, to see it rotting like this, and it hurt even more to know she was about to tear it down. "OK,

ladies, I'm going to need everything you can give me, but I'll warn you—magic is getting stale up here already."

Silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the low hum of power building around the triplets. Clara felt a tingle race through her veins, the magic on the mesa thrumming in response. Although the triplets could cast spells individually, their superpower was combining their abilities. They not only drew in massive amounts of magic when they did so, but somehow amplified that magic, producing power far greater than any three witches could hope to do.

It took only a moment for them to gather enough magic and loop it around and through themselves, turning the dull local magic into a thick braid of almost pure-white energy, levitating the three of them a few inches off the ground. **«Ready,»** they said in the eerie, three-in-one voice they used when they were in synergy.

"I'll meet you all at the foot of the mesa," Herrera said, vanishing in a swirl of sparks.

Clara held out her hand and whispered, "Ed." He moved closer to her and grasped her hand tightly in his own.

"Do you need anything from me?" he asked quietly.

"Anchor me."

"Got it."

"And. . . you may need to get us all out of here. I don't know how bad this is going to be."

"WIll do."

"Wait, where did Herrera tell everyone—"

"Linginham. Plenty far away."

"Okay." Clara took a deep breath. "Hit me, ladies."

The triplets blasted Clara with power, and Clara quickly took it up in her mind's hands. The equations of magic this pure were bright and simple, expressing basic concepts like life, light, and air. Easy equations, with just a couple of terms apiece. Clara took that and split it into three streams, one of red, one of green, and one of blue. These equations she shaped into tools: one to cut, one to lever, and

one to cauterize. The math grew more complex, new terms and subexpressions emerging as Clara gave purpose to the power. The equations themselves began lining up into three-dimensional shapes, spinning slowly and gently as she coerced the magic into the forms she needed.

Once again, Clara sent her awareness deep into Underhill, her glowing tools darting before her.

Darkness writhed back, obsidian tendrils lashing out at Clara's magic. Gritting her teeth, she held her tools steady, a gleaming shield against the encroaching void. She threaded her way through the. . . *rot* was the only appropriate term, darting between the hungry curls, slipping through the least-dense sections she could find.

There. The root of the Border, its basic core, now entirely surrounded by whatever phenomenon the witch-hunting Paladins had unleashed with all those nails. The last of Border's foundation magic was bleeding out in navy blue symbols, each one twisted and bent out of shape.

With fierce determination, Clara plunged the crimson blade of magic deep into the pulsating core of the Border. Tightly woven equations and geometric shapes solidified around it, a scalpel expertly severing the tether that connected the world of Ordinary to this dangerous realm. As she drew upon the seemingly bottomless well of magic from the triplets, her blade grew stronger and more precise. Orange sparks flew in every direction, each one eagerly snatched up by a black tendril of rot, fighting for control. But Clara remained focused, directing her energy through the Border's origin with precision and force. The black tentacles began to quiver and part, releasing the disintegrating core as she quickly directed vibrant green magic to cauterize them, preventing any chance of reconnection. Simultaneously, she used her blue magic like a lever, applying pressure and causing the Border's darkened energies to stretch and stress. It was a delicate dance, but Clara's mastery over all three types of magic gave her an advantage as she

worked tirelessly to dismantle this dangerous barrier between worlds.

This is probably quite the show on the other side, she thought grimly.

Time stretched on endlessly as Clara relentlessly sawed her red blade against the decaying power. She fought against it, bolstering her efforts with the triplets' pure energy supply until her arms ached and burned. With each tendril she cut through, she unleashed searing blasts of green magic, pushing herself to the brink as she pushed her blue lever further and further. The next set of tendrils strained under her intense focus before she bore down with all her might, determined to destroy this vile force once and for all.

Cut, burn, shove. Cut, burn shove.

With every ounce of strength she had left, Clara cut, burned, and shoved her way through the thick tendrils of power that seemed to be alive and fighting against her. She could feel the heat radiating from her hands as she clenched them tightly, trying to maintain her focus. The tendrils stretched and strained, almost at their breaking point. She was so close now, she could practically taste victory.

Cut, burn, sh—

But then, suddenly, everything broke loose. With a final burst of energy, Clara pushed through the tangled mass of oily power, sending cut ends flapping wildly as they disintegrated and dissolved.

I've got nothing left, she realized with sudden panic. Already, she could feel her awareness drifting down. . . down. . . down, further than she'd ever gone. Not into the Ordinary, but sideways, into some other dimension. She struggled to regain her connection to her friends, to Underhill, but she was out of power. Even the triplets' energy seemed distant and faint to her now. *Ed.* . . she called in her mind, even as she started to lose consciousness.

She was vaguely aware of a comparatively weak ring of magic surrounding her, pulling her up, back, and away, just as her vision swam and went black.



"Well." Professor Herrera joined Clara in the meadow that once led to the foot of the mesa.

"Sorry," Clara said, her voice filled with fatigue.

Surveying the aftermath of Removing the Border, she was struck by the destruction. The once majestic mesa lay shattered and broken, its pieces scattered chaotically. Enormous boulders jutted out from the ground like jagged teeth, while a haze of dust hung in the air, slowly settling in the gentle breeze. What had once been a towering mesa was now reduced to a massive pile of rubble. It was a sight that left Clara both awestruck and saddened.

The school's main building, once a charming recreation of Bavaria's Neuschwanstein Castle, had been obliterated.

"I suppose we can rebuild," Herrera sighed. "There was no other way?"

Clara shook her head firmly. "None. Whatever it was, it was sucking the magic out of the school. Out of Underhill itself. I'm assuming they used nails with a high iron content. I've never seen it pull at magic like this was doing. I'm surprised the Border didn't explode or something, honestly. And you saw, it was killing the land."

"It couldn't have just been iron," Johanna said, although she didn't sound sure.

"Borders are pretty special, in terms of magic," Idalia mused. "Most of the usual rules don't seem to apply to them."

Ed nodded slowly. "Yeah. You know, if it created a feedback loop or something—"

"That isn't what I saw," Clara interrupted him. "It was...a darkness." She exhaled sharply in frustration. "Rot."

"Okay," Ed interrupted gently, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as she leaned into him.

"Could...this is just an idea," Idalia said slowly. "What if they had copper or brass in them?"

Clara frowned. "Why?"

"Because those metals can hold magic," Ed said.

Clara's eyes flew open. "You think... but they're Paladins. Why would they—"

"They don't have a problem with magic if it's presented as a 'holy relic,'" Harriett reminded her.

Clara considered it. "Maybe," she allowed at last. "It would definitely explain what I saw."

"Rotting it," Johanna whispered.

"Yeah," Clara agreed quietly.

"You know, the old legends talk about a Rot," Ed mused.

"The Fae," Herrera agreed. "It's said that's why they left Underhill."

"What caused it?" Clara asked.

"Humans," the professor said sadly. "Driving iron spikes into fairy rings, wrapping iron chains around the standing stones."

"Which were the Borders, back then," Idalia said.

"It still bothers me."

"How so?" Ed asked.

"I don't know. I mean, fairy rings, standing stones, fine... okay, right? I mean, they're pretty obvious. Everyone knew what they were back then. Magic was openly acknowledged back then."

"Yeah? So?" Harriett asked.

"Our Borders have been pretty hidden for generations," Clara explained. "So how'd they find it?"

"They'd simply need to watch," Herrera said. Everyone looked at her, and she shrugged. "They're already in the habit of staking Anchors in the Ordinary."

"But they found my Border," Clara countered.

"Probably," Herrera agreed.

"And they've put magic nails in it," Johanna said sadly.

"Or something," Clara muttered.

"It still could be magical artifacts," Ed countered.

"Appleton, yeah, that's what I was thinking at first," Clara said, nodding slowly.

"Permanently?" Idalia asked with a frown.

Clara shook her head. “No, it came back slowly."

“How was the ambient magic in Vegas?” Harriett asked.

“It was fine.”

“So it’s different.”

Clara shrugged. “It’d have to be."

Herrera cleared her throat. “So we have two problems."

Clara nodded once. “It’s more likely they spotted us using it."

“We need to tell your Mom,” Ed said.

“Yeah. She’s gonna flip.”

“It sounds like we need to put the word out to be even more cautious using the Borders,” Herrera added.

“But yeah,” Clara reluctantly agreed. “Until we can figure this out, at least."

“Clara, how long would your Borders normally last?” Herrera asked.

Clara shrugged. “Centuries. Millennia."

“That’s a long time,” Herrera mused. “to have been taken down so soon.”

“Time,” Clara whispered. A cold sensation trickled down her spine. “You’re right. I think we need to find Mom.”

CHAPTER 2
RELIC QUEST

"I don't like it," Jessamine Holdaway grumbled, slouching in her chair and crossing her arms in front of her. "I don't like what it *implies."*

Clara and Ed had come directly to Jessamine's Philadelphia row home, where they'd found her puttering in her basement workshop. Once they'd told her the news, she'd led them to the small sitting room upstairs, and summoned her husband, Alex.

"What does it imply, hon?" he asked.

Clara struggled to keep the concern out of her face as she looked at her biological father. The years he'd spent in Paladin captivity had worn hard on him. He was getting around better now, well enough that he felt comfortable rejoining his wife in their Ordinary home, but he still moved slowly. Small wonder he'd given up the field aspect of Counter-Hunting, choosing instead to focus on research to support Jessamine's team. Clara's former classmate, Finlay, and his boyfriend, Wolfgang, had joined the research team.

Jessamine's frown deepened. "I get that there's a way to destroy Borders. I don't like it, but I get it. There always has been. Oberherr took down the last-generation Borders, or most of them."

Clara grimaced. That had been her introduction to Underhill and witch society—the critical Borders between Underhill and the Ordinary collapsing, taken down by a madman who wanted to control the movement of witches and trap them all in Underhill.

"But *finding* Borders. . ." Jessamine continued. "That's a little too close for comfort."

"They've been able to triangulate Anchors for some time," Ed pointed out.

"Different," Jessamine insisted. "Anchors are pretty obvious once you get within line of sight, especially if you have those goggles they use. And it takes them a good bit of time to triangulate them, and they have a limited number of artifacts—fewer, now that we destroyed their lodestone—that can do it. But Borders are invisible to humans. They don't even give off an aura. As far as we know, that means you shouldn't be able to triangulate them in the same way. Right, Clara?"

"Maybe?" Clara said uncertainly. "It's different for me, I guess. I know where all the Borders are, already. And *I* can definitely see them."

"Point. But this means they've got some *new* artifact that can—"

"Slow down, hon," Alex interrupted gently. "Clara already said—she and Ed have been spotted there before. It'd take nothing for them to show some photos to the valet staff, and just ask them to keep a quiet eye out. That Border was pretty much fully visible from the valet waiting area. It would only have taken one kid seeing them pop out of a wall, and they'd have known exactly where to attack."

"Maybe," Jessamine allowed, but her expression didn't grow any brighter. "I think we should focus on finding more of their artifacts. Get a better feel for what kind of capability they've got."

Alex chuckled. "You're only saying that because you've already got a lead on a place."

Jessamine allowed herself a small grin. "Call it convenient timing. The fact is, we *have* seen an uptick in them using artifacts."

"Fighting fire with fire," Finlay said quietly. *He and Wolfgang*

spend more time here than I do, Clara thought. *Now that Dad's moved here full-time, at least.*

"Passing them off as 'holy relics,' of course," Jessamine snorted. "Mind you, they've come up with dozens more 'relics' in the past few years as, like, all of prior history combined." Her frown returned. "That in and of itself is suspicious. They *have* to have someone working with them. A witch, I mean."

"Oberherr?" Ed suggested.

"Could be. He does keep turning up like a band penny. Although we haven't run across him since Salem."

Jessamine, Clara, and the team had made a move on one of the Paladins' headquarters—*the* headquarters, they'd thought—where the group's former North American leader, Laura Deuxm, was based. She'd claimed to have Oberherr—their former ally—chained up in the historic old home's basement, used to power a magic suppression field. Clara had managed to vanish the entire house, basement and all, including its occupants, by casting a spell she still didn't fully understand.

"We haven't run across Deuxm, either," Clara pointed out.

"She's out there," Jessamine said grimly. "She's the most driven leader in our history. Still, I can't imagine she's getting Oberherr to enchant artifacts for her. Reginald was never good at artifact magic."

"Wish we'd managed to get some of what they'd stored in Schaumburg," Ed sighed.

"Well, that's the point of this new lead, actually," Jessamine said, brightening a bit. "We've actually seen Paladin traffic, and we know they're carrying stuff in and out. Could be our best lead yet for figuring out what they're doing with artifacts. Maybe even where they're getting them."

"Well," Clara said, "when do we leave?"



"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," Ed said around a mouth of food, "how it can be a museum of *Jurassic* technology."

"It's meant to be funny," Jessamine said, sopping up curry sauce with a piece of naan bread. They'd settled down to lunch at an Indian restaurant across the street from their target. "I mean, I think. It's supposedly pretty weird inside."

"Does it have a basement?" Clara asked.

"Of course."

"And is it even open?" Ed asked, peering through the window and through the near-continual stream of cars. "It looks closed."

"It's by appointment only. They probably don't have any today," Jessamine replied. Clara's mother was focused on her meal, but she kept stealing occasional glances across the street. "I didn't think there'd be a street fair today."

The street that ran alongside the museum and a neighboring yoga studio was crowded with tents and people. "Is that good or bad for us?" Clara asked.

Jessamine gave a slight shrug. "Good, I guess. If we need to blend in, it'll be a lot easier."

"How are we getting in?" Elsie asked. She'd come along as firepower. Quite literally, as all of her strongest spells involved flames and explosions.

"I've a solid lock picking spell," Reuben said. "It takes a ton of energy, but it'll do the job." Reuben, one of Jessamine's original team members, was skilled at delicate, complex magic, and had a firmer understanding of human science than any witch Clara had met.

"And I've got something to defeat the alarm system," Sandy said, spooning some curry onto a piece of bread. Sandy specialized in magical devices—the perfect member of the team to have along on a mission to find artifacts.

Trevor, the last member of their breaking-in-and-entering team, spooned up the last of his curry. "I'm hoping this is all a red herring, to be honest." His specialty was history and human architecture. If they found any artifacts—or "holy relics"—he'd be best-equipped to

identify them. Along with Clara, of course, who could actually see their magic.

"Red herring how?" Ed asked.

Trevor shrugged. "I still feel it's more likely they just spotted you two using the Border. Probably more than once. The idea that they'd have a so-called 'relic' specifically designed to spot Borders. . . it's a little off-plot for them, honestly."

"How so?" Jessamine asked.

"Well, look—the reason they present these things as relics is mainly because they are indeed quite old. I mean, that lodestar was from the seventeenth century or whatever."

"So how could they have an ancient artifact designed to find a type of Border that didn't exist until seven years ago," Clara concluded.

"Exactly."

"Could they be artificially aging them?" Ed asked.

"Sure," Trevor allowed. "But then that takes us back to the question of how they're creating new artifacts."

"Obviously a traitor," Jessamine growled, looking out the window again.

The word *traitor* floated around Clara's mind for some reason, but didn't seem to connect to anything. She shrugged and ate a final spoonful of curry.

"That's why this is still worth doing," Jessamine insisted. "Every artifact we destroy or take from them is one less tool they have to use against us. And it's *entirely* possible they're using an artifact to *destroy* the Border, once they find it. However they find it. And regardless, we may find some clues about where they're getting these things."

"Point," Trevor conceded. "After all, we know some kind of 'rot' is what ultimately drove the Fae out of Underhill more than a century ago. So it's plausible that the Paladins would have some kind of Border-poisoning relic, even if they found the Border just by watching carefully."

"What *were* the Borders, back then?" Clara asked.

"Fairy rings and standing stones, through the very early 1900s," Trevor said. "And until about the, what, 1950s, Jess? Wasn't that when Risewell came along?"

"Roughly," Jessamine said. "Before then we didn't actually have very many Borders. Witches didn't start going over there in huge numbers until the early Fifties."

"Really?" Ed said in surprise. "I'd thought it had been a lot longer."

"We weren't nearly as welcome when the Fae were still in charge," Trevor said. "And once they'd left, it took a really long time for someone to find a way back. *Those* Borders, the ones that ran from roughly the Twenties to the Fifties, were actually artifacts. Completely portable, apparently."

"You're joking," Clara said in astonishment. "I can't even imagine how that'd work."

"They didn't always," Trevor grinned. "That's why Risewell's were such a breakthrough. She modeled them on the original fairy rings, I believe."

They all fell silent as they thought about it, turning to watch their target through the window. *I modeled mine on the standing stones,* Clara realized. *So we're just kind of reinventing the same things.*

"How did you find this place, Jess?" Trevor asked.

"I didn't, actually. There's a witch family living near here—one of the stubborn ones, like us, that doesn't want to hole up in Underhill all the time. They'd seen a couple Paladins going in and out of the place, and got word to the team. We've had someone watching it for a couple of weeks now."

"They're always carrying things in and out," Sandy said. "Trevor, if they have another artifact hoard, this'll be it." The last hoard they'd known about had been in an office building in Schaumburg, Illinois, but they'd had to leave the building before they realized what it contained, given that their priority has been rescuing Clara's Dad. The Paladins had moved everything out immediately, of course.

"Possibly," Trevor allowed. "Maybe I'm just biased to East coast for artifact storage. Those old buildings, all stone and wood, are much better than the newer ones out here."

"That building doesn't look especially new," Elsie pointed out. Indeed, the museum was a ramshackle-looking structure.

"Probably stucco and plaster over wood," Reuben said. "This is a pretty old part of L.A."

"Finish up," Jessamine ordered, sopping up the last of her curry. "It's time to go."



Clara's muttered words echoed in the strange, dimly lit space. "This place is weird."

A thick curtain of dust motes danced in the single shaft of sunlight that speared through a high window. The air hung heavy, thick with the scent of old paper and something faintly sweet and cloying, like dried figs left too long in the sun.

The room itself was a riot of crammed curiosities. A massive mahogany cabinet, its surface dull and scratched, dominated the center. Its glass-paned doors offered glimpses of a chaotic world within: a glittering obsidian skull leered beside a collection of intricately carved jade figurines, their colors muted by time. On the wall opposite, a vast tapestry, faded and threadbare, depicted a scene you couldn't quite decipher—a sprawling jungle filled with creatures that seemed both familiar and alien.

Everywhere you looked, there were more oddities. A dusty telescope pointed towards the grime-coated ceiling, promising glimpses of unknown constellations. On a side table, a collection of glass jars, their labels faded to illegibility, held specimens suspended in a murky liquid – a gnarled, hairy root, a misshapen bird with iridescent feathers, a hand, perhaps,but the fingers too long and the bones impossibly delicate.

An unsettling silence pressed upon the group, broken only by the

occasional tick of a grandfather clock in the corner. The air, though still, felt charged with a strange energy, as if the room itself held its breath, waiting for you to disturb the secrets it held so close.

"But kind of elegant," Elsie chimed in, her voice light and airy. "In, granted, a weird way."

Jessamine's soft voice interjected, "It reminds me a bit of House on the Rock. Only darker and smaller, obviously. And yes, this should be the basement."

The museum's front doors had barely put up a fight against Reuben's powerful construct, clicking open obediently at his command. Sandy's own construct hummed with energy as it disabled the alarm system, allowing the group of witches to enter without detection. Carefully closing the door behind them, they stepped into an otherworldly realm.

"I was expecting dinosaurs," Clara complained quietly.

"You know, it's really more like the curiosity cabinets of the Edwardian era," Reuben remarked, gesturing towards the strange artifacts and oddities that adorned every surface. The air was heavy with mystery and dust as they ventured further into the depths of the basement stairway. “Goodness, it’s dark, though,” he added. “Watch your steps. *Maama.”* A soft, gentle light glowed to life down the narrow staircase.

“Magic check,” Jessamine said.

“You know,” Reuben muttered in mock-indignation, “I *do* have detection and revelation spells that—“

“I have eyes,” Clara quipped. “And nothing yet.”

“I mean, this is the *perfect* place to hide magic constructs. Holy relics. Whatever. They’d never stand out.” Elsie ran a finger along the wall as she stepped slowly down the stairs. “I dig the vibe. Moms would spend hours in this place. Do they serve tea?”

“According to the brochure,” Sandy said, “they in fact have a tea room, when they’re open.”

“I have to tell Moms.”

“They sticking with the Ordinary?” Clara asked.

Elsie sighed. “Yeah. They worry me. I mean, it’s a tiny village, last place anyone would look, and they mostly just putter in the garden all day. Most of the flowers won’t grow normally in Underhill, and they don’t want to leave them.”

“Don’t blame them,” Jessamine said firmly. “Nothing wrong with the Ordinary that getting rid of Paladins won’t fix. Now—oh. Clara?”

“Checking.” They’d stepped into a cramped, crowded basement that smelled strongly of mildew. Shelves lined the walls and were tightly packed into the center, and each was fully laden with boxes, chests, crates, baskets, and more. Almost everything was uniformly covered with a fine layer of gray dust.

“Jackpot,” Reuben said with glee, rubbing his hands together. “This has to be—“

“Entirely non-magical,” Clara pronounced.

“What?!” Reuben objected. “How?”

Clara shrugged. “Not a bit of magic in any of it. Barely even any ambient magic.”

“Which is why we brought crystals,” Ed said, his voice tense. They’d spent a laborious two days fully charging two crystals apiece with magic, ensuring they’d have access to power even if the Paladins tricked them into another iron cage. Two crystals apiece except for Clara, of course—she couldn’t use them directly. But Latoya and the triplets were on standby at a safe house in West Hollywood in case things went sideways, also in possession of several fully charged crystals.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Jessamine frowned. “We know they’ve been carrying stuff in and out. You didn’t see any signs of anything upstairs, right?”

“Nope,” Clara confirmed. “Nothing that even looked like a ward.”

“Is there any way someone could hide something from you?” Sandy asked.

Clara copied her mother’s frown. “Not easily. Shields, wards, even something meant to physically hide something—it’s still magic. I can usually still see it, if I look. And I’ve been looking.”

"Guys?" Ed called softly from a few aisles over. "Come look at this."

"I don't get it," Sandy said. "It's a manhole cover."

"Yes," Trevor said, excitement growing in his voice, "but it's *in a basement.* The only reason for it to be here would be if it was a French drain, and those are almost always along the perimeter." He looked around. "If you took all this clutter out, I bet you'd find this is nearly in the exact center of the building's footprint."

"So there's a sub-basement," Jessamine said.

"Seems likely," Trevor said.

"Clara?" Jessamine asked.

Clara stared at the manhole cover. "It isn't metal," she said slowly, and with some surprise. "There's not *much* ambient magic down here, but there's some, and it's not being drawn to this."

"So what is it?"

Clara shrugged. "Plastic of some kind, maybe? It doesn't look like painted wood. And. . ." she paused, squinting at the circular plate in the floor. "I think there's magic coming *out* of it."

"Jackpot," Jessamine said with satisfaction. "Everyone stand back." Everyone moved to one end of the aisle or the other. *"Gora zatoz!"* she ordered, sweeping her hand over the cover. It flew upwards, hovering in midair long enough for Jessamine to grab it, turn it on its edge, and lower it to the floor. "It's light. I think you're right, Clara. Plastic of some kind." She peered into the dark hole the plate had formerly covered. *"Verlicht de diepten!"* she commanded. A sphere of bright light sizzled into being and dropped into the hole. "Always go Dutch," Jessamine said smugly as the light spread out below them. "They know something about lighting deep, dark places."

"There's a ladder," Trevor observed as he stepped forward.

"Try not to touch it in case it's rigged," Jessamine instructed. She held one foot over the hole, said, *"Luma bezain leuna,"* and swung her other foot over the open space. She dropped quickly, but came to a gentle landing, barely flexing her knees as she touched down. She

scanned the space quickly, and then looked up. "Definitely jackpot. Everyone down."



"Wow," Ed said softly as he took stock. He was the last one down, and the other witches had spread out in a loose circle around their landing point.

The sub-basement was notably more modern-looking than they'd expected. It was perfectly round, with polished concrete walls that were completely lined with glass shelves. As they began moving, soft lights came on overhead, bathing the entire space in a cool, comfortable light that complemented Jessamine's glowing orb.

"It's rare to see a structure like this go so deep in this part of California," Trevor mused.

"Magic check, Clara," Jessamine said.

"It's *all* magical," Clara said in awe. "But. . . I think some of it's still ambient. So we shouldn't be trapped."

"I'm still gathering a bit," Sandy confirmed.

Everyone relaxed a little as they tested their own ability to absorb some of the ambient magic into themselves. Had this been a trap, the Paladins would have used substantially more iron and steel in its construction, blocking ambient magic and grounding nearly any escape spell they might use.

Elsie's eyes swept the ceiling. "No cameras I can see."

"Alright, let's see what we've found," Jessamine said. "Nobody touch *anything* without my say-so. Reuben, Sandy, you're up. Clara, help them out. Elsie, Ed, you guys are on watch.

"I'll go back up," Ed offered, preparing to cast a spell.

"No, stay down here," Jessamine countered. "I want us together. But do you know how to do a snitch?"

Elsie grinned. "That's more my speed," she said. She held out one hand, palm up, and said, *"Geh hinauf und erzähl mir, was du siehst und*

hörst!" A mote of dull red light sparkled to life in her palm, and she tossed it up through the overhead hole.

"You know the *German* one?" Ed asked, shaking his head. "Gross."

"It's less likely to burst into flames than the Finnish one," Elsie said defensively. Even two years past graduation, she still struggled not to inject too much of her decidedly flame-friendly magic into her spells, often resulting in explosive failures.

"Let's start here," Sandy said, striding to one of the shelves. This one held a worn and battered leather sword sheath, missing its sword but still—to Clara's eyes—covered in magic. "Clara, what can you tell us?"

Clara concentrated, bringing the magic into sharper focus. Then she frowned. "It's. . . really weird, actually."

"Weird how?" Sandy asked.

"The colors are all. . . muted. Dark. Like, dark red and almost a. . . what's the word. . . like dijon mustard. And the equations are. . . *smeared.*"

"Smeared?" Sandy asked with a frown.

"Usually they're sharp. Crisp. But these look like they've gotten. . . 'smeared' is the best word for it. Like if they'd been written in water-soluble ink and had a wet sponge wiped across it." She leaned in a bit closer. "Also, it *smells* funny. Like, acidic or something. Like rotten eggs."

"Sulfurous," Ed said from the middle of the room.

"Yeah, that. Also. . ." she paused, staring at the sheath.

"What?" Sandy asked.

"It *feels* gross," Clara concluded, taking a step back. "Creepy. Wrong, somehow." She frowned. "It actually reminds me of whatever was rotting my Border."

"Does it?" Jessamine asked quietly, putting an arm around her daughter. "I wonder if this is related to whatever they did, then."

Reuben had been bent over the object, examining it with a magnifying glass he'd produced from a pocket. He was as close as

possible to touching it without actually doing so. "You should see this."

"What?" Jessamine asked.

Reuben stood and handed her the magnifying glass. She bent over, and inhaled sharply when she realized what he'd seen.

"What is it?" Sandy asked.

"There's a maker's mark on it," Reuben said grimly.

"Why's that bad?" Clara asked.

"Because it says 'Tandy,'" he answered.

Clara's brow wrinkled. "So?"

"Tandy Leather was founded in 1919," Trevor said. "But that's impossible. The design of that sheath is 17th-century at the latest. Look, there's no metal tip at the end." He frowned and stepped closer to the artifact. *"Antiquitatem tuam revela."* Whatever the spell did was only visible to him, but his frown deepened. "This is *from* the mid-17th century," he insisted. "Like, it's definitely that old. 1650s, probably."

"Tandy Leather definitely didn't exist then?" Jessamine asked.

"Quite definitely," Trevor said, clearly confused.

She frowned. "Can we tell what it does?"

Sandy waved her hands a couple of times. "Roughly, it looks like it's designed to slice magic. Or at least, if you leave a blade in here long enough, that's what the blade will be able to do. Neat trick, rather than enchanting the sword itself. It'd need to be bronze, though."

"Very much out of favor by the early 1900s," Trevor said, still confused.

"Uncommon in the mid-1600s?" Reuben asked.

"No, they definitely had carbon steel by then."

"Huh."

"Let's move on," Jessamine said slowly.

"This seems more. . . relic-appropriate," Sandy said of the next object. It was a heavy-looking cross, clearly made of bronze, fairly crudely engraved with ornamental grooves and curves. It had been

polished, but not thoroughly: a gray-green patina could still be seen in the deeper grooves.

Sandy hefted the cross, the weight of it surprising despite its unassuming size. “It’s cold,” she said with surprise. “It’s like it’s actively leaching the warmth from my hand.”

“Let me,” Clara said, accepting the cross from Sandy.

It immediately sent a shiver down her spine. The cold wasn't the comforting chill of a frosty morning, but a deeper, more unsettling cold, like that emanating from a tomb.

Clara stared at it. The crude engravings, once meant to be ornamental, now resembled writhing, pulsating veins. The patina wasn't just age—it had a sickly, greenish tinge, like old, dried blood clinging to the metal. An oppressive silence seemed to emanate from the cross, suffocating the air around them. It wasn't a physical weight, but a psychic one, a sense of immense, ancient evil pressing down.

Despite its obvious power, there was a wrongness to the magic she felt. It wasn't the clean, invigorating power of ordinary magic, but that same twisted, corrupting force that threatened to stain her very soul if she held it for too long. A primal fear, a revulsion towards something unnatural, clawed at her insides. This wasn't just a magical artifact – it was a tangible piece of darkness. “I’m not sure we even want to know what this does.”

Trevor took the cross and repeated his dating spell. “Third century, roughly,” he said after a moment’s examination. “Early Christian church.”

Sandy was also waving her hands. She frowned. “That doesn’t fit.”

“How so?”

“Look at the metal composition.”

Trevor turned back to the object, waving his hands and muttering something Clara didn’t catch. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Sharing is caring,” Jessamine murmured.

“It’s an aluminum alloy,” Trevor said. “Very hard. This corrosion

shouldn't even be present. This is very much modern-day. Relatively, I mean. We're talking 1920s, probably."

"So another impossible artifact," Jessamine said.

"Something relatively new," Reuben said slowly, "made to look very old."

"Yes, but you can't just make it *look* old," Trevor insisted. "Not with the spell I'm using. It's like carbon dating. You can't just. . . *fool* it. The molecules in this thing have been around for close to two thousand years."

"Fascinating," Jessamine said. "Clara?"

"Gross, smeary magic," Clara said, wrapping her arms around herself. "Feels gross, smells gross. And I don't normally *smell* magic." *Although I did, for a minute,* she thought, recalling the spell she'd woven that vanished that house in Salem.

"Function, Sandy?" Jessamine asked.

Sandy examined it again. "Some kind of purification, I think. If it's activated it would wipe out any magic within a small radius."

"About a hundred feet," Clara said, forcing herself to stare at the thing and decipher its muddled, hazy equations.

"Clara, can you. . . nullify any of it?" Jessamine asked.

Clara considered it, examining the artifact carefully. "I think so. There's rebar all around us, but it's not tightly spaced. It won't stop me from working, but I should be able to ground the magic in it."

"Give it a try. Whichever one you want."

"Sure." Clara stayed focused on the cross. She let her sense of the world sink even further into the back of her mind, focusing on the dark, malicious-looking mathematical shapes that flowed in and around it. *That* bit kept it dormant until. . . *that* bit kicked in, which would trigger if you slammed the thing hard enough against a solid surface. And then *this* part would kick in, essentially pushing magic away from the cross. She frowned a bit. It wasn't grounding anything, just pushing—you'd knock out any spells, but all the magic would just pile up in a circle around it. *Hard to predict what it'd actually do,* she thought. *This bit.* . . "I think I found it," she said

slowly. "The part that keeps it bound to the actual object. It's. . . I think the aluminum is a big part of it, actually. It's connected differently than I've seen before."

"You can break it?"

Clara looked a moment longer. "Yeah. You might want to stand back." She herself took a couple of steps back, her gaze still focused on the magic. She reached out with her mind, struggling for a moment to grasp the slippery threads of power. "It's gross," she said, wrinkling her nose. "It's like grabbing an eel."

"You've never grabbed an eel," Elise pointed out from behind her.

"Hush," Clara said. "Here goes." With the hands of her mind on the right bit, she *twisted* a key sub-expression, disrupting the steady and even flow of power. The change cascaded quickly, individual numbers and symbols warping out of their intended shape.

Clara stumbled backwards into Ed as the cross erupted with a bright flash of light and heat, singeing the shelf it was sitting on. Clara kept watching as the magic whiplashed for a moment before it took the easiest path out: into the concrete wall, down through a piece of rebar, and into the earth.

"I'll take it that worked," Jessamine said wryly.

"Yeah," Clara said. "Sorry, Ed."

"No problem. So. . . are we going to do all of them?"

Jessamine considered, slowly turning. The room held at least a hundred artifacts. "No, I don't want to spend that much time here. Trevor, Reuben, Sandy—you three spread out. Examine them as best you can, and let's grab as many of them that look useful as we can."

"You don't want to try for them all?" Elsie asked.

Jessamine shook her head. "Some of them are big." She gestured to the largest object, a heavy-looking wooden chest banded by brass strapping. "And we might want to try and carry these out of here physically. No telling if any of them will react to translocation magic. We'll head to a safe house here in LA and study them a little more carefully."

"Sounds good, boss," Trevor said and he, Sandy, and Reuben spread out.

"Clara," Jessamine said more quietly, "You can check, too. But don't *do* anything with any of the others. If you get a sense for what one can do, tell Sandy. If you don't, that's fine. And. . . keep your distance."

"Fine, Mom," Clara said with a small nod. Just touching that artifact with her mind had felt. . . *violating.* Filthy. She was more than happy to keep her distance.



"Okay, we've got these eight," Sandy said after about twenty minutes of rapidly examining artifacts. "They seem the most complex, at least, and they show the most signs of being. . . not right, time-wise."

"Seven of us," Jessamine said, nodding, "so I'll take two, everyone else take one."

"We still going to try and just walk out?" Ed asked.

Jessamine considered. "You all *feel* like you could translocate?"

Everyone exchanged glances. "There's some resistance," Ed said as he examined the feel of the room, "but that's likely just the rebar. I don't think there's anything actively—"

A *clang* from overhead drew their attention.

"What," Jessamine said cooly, "is *that?*"

That was a circle embedded in the ceiling, surrounding the opening they'd come through. Clara had originally taken it to be the lip of the manhole itself, but now it was glowing a dull red. She switched her vision to magic-mode. "It's sealing the opening," she said after a moment. "It's regular magic, though, not the smeary stuff. I can probably—"

An uncomfortable sensation settled over the room. To Clara, it felt as if someone had stuffed her ears with cotton. Sounds seemed muffled, and even the air felt slightly heavy.

"I can't touch my magic," Elsie said at once.

"Crap," Jessamine muttered.

"A trap?" Reuben asked.

"Maybe. Maybe we just overstayed our welcome and it's an automatic thing," Jessamine said. "Clara?"

Clara's eyes, still in magic-mode, darted around the room. "It's like all the magic is *frozen.* It's all just. . . hanging there."

"Stasis spell," Trevor said at once. "That's actually pretty old magic. They used to use it for inter-coven meetings, before the Great Accords were signed. Kept anyone from using magic against each other."

"Any way to break it?" Sandy asked.

"Well, no, that's kind of the point," Trevor said with a frown. "I think we might have a better chance physically attacking whatever's blocking the manhole."

"That's still active," Clara noted, glancing upward.

"All right, so the stasis stops just short of the ceiling. How about the floor?"

Clara eyed the artifacts piled there. "They've all frozen, too."

"All right," Jessamine said with a confidence Clara hoped wasn't fake, "so we need to get a fingertip above the line, right up against the opening. This might be targeted at preventing physical egress. It might not stand up to a magic attack, especially if there's enough force."

"I'm your girl," Elsie said at once. "Also, I'm light."

"Trevor, you're tallest," Jessamine said.

He sighed and positioned himself under the opening.

"I'll help," Ed said, standing behind him. "Up you go," he grunted, boosting Elsie up so that she was sitting on Trevor's shoulders.

"Easy peasy," Elsie said, sticking a finger up. It stopped at whatever force was covering the opening, and Clara could see Elsie's fingertip flattening slightly as she pushed against it. "You know," she

observed casually, "for a bunch of people who want to kill all witches, they use a surprising amount of magic."

"Make sure to push everything into your fingertip," Jessamine said.

"Exactly the opposite of what Professor Dunesworthy kept telling me to do all junior year," Elsie noted. "Got it. *Whakanuia!"*

Clara rolled her eyes. Elsie's discovery of Maori magic had done nothing to reduce her fiery tendencies, although it *had* made her fire-based spells a lot more focused. She shied back a bit as Elsie's fingertip exploded into orange flame. The magic covering their exit held for a moment, the flame spreading out across it. But as Elsie focused, the flames grew hotter, glowing yellow and then nearly white. Before long, the barrier collapsed, sending a plume of magic fire upwards.

"Oops," Elsie said, sliding off Trevor's shoulders. A thin rainfall was coming through the opening. "I think I set off the sprinklers."

"Everyone out," Jessamine ordered, scooping up two of the artifacts. *"Lève-toi doucement!"* She rose through the opening, and everyone else scrambled to grab an artifact and follow her.

"DON'T MOVE!" a flat, electronically amplified voice ordered.

CHAPTER 3
ATTACK!

Reuben's hands trembled as he summoned the dark magic within him, his eyes flashing with power. Clara could see the swirling vortex forming around him, a translocation spell seemingly aimed at the entire group of seven—an enormous effort for the man. But before she had time to reach out and help, the spell shattered in a deafening explosion. Clara's ears rang painfully and she felt disoriented as the ambient magic around them slowed to a crawl. With clenched fists, she realized it was a stasis field, but unlike any she had encountered before. It didn't completely halt their movements, but instead made them sluggish and clumsy like puppets on strings.

Clara gritted her teeth and focused all her energy on breaking free from the stasis. The magic responded sluggishly, like molasses dripping down a cold wall. She strained against it, her mind feeling like it was being pulled apart by invisible hands. In a moment of desperation, she imagined Lucky Charms marshmallows scattered into thick pancake syrup and began mentally pulling at each sticky piece.

As if sensing her defiance, the fire sprinkler above them suddenly

burst to life with full force. Water gushed down onto them in a chaotic downpour, quickly saturating their hair and clothes. But amidst the chaos and struggle, Clara refused to give up.

A. . . *form* stepped to the end of the row of shelving they were huddled in. Clara blinked at it, even as she continued trying to wrest the local magic into something usable. It was disturbingly human-shaped, but also *wrong* somehow.

The room was flooded with blinding lights, revealing the silhouette of a human figure covered in thick, dark armor. The metal plates distorted their shape, making it impossible to discern any physical features. A bulky black helmet completely obscured their head and face, adorned with multiple sets of glinting lenses that reflected the harsh fluorescent lighting. As Clara's eyes adjusted, she could make out armored shoulder pads, a massive chest plate, thick sleeves and gloves, and heavy leggings tucked into imposing black boots. A squared-off backpack rested on the creature's back, its chunky antennas extending upwards like menacing spikes. But her fear reached new heights when her gaze landed on the monstrosity held in its hands; it wasn't a gun, but rather a nightmare given form. Gone were the sleek and streamlined shapes of a handgun; this weapon was an intimidating cube of metal radiating raw power that made her skin prickle. Sharp arcs of electricity crackled around its blocky muzzle, sending shivers down Clara's spine. Suddenly, she realized with a jolt that it must be a Taser; they were going to electrocute them. Her mind raced as she frantically tried to manipulate the local magic to protect herself from this terrifying threat.

A scuffling noise behind them made everyone turn their heads, where another black-armored person had moved into position. Additional scuffles told them there were additional people bracketing them in the aisles to either side.

"I'm guessing you're not LAPD," Jessamine called out cooly.

"Don't move and you won't be harmed," the flat, mechanical voice said again. It *seemed* to be coming from the first figure they'd seen, but the voice echoed strangely in the basement, and Clara couldn't

be certain. *"Hold your hands on top of your heads. You will be handcuffed."*

"This has to be another artifact," Ed whispered to Clara.

"Inside or outside the stasis field?" she whispered back, most of her mind still wrestling with the ambient magic.

"Could be either," he whispered. "But if I had to guess, inside. Radiuses are easier."

"Quiet!" the mechanical voice ordered. Oddly, none of their attackers had moved, obviously waiting to see what the witches would do.

Clara's eyes scanned the room wildly, but she couldn't see any concentrations of magic that looked like an artifact. But she nearly had an armload of magic in the exact shape she wanted. She realized that her Mom and Elsie were also surrounded by sluggish eddies of equations—they were pulling from the crystal magic batteries in their pockets.

"Stand with your faces to the shelves on my left," the voice ordered. The first figure, whom Clara was thinking was the leader and the one doing the talking, took a step toward them.

"Do it," Clara ordered. That earned a fierce glare from her Mom, but she raised her eyebrows and glared back. Mom's expression immediately relaxed—she understood that Clara had a move.

The witches quickly pressed themselves against the shelves, resting their hands atop their heads.

"Dit beteken nie eers iets nie!!" Clara shouted. She didn't need the words, but they might help distract their attackers.

A lance of blue-white magic shimmered into existence just behind Clara, at roughly the height of her chin—although it'd be chest-height on the two attackers she could see. Instantly, the lance stretched, expanding down the aisle and striking both attackers in their armored chests. They flew backwards, their arms and legs akimbo, slamming into the concrete block walls at either end of the aisle.

Clara didn't have time to process what had just happened before

another figure appeared in front of her, aiming a Taser directly at her face. Without thinking, she raised her hand and sent a blast of magic towards it. The figure stumbled backwards and fell to the ground.

The stuffy, smothering feeling that surrounded them flickered for a moment.

It was enough for Jessamine and Elsie to finish their spells, and they shouted the trigger phrases almost in the same breath.

"Een enorm gewicht van bovenaf!" Jessamine's spell felled the figure standing on the other side of the shelf they were facing, slamming him into the concrete floor.

"Patua ahi!" Elsie's was cast from her fingers, which she'd twisted to point behind them. A great gout of white-hot flame—*Because of course it is,* Clara's brain giggled—blasted *through* the shelf behind them, smashing into the figure standing there. The resultant crashing noises suggested he'd taken the next row of shelving down as well.

A *twick* sound was followed by a sharp, insistent clicking. "Reuben!" Sandy hollered as the rotund witch went down, the electrodes protruding from his chest still flickering with sparks. Another *twick* preceded Trevor's fall. The men had been at either end of their line. A wave of weariness threatened to overcome her as Clara began dragging magic into shape for another attack.

But Ed hadn't been idle. *"Tarian!"* he muttered, holding his hands, palms out, toward either end of the aisle. Shimmering walls of force sprang up, just as two more *twicks* echoed in the basement. Whatever projectiles they'd fired skittered across Ed's shields, tumbling to the floor with a metallic clatter. "I don't think it's a radius," he said, panting with the effort of controlling the syrupy magic. "I think it's an aisle!"

"What?" Jessamine snapped, turning to look at him.

But Clara understood. "It's that guy," she said, pointing at the one who'd been speaking. He'd levered himself into a sitting position, and was re-aiming his weapon. "It flickered when I hit him!"

A *thunk*—definitely from the man's gun—was followed by a

shower of green sparks from Ed's shield. Everyone ducked as something indefinably *heavy* sailed over their heads. *Bad aim,* Clara thought as the boxes on one shelf rattled. *He just hit—*

"That was iron," Ed said grimly.

Now Clara could see the sparking hole in his shield, and could see the equations moving *so slowly* as Ed tried to re-knit the magic. She turned to him, and saw his jaw locked, and the cords on his neck standing out. *"Tarian berffaith, wedi'i hatgyweirio a'i hadnewyddu,"* he muttered, his eyes locked on the damaged shield. Then his head whipped the other direction as another *thunk* accompanied a second iron bolt, blasting through the shield on the other side. "I can't hold these," he gritted out.

Clara's heart raced as she watched Ed struggling to maintain the shields against the relentless onslaught of the attackers. She knew they had to act fast before Ed's defenses crumbled completely. With a surge of determination, she quickly wrangled the battered local magic into a new form. A wave of energy burst forth from her fingertips, knocking the weapon out of the attacker's hand and sending him sprawling backwards—although he rolled like an expert and came up on his feet, his hands already reaching to his belt for a new weapon.

Meanwhile, Jessamine and Elsie worked in tandem, weaving intricate spells to incapacitate their foes. Jessamine raised a cloud of dust from the basement floor, braiding it into ropes that she used to bind one attacker, while Elsie conjured a swirling vortex of light to disorient another. The basement crackled with magical energy as each member of their group fought with all their might.

Sandy, never one to back down from a challenge, leaped into the fray with a battle cry on her lips. Her fists glowed with raw elemental power as she magically reinforced her body. She leapt toward her closest assailant, pummeling him in the chest. Trevor and Reuben, recovering from their injuries, joined forces with Sandy, who had fallen back and begun forming a wall of defense against the attackers. Their enemies, caught off guard by this sudden

display of coordination, hesitated for a moment before renewing their assault.

The clash of magic and iron reverberated through the basement, creating a cacophony of sound that seemed to shake the very foundations of the building. Clara felt a surge of pride as she watched her friends fight with courage and determination. Despite the odds stacked against them, they stood their ground, refusing to yield to the forces arrayed against them.

As the battle raged on, Clara could see that her friends' stored magic was beginning to run out. The shimmering walls of force they had erected were flickering and weakening, the stasis field beginning to overwhelm them. Ed and Sandy, who had been holding the shields, were panting with effort and starting to sag under the strain. Clara knew she had to act fast before their defenses collapsed completely.

With a deep breath, Clara focused all her energy on the stasis field surrounding them, looking for its equations in the shimmering, vibrating chaos of magic around her. She could still feel the oppressive weight of it bearing down on her, but she pushed through the discomfort. Drawing on every last ounce of her own reserves, she spotted it: a series of iridescent blue equations, looping through the basement. She began to unravel the threads of the math, unraveling it like a delicate tapestry.

There.

It all traced back to their first attacker.

She realized at once that she couldn't attack the artifact directly. Its cold, slippery magic resisted her attempt to pull it apart. She'd need to take it down some other way.

Another *thunk* echoed in the basement, and Reuben went down again.

Clara's mind raced with possibilities. She knew they needed a new strategy, something that would tip the scales in their favor. Her gaze hardened as she locked onto the first attacker, her mind already racing through spells and incantations. She could feel the

powerful magic coursing around her, begging to be unleashed. With a primal scream, Clara summoned it to her, her mental hands trembling with raw power as she shaped a new attack. This time, there was no need for fake spell words or clever incantations—Clara channeled all of her focus into one final equation, funneling it into a bright orange equal sign that crackled with energy. With one swift movement, she directed the full force of her power towards their attacker, determined to end this battle once and for all.

A bolt of pure magic, no larger than a thumb but radiating with a searing violet glow, shot out from her fingertips. It slipped through gaps in Ed's collapsing shield and flew towards their attacker with the speed of a bullet. The target was armed and ready to strike again, but the bolt reached him in less than an eye blink, striking him directly in the chest. The force of the impact caused him to stumble back, his gun falling from his grasp as he grasped at his chest in pain. The air crackled with energy as the magic tried to infuse itself into his body.

It didn't penetrate—that armor was likely laced with iron, and Clara hadn't expected to take it out, not with magic as constrained as it currently was. Instead, her attack splashed across his cheek, instantly forming a web of magic so hot, so violet, that it became nearly invisible even to her. She was vaguely aware of someone shouting, and the flat, harsh, mechanical tone of it made her realize it was the man she'd hit. Her magic wrapped around him, extending down his arms and sparking down his legs. It threaded itself through his backpack, which was conveniently unarmored—

—and quite obviously where whatever artifact had powered the stasis field was located. Within a second eye blink, Clara's magic found something and shattered it.

Much of the smothering sensation vanished instantly, and magic whirled back to its normal speed. Clara began gathering more of it, her mind weeping with pain and effort, shaping it into—

"Translocation is still suppressed, somehow," Sandy muttered,

holding her hands in front of her as if she could physically draw her power into the right shape.

Clara realized she was right, as her own attempt to translocate them out refused to snap into place. She switched tactics, quickly firing red-orange bolts of magic at the two attackers she could see, even as Elsie unleashed a dragon's breath spell at the attacker behind them, slamming him back against the far wall.

The one Jessamine had knocked down was up again, and he attacked with the simplest option at his disposal: shoving the shelving over on them.

"Struik en steun!" Jessamine grunted, ducking a bit before her magic took hold and pushed the shelving back upright. It rattled loudly in protest, and several items crashed to the floor on either side.

Clara quickly crafted a Sending, firing it off to Latoya and the triplets.

The man who'd been carrying the stasis field artifact had managed to rise to his knees, shaking his head groggily, but still pointing his weapon in their general direction.

"We need these shelves out of the way," Jessamine growled.

"You should have said so," Elsie said with a mad grin.

"Elsie, don't—" Ed started.

"Shōkyaku suru!" she shouted, swinging her arms out.

Clara's eyes squeezed shut as she collapsed onto the floor, curling into a tight ball to shield herself from the hellish inferno consuming the basement. Elsie's magic blazed through the air, a searing wave of heat that turned everything in its path to ash. Clara's skin prickled and blistered from the intense heat, her screams drowned out by the roaring flames.

"Sffêr gwrthdan!" Ed shouted, instantly encasing them all in a cooler sphere—and conveniently blocking the sullen shower from the overhead sprinkler.

Elsie's inferno vanished as quickly as it had formed, and Clara blinked as her vision returned to normal.

Everything was *gone.*

Not their attackers—Clara quickly picked out the four figures, their armor charred but seemingly intact, although they'd been smashed against the far walls. But every bookcase, every shelf, every item *on* those shelves, was *gone.* Even the sprinkler heads had melted into slag, their black supply pipes blistered and streaked.

Ed's spherical blue shield wavered and vanished. "Hell, Elsie—" he started to pant.

"Brutal, but it'll do," Jessamine announced calmly. She flung a hand at each of their four attackers in turn. *"Ärge liigutage tolli,"* she intoned as she pointed at each one, launching a green-purple spell at each of them. In a moment, all four were covered in a complex weave that anchored itself to the walls and floor, sparking yellow as it thrummed across their iron-laced armor plates. "Up the stairs," she ordered.

In a sudden burst of power, Clara felt the overwhelming surge of magic hammer into the basement. A snapping sensation pulsed through her body as whatever had been restricting their abilities was overwhelmed and broken. The triplets materialized in a dazzling display of cold-white sparks, forming a perfect triangle with Latoya at the center. Her hands glowed with an intense, pulsing magic as she spun on her heel, taking in the room in a matter of seconds. Every inch of her body radiated with power and determination.

"We're fine," Jessamine said quickly. "Trevor and Reuben are hurt, but I think they're okay. Get us out of here."

«On it,» the triplets said in their three-in-one echo. No sooner had they spoken than a whirlwind of nearly pure magic swept them all up and away.

CHAPTER 4
DEBRIEFING

"Well, that sucked," Clara said in a dour tone. She set her artifact—a rotting leather bag full of iron nails—on the workshop table and turned to head upstairs.

The triplets had taken them directly to the row home in Philadelphia, although they'd appeared basically in the middle of the narrow street out front. **«Sorry,»** the triplets had said as soon as they'd arrived. **«We weren't sure if we could fit everyone inside.»**

"It's fine," Jessamine had said, wearily climbing the short flight of steps to the front door. "Half the people on this block know me, anyway."

With the adrenaline from their encounter rapidly draining from their systems, the team was *tired.* They'd trooped into the basement, laid out their artifacts with varying degrees of gentleness. Elsie had all but tossed hers—a long woven belt with what looked to be a bone buckle—before Ed had caught it and laid it down more carefully. "Relics" deposited, they'd left them with Alex, Finlay, and Wolfgang, and headed upstairs.

Jessamine and Sandy had handed their artifacts to Ed, and stayed upstairs to tend to Trevor and Reuben. The triplets had

floated the latter two into the living room, settling them gently to the plushly carpeted floor. Trevor was already reviving, shaking his head as Sandy helped him up and into an easy chair. But Reuben was still unconscious.

"I'm only so-so at healing magic," Sandy said nervously as Jessamine cast a few minor spells over the man.

"You can't possibly be worse than me, and since I'm getting nothing. . ." Jessamine said with concern. "I can feel his pulse, and he's breathing, but I don't know what's wrong with him. Those things are supposed to be non-lethal."

"That's the police version," Ed sighed as he crouched next to Reuben and double-checked the man's pulse. "It's not as steady as it should be."

Clara shifted her vision, blinking away a few tears as a gentle stab of pain accompanied the transition. *Need to rest that a bit, I guess,* she thought wearily as she looked at Reuben. "Get the crystal out of his pocket," she said at once.

"What?" Jessamine said, hurriedly digging it out. "What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know," Clara frowned. "It was messing with his normal flow, though. It's like he was charging it, but he needs his magic for himself, right now."

"His pulse is steadying," Ed said, two fingers still pressed gently to Reuben's neck.

"Should we," Harriett began.

"boost him," Idalia continued.

"a bit?" Johanna finished.

Clara rolled her eyes. The post-conjunction triplets were annoying for several minutes, as their brains shifted back to having individual identities. "No, leave him a minute. His magic's already looking more normal."

Everyone waited anxiously for several minutes until Reuben coughed and sputtered. Sandy and Jessamine quickly helped him sit

up, and he blinked several times. "What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

"You got zapped," Jessamine said, sitting back with relief. "Some kind of electric shock probe or something. And your crystal was drawing your magic in."

"Ah," he said, taking a few deep breaths. "I feel okay now."

"Good." Jessamine heaved herself off the floor and dropped into her sofa. Sandy joined her. "Who's for pizza?"



The pizza was ordered, a box was taken downstairs where Alex, Finlay, and Wolfgang continued to work, and the rest was devoured upstairs. Clara and Ed helped pack away the trash while Jessamine resumed her place on the sofa. "So, post-mortem. What did we learn?"

"The Paladins have a much better-equipped kind of team than we've seen before," Trevor said wryly. "I mean, I've never even heard of guys in armor like that."

"Let alone those guns," Ed agreed. "They were firing iron bolts along with those shock things. Blew right past my shield, and we're lucky none of us was hit by one."

"They didn't have a lot of force," Clara said. "I think they were *just* to take out your shield."

"Humph."

"I'm way more concerned about the number of magical artifacts they're using," Reuben sighed. "Stasis fields are complex, incredibly fragile spells in the first place—binding one to an object is fiendishly difficult. You can't possibly imagine that they've found *actual* holy relics with that kind of magic still functional."

"No," Trevor agreed. "As far as I know, stasis spells didn't even exist until the mid-1900s."

"Translocation magic exclusion is older," Reuben mused.

"This wasn't an exclusion spell," Clara insisted. "I know what

those look like—they used them at school all the time. This was. . . *really* different. All the ambient magic was moving super, super slowly."

"Yet you were still able to use it," Sandy pointed out.

"It was *hard,"* Clara admitted. "But yeah."

"We could all *feel* our magic," Ed said. "But it's what Clara said—it just felt. . . sluggish."

Reuben frowned. "Which isn't *precisely* what a stasis spell is supposed to do. It should *stop* magic entirely, hold everything in abeyance for as long as it's active."

"So possibly they had something new," Jessamine said.

"Or imperfect," Trevor said.

Jessamine looked even more upset, her frown deepening. "So we have Paladin teams that are better equipped, and equipped more specifically to deal with witches."

"I don't think—" Reuben objected.

"Multi-function guns that fire tasers and iron spikes," Jessamine interrupted.

"And he was trying to switch it to another mode," Clara pointed out.

"Fine," Reuben conceded. "They were pretty specifically equipped to deal with us."

"Including iron-laced armor, suits that gave them substantial protection against fire, and at least one artifact capable of something very like a stasis field," Jessamine recapped. "On top of that, we're seeing more Paladin activity, especially in North America, than we've *ever* seen. And I mean by an exponential amount."

"They've been staking Anchors whenever they can find them," Ed added.

"And that's been happening in a half-dozen major cities," Sandy pointed out. "Which means they've either got multiple artifacts to help them triangulate, or they're moving a smaller number of artifacts around a *lot."*

"And sadly," Trevor said, "witches have noticed. Did you see the latest numbers?"

"No," Jessamine sighed. "How bad is it?"

"They're estimating something like seventy percent of all witches have permanently relocated to Underhill and abandoned their Ordinary holdings."

Clara's eyes widened. "Where are they even keeping all those people?"

Trevor shrugged. "Your Borders have stabilized Underhill's geography more than you might realize. There are dozens of little villages sprouting up everywhere. Underhill's a proper continent now, surrounded by an actual ocean. There are even a few islands off the coasts."

Clara took a moment to absorb that. "I had no idea."

Ed snorted. "We've been spending almost all our time here, hunting Paladins. No way you *could* have noticed."

"Whoever replaced Deuxm means business," Sandy said.

"Or it's still Deuxm," Jessamine corrected. "Just because we haven't run across her doesn't mean she's gone." She paused, and gave her daughter a long look. "Clara, I know we've spoken about this before, but. . . can you tell us *anything* more about the spell you cast in Salem?"

Clara took a deep breath. "I've told you, it wasn't a spell, really. It was just. . . magic. I mean, I put it into a form, so yeah, I guess that's technically a spell, but it's not something I think i could replicate. And I wasn't aiming for anything specific. It was. . . I'd meant it to be a version of the forgetting spell." She looked around the room and saw eyes widen. She'd never mentioned that detail before.

"Are you saying," Latoya said carefully, "that you. . . *forgot* that entire house? Deuxm, Oberherr, the staff, all of it?"

"Maybe?" Clara ventured in a small voice. "There's. . . something more."

"More?" Jessamine said, arching an eyebrow.

Clara flushed a little. "Every time I've used a version of that

magic, there's this. . . feeling. I get this sense that something is watching. That it approved, somehow."

"Something," Jessamine said. "Something. . . sentient?"

Clara flushed even more. "It sounds stupid, I know, but—"

"It actually doesn't," Johanna interrupted. Everyone turned to look at her. "The Fae had always believed magic itself had a larger sentience. We know from Clara's visions in Underhill that Underhill itself has a kind of sentience. Given how Clara manipulates magic, it's not unreasonable to think magic is *aware* of her."

"Baby," Jessamine said slowly, looking at her daughter, "does it *speak* to you?"

Clara tried to squirm deeper into her chair. "Yes?" she said in a very tiny voice.

Around the room, eyes grew wider.

"Baby, what does it say?"

Clara sighed. "It says 'Veil.'"

"Everyone!" Alex called from the basement. "Come down here!"



"What've you got, hon?" Jessamine asked her husband as they all crowded around the work table. The table ran nearly the entire length of the long basement, and took about a third the square footage. Narrow aisles ran on either side of the table, and shelves packed with boxes, books, and objects lined the walls.

"Well, I'd actually like Clara to look at these first. When she's not in, you know, such a rush," Alex said, patting his daughter on the back.

"Here goes," Clara said, letting her vision slip into magic-mode. Her upper lip immediately curled in disgust. "Gross."

"What is it?" Reuben asked. "And by the way, I would give a lot to be able to see magic the way you do, if you ever think up a way."

Clara's tone held a deep revulsion as she spoke. "You wouldn't want to, in this case," she said, her disgust evident. "It's like...

normal magic - the kind you all use, or even the ambient magic in the air - it looks like equations to me, right? They're all glow-y and in different colors. But they're bright colors, mostly. Like an electric rainbow or neon lights."

"Okay," Ed said encouragingly.

"This magic," Clara continued, gesturing to the objects spread across the table, "doesn't look like that at all. It's like what I told you before - it looks smeared. The equations, the numbers and symbols, they're all marred. And the colors are dull, muted. Reds, browns, and grays dominate. And they feel gross, almost slimy. Even the way they move - it's not like magic at all. It's more like... sliding. It's revolting." She looked up at them with a troubled expression. "So what is it?"

"We have a theory," Alex said nodding to Finlay and Wolfgang.

"Fealltóir Fola," Wolfgang said.

Clara furrowed her brow, tapping her temple as she frantically searched her memory. She knew she had heard those words before, but couldn't quite place them. Her heart raced and her palms began to sweat as she struggled to remember.

"Blood traitor," Ed said with a frown.

That's it, Clara thought.

"But I mean," Ed continued, "we *know* the Paladins have had a witch helping them, right? That's not—what?"

Alex was shaking his head. *"Fealltóir Fola* doesn't just mean 'blood traitor.' Originally, it referred to—"

"You're talking about Blood Magic," Jessamine interrupted sharply.

He nodded. "We *know* they've used it in the past, hon." When Clara was still a baby, her parents had been forced to give her to two close human friends, who eventually adopted her. Jessamine and Alex had been. . . *taken.* "We know that's what they sent after you and me. A *qonli hayvon.*"

"A blood beast. You mentioned that before," Ed recalled.

"Which can only be summoned by Blood Magic," Finlay said.

"But we just assumed Oberherr—" Jessamine started.

"He couldn't have, Mom," Clara said. "He went back to Underhill. You told me that once a witch was stained with Blood Magic, Underhill wouldn't let them in."

Jessamine blinked a few times. "You're right. Then they must have another—"

"Well, that's where it gets interesting," Alex said. "Wolfgang, go ahead."

Finlay's boyfriend cleared his throat. "Blood Witches don't *have* to be witches."

Trevor frowned. "That's nonsensical. You have to start as a witch before—"

"Nope," Finlay said. "Show him, Wolf."

Wolfgang plucked a book from the shelf behind him, flipped it open, and slid it across the table. Trevor took it and read a few lines, his frown deepening. He closed the book and read the title on the cover. *"Operatio virtutis."* I've never heard of this one.

"A Working of Power," Wolfgang said, sliding the book back. "It's a manual for *humans* who want to become Blood Witches."

A heavy silence fell over the basement.

"That's not good," Jessamine said at last.

"No," Alex agreed. "But it makes the most sense for what we're seeing, and what Clara is describing. It *isn't* ordinary magic. And a human Blood Witch can't cast spells the way we do—they can't access magic on the fly. They *have* to create artifacts and imbue them with magic. And, because they do so with blood, that magic can be *very* durable. And it can be renewed, simply by supplying more blood."

"Although they can have a *lot* of artifacts on them at any given time," Jessamine said ruefully. "Found that out the hard way."

"Abomination," Reuben muttered.

"So that's what all of these are?" Jessamine asked, nodding at the table.

"Yes," Alex confirmed. "But. . . well, Trevor, we're seeing exactly the same thing you saw back in LA."

"Meaning?" Trevor asked. "Wait, you mean the ages?"

Alex nodded. "The ages, yes. Finlay, you did this bit."

"Every one of these *dates* as at least two centuries old, and most of them *date* as even older. This one," he said, tapping what looked like a human finger bone, "is at least seventeen *centuries* old. When you date it."

"If we were Catholic, it'd be a first-class relic. The finger bone of a saint, basically," Alex said.

"But they're not that old, are they?" Jessamine said.

"Not even close," Finlay confirmed. "The finger bone still has traces of marrow in it. If it was really that old, that would all be gone."

"Most of these show marks of modern tooling or construction," Wolfgang added. "They're years old, at best. Not even a decade, probably."

"How is that possible?" Jessamine. "Time travel isn't a thing."

A cold, hard feeling grabbed at Clara's heart. "That's not entirely true."



They'd all returned to the living room, which wasn't any less crowded but felt less dour than the basement had become.

"Not everyone's heard the story, baby," Alex told Clara. "Why don't you take it from the top?"

She took a deep breath. "Right. Okay, so, I had just turned fourteen. We'd just started the next semester of school. I'd spent most of break going back and forth between Ordinary school and Underhill, putting up the new Borders. And I had a dream—one of the ones with the elf." There were a few blank stares. "It's like an avatar of Underhill itself. It talks to me in dreams. Visions, sometimes." The stares had gone from blank to disbelief. "I know, I know. Just trust me. Anyway, it told me I only needed to raise one more Border. And it showed me where—the big forest."

"It's the one in what we're now calling the Northwest," Alex said.

"Sure. Anyway, it warned me not to spend too long there. When I went. . . there was a woman. An old Black woman, like a grandmother. She. . ." Clara paused, trying to gather her memories. Even *thinking* about it was difficult, for some reason. "I think she made me tea. She asked me a lot of questions. But she said she'd answer both of *my* questions. Except I hadn't even asked any questions."

"What were they?" Jessamine prompted, having heard the story before.

"The first was where to put the final Border, and the second was where to find my friend. Elsie," Clara said, nodding at the other girl. "But then. . . I don't actually remember raising the Border. I kind of. . . came out of it, I guess, in the middle of a meal in the dining hall at school. Only it was near the end of senior year." Eyes widened around the room. "I *lived* all those years, but I still can't *remember* them. Even now, sometimes, facts will just pop into my head at need, because it's something I learned then, only I can't remember learning it."

"So the old woman. . ." Sandy said.

"She said her name was Aunt Ikwity." Clara was careful to pronounce *aunt* as *ant.*

Trevor snorted. "Aunt Ikwity. Antiquity. Cute."

Ed cleared his throat. "We think she was a Great Power."

"An incarnation of time, you mean," Reuben said.

"Yeah. The Fae were always messing with time in Underhill, right? Humans have stories about it. You go into Underhill and spend years, only to come out the day after you left. Or the opposite, you go in for a day and come back to find everyone you know has aged two decades." He shrugged. "So it's not surprising time itself developed a kind of sentience. Like Underhill did."

"And so," Jessamine said slowly, working it through in her head, "are we theorizing that the Paladins are having a human Blood Witch create artifacts for them, and then for some reason *the incar-*

nation of time itself is depositing those artifacts in the past, so that they can be found and treated as holy relics? Do I have all that?"

Alex grimaced. "It fits."

"So then," Jessamine continued, staring at her husband, "we must also be theorizing that *time itself* wants the Paladins to win?"

Everyone exchanged silent glances.

"I'm not sure that's something to tackle right this minute," Alex cautioned.

"You don't think the idea that *time itself* is against us is something we should. . . tackle," Jessamine said flatly.

Alex spread his hands. "It's a little beyond anything we can do anything about, is all. Meantime, I do think. . . look, we have a good idea of what some of those artifacts downstairs can actually do."

"Do I want to know?" Jessamine asked.

"I doubt it," Alex said wryly, "but I think you *should."*

"I'd certainly like to," Sandy put in.

Alex took a deep breath. "Got it. Eight artifacts. Wolfgang, why don't you start with the finger bone?"

"It's the simplest one," he said. "It shoots energy. If you keep bleeding on it, it'll keep firing. Our best guess is that it'll break down wards, shields, nearly any kind of magical construct."

"At least they only have one," Ed said darkly.

"Number two is the bag of nails," Wolfgang continued. "We're pretty sure these are what they used to take down the Border in Las Vegas. Or something like them."

"Whatever did that absolutely felt like that Blood Magic looks," Clara agreed. "Rotten and sick."

"From what Sandy told us about the sword sheath you saw, we think this works similarly," Wolfgang continued. "The nails that go in are just plain iron, but the bag enchants them."

"So Blood Magic works fine with iron?" Ed asked.

Wolfgang nodded. "Seems to, yes."

"Delightful."

Finlay spoke up. "Number three is the woven belt. The buckle is

made to look like bone, but it's actually plastic, which is a pretty dead giveaway that it isn't the almost four hundred years it dates as. It's a shield spell—and a strong one. Again, if you dribble a little blood onto it, it'll recharge itself."

"Four is the bronze bracelet. Definitely modern manufacture, despite dating back to the 1600s," Wolfgang continued. "Also a shield spell, although smaller area—basically an invisible arm shield. But it also reinforces the wearer's skin and skeleton, so it'd make you a bit stronger and definitely able to take some damage."

"Five is the iron circlet," Alex said. "That one's especially egregious in terms of the time mismatch—it's very modern cast iron, and it's worked to make it look like a crown of thorns. Very symbolic. But it dates back to the fifth or sixth century, the oldest-seeming one we've got. And if someone's wearing it, it'll nullify nearly any magic within a small radius of them."

"Please don't tell me it's powered by the blood that comes out of your scalp when you wear it," Sandy said, wrinkling her nose.

"Fine, I won't tell you," Alex said calmly. "Six is a bag—"

"Wait, that's how it works?" Sandy exclaimed.

"Six," Alex continued, "is a leather bag of dirt." He hefted it, and Clara recoiled. It smelled of. . . *death.* Of regret. She took a step back as he continued. "This one was tricky to figure out. It's the reverse of the other one. The bag itself is really a shield against the spell that's set into the dirt itself. We'll put this one in the iron locker, by the way, and I'd suggest nobody go near it. From what we can tell, the merest touch of that dirt on the skin of a witch—anyone with internal magic—will instantly corrupt that magic. Best case, you'll be weak and extremely sick. Worst case, with enough of it on you, you'll die."

"Wow," Harriett breathed.

"Wow," Alex agreed.

"That leaves us with the thurible," Wolfgang said. "It's—"

"Can you say that again?" Idalia piped up.

"Thurible," Wolfgang repeated, enunciating carefully. "It's a

metal censer. A globe, basically. In churches, they burn incense in it and kind of wave it around to spread the smoke. Which is what this one does, only it enchants the smoke on the way out."

"Sickness or death?" Jessamine asked grimly.

"Probably a bit of both, and it probably depends how much blood the incense was soaked in," Wolfgang said.

"Disgusting," Clara muttered.

"So in short," Jessamine said, "the Paladins are going to start equipping a lot of ordinary people to be warriors of god or something. Using Blood Magic artifacts disguised as holy relics."

"That about sums it up," Alex agreed.

"We give up," Reuben said flatly.

"What?" Jessamine asked.

"Jess, we *give up,*" he repeated. Clara couldn't tell if he was depressed, exasperated, or some combination of the two. "They're *equipping* themselves. This goes beyond iron spikes in an Anchor! They're *designing weapons* to counter us, and disguising them as holy relics so they can engage the general human populace against us! We can't possibly fight this! We're. . . this could be our *extinction!"* His eyes flew from face to face as the atmosphere in the room grew even more sober. "You're all thinking it," he said more quietly.

Alex sighed. "You're not wrong."

"But if we can't access the Ordinary," Jessamine said in a slow, deliberate tone, "then we *will* go extinct. Everyone know that. We can't *conceive children* in Underhill."

"The magic is fresher here, too," Harriett added.

"That's because *humans* are here," Clara said. Everyone looked at her. "Oh, come on. I know it, Ed knows it, we all know it. Magic comes from humans. That's why it feels fresher here. It leaks through to Underhill, mainly through the Borders. That's why Underhill was dying when Risewell's Borders were falling—not enough magic was leaking through anymore."

Jessamine tilted her head at her daughter. "So what are you saying?"

"Take humans to Underhill," Clara shrugged. "Mom and Dad—other Mom and Dad, I mean—would probably go. You have neighbors here who know about you, they'd probably go. Magic comes from humans. Take humans to Underhill. Underhill has fresh magic. Simple."

Jessamine considered it. "And would that solve the baby problem?"

Clara hesitated. "I don't know. Isn't it. . . didn't Professor. . . ugh, I can't remember. It's right there in my head, but I can't. . ."

"Professor Selenius," Harriett said quietly. "She said the reason witches can't conceive in Underhill is because the Fae exhausted its Creativity. Capital 'C.' She said its why all the really groundbreaking spells are developed in the Ordinary. Underhill doesn't have enough Creativity for big new ideas."

"Everyone called her crazy, though," Idalia said uncertainly.

"Dad called her crazy," Johanna corrected. "Mom said she made good sense."

"So. . ." Clara started slowly. "You guys said time became. . . sentient, or whatever, because the Fae messed with it so much. And Underhill is *definitely* sentient. No, not right now," she said quickly as Reuben opened his mouth with a question. "Just trust me, it's sentient. Very, very sentient. And blue, with pointed ears. But," she hurried on, as Reuben made another attempt to interrupt, "does that mean *Creativity* could also be sentient?"

Reuben's jaw shut with an audible *click*.

"I mean, if the Fae *abused* Creativity," Clara continued as everyone stared at her, "wouldn't it make sense that it. . . just left?"

"What do we really know," Jessamine said softly, "about these Great Powers? Looking at you, history boy," she said to Trevor.

He thought about it for a moment before speaking. "Not much, actually. We have *lore* that tells us certain aspects of nature can become sentient, and the lore usually involves them being constantly manipulated with magic. That they can incorporate and

interact with us as people. But. . . honestly, that's about it. And they're *stories."*

"In the case of Aunt Ikwity," Clara said firmly, "the stories are true. And Underhill, for that matter."

"Then the idea of Creativity being. . . sentient, and even corporeal, is. . . possible."

"So witches *can* retreat to Underhill," Finlay said quietly. "We just need to bring enough humans to supply us with magic."

"Actually, the Borders are still up," Clara pointed out. "If we stop using them, I'm betting the Paladins will stop looking for them. They wouldn't have any reason to, and they can't actually know how *many* I created. I could probably even make more, try to convince them to go to more out-of-the-way places."

"Convince them?" Sandy asked.

Clara nodded. "They kind of. . . go where they want. Like, they find their own fit. And they prefer places with a lot of people."

"More people, more magic," Idalia said.

"Yeah, probably."

"So bringing humans over would *freshen* the magic of Underhill, and act as a backup plan for the Borders being taken down, but we could probably survive with less than the entire population of Earth," Wolfgang said. "Which just leaves us with the. . . baby problem," he continued, nodding to Jessamine. "Which means we need to find Creativity and convince it to come back to Underhill."

"This is crazy," Jessamine snorted. "We can't just give up—"

"We may have to, Jess," Alex said gently. "Let's not forget that not only are the Paladins gearing up for an all-out holy war against us, but they seem to *have* one of those Great Powers on their side. This might not be a battle we can win. And certainly, most other witches don't seem to want to fight it."

Jessamine glowered at her husband. "I'm not subjecting myself to Aaron Witcher's Anchor network, just because—"

"That is *definitely* a fight for another day," Reuben countered. "Besides, if we can find Creativity, you'll have dealt him a severe

blow—he's making most of his money taking people to safe 'honeymoon retreats' he's set up in the Ordinary."

Jessamine's expression didn't lighten. "You are literally talking about finding a personification of a thing we don't even know is a thing, and don't even know if it's been personified, and that's your Plan *A?*"

"Honestly, my main question is whether or not we have time to do it," Reuben said heavily.

Time. "I think," Clara said slowly, giving Ed a haunted look, "I need to speak with Aunt Ikwity again."

CHAPTER 5
COUNCIL HEARING

"I'm just not comfortable with it," Jessamine groused.

She, Alex, Clara, Ed, Wolfgang, and Finlay had translocated to Chicago, and gone through its Border to the burgeoning Underhill town of Meadowside. Jessamine and Alex had constructed a house there, one of many that had been raised since more and more witches began relocating permanently to Underhill. The upside, she'd said in selecting the location, was that it *was* very close to a Border—meaning she didn't have to use the Witcher family's Anchor network in Underhill.

"Mom, *I'm* not comfortable with it," Clara assured her. "But we *have* to go. It's the only way we're going to get any answers. Maybe if I can convince her, we can still have a shot at keeping the Ordinary open."

They were standing in the house's front room, and Ed was staring out the window. "There might not be much demand for the Ordinary," he said glumly. "I can't believe how built-up this place has gotten just in the past few months."

Clara joined him and sighed. When her parents had raised this house—essentially creating it out of thin air, using magic—it had

been one of a half-dozen on a short, packed-earth road. Now, the road had been lengthened, cobbled, and tightly spaced houses had popped up to occupy nearly every inch of roadside. Everyone had adopted a vaguely Tudor style for their homes, making the growing village look for all the world like an Ordinary medieval town.

"It looks like Disney's Ye Olde Village," Jessamine said, joining them at the window. "Did you know someone's set up a well at the next intersection? It magics water up, as if we couldn't do that on our own," she groused.

"People want Underhill to still feel magical," Alex said mildly from the sofa. "To them, that's what this feels like. A little otherworldly, but still comfortable."

"It's like they're actors," Jessamine muttered. She turned to Clara. "I'm coming with you," she announced.

Clara rolled her eyes and plopped into the sofa next to her father. "You're not, Mom. I already told you, Ed's coming with me, but she doesn't like witches. I'm not going to antagonize—"

"She picked an odd place to live if she doesn't like witches!" Jessamine snapped, her eyes flashing. "And *she's* the one helping the Paladins force us here! How can she possibly—"

"That's what I want to find out!" Clara snarled back, leaping from the sofa to stand nose-to-nose with her mother. "And we're not going to if we go in—"

"You are *too young* to handle something like this on your—"

"*I'm the one who went last time!* And I'm twenty, almost twenty-one, and you—"

"I am *still* your mother, and you'll—"

"You have no idea what—"

"Enough!" Alex barked, rising slowly from the sofa. Both women turned to glare at him. "Enough," he repeated more gently. "Shouting at each other isn't going to solve anything. "Jess, I hate this just as much as you do. Maybe more, especially knowing what happened to Clara last time. But I trust her. She's taking Ed. They're more than old enough to make these decisions for themselves."

Clara's expression softened and she hugged her father.

Jessamine was still glowering, but she crossed her arms and looked away. "Fine." She exhaled heavily. "Fine," she said in a quieter tone. "I don't like it, but—" She was interrupted by a distant, ringing bell. "Who could that be?" she said with a frown, walking to the front door.

"Jessamine Holdaway?" The man at the door was short, lean, and flushed. "Alex Holdaway, Edward Langsdale, Clara. . . Thorn?" He was wearing some kind of uniform, a neat, gray, band-collared tunic, black trousers, and gleaming black boots.

"Who's asking?" Jessamine said cooly.

"You are all summoned to the Ard-Chomhairle in Toujours Plus to testify on the Border crisis," the man said as if reading a royal proclamation.

"They *what?"* Jessamine said with a scowl.

"It's what they're calling themselves," Alex sighed behind her. "The Grand Council. They must have heard we'd come back."

"Where in Hades is Toujours Plus?" Ed asked.

"It's what they're calling the new capital," Alex said, shaking his head. "Ever More."

"Oh, for pity's sake," Jessamine said, rolling her eyes. "Are you serious?" she asked the man.

He nodded, and had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "It's an Anchor hub now," he said helpfully. "There's a direct link to here. It's next to the village square, I just came from—"

"I know where Aaron Witcher's Anchors are," Jessamine snapped. "Fine. When exactly are we expected?"

"Forthwith," the man said. He flushed slightly, adding, "That means right—"

"We know what 'forthwith' means," Clara muttered. "Fine. But I'm going to go change, first."

Although her parents' house looked like a fairly small, two-story Tudor townhome, the inside was substantially larger, thanks to some clever dimensional magic Alex had worked out. Ed followed

Clara upstairs, turning into a guest room while she proceeded down a long hallway to her own bedroom. She heard her parents slam the front door, then a murmured discussion as they went to their own bedroom. "Ed," she called, "should we get Finlay and Wolfgang?"

"Already sent them a Summons," he called back.

Clara shrugged out of her clothes and rifled through her small wardrobe, selecting an outfit that looked at least a little formal: gray jeans, a deep red long-sleeved blouse, and matte-black flats. She fluffed her hair a bit in the mirror, and decided against makeup. She'd met various Council members once or twice when she was still raising Borders, but she'd never "testified" in front of the entire assemblage. She found herself vaguely nervous. She pushed her hair around one last time, turned, and met Ed in the hallway.

"The guys are out front," he said quietly as they made for the stairs. "What do you think he meant by 'Border crisis?'"

"I don't know," Clara said, the tension in her voice matching the tightness in her neck and shoulders. "I'm hoping it's just about the one at school. Someone would have called if another one was going bad, wouldn't they?"

"Dunno. Maybe. Maybe that's what this is."

"Stupid Paladins," she grumbled. "We need to talk to Ikwity."

"After we 'testify' to the 'Ard-Chomhairle,'" Ed said.

Clara rolled her eyes.



"Arriving, Meadowside, six!"

Clara's eyes fluttered open as the shrill announcement pierced through her ears like a sharp needle. She let out an exhausted sigh, feeling her dislike for Anchors bubble up inside of her. In her opinion, they were the most unpleasant form of translocation magic. Instead of a graceful swirl of lights and wind, accompanied by a delightful cool tingling sensation, Anchors were more like a dull thud. As she reluctantly stepped off the Anchor platform, she

couldn't shake off the musty feeling that enveloped her. A metallic taste flooded her mouth, reminiscent of copper and iron. She swallowed hard, trying to rid herself of the unpleasant aftertaste.

She'd been the last of their group to go through, and Jessamine was already handing their payment chit to the attendant. He glanced at it, eyebrows raising as he saw who it was. "Mr. and Mrs. Holdaway," he said in quiet awe, "it's so good to meet you. I—"

"Sorry, apparently we've been 'summoned,'" Jessamine said. "Mustn't keep the Council waiting."

"Of course not, I—oh, Miss Thorn!" Now his eyes were wide and he'd flushed slightly. "I didn't see—that is, I—"

"Sorry," Clara said in a milder tone than her mother has used. "I'm to go to the Council as well."

"I, of course, I—"

"Why Clara," said a loud, silky-smooth voice that dripped with sarcasm. "How good to see you following proper channels this time."

Clara turned and groaned to herself.

"Hello, Phoebe," Ed said politely. "How've you been?"

Phoebe Witcher had been one of their classmates at Linginbaum's, and was the daughter of Aaron Witcher, the man who owned and operated the Underhill network of Anchors. She was wearing what was obviously a uniform of some sort: a fitted gray jackets over black trousers, all with silver piping.

"I've been promoted," Phoebe said primly, a smug grin sliding across her face. "I'm now in charge of Anchor Compliance for the Underhill Translocation and Travel Network."

"It is *not* called UT&T," Clara muttered in a low tone.

Ed suppressed a grin. "That's great to hear. Sorry though, we can't really catch up, we're—"

"Oh, this isn't 'catching up,'" Phoebe said, obviously quite pleased with herself. She held out a slip of paper. "This is your fine."

Jessamine had turned to see what was holding them up. She stalked over, snatched the paper from Phoebe, and glanced at it. "Fine? What fine? For what?"

"Direct translocation outside the network incurs a civil penalty," Phoebe said, her grin widening. "And my, you and your family and friends have incurred quite a few. I'll just—"

"Bullshit," Jessamine said flatly, crumpling the slip in one hand and tossing it at Phoebe. "Nobody tells me—"

"Oh, but we *do,*" Phoebe said gloatingly. "The Council has authorized—"

Phoebe's smile fled and she took a quick shuffle backward as Jessamine stepped *very* close to her. "You listen to me, you spoiled little—"

"Mom," Clara said firmly, putting a hand on her mother's shoulder. Jessamine gave Phoebe a final glare before turning on one heel and striding away.

Phoebe's arrogance returned in an instant. "There's still the matter—"

Clara stepped nose-to-nose with her. "Let me ask you something, Phoebe," she said in a low, dangerous tone. "Would *you* like to *continue* 'mattering?'"

"What do you—"

"Stay out of my face. And my family's. And my friends'." Clara's voice was low and sheathed in steel.

Magic began swirling around Phoebe's arms as she prepared a spell. "You can't threaten me," she said cooly. "I'm authorized to—" Clara reached out with her mind and scattered the softly glowing equations. Phoebe's eyes widened, and a hint of doubt crept across her face.

"Stay. Out. Of. My. Face," Clara repeated slowly. Once again, magic began gathering around Phoebe's arms, and once again, Clara simply dispelled it. "I can do that all day," she said even more quietly, "and I can go a *lot* deeper." Phoebe's eyes widened further. "Let's go, Ed."

Ed noticed that Clara spun on her heel *exactly* as her mother had, and even strode away with the exact same gait.



"She's always been that way," Finlay explained to Wolfgang as they waited outside the Council chambers. Or, as the words carved into the marble above the door titled it, *Príomh-Dhlísheomraí na Ard-Chomhairle*. "She loves her Daddy's money and power only slightly less than she enjoys wielding them herself."

"Fine *me* for using *my own magic,*" Jessamine muttered, one lip curled in distaste. "That precious little bi—"

She stopped as the chamber doors were flung open. A flunky dressed in the same gray-tunic-and-black-trousers as the one who'd come to them in Meadowside stepped forward. "Hunters Holdaway! Clara Thorn! And. . ." he quickly surveyed the group standing before him. ". . .associates! Step forward and be heard! *Céim ar aghaidh agus bígí ag éisteacht!*"

"Thank the gods they're not full of themselves," Ed said as the flunky turned and they followed him into the chamber.

"I'm surprised he could pronounce all that," Clara replied with a small grin. She'd spent an entire semester trying to master Irish Gaelic and still got it wrong about half the time.

"Jessamine, Alex. Clara. Thank you so much for coming." Clara recognized the councilor who'd spoken: Conall Ó Brolcháin, one of the men she'd dealt with the most when raising the Borders.

He was seated in the center throne, with three councilors on either side. And they were definitely *thrones,* not chairs: No chair had even tried to be so imposing or ostentatious. In fact, the room was grand and imposing, with pearly white walls and a high arched ceiling painted with intricate designs. The thrones sat atop a raised platform, forcing everyone below to crane their necks slightly to make eye contact with the councilors. Behind the throne, a sweeping curved wall loomed like a fortress, adorned with flags and symbols of power. On either side of the room, flat walls stretched out, accentuating the singular focus on the thrones. As Clara surveyed the space, she noticed that even the rear wall

was curved, enclosing the room in a complete circle. A small gallery occupied this wall, with six rows of tiered seats filled to capacity with people whispering amongst themselves. In stark contrast to the opulence of the thrones, the middle space was completely bare and devoid of furniture, leaving Clara and her group to stand humbly before the council.

I'd rather get called to the principal's office, Clara thought.

"Didn't feel we had much choice, Conall," Jessamine said carefully.

"I'm sure you can appreciate the enormity of the situation," the councilor to Conall's left said. Clara had only met the man once, and it took her a moment to remember his name: Mason Hammond.

"You mean the Border?" Clara said, keeping her tone neutral. "Yeah, I'm pretty aware of it."

"We're actually more concerned about *how* it happened," Conall said. Clara relaxed a little: she'd always liked him and found him easy to talk to. "It's the Paladin threat we're really focused on. You all probably have the most first-hand experience and information. We just want to hear what you know. What you've seen."

"I don't know that I've met everyone here," the councilor on one end said. *Odele Buys,* Clara's memory supplied. She was the newest amongst them.

"Ed Langsdale," Ed said. "I went to school with Clara."

"Finlay Addington and Wolfgang Wintsch," Finlay said. "We did, too."

"Finlay and Wolfgang are part of my research team," Alex added.

"Well met, then," Conall said with a polite nod. "Now—what can you tell us about the Paladins? Where do we stand? What *did* happen with the Border at Linginbaum's?"

"And what *exactly* took the entire mesa down?" another councilor —*Nicolas something,* Clara thought—demanded. "The Headmaster was *extremely* vague about—"

"We'll get there, Nic," Conall said easily. "Let's hear what they have to say."

Clara spoke first. "The Border had been. . . staked, basically. Like an Anchor."

Odele frowned. "We'd been told that Borders weren't subject to staking."

Clara nodded. "They're not. It's not *exactly* the same thing. It took actual magic, not just iron, but that magic acted. . . well, a lot like iron. It attacked the basic structure of the Border itself, and attached itself to the magic that actually connects Underhill and the Ordinary. It was. . ." she paused a moment as she remembered the ugly, black, slick-feeling tentacles. "It was like a leech. It was draining magic *out* of Underhill."

"Like the Rot in the Fae stories," Finlay added.

The councilor's eyebrows rose as they exchanged glances.

"I. . . disconnected it, basically," Clara continued. "But it took an *immense* amount of power. Brute force. That's what took out the mesa. The Borders go *deep*, to the place where Underhill and the Ordinary. . . touch. Where they sit alongside each other. Ripping the Border out by its roots like that. . . that's what destroyed the mesa. And the school."

"And where," the woman next to Odele—*Damara. . . Hocksteader? No, that's not it.*—asked, "did the Paladins get this kind of power?"

"Blood Magic," Clara answered. A murmur swept through the gallery behind her as the councilors frowned in concern.

"You're certain?" Conall asked. "We haven't had a known Blood Witch in. . . decades. Longer."

"We're certain," Jessamine said before Clara could answer. "Clara can identify it visually. And that's the real problem. The Paladins are sitting on *dozens* of magical artifacts, and they're *all* powered by Blood Magic."

The councilors exchanged glances again, and the susurrus from the gallery grew louder. "Quiet, please," Conall said firmly. Then, to Jessamine, "I don't understand—wouldn't the Paladins *avoid* magical artifacts? Or destroy them?"

Jessamine nodded tightly. "Except these are being pitched to

them as 'holy relics.' Most of them. . . well, they *appear* to be centuries old. Many centuries, in some cases."

Conall frowned. "I hear a 'but.'"

Alex spoke up. "Our team tested the artifacts' ages using *Revelata Tempora*. Standard spell for that purpose, and more accurate even than the humans' carbon dating. But at the same time, we found significant evidence of modern manufacture. Tooling marks, even in one case a 'Made in China' engraving that had been mostly buffed out."

The councilors stared at them for several long moments. "That's impossible," Danielle said flatly.

"Exactly," Alex agreed.

"So you got it wrong?" Odele asked, confused.

"No," Alex said calmly. "No, we definitely didn't."

"So you're implying that these artifacts were somehow. . ." Conall took a moment to think about it. "Manufactured in modern times, enchanted with Blood Magic, and. . ."

"Go on," Alex urged when the councilor stopped.

"Time travel is impossible," the councilor on the left end said. *Moira,* Clara thought. She was one of the other ones who'd worked closely with her on the Borders.

"For us, yes," Alex said, still calm. "But we suspect that a Great Power resides in Underhill. An incarnation."

"Of time," Conall said.

Alex nodded.

"Where?" Nicolas demanded.

"We're not prepared to share that yet," Jessamine cut in smoothly. "We. . . there's a plan. We need to move carefully with this. . . creature. If it is in fact what we think it is."

"You must tell us—" Nicolas began.

"That's perhaps for another time," Conall cut in. "In the meantime. . . I'll be honest, this is graver than I'd expected." He thought for a moment. "How many artifacts are we talking about? And what exactly do they do?"

"We found one repository in Los Angeles," Jessamine said. "And there were dozens. Close to a hundred, maybe. We collected seven, and they're under guard at my workshop in Philadelphia. They all have different functions, and while we can't be *certain* about what they do, there's definitely a theme. They're all weapons for hunting and killing witches."

"Silence!" Conall ordered as a louder round of conversation rushed through the gallery. "A hundred, you said."

"There," Jessamine said, shaking her head sadly. "There will be more. There *was* a cache in the same facility where they were holding Alex. With the rush to get him to safety, we didn't have time to explore that. There will be other locations, though."

"Well, there you go," Nicolas said, throwing his hands in the air. "This is what I've said all along. We can't win this battle. We must evacuate all witches here, to Underhill. As quickly as possible."

"The Conception Problem," Odele said uncertainly. "We can't just—"

"That's already been handled," Nicolas insisted, leaning forward to glare across the desk at her. "The Fortified Redoubt Group has—"

"We're all aware of Mr. Witcher's resorts," Conall said calmly. Clara stopped herself from rolling her eyes. He looked at Clara. "It *is* unfortunate that all the Borders are in such. . . populated places."

She shrugged. "The magic goes where it wants to. It likes people. They're where magic originates to begin with. It probably—"

"That's a lie!" Nicolas shouted, his face flushing red. "That's an unproven—"

"It's *not* a lie, Clara insisted loudly. "Remember, I can *see* it. Magic flows from humans, and the Borders bring it here. You don't have to like it, but—"

"Lies!" the councilor screamed, half-standing from his seat.

"Quiet!" Conall ordered, glaring at his co-councilor. Nicolas lowered himself back to his seat, but he was clearly still fuming, and shooting angry glares at Clara and her mother. "The source of magic is not relevant to this conversation. This facility in Los Angeles—why

did you retrieve such a small number of artifacts? Were you able to destroy the rest? *Can* they be destroyed?"

"They can be," Jessamine said. "Clara can take them apart safely. Well, relatively safely. With the right precautions, it's fine. But. . . we were attacked. There was a battle. We had to leave fairly quickly."

"Is your team all right?" Odele asked softly.

Jessamine nodded. "Everyone's fine now, thank you. But. . . it was touch-and-go, for a minute. Those Paladins. . . they were better-equipped. Almost like a SEAL team, for them. Heavily armored, and they had artifacts that suppressed translocation magic. And something, we assume an artifact, that suppressed *all* magic. Slowed it down. We were extremely vulnerable." She shrugged. "So we took what we could, and left the moment we could."

"That. . . is even *more* concerning," Damara murmured. "Our enemy is better equipped than ever, and now they can use magic against us." She shook her head. "I fear I'm beginning to turn to Nic's side."

"Meaning what?" Jessamine asked. "We just. . . abandon our homes? Leave it all behind, come here forever?" She snorted. "Pay Aaron Witcher if we want to go back and start families?"

Clara opened her mouth, and then decided against sharing their theory about Creativity.

"Underhill isn't even *ours,"* Wolfgang said quietly.

"The Fae are long gone," Odele said gently. Clara thought she looked sad. "And it's getting too dangerous in the Ordinary. Do you know. . . we've had reports, you know." She exhaled heavily and shook her head. "Too many direct attacks. Too many families."

The seventh councilor, the one who'd remained silent to this point, cleared his throat. Clara didn't remember meeting him, and her memory didn't offer up a name. "There's an obvious concern that the Paladins will find a way to open a Border. That they'll come here. The more back-and-forth there is, the more dangerous it becomes. UT&T"—and here, Clara couldn't suppress a derisive snort —"has offered to secure them. On both sides, where it's practical."

"So the Witchers control our movements in Underhill, and into and out of Underhill," Jessamine sneered. "Nice."

Nicolas and that guy are clearly Witcher's men, Clara thought. She noted that Odele and Danielle looked distinctly uncomfortable at the thought.

"We're not having a vote here and now," Conall said into the uncomfortable silence that had fallen over the chamber. "But. . ." He exhaled heavily and shook his head. "It'll be soon. Everything you're telling us. . . Paladin tactical teams. Blood Magic artifacts made for hunting witches. An. . . *entity* capable of taking modern artifacts into the past so they can be passed as holy relics." He shook his head again. "This is a losing battle, Jess. We're losing. We've seen what happens when humanity at large finds out about witches. And now they're *armed* against us."

Damara spoke up. "Learning that they can suppress our magic. . . that's especially troubling."

"It's an ordinary stasis field spell," Alex said. "Given time, I'm confident we can create a counter—"

"Enough," Conall said, although his tone was gentle. "That's enough. Again, we're not holding a vote on this today."

"But you will," Jessamine said. He nodded. "And when you do. . . will people be given a choice?"

"Any fool who wants to remain in the Ordinary may," Nicolas said sharply. "But—"

Conall raised a hand and Nicolas stopped. "Everyone has a choice," he said. "Yes. But those who do choose to stay. . . they'll be on their own. We won't send help, if—*when*—they're attacked. We can't ask others to risk their own lives. And we'll be clear on that. Obviously we can hope everyone chooses to join us here."

Everyone, Clara thought. The word echoed in her mind for a moment, but nothing else came to her. She blinked and realized she'd missed part of what Conall was saying.

"—debrief us on this entity you believe is here in Underhill.

That's. . . perhaps not our most immediate problem, but it *is* something we need to understand."

"Sure," Alex said. Clara's Mom was staring daggers at Nicolas. "Of course. As soon as we know something."

"Then, we thank you for what you've shared today. That'll be all for now. In fact, let's break for the day."

"Is féidir go n-ardóidh gach duine agus go bhfágann sé faoi shíocháin!" the flunky who'd led them in shouted as the doors swung open.

"Whatever," Jessamine said darkly, pushing past Clara to lead them out.



"SMALL-MINDED, TERRIFIED LITTLE. . . *MICE*!" Jessamine spat.

She, Alex, Ed, and Clara had returned to the home in Meadowside. Finley and Wolfgang had headed back to wherever they'd come from—they'd said, but Clara hadn't paid attention. They'd purchased Anchor chits from the same man who'd greeted them, although this time Jessamine's intense, angry glares encouraged him to keep his remarks to the bare minimum necessary to conclude that transaction.

"We never needed *money* in Underhill before," she added.

"They're scared, hon," Alex said as he sank into the sofa. Clara thought he looked a little gray.

"If they'd *help do something about it,"* Jessamine growled, "the Paladins wouldn't have a chance!"

"Or they'd turn out to be better-equipped than we think, and they'd massacre us," Ed said quietly.

Clara stared at him for a moment. "You're on their side?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. They're not wrong. I hate the situation, is all." He met her eyes. "My whole family's moving."

Clara's eyes widened. "You never—"

"I know, I know. They just told me a few days ago. It made me

mad, and I didn't want to talk about it. But now, after seeing that. . . tactical team, is that what he called it? That, and all those artifacts. . . all Blood Magic. I don't know. It's hard to be mad at them, now." He looked away. "Clara, it's *bad."*

Clara set her jaw. "We need to go find Ikwity. Right now." She moved toward the door.

"Tomorrow, babe," Jessamine said, pulling her daughter into a hug. "It's going to be dark, soon. Even over there."

Clara sniffed, and realized how much the council meeting had upset her. Her Mom felt just as tight, just as tense. "What do you mean 'over there?'"

"Underhill's developing time zones," Alex said. "This side, what everyone's calling East, gets darker a little sooner than that side."

Clara blinked, and leaned harder into her mother. "I didn't know," she said.

"It's like it's becoming. . . more *real,"* her Dad continued. "I think that's one reason people are more comfortable moving here. It's. . . I don't know if it's just your Borders, but everything here is more stable. It feels more like the Ordinary."

"Hah," Clara said, although there was no force in it. "It feels more like a theme park, you mean."

Alex shrugged. "There are plenty of older towns and villages in Europe that still look exactly like this. The style may be old, but it's hardly gone or forgotten. Besides, do you really want high-rises here?" He grinned at his daughter.

Clara's lips twitched into a half-smile. "Mom and Dad—Arlene and Theo, I mean—might like that." Then she blinked a few times and the word *everyone* slid through her mind again. *Wait, could that be part of it?* she thought. *Wouldn't that—*

"I'm starving," Ed said as he stomach grumbled. "I vote for dinner."

"I can spell up some food," Alex offered.

"Oh no, you don't," Jessamine said, releasing Clara. "You're terrible at cooking spells."

"I'm better than you," Alex argued with a grin.

"The bar's low," Jessamine acknowledged. "But there's a reason we didn't even put a pantry in this place. No, we'll eat out."

"I have a suggestion," Ed said.

"Shoot."

"There's a little village growing up along the southern coast. It's called Wisding. It's where—"

"Wait, did you say *coast?*" Clara said.

He chuckled. "I told you Underhill has oceans now."

"Sure, but—"

"Where ocean meets land, that's what we call a coast."

Clara stuck her tongue out at him. "Very funny, smarty pants. I just didn't. . . I don't think I've processed all that, yet. Underhill being. . . ordinary."

"Anyway," Ed continued, "it's where my family is moving. Or thinking about, at least. Mom's always dreamed of living in a little seaside village. But there's a really excellent pub there. And Wolfgang's family already put up a place there, that's where he and Finlay went."

"I could go for seafood," Alex said.

"I want tacos," Clara said.

Ed laughed. "I haven't seen anyplace here doing Mexican. But I know they have fish and chips. You love fish and chips."

"Tacos," Clara said stubbornly, but they could all tell her heart wasn't in it.

"We'll find Mexican another night, babe," Jessamine said, laughing softly. "Personally, I'd murder for a good stew."

"We can use the time to plan our next steps," Alex said thoughtfully. "I'd like to get really clear on the *exact* questions we're going to ask this Ikwity creature. Great Powers. . . well, there are all kinds of legends about them weaseling through loopholes, if you're not super precise."

"Fine," Clara gave in. "Fish and chips and planning." Then she

rolled her eyes. “How many Anchor stops do we have to make to get there?”

“Just one,” Ed grinned. “There’s a bigger town between here and there, South Sea, also along the coast. They’ve got the biggest regional connection system in the area, so far.”

“’Regional connection system,’” Clara groused, looking at her mother. “’UT&T.’ It’s all so. . . mundane.”

Jessamine ruffled her daughter’s hair. “We can always go direct and keep running up our fines.”

Clara brightened. “Why didn’t you say so?”

CHAPTER 6
WISDING, UNDERHILL

In the end, Ed and Alex convinced them to use the Anchor network. "We don't need to die on that hill," Alex had said. "And more importantly, we don't need the distraction of dealing with the Witchers right now. You saw it—he's got at least two of those councilors firmly under his thumb, I'd say. We need freedom to operate, right now."

Ed smothered a chuckle at the near-identical stubborn expressions Jessamine and Clara had worn through the trip.

"What I find so irritating," Jessamine grumbled, "is these 'coins' he's making everyone use."

"Tokens," Alex said mildly. "And when you can summon anything you want, what's the purpose of regular money?"

"Yes, but having to charge *actual magic* into them?" Jessamine spat.

Ed shrugged. "That's the only thing of any value, here."

"So Witcher is just accumulating magic. Why?" Clara asked, mimicking her mother's grumble. Then she paused. "Oh."

Ed's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought about that."

"What?" Jessamine asked irritably.

"If the Borders go down, or if they are even cut down in number," Clara mused, "magic stops coming through."

Jessamine stopped as she realized what he daughter was saying. "He's stockpiling *magic."*

Everyone had fallen into a sober silence at that. But Clara's eyes lit up the moment they stepped outside the Anchor terminal in Wisding. This *was* a coastal town—it reminded her of the few months she and her adoptive parents had spent in Maine, only much warmer. The sharp, crisp smell of the sea permeated the town, carried on a stiff, pleasant breeze. She sighed inwardly a bit as she saw the residents here had taken up only a slightly different medieval theme for their village: stout, squat, one- and two-story buildings made predominantly of heavy gray stone, with roofs of either weathered wood or dense thatch. Carefully shielded oil lamps dotted the streets, casting warm, flickering light as the sun sank lower in the west.

Wisding was indeed growing—Clara could see where the streets at the edge of the village had been extended. They were just bare, scraped earth for now, but they'd soon be cobbled like the rest of the village already was. Home sites were being cleared along those streets, and she could see a few large piles of boulders and stones waiting to be put to use. Here in the village's center, a number of businesses were open, with both oil lamps and mage-lights illuminating their storefronts and interiors.

"Where'd they come up with *Wisding* for a name?" Clara asked as Ed led them to the pub.

Alex chuckled. "I think 'by the long way around.' Very, and I do mean *very,* roughly, 'wisding' translates to 'glaise' in Irish Gaelic, which translates to 'green' in English. Now, mind you, you can only get there if you're casting translation spells after you've been drinking, but I'm *told* that's more or less what happened."

"Here we go," Ed said, pulling the pub's door open. "Welcome to Naemi's."

"Over here, guys!" Finlay and Wolfgang had already snagged a large trestle table for them, and were waving to catch their attention.

They exchanged greetings as they settled, and recounted their Council session. Jessamine was still irritated about it, focusing more on the simple paper menu that Finlay handed her. A teenage girl dropped off glasses of chilled water, and after a few minutes an older woman came over.

"Welcome, welcome," she said, smiling cheerfully. "I'm Naemi. Decided on something for dinner? Any questions?"

Clara had barely glanced at the menu, and grabbed one as Finlay and Wolfgang placed orders. It offered two stews and three soups. "This peanut stew," she asked Naemi. "Any good?"

"Child, it's the best," the woman said with a broad smile. "If you like a little heat in your food, that is. Onions, garlic, ginger, cumin, turmeric, cinnamon—not spicy-spicy, but nice and warm."

"I'm in," Clara said, returning the woman's smile.

"Brown bread for the table?"

"Please," Wolfgang said.

"It'll be out in a minute." Naemi hurried off, ducking through a door at the back of the pub into what Clara assumed was the kitchen.

"It's all West African flavors," Finlay said, clearly excited for the meal. "She had a beef stew on this time, but the lamb sounds even better."

Their food came out in just over a minute. Large, sturdy earthenware bowls contained generous portions of steaming stew and soup, and the peanut stew had the most amazing aroma of them all. A big platter of sliced, hearty brown bread went in the middle of the table, and it was instantly clear that you wouldn't need butter or any other spreads—just sopping up the main dishes would be plenty.

They ate in a comfortable silence for a while, until everyone had gotten about halfway through their bowls.

"So you think they're going to vote to cut off the Ordinary?" Wolfgang asked.

Alex frowned. "I certainly got that impression, yes."

"That's going to make our research a little harder," Finlay pointed out. "We can't do most of it here."

"I know."

"What have you guys been working on?" Clara asked. Since graduating, she'd only seen Finlay and Wolfgang for meals here and there; whatever they were working on with her father seemed to occupy most of their time. "Dad, you've been in Underhill a lot anyway, right?"

An expression of anxiety slipped across his face, but it was gone as soon as it came. He spooned up some more of his soup. "A lot, but not entirely. We've a lot more books and documents here than over there, which is where I've been focused. But the boys have been—well, they can tell you."

"We set up another workshop near my parents' place in Ireland," Finlay took over. "We've been experimenting with some of the artifacts your lot found, but we've also been experimenting with ways to counter some of the Paladins' defenses and weapons."

"And some of the drugs we think they used on your Dad," Wolfgang added. Alex had been in and out of a drug-enforced haze for most of the eighteen years he'd been in captivity. "We actually came up with a construct that'll block the worst effects of something like Sodium Pentothal, which is what we think they were mainly using."

"But we can't experiment on stuff like that here," Finlay said, the disappointment clear in his expression. "The magic here isn't right, and besides, a lot of it would be dangerous. We'd have to go off to the hinterlands, like out where Linginbaum's is. Was."

"If everyone gets restricted to Underhill," Ed said, "we probably won't need to worry about Paladins anymore. That's kind of the point."

Finlay's face fell even further. "Yeah," he said. "I guess."

"You should come up with a better Anchor spell and compete with Witcher," Jessamine muttered.

"That's actually part of what I've *been* doing," Alex said. "Not

exactly Anchor spells, but—do you know how much spell lore we've lost, over the centuries?"

"What do you mean?" Clara asked.

"Just that most of the grimoires and spell books we have are the ones they use in the schools. But you saw it yourself, right? Politics, different headmasters having different opinions and priorities, all kinds of books get suppressed."

"Like Risewell's Border magic," Clara agreed.

"Exactly. And we actually *don't* have a lot of magic libraries *outside* the schools. And—very good recent example—we've lost anything at Linginbaum's that might have been unique to that school. Anything that didn't have a copy somewhere else, I mean. The Council's set up a library in Toujours, and they've started collecting books there, but. . . well, honestly, *politics.*"

"So you've been. . ." Clara prompted.

"Trying to piece a lot of it back together. I'd focused on combat magics to begin with. Like, the really old Norse spells, the old Celtic spells, the stuff that predates modern Western European magic. Almost *everything* we have now dates back to the Renaissance, but the older stuff. . . a lot of it is more *subtle.* Simpler, in some ways, more complex in others. But then I kind of went on a tangent, and started looking at translocation magic. Specifically the Borders at first, but I kind of branched out from there. And then there's a whole class of what I'd call 'household magic,' spells that are designed to be more persistent than anything we're using now."

"Artifacts, you mean," Jessamine said.

"Exactly. We've been focused on the Paladin threat, but I half wonder if even the way we think about magic couldn't be better. And then you all show up with those Blood Magic artifacts—and, vile as that is, it definitely shows a subtler understanding of artifact construction. Why, take this village. Or the one we live in. We use spells to gather materials, right? Some of it, we even bring over from the Ordinary. Two-by-fours, that kind of thing. And then we use magic to assemble the homes. But that's it. We're not binding magic

into the structure, using magic to make it stronger, or anything like that."

"You've got that space-expanding trick," Ed pointed out.

"Aha! Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Finlay helped me figure that one out. That's the *first time* anyone's really bound magic into the structure in a permanent way. Now, if we could do that with shields, or even weapons that carried their own magical charge, then we'd have really had something to take the fight to the Paladins at scale. You wouldn't need to teach everyone complex combat magic, you'd just need to have a team set up to create preloaded weapons."

"But the space-expanding thing," Clara said, "that's been around, hasn't it? The triplets' family had a safe room in Vegas, and the school used it all the time."

"My family's house uses it," Finlay agreed. "But that's a modern spell. It's complex, it takes a *ton* of power up front, and it has to be refreshed a lot. The school's ran out of a general pool of magic that powered the classroom shields and stuff. The professors all have to contribute to it every week."

"That's what makes this different," Alex said excitedly. "It's subtle, and not very complex at all. And it's woven into the structure —basically, the entire building is an artifact. And it maintains itself mainly from ambient magic, once it's going."

"Are you saying," Jessamine said slowly, understanding dawning in her expression, "that you can do this with *combat* magic?"

Alex hesitated. "Not yet."

"Defensive magic?"

"No, not yet. The—"

"All the combat and defensive magic we know is modern European-style," Wolfgang said. "It's too complex. We've been trying to deconstruct them into more basic elements, and experiment with some of the—"

"Day late, dollar short," Jessamine said, shaking her head. "Look, if we could have equipped *every* family of witches with offensive and defensive spells that they didn't need to understand. . . sure."

"We had it working with one of the old Viking shield spells," Alex mumbled. "Sort of."

"You said, 'had,'" Jessamine pointed out softly.

Alex sighed and reached for a piece of bread. "I did. You were there this afternoon, Jess. You heard them. They're going to do it."

"How, exactly, are they planning to enforce it?" Wolfgang asked. "Keeping everyone here, I mean?"

"It wouldn't be that hard," Ed said. "On this side, the Borders are pretty easy to box off. You could literally just build a building around them and guard it to keep people out. Set defensive spells and traps on the inside for anyone coming through unannounced."

"Witcher," Jessamine grumbled.

"He has enough influence with the Council," Alex agreed.

"Would you guys move here permanently?" Clara asked her parents in a soft voice.

Jessamine sighed and leaned back, crossing her arms. "I don't know. Yes, probably. I mean. . . probably. It's not like we're going to try and start a family. I just. . . what if *you* want to, baby?"

"Last thing on my mind right now, Mom," Clara assured her.

"But it's on *someone's* mind," Jessamine insisted. "And that's what riles me up about all this. Witcher having control over people coming and going. Charging *money* for his little honeymoon habitats or whatever he's setting up over there."

They were quiet for a moment, until Clara said, "I need to understand more about these Great Powers."

"How so?" Ed asked.

"We know we need to find Creation. Creativity. Whatever it calls itself. We need some clues on where to start."

"I thought we were hoping Ikwity—"

"I don't want to put all our eggs in that basket," Clara said. "I mean, I don't remember her well. . . it's all really hazy, still. But I definitely have an *impression* of her. A feeling. And it isn't one of unbridled cooperation."

"Fair," Ed conceded. "So, you know a little bit already. The world

is full of powerful forces. Time. Death. Creation. There are probably more. When—"

Wolfgang interrupted. "The Fae actually defined five. Death, Time, Fate, Creation, and Conflict. They all existed between two poles, they called them. Not exactly Good and Evil, because the Fae had a different take on morality than we do, but that's close. And they all operated within a sphere that contained the four essential elements: Earth, Sea, Sky, and Flame."

Ed blinked. "Where'd you get all that?"

Wolfgang grinned. "I love old Fae lore. I've got a pile of books at my parents' place."

"Fair enough. Anyway, the Fae loved to tamper with them. Time, for certain, and obviously Creation. Tamper with them enough, and they started to become sentient. Once they were self-aware, they'd form corporeal bodies. Incarnations. Like your Aunt Ikwity, we assume."

"And Creation, except it bailed on Underhill and is somewhere in the Ordinary, we think. Which is why people can't conceive children here," Wolfgang added.

"Sleeping," Clara said distractedly.

"What?" Wolfgang asked.

"Oh, it's something the elf said to me. After graduation." Underhill itself was sentient, and it presented itself to Clara as a small, blue, elf-like creature who visited her in dreams and visions. "It said Creation was sleeping. Or at least missing for a long time. Which still doesn't tell me where to start looking."

"Art," Alex said.

"Art?" Clara asked, confused.

"Art," he repeated. "Look for. . . artist colonies. Cities with a huge art scene. Music, paintings, whatever. Surely the presence of an incarnation of Creation would be. . . inspiring."

Clara hesitated before saying, "I suppose so." Her tone was unsure. "It seems like quite a lengthy list."

Her father shrugged. "It's something we can start with, at least."

"Yeah."

Everyone returned to their meals, sopping up the last of the rich, flavorful stews and soups with the thick slices of brown bread. When they finished, they pushed their bowls away and sat in silence for a few minutes. Ed was the first to speak up. "I think I'm going to take a walk. Clara, want to come?"

"Sure," she said, sliding off her bench. "Where to?"

"It's nice out. How about along the waterfront?"



Someone had built a long wooden boardwalk well back from the ocean's high tide point, stretching the width of the entire village. They'd even built a couple of small jetties and docks, although there weren't presently any boats tied up.

Ed and Clara walked along the boardwalk until they came to its end, kicked their shoes off, and stepped down into the soft, white sand. It all but glowed under the light of the two bright, blue-white moons.

"I'm not thrilled about seeing Ikwity," Ed said quietly, breaking the silence they'd maintained since leaving the pub. "I mean, the last time. . ."

"I know, I know," Clara sighed. "But look. . . yes, losing four years' of memories wasn't awesome, but it didn't *hurt* me. And the facts and stuff, they do come back to me when I need them. So. . . I'm fine."

"I get all that, but still. . . it worries me. There's no telling what could happen. We could go into that forest and only be there an hour, and come out to find its a hundred years later."

"I know."

"There's no other way though, is there?"

"I don't think so."

They walked several more yards in silence. "I'm glad I'm going with you," Ed said.

"Me too."

They walked further, accompanied by the gentle sound of the sea lapping against the beach.

"Do you have a plan?"

"I... no, not really. Last time was so... fuzzy." She laughed softly. "I've been hoping the elf would come to me and give me a tip or something."

"It hasn't?"

"No."

"I feel like we should have a plan."

Clara shrugged. "I want to know why she's helping the Paladins. I'd love to know if she knows where we can find Creativity, but that feels like a stretch. And last time. . ."

"What?" Ed asked after she didn't continue.

"I don't remember much. But I remember her saying she took a price."

"That was your memories."

"Yeah, and it was to answer two questions, right? Where to put the Border, and then where Elsie was being held."

"Sure."

"So what'll she demand for the answers we want this time?"

"Ah." He considered. "And she only takes payment in time."

"I assume."

"Can we just make it clear that we don't agree to anything until we actually agree to it?"

"I guess. I mean, I'd have thought that was implied but. . . what if we *do* agree to it? She's Time, Ed. She *knows* what's going to happen. For her, it might all be happening at the same time. So if we do agree, then she knows, and so. . . maybe to her—"

"This is getting a little convoluted," Ed chuckled.

"Yeah. Sorry. I just. . . don't tell Mom or Dad this, but I think it's just going to be. . . what it is."

"You mean we go in without a plan and roll with it."

"If we *have* a plan, wouldn't she already know it?"

He exhaled heavily. "Maybe. Yeah, I guess. That makes sense."

They turned and began walking back along the beach. "You know, this is pretty amazing."

"What is?" Ed asked.

"This beach. Underhill didn't have oceans before, did it?"

He considered. "No, I don't think so. The Fae weren't big on large bodies of water. Lakes, streams, ponds, sure, but not oceans."

"I wonder if it just. . . stops. At the end, I mean."

"The end of what?"

"Well, it can't all go on forever, can it?"

"I hadn't thought about it. I guess not."

Something occurred to Clara. "You know, this has to be because my Borders are different from Risewell's."

"How so?"

"Mine go deeper. Like, all the way down. In my mind, when I raised them, the magic went *down,* and kept going until it hit the Ordinary. Down there, underneath us, that's where Underhill and the Ordinary world touch. Risewell's Borders were. . . like vertical fairy rings. All lights and air. Not *solid.*"

"True."

"So I wonder. . . I think mine connect the two worlds more strongly."

"Sure."

"I wonder if that's making Underhill *mimic* the Ordinary. I mean, look at all this," she said, gesturing to the sea. "A beach. An *ocean.* It's got tides."

"I mean, we have two moons."

"Yeah, but before, that was just for show. Now they're *doing* something. Like. . . physics is becoming real, here."

"Huh."

"And even if all witches move here, the Borders still connect the two worlds."

"Because we need magic from the Ordinary," Ed agreed.

"Right, but. . . well, no. We need magic from *humans.* They just happen to all *be* in the Ordinary."

"We've talked about that. Bringing friendly ones here."

"Sure*, we've* talked about it," Clara agreed. "But you heard Nicolas. A lot of people still don't want to believe magic comes from humans. Once I got the first Borders up and Underhill was fine, they all just forgot about what happened when the Ordinary was cut off."

"We could. . . convince them."

"I guess." She thought about it. "I wonder if the Council is even thinking about that. Like, we're going to need a *lot* more homes, and humans can't just magic them up like we can."

"You know," Ed said slowly, as if something was just occurring to him, "you're not wrong, there. But. . . something you said about your Borders connecting more strongly."

"Yeah?"

"And we can't take the Borders down."

"Honestly, Ed, I think the only reason I got the Linginbaum's one down is that it was rotten. I seriously am not sure even I *can* take a healthy Border down. They're rooted *very* deeply."

"But we bring humans here anyway, for the magic."

"It'll be fresher. And that way if the Borders *do* go down, we won't lose magic. Remember, Underhill needs magic to survive."

"I'll never forget." The collapse of Professor Risewell's Borders, just before Clara's first year at school in Underhill, had almost precipitated a collapse of Underhill itself. "But stick with me for a minute. The worlds are connected. The Borders aren't going away. Isn't there any concern that the Paladins' pet Blood Witch, which we assume they have, won't somehow let them through a Border?"

"That's what Mom was saying. They'll probably box them in."

"Can't we make them *forget?"*

Clara frowned. "Forget about the Borders?"

"Forget about *magic.* About witches. Make them forget it *all.* You and Latoya have that spell, right?"

Clara's brow furrowed. "We do, but I could never make it big

enough, Ed. You'd have to cover the entire *Earth*. It's way too big, even if the triplets fueled it."

"But your Dad's been doing all that work with perpetual constructs, right?"

"I guess," Clara said slowly.

"I don't know. It just feels like we're missing a piece." Clara heard the frustration in Ed's voice. "Like, everyone coming here seems like a done deal, right? But. . . what if it doesn't help? What if it just turns into a trap?"

"I. . . hadn't thought about that," Clara admitted. "But I don't know what to do about it."

Ed sighed. "Me either. But. . . maybe keep thinking about it."

"Yeah."

The twin moons shone down as the breeze raised gentle waves to splash against the shore.



Neither of them were ready to retire, so they returned to the pub to find Finlay and Wolfgang still there.

"Your parents headed home," Finlay said as they took their seats.

"Did they Anchor it or do it themselves?"

"Your Dad said they were going to Anchor," Wolfgang grinned. "Your Mom didn't look happy. My parents have a couple of guest rooms, you're welcome to spend the night, if you want."

Clara nodded, her mind still replaying the conversation she'd had with Ed. "You guys believe magic comes from humans, right?"

Finlay shrugged. "Sure. I mean, you've said you've *seen* it, and I trust you. And magic does feel. . . different over there. Fresher, like people say. So it makes sense."

"What's up?" Wolfgang asked.

"It's just. . . the Council, today. Some of them obviously don't believe it. They think they can just huddle up here, and somehow it'll

be okay, even though the last time the Borders went down, it very obviously wasn't."

Finlay's brow furrowed. "Are you worried about your Borders?"

"Not. . . no, in and of themselves, no. They should last centuries. Even when they start to decay, from what I can tell they'll still bring magic in. But the Paladins? Absolutely. What if they *do* have a way of finding them, or create a way? If they start spiking them all, it not only takes down the Border. You guys didn't see the one at school—it was *rotten.* Like, literally rotting, and it was drawing magic *out* of Underhill. It was *eating* the mesa. If they do that again. . . and again, and again, then even if I cut loose the rotted ones, we start to lose magic unless we have friendly humans here with us." She put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. "I don't know how to convince them."

"What would happen if the Border location on the other side changed?" Wolfgang asked. "Like, if the building was knocked down?"

"The Border's magic would flail around for a bit and attach to something new," Clara replied. "They *want* to connect the worlds."

"Yes, dear, you did a much better job on that than I did."

The four young people turned their heads as a plump, extremely old woman with long white hair toddled up to their table and sank onto a bench.

"Professor Risewell?" Clara said in surprise. She felt a sudden stab of guilt—the professor had lived in one of Linginbaum's secret spaces, squirreled away after her brand of Border magic became politically unpopular. Clara hadn't even thought about whether she'd made it out or not.

"Oh, you remember!" the old professor chirped happily. "Yes, they finally moved me out of the school once your lovely new Border stones were standing. I'd always fancied a seaside retirement, and now I have it." She gave them all a pleased smile. Clara got the impression that the old witch wasn't *entirely* with them, but then, she *was*

well over a hundred years old. "I have to say, smart on you for copying the old standing stones instead of the fairy rings." She shook her head. "I was always infatuated with the Fae, or at least the idea of them." A glimmer of sharp intelligence sparkled in her eyes for a moment. "You seem to have drawn the worlds more closely together than I."

"You mean the geography?" Risewell smiled. "Yeah. I didn't know it would do that. But the Paladins—the witch-hunters in the Ordinary—they found a way to poison them. That's what happened to the one at Linginbaum's."

"Oh. Well, that's too bad, dear," Risewell said, reaching over to pat her hand. Her expression had glazed over a bit.

"Professor," Wolfgang said suddenly, "does magic come from the Ordinary?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, poppet. Of course it does. Right from human souls. Even the Fae knew that. It's why they kept the worlds so close."

"Close?" Clara asked.

"Yes, yes, of course. Had to, you see. Practically on top of one another, with only their Veil separating the worlds and keeping humans from being constantly aware at how close it all was. Why, their Borders were basically just piercings. Not at all what you and I had to build, no. Goodness, my rings were more like tunnels! Goodness, goodness." She trailed off, her eyes focused on the past.

Veil, Clara thought.

"Professor," Clara said, putting her hand atop the old woman's, "you said the Fae Veil made humans. . . *forget?"*

"Mmm? Oh, yes. Can't have them constantly poking and prodding. No, only their favored few were allowed to know. Allowed to remember."

"Clara?" Ed asked softly.

"There's something there," she whispered back. "Something about the spell I modified for Latoya." She glanced back to Risewell. "I'll tell you later." He nodded.

"Professor, could we bring humans here, instead? To Underhill? To supply magic?"

"Of course, child," Risewell said distractedly. "That's why the Fae had their special humans over all the time. Freshens the place up a bit."

"And what could take a Border down?" she asked, while she still had the professor's attention.

"Oh, not very much, dear. Iron, back in the Fae days, but only because their fairy rings were so delicate by nature. Blood of the earth, you know, iron is. And of course, Blood Magic." She sighed and frowned. "That's how they destroyed mine, you know. I could feel it when it happened."

Everyone's eyes had widened at the mention of Blood Magic. "Oberherr must have," Finlay whispered.

Clara shook her head. "He couldn't have, Underhill let him back in once the exile spell was off him. But he must have found one."

"Same one the Paladins are using now, I'll bet," Ed agreed.

"I should have gone with the standing stones," Risewell was murmuring. "Ah well, live and learn. I *did* have quite the infatuation with the Fae, you know. Would love to have met one." She perked up a bit. "You know, I could do with a good cup of tea. Where's that tea set gone off to, this time?" She waggled her fingers in the air and added, *"Viens ici, petit service à thé! Maman veut du thé!"* She chuckled to herself. "French magic is the best for hospitality, you know." And with that, she rose and wandered off out the pub door.

"Did you know she lived here?" Clara asked, looking at Wolfgang.

He nodded. "I've spoken to her before. She has lucid moments, now and then. But don't worry, someone will make sure she gets home. Everyone looks after her."

Clara rolled her eyes. "The world's foremost authority on Border magic and she's living right next door. I wish you'd have said something."

He shrugged. "Her really lucid moments are pretty rare. And short. I'm surprised you got that much out of her."

"Blood of the earth," Ed mused. "Interesting connection."

"It's all the Blood Magic artifacts the Paladins have that are giving them their advantage," Wolfgang said.

"And the fact that they're able to pass them off as holy relics to their people," Clara added. "Complete with accurate carbon dating, if anyone questions them." She set her jaw. "We're going to go see Aunt Ikwity first thing in the morning, Ed."

"Yeah, I know," he sighed. "I'm still not happy about it."

"She *has* to be the one helping them. We need to know why."

"Does it matter?" Finlay asked. "From what your parents were saying, it seems like a done deal that the Council's going to order everyone here. Even my family's already scouting for a village."

"It matters," Clara said firmly. "We still *need* the Ordinary, especially if the Council won't believe that we need to bring humans here in case the Paladins pull down other Borders. And remember, when they do that, those Borders *rot.* It's a danger to Underhill. Even with everyone here, the Paladins are *still* a threat to us."

"Who's to say they'll give up just because we're gone?" Ed agreed. "They've no reason to not keep tracking down Borders until they think they've found them all."

"Ikwity," Clara repeated. "First thing in the morning."

CHAPTER 7
BORDER DROUGHT

As the sun rose over the quaint village, Clara and Ed savored their final bites of a mouthwatering, savory porridge. The rich flavors danced on their tongues, filling them with warmth and comfort. Meanwhile, Finlay and Wolfgang had bid their farewells and retired to Wolfgang's childhood home for the night, while Jessamine and Alex had made a late-night decision to return to their own cozy abode in Underhill. They'd left a note with the innkeeper explaining their absence.

Ed exhaled heavily as he scooped the last bit of porridge out of his bowl. "You ready for today?"

Clara let her spoon rattle to a rest in her empty bowl. "For Ikwity? No. Not really."

"It's scary," Ed offered.

She nodded slowly. "It is. I mean, in theory."

"In theory?"

"It's. . ." Clara flapped her hands as she struggled to find the word. "Yeah, in theory. Yes, I lost all that time. But I didn't lose it, right? I still *know* everything. Like, it *happened."*

"But you missed it."

"But I didn't *know* I missed it. I mean, I never *had* it, right? I just. . . woke up in the dining hall. Like nothing had happened. In a way it's like I got a. . . an express pass, or something."

Ed looked into his bowl for a long moment. "You missed *us.*"

Clara's exasperation vanished. "I know. I mean, mentally, I know. But. . . I feel like we have it *now.* I know. . . look. I get how it's affected all you guys. One minute I'm right there with you, the next minute I'm years younger and I don't know everything that happened. For years. I get it. It's just hard for me to internalize it. By definition, I didn't experience it."

He nodded. He looked up at Clara, and her heart melted at his soft, soulful eyes.

She gave him a rueful smile. "But that doesn't mean I'm not worried."

"About what she'll do."

"Yeah. About whatever price she'll want. She just—"

"But this isn't the same thing," Ed protested. "You're not going there with some kind of question for her. This is *about* her. Why she's helping the Paladins."

"If she's helping them."

Ed snorted. "It seems pretty obvious she is."

"I know, but—"

"Clara Thorn?" A male voice called from the front of the inn. Clara and Ed turned to see a simply dressed man scanning the room anxiously, looking at each of the patrons until he landed on them. "Miss Thorn?" he said, moving quickly toward them.

"What's this about?" Ed said warily.

"We'd heard you were here," the man said, and Clara's heart started beating faster at the urgency in his voice. "Please, you have to come with me."

"Where?" Clara asked, rising from their table. "Why? What's going on?"

"My name is Ouin. I'm from Soloton. It's—"

"In the Northeast," Ed supplied, standing.

Ouin nodded quickly. “Past the mountains, yes. We—”

“Mountains?” Ed asked.

“There are now, yes. But that’s not the—”

“You have a Border,” Clara said flatly, a trickle of cold slithering down her spine.

“That’s the problem,” Ouin said. “You need to come quickly. There’s an Anchor—”

“Oh, no,” Clara said firmly. Already, her mind was reaching out to the Border in what she’d always thought of as the upper-right reaches of Underhill, and ambient magic was spooling around her arms. She grabbed Ed’s hand across the table, and reached to take Ouin’s. “No Anchors.”



As they materialized on the outskirts of town, Clara's eyes scanned the unfamiliar landscape. The once-empty fields were now filled with houses and bustling streets, a testament to how quickly the village had grown since she had raised the tall stone monolith of the Border. Despite the changes, Clara couldn't help but feel a bitter twinge as she spotted the familiar sight of the Border looming in the distance. *At least it’s outside of town,* she thought. For once, someone hadn’t decided to build their village square around the thing.

With recent events and the increasing interference from outside forces, Clara found herself longing for even more distance between her Borders and any kind of civilization. The destruction of Linginbaum's and its entire mesa was still fresh in her memory, a reminder of the consequences that could apparently come with living too close to a Border. *But who knew Borders could Rot?* she sighed to herself.

As they made their way towards it, Clara noticed that unlike other Borders, which were often surrounded by a path of hard-packed dirt or even stones, this one stood isolated amongst a sea of grass and delicate meadow flowers. It seemed almost peaceful in

contrast to its ominous purpose, making her wonder about its origins and history.

Grass which was, she noted miserably, dry and brown in a perfect circle, maybe six or seven feet across, around the Border. It was like a very targeted drought has settled around the Border, instantly draining the water from the ground cover. *Or draining the life,* Clara thought grimly. Aloud, she asked, "How long?"

"This one isn't used much," Ouin admitted. "Johann, our local baker, noticed it this morning. He'd planned to go through and bring back some more of his equipment and supplies from his home in the Ordinary. But before that. . . I don't know. It could have been a fortnight, maybe more."

As Clara watched, a few more stalks of grass on the edge of the blighted area browned and withered. "It hasn't been that long."

Ed had also noticed the rate of spread. "A full day at most, the way it's going."

"Where's this come out?" Clara asked.

"Tallinn," Ouin replied. "In Estonia. You know it?"

Clara shook her head.

"I do," Ed said. "A little. Somewhere in the old town?" Ouin nodded. "All right. I'm familiar enough and it's. . . well, as safe as anyplace." He exchanged a glance with Clara.

Assuming this isn't a Paladin trap, she thought.

"We should get some more of the team," Ed said, taking a step back and turning toward the village. "Latoya, definitely the triplets, maybe—"

"You still have charged crystals?" Clara interrupted.

He stopped and gave her a confused expression. "Yeah, two. I've always kept some on me, just in case—"

"Then just us."

"But—"

"Just us," Clara repeated more firmly. "We'll be harder to spot than a big group. As soon as we go through, you translocate us some-

where else. Nearby, not far, but we don't stay at the Border in case they're watching it."

"They've already had a day to—"

"This feels *bad*, Ed." Clara's skin was crawling, and even as she watched another few blades of grass browned and died. "But the Border is still *functional.* This might be our best chance to find out what's happening. You've got the crystals, if—"

"A stasis field affects them, too."

"Can they raise one outside? Right at a Border?" she challenged.

He considered. "I doubt it. You need boundaries for a stasis field."

"Begging your pardon," Ouin said, "but I used to specialize in stasis magic. He's right. You need six surfaces as boundaries. No way to do one outside. And near a Border. . ." He considered, and then shook his head. "Wouldn't work. Too much conflicting magic in too small a space."

"There you go," Clara said even more firmly, grabbing Ed's forearm. "Get a jump spell ready. As soon as we're through, hit it."

"Wait, wait," Ed said, thinking quickly. "Give me a second." Clara stared at him as he considered. "Okay. Yeah. I don't know exactly where the Border comes out—"

"Behind the Restaurant Odessa," Ouin supplied. "There's a sort of square, with a few trees."

Ed considered. "Right. I know where that is. There's another restaurant, the Stenhus, it backs against the same square. I can be pretty precise over that short a hop, maybe put us in the bathrooms. We can go out the back into the square."

"Perfect," Clara said, resuming her march, her hand still clamped around Ed's forearm. "Let's go."



Clara barely had time to blink away the dappled sunlight that hit her eyes before a spiral of magic seized her—and Ed—and carried them away. The sensation lasted for no more than a heartbeat, and she

was blinking again inside a brightly lit men's room. She wrinkled her nose at the urinals as Ed quickly led her out.

They found themselves in a narrow, dimly lit hallway, with stone walls on either side. "This is a nice place," Ed said quietly. "But a lot of tourists come here."

Clara realized he was looking at the simple outfit she'd put on that morning—jeans and a t-shirt, with a gray hoodie—and frowning. "It's not like you're in a tux," she muttered. "And I thought we were going out the back."

"We are," he confirmed. Clara felt another tickle of magic, and realized he was casting a glamour over them.

"Vaadake, mida peaksite nägema," he muttered, giving the magic shape and purpose.

Appropriate, Clara grinned. An Estonian spell for Estonia. A complex one, too, one she'd never bothered to master. Rather than giving them a specific appearance, anyone who saw them would simply see someone they'd *expect* to see. A waiter, perhaps, rather than a couple of young tourists dressed in jeans.

"That won't hold," he murmured. "Latoya's been trying to show me the trick of settling it better, but I haven't gotten it."

"There's the kitchen," Clara said, resuming her grasp on Ed's forearm and pulling him along—albeit more gently than she'd dragged him through the Border.

They pushed through swinging stainless steel doors. The kitchen had been done in the universal style of commercial kitchens: stainless steel, bright white lights, immaculate white backsplashes, and a continuous clanking of pots and pans. They threaded their way through quickly, drawing no more than a disinterested glance from a prep cook who was busily slicing vegetables. Aside from the clinks of metal cookware, the kitchen was quiet, each person moving with efficiency and speaking only loud enough to be heard. A moment later, they were out the back door, standing in a small, irregularly shaped courtyard dotted with mature oak trees.

"There," Ed said, pointing across the courtyard.

Clara felt Ed's glamour flickering as it began to lose its stability. Almost idly, her eyes spotted the pulsing, unstable equation at the center of the spell, and she *twisted* it with her mind. The problematic symbol split in two, balancing the spell. The flickering sensation faded as the spell settled more firmly onto their skin.

"Thanks," Ed murmured.

With her vision already in magic-mode, Clara quickly spotted the Border. It was attached the a red-brick wall, just to the side of the Restaurant Odessa's rear door. She frowned as she noticed something wrong with the bricks. "Ed, you see that? Next to the Border itself?"

"Mis on kaugel, tehke lähedal," Ed whispered.

Clara suppressed a smile as she mentally twisted the ambient magic into the same shape, creating a wavering disc of air in front of her that magnified her view of the Border. She wondered if Ed was deliberately sticking with Estonian spells, or if he'd just settled on those for his everyday needs.

"I see it now," he said.

"It's chipped all around the edges."

"Like someone tried to drive spikes into the brick. And it looks fresh."

"You mean how the edges are sharp?" she asked.

"Yeah. They tried. . . a half-dozen times, I think. Someone must have come out at the noise of it and chased them off."

"Probably." Clara's stomach heaved a warning and she let out a soft grunt.

"You feel that, too?" Ed asked.

Clara looked up and saw that his face looked a little green. "Yeah. It's. . . it feels sick out here."

"What's the magic look like?"

Clara unfocused further, letting the real world fuzz so that she could see more of the ambient magic. She frowned. "It's smeared. Not as bad as the place in LA." She peered more closely. "It's like the local magic is getting itself back in order. But there are still. . . pools

of the twisted stuff." Even as she watched, a smudge of dark-red magic scuttered across the ground, looking for all the world like a semi-sentient oil slick.

"So this happened a while ago," Ed said.

"I'd guess, yeah. It would have been bad, when they did it."

"So it was Blood Magic."

Clara's stomach gurgled again. "Definitely." Her skin was crawling now, and she batted empty air in a futile attempt to push off a knot of twisted, blurred magic. An acidic, putrid flavor was beginning to surface in the back of her throat. "Ed, I *don't* like it here."

"No, me either," he said, his teeth clenched.

"And I am *not* going back through that Border."

"No." He paused. "Do you think it'll be okay?"

Clara's eyes tracked one of the remaining clouds of Blood Magic. This one was drifting heavily toward one of the trees, but some of its symbols were already lightening in color and growing sharper. "It might. The Blood Magic isn't persisting. We can tell the people in Soloton to keep an eye on the other side."

"Well, that's a relief. Still. . . let's find another Border to get back."

"Yeah. I think we should—wait." Clara's voice tightened. "We need to go."

"What's happened?" Ed said, but Clara could already feel him gathering magic for a translocation spell.

In Clara's vision, all the local magic had suddenly brightened, and begun spinning in a frenetic, frantic pattern. "I think we set off some kind of alarm."

Ed's jaw clenched. "I'm taking us to your Mom's."



From Philadelphia, Clara translocated them to a random Border, this one in Tokyo—a place where there'd been no reports of Paladin activity to date. It was in the middle of a narrow, crowded market

alley, so full of people any Paladins couldn't possibly have noticed them. The Border's magic encouraged humans to give it a bit of space, and so she and Ed were able to step through with no more than a moment's jostling by the crowd.

That Border led to a tiny Underhill hamlet named Nek, at nearly the opposite end of the continent from where they'd begun. Ed begged her to take Anchors back to Wisding, but Clara was in no mood to listen, especially after he checked and admitted they'd have to make at least three connections. With a peremptory snap of her fingers, she drew the local magic into a translocation spell, and deposited them just outside the inn where they'd spent the previous night.

"You're just causing trouble," Ed told her, shaking his head.

"Screw Phoebe Witcher."

Finlay and Wolfgang were already inside the inn, seated at an otherwise empty table with worried expressions on their faces. When they spotted Ed and Clara, Finlay rose, relief relaxing his features.

"Where'd you two go?" he asked. "I thought you said we'd talk before you two went to meet. . . her."

"That's not where we went," Clara said tiredly, sinking onto a bench and signaling the server for a coffee. Something about Underhill made imported coffee both stronger and less bitter, and it was exactly what Clara needed right then. "There's a problem with the Border in Soloton. Or there was."

"Rot?" Wolfgang asked.

Clara shook her head. "Not that bad. We went through, and—"

"Alone?" Finlay said, his voice rising to a near-squeal.

"Stop it," Clara snapped. Then she sighed. "Sorry. Yes, just the two of us. And we were fine. It was Tallinn, in Estonia."

"Was it Blood Magic?" Wolfgang asked.

Clara nodded grimly. "Not entirely fresh, but fresh enough to make us both sick after a few minutes. But it's fading."

"They tried to hammer spikes into a brick wall," Ed added. "But

they apparently couldn't get them into the brick. So it wasn't enough to take the Border down or cause actual Rot, but the Blood Magic obviously leaked through the Border."

"That's almost worse than Rot," Finlay mused.

"How so?" Clara asked.

"I mean, if all they have to do is get Blood Magic *near* a Border to start poisoning Underhill. . ."

"Oh. Yeah." Clara shook her head in frustration. "They shouldn't be able to even *find* Borders. Maybe after we see Ikwity, I'll see if I can relocate some of them. Convince them to. . . let go. Maybe convince them to touch down somewhere less populated. Somewhere easier to hide."

"You make it sound like they're. . . intelligent," Wolfgang said quietly.

"I'm not sure they aren't," Clara said. "Underhill is. They're an extension of it, in a way. Believe me, when I was raising them, they *definitely* had opinions about *where* they wanted to connect the worlds."

"You relocated the first one. The Vegas one," Ed pointed out.

"Yeah," she acknowledged. "But. . . it wasn't ever very happy about being connected to the desert out by the dam. I think it—Underhill, whatever—was just desperate, and we were feeding it so much energy it didn't care. But even then, you remember what it did to the field?"

Ed chuckled. "I do." The former football field had been scorched to bare earth, cementing the plan to move the field, its stadium seating, and its support buildings to the other side of the school's mesa.

"I can't keep doing that if people are going to keep building villages next to them," Clara groused.

"Point," Ed agreed. "So the plan is still to go see Ikwity?"

"Yes."

"What do your Mom and Dad think about all this?" Finlay asked. "The Blood Magic in Tallinn, all that?"

Clara frowned. "I haven't told them. I told you, we went alone."

"Yeah, but—" Finlay started. Then he stopped, looking confused.

"The innkeeper said they'd gone home early this morning," Ed said cautiously.

Wolfgang shook his head. "When you guys weren't here, we tried to send a message. They're not at home, either. We assumed you'd changed your mind, and they'd gone with you."

"They didn't. And they weren't at the row house in Philly," Clara said, suddenly worried.

"Should we. . . check on them?" Ed ventured.

Clara considered it. "It's too easy to put off seeing Aunt Ikwity," she said at last. "But. . . yes. I think so. Maybe they were just. . . I don't know, out for breakfast or something."

"No, we tried to—" Finlay said, but Wolfgang hushed him.

"Let's just check their place here," Ed suggested.

"Fine," Clara said, starting to swirl the local magic into a translocation spell.

"And," Ed said gently, placing a hand on her forearm, "may we *please* follow the rules, this time?"

Clara's mouth twisted into a frown, but she gave in. "Fine."

"We're coming with—" Finlay started.

"*We* will stay here, in case they come back for some reason," Wolfgang interrupted. "Do a Sending if you need us, though."

"Fine," Clara groused, rising and following Ed out of the inn.

"I don't know why this vexes you and your Mom so much," Ed said lightly as they walked toward the Anchor terminus building.

"It's Phoebe Witcher. Her father. The whole family," Clara said. "She was a twit all through school, and—"

"You don't even *remember* most of that, remember?" Ed teased.

"She's still a jerk. And we're *witches,* Ed! Why do we have to take the stupid *bus* when we can just take ourselves wherever we want? It's monumentally *stupid.* The Witchers just want to control people, make *money* off of them. For no reason!"

"We have enough going on," he replied softly as they stepped into the Anchor building. "Let's fight that battle later, maybe?"

"Fine." Clara's tone clearly indicated that it *wasn't* fine, but that she'd drop it. For now.

Ed purchased the travel chits and handed one to Clara. "Off we go."

They stepped up to the painted circle on the floor that marked the Anchor's endpoint, stepped over, and—

—smacked hard into a cold, stone wall.

CHAPTER 8
WITCHER

"Baby, are you okay?"

Clara blinked awake, the world unfurling around her in frustrating slow-motion. A dull ache throbbed behind her eyes, and a deeper, more unsettling emptiness settled in her gut. It was a sensation she hadn't felt since she was a child, fumbling with her first magical equations—a hollowness where the familiar hum of magic usually resided. Panic clawed at her throat. She shifted her vision, and found the space in front of her utterly *empty*. Devoid of the glowing symbols that had been available to her since she turned thirteen. All she could see were the shapeless, yellow-purple blotches that accompanied a sharp knock to her head.

The visual emptiness was accompanied by silence. A dreadful, suffocating silence where the whispers of magic were supposed to be, whispers she'd barely noticed until they were gone. It was like all that soft, ethereal sound had been muted, leaving her adrift in a vast, empty void. Fear, cold and sharp, edged its way through her.

Someone had taken *magic*, and replaced it with a crippling sense of vulnerability. Her breath hitched, a strangled gasp in the oppres-

sive quiet. This wasn't a simple prison; it was a cage built to hold not her body, but the very core of who she was.

"Clara?"

She shook herself. That was her mother's voice.

"Ow," Clara said, rubbing her nose. "Am I bleeding?"

"No, baby. You're fine, just fine."

The flashing stars in Clara's vision were beginning to fade, and she realized her mother had pulled her into a tight hug. "Mom?"

"Yes, baby, I'm right here. Dad's here, too."

"I'm okay too," Ed groaned. "But I'm going to have a bruise on my entire face." Then, in a worried tone, he added, "Wait, why can't I cast a healing spell?"

Clara pulled away from her mother, scanning their surroundings. They were in a small, square room, maybe a dozen feet in either direction. Three walls, the floor, and ceiling were made from close-set white stone, while the fourth was blocked with heavy brass bars that were set into the ceiling and floor. "Are we in *jail?"*

Jessamine's expression twisted into a sneer. "Yes. The Witchers, if you—"

"It's actually on Council orders." Phoebe Witcher, wearing her gray-and-black uniform, stepped into view on the other side of the bars. "You've all been in flagrant violation of the Edict for Secure Translocation, and an Anchor trap was authorized."

"They caught us heading home this morning," Jessamine growled.

"You put us in a *magic sink?"* Ed said in disbelief.

Phoebe's smug grin widened. "As I said, this was authorized by the Council. Now that we have all of you, we'll proffer charges and schedule a hearing. Shouldn't be more than a month or so." Her eyes sparkled with glee.

"And perhaps this will serve as a lesson to you," a male voice said. Clara's eyes widened slightly as a tall man with long, white hair stepped into view. She'd only seen Aaron Witcher a few times at school functions, and always from a distance, but he was impossible

to not recognize. Everything about his features was perfect and regal, as if he'd been explicitly designed for royal portraits. Aquiline nose, strong cheekbones, square jaw, and full lips. *He actually makes Phoebe look plain.* "Respect for the law is what sets us apart from animals."

"Let us out of here *now,* Witcher," Jessamine growled stepping toward the bars.

His lips quirked into a grin that was clearly where his daughter got her own smug expression from. "I think not. Traipsing around the countryside as you have been? No, you're a clear and present danger to everyone. Why, you could pop up anywhere you like, couldn't you?"

"We are dealing with a *crisis,* Witcher," Jessamine said. Clara could tell her mother's anger was boiling into a full-on range, compounded by having her magic taken from her. "Something is attacking the Borders, from the Ordinary side. With *Blood Magic.* Do you know what that means? It's the—"

"The Rot, yes," Aaron Witcher said calmly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Plans are already under way to lock down the Borders, so never you mind. As if you're the only one who can save us all," he added mockingly. "Jessamine and Alex Holdaway, the mighty Counter-Hunters!" He gave a delicate snort. "We're well past the wild days, my dear woman. Past and well-rid of them. Phoebe," he said, turning to his daughter, "see that they're cared for in accordance with the law." He turned back to Jessamine, cocking one eyebrow. *"We* are not animals, of course." With another ghost of a grin on his lips, he turned and stalked away.

"You couldn't get away with it forever," Phoebe said, clearly enjoying herself.

"Pfft," Clara said, unimpressed. "When will you idiots ever learn?" Already, she'd let the room's magic fade into her sight, and while the air *in* the room was empty, she tracked the pattern of densely intertwined expressions that were marching steadily *through* the walls, floor, and ceiling. The brass bars, she realized, were at the center of the overall structure. They weren't *draining* anyone's magic,

like iron would do, but they were instead somehow forcing everyone's magic to stay *in* them. *But that's not stopping me,* she thought as she looked for a weak spot in the spell.

"You can't bluff your way out of a magic sink," Phoebe said confidently. "Now, I'm required to bring you a meal. Would you like. . ."

Clara let Phoebe's self-satisfied voice fade from her awareness, and redoubled her focus on the spell. It *was* tightly crafted. One of the best she'd seen, in fact, each equation perfectly balanced, the overall structure elegantly directing magic.

Almost perfect, she thought as she spotted it. Not an imperfection, but what looked to be a structural weakness in the spell's conceptualizing. *That* equation, right there, was delicate, bridging the gap between the air in the room and the brass bars. The triplets could probably have overwhelmed it with enough synergistic magic, but even a dozen ordinary witches wouldn't have been able to. *Of course, I'm not ordinary.*

Clara reached out with her mind and *snipped* the bridging subexpression, breaking it into two. It quickly reformed—a testament to the spell's precise construction—but the revision was no longer stable. The change propagated quickly, and within seconds there were a thousand pulsing, overly bright cracks in the spell's structure. Within seconds more, the whole thing collapsed, tendrils of rainbow-colored light whipping gently as they broke down and faded. Ambient magic came flowing back into the room.

Phoebe Witcher didn't realize anything was wrong. "—bread or porridge, and water. Obviously, we have to—what are you doing?"

Jessamine Holdaway was wearing a ruthless, determined smile. She raised one arm, palm toward the brass bars, and Clara watched a thick spear of tightly woven magic leap from her hand to the brass bars. *"Drehen und biegen,"* she said firmly, giving the magic its purpose. Instantly and with a tortured, shrieking sound, the bars bent in the middle, pushing themselves toward the side walls. The bars in the center broke free of the ceiling and floor, clattering like broken bells into a loose pile.

Phoebe's mouth was agape. She took a few steps backwards as Ed, Clara, and Clara's parents advanced on the gaping space where the bars had been. She stopped only when her back was pressed to the stone wall opposite the former jail cell.

Clara's Dad was shaking his head. "You really *don't* ever learn, do you?" he said sadly. "Jess, I'm coming around to your point of view on the Anchors."

"Me too," Ed said.

"I got this," Clara said. She pulled the local magic into the correct shape, and the four of them vanished in a shower of prismatic light.

CHAPTER 9

AN INCARNATION OF TIME

"The good news is that there are no Anchors anywhere near, and never will be," Clara said. "So we can't get in more trouble for teleporting ourselves."

"Translocating," Ed corrected her with a grin. "You know the professors always got irritated at that."

Clara shrugged. "And I still don't get the difference."

"Honestly, I never did either. I suspect they just get snippy about it seeming like science fiction rather than magic."

"Whatever. You ready?"

They'd returned to the inn, although Jessamine announced she and Alex would be going directly to their Philadelphia home. Finlay and Wolfgang both looked anxious.

Ed shrugged. "I mean. . . I'm dressed. We're seriously not taking anything?"

"What would we take?"

Ed considered this. "I guess I'm ready, then."

"I still wish you'd let me come," Jessamine murmured.

"Go to Philly, Mom," Clara sighed. "The more of us there are, the more she's going to be irritated."

"I could go instead of—"

"Ed's coming with me," Clara insisted. She took his hand to underscore her words.

"Fine." Jessamine's stubborn expression—one that Ed noted was remarkably like the one Clara herself was wearing—said it *wasn't* fine, but she'd let it go. He smothered a chuckle at how alike the two were.

"Yeah." Clara took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I don't actually directly remember going, so I'm going to try and see if Underhill will guide me, like it did the last time."

"Wait," Ed said, suddenly concerned, "you *don't* know *exactly* where we're going?"

"I didn't last time, either."

"Oh, well in that case I'm completely relieved. What can I do to help us not die?"

"Hush. I need to concentrate."

Clara began to draw magic around herself and Ed, tugging it gently. She closed her eyes and *listened.*

She'd never been able to actually summon the elf or one of his visions; *she* went to *him* when he had something to share. But when she forced herself to be very still, when she shut out the rainbow symbols of ambient magic that always teased the edges of her vision, when she simply *listened,* she felt like she could *feel* Underhill's sentience.

Her heart thumped softly in her chest, and she could feel the gentler, reassuring pattern of Ed's pulse in her hand. She took a slow breath, concentrating on the sensation of the air filling her lungs. She held it for a moment, and then exhaled even more slowly.

There.

A sensation at the back of her mind. Not an intelligence, perhaps, but an *awareness.* Underhill's awareness, bigger and broader than her own, blanketing the world. It breathed magic just as she breathed air, drawing it in from the fountains of the Borders, exhaling an iridescent river that coated the land and filled the skies.

She sensed the Borders—all of them, now—as geysers of pure, white light. Magic, in its purest form, brought over from the Ordinary and colored with Underhill's essence. *There* was the Border in Soloton, its plume of energy already whitening as the Blood Magic in Tallinn finally dissipated. *There* was the broken stub of her first Border, burned and hacked off, disconnected and dead. And *there*. . .

Far to the North, settled cozily amongst the enormous trees of the forest, was her last Border. The Final Border, the one Ikwity herself had told Clara where to place. It differed from the others, in an almost indescribable way. Its fountain of magic was stronger, roaring higher into the sky, but also calmer. It *flowed*, rather than *gushing,* and Underhill sipped at it rather than inhaling with all of its might. The Final Border was at once sturdier and more delicate, stronger and more subtle.

Clara fixed her mind on it, calmly wrapped the local magic into the correct form, and translocated herself and Ed.

She opened her eyes as they arrived.

"It's so quiet," Ed whispered.

It was: a breeze played softly in the leafy canopy overhead, but there was no birdsong, not rustle of little animals. The forest's floor was clean and clear, with only small patches of bushes and underbrushes wherever the sun wedged its way through the dense boughs so far overhead. The trees here felt *ancient,* as if they'd stood before even the coming of the Fae. *They might have,* Clara thought to herself.

"Nobody lives here, as far as I know," Clara murmured, reluctant to break the nearly perfect silence.

"They're calling it the Great Northern Wood," Ed said softly. "There are a few people living along its northern edge, along the coast. Not even enough to be called a village."

"They must like their privacy."

"They're not very welcoming of visitors, no."

They stood for a moment, looking around them, as Clara reached out with her mind and tried to orient herself.

"How do we find her?" Ed whispered after several long, quite minutes.

"Can you feel the difference?" Clara asked distractedly, ignoring his question. "The magic?"

He paused for a moment, considering, and shook his head. "It feels a little looser, maybe. But otherwise, no."

"It's *so* different," Clara whispered.

For a moment, she pitied Ed for his inability to see what she could see. The local magic *was* looser, just as he described, but that's because it was *thinner*. The rainbow hues were muted, emeralds dimmed to avocado, ruby muddied to rust. The symbols and equations themselves were pinched and bloated, as if in a funhouse mirror, and they slipped easily and quietly between the trees. "There's something else," she realized.

"What?"

"I don't know." In Clara's vision, magic had always taken the form of numbers, letters, and mathematical symbols, forming delicately balanced equations. Ambient magic, undirected by any witch's mind, morphed slowly as it drifted through the environment, carrying potential energy with it.

But here, in the Great Northern Wood, magic was joined by something. . . *other*.

"It's more of a haze," Clara said, peering intently at what looked to Ed like thin air. "It's out of focus." She knelt, absentmindedly brushing aside fallen leaves to reveal a patch of smooth, bare dirt, and began tracing a finger through it. "You have to look really, really close," she murmured, her eyes still fixed on a point in midair. "It's not math." She began to sketch.

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"What's it mean?" Ed asked quietly.

Clara shook her head. "I don't know. It keeps. . . changing. No,

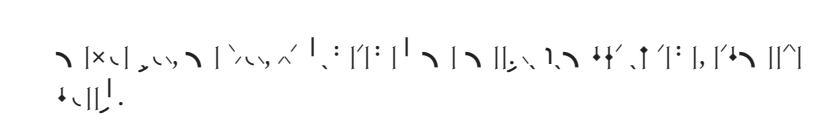
not *changing,"* she realized slowly. "It's. . . more than one thing at once, somehow." Her hand brushed aside another pile of leaves, and her finger traced its way through the dirt.



"It's. . . sad," Clara added as she completed the tracing. "It feels so *heavy."*

Ed nodded slowly. "I suspect that I feel that. Yeah. Maybe." It wasn't just the silence of the forest that weighed on him. As he watched the strange symbols take shape under Clara's fingertip, he felt an *inevitability.* Something here was incredibly ancient. *Beyond* ancient, yet also newborn and nascent. His eyebrows raised. "Clara, I think it's—"

"It's changing again," she whispered. Almost without conscious thought, her hand cleared another section of earth and her finger began tracing new symbols.



"Those are different," Ed said, his brow wrinkling.

"It's what they are," Clara said, her eyes still unfocused. "What were you saying?"

"I wonder," Ed said slowly, "if you're seeing *time."*

Clara blinked furiously as she stood, even shaking her head a bit as her eyes refocused on reality. "Time." Then she nodded. "You may be right. It's *thick* here, Ed."

"So she is one of the Great Powers."

Another nod. "I'd say so."

Then he frowned. "But why would the local magic be different

here? You said this Border was stronger?"

"But delicate," Clara reminded him. She looked up, but even with her vision in magic-mode, she couldn't see past the thick canopy of leaves overhead. "The other Borders. . . magic kind of explodes through them. If you could *see* it, it's like. . . a faucet that's turned on full, but the water's hitting something as soon as it comes out. The magic scatters everywhere. It's *thick,* most places in Underhill. But this Border is different. It's more deliberate." She wracked her brain for an analogy. "You remember that time we walked down to the Bellagio to see the fountains?"

"Sure."

"They're *focused,* right? They can blast water, what, four hundred feet up?"

"I guess."

"That's this Border. The magic doesn't spill out everywhere, here. It blasts up, and then it rains down over all of Underhill. And it's mingling with all this. . . Time." A realization bloomed in her mind. "Ed, that's the trick."

"What is?"

"Time. There's no such thing as time magic, right?"

"I mean, allegedly. Although obviously—"

"But is there a spell that holds you. . . I don't know. *Firmer?* To the time you're in?"

He considered. "You know, there's the Studying Spell."

Clara's memory obligingly delivered and she inhaled sharply. "The Polish one. The one you all called *Trzymaj mnie tu, w tej chwili, ostro."*

"That's the one."

Clara lowered herself into a crouch once more as she let her eyes unfocus. She pulled the thin ambient magic into the proper form for the spell, actually muttering the words under her breath as she did so. "It's working," she said quietly.

The magic pulled and strained against Time. With a *snap,* the

hazy, unfocused not-magic around them clicked into focus, and Clara quickly sketched what she was seeing.



"It doesn't look any different," Ed observed.

"It's still ancient," Clara said, standing. "But it's sharper now. Although. . . mm," she said with a grimace, releasing the spell and refocusing her eyes. "It's a *lot* to hold onto, here. But it might work."

"Work for what?"

"Ikwity. If we can find her."

"She finds *you,"* a voice snapped behind them.

They whirled, and Clara blinked furiously. They were no longer amongst the trees, but were instead standing in Ikwity's little cottage. A small fire flickered gently in the fireplace, and the old woman was seated before them. "Sit," she ordered, and without passing through any of the intervening space, Clara and Ed were sitting in old, overstuffed chairs that hadn't been there a moment before.

Clara's mind started to feel fuzzy. "Stop that," she snapped. She reached out with her mind and forced the local magic into the Studying Spell. She knew an extended version of it, and she muttered the words to reinforce her efforts: *"Trzymaj mnie tutaj w tej chwili ostro, mój czas jest skupiony i nieruchomy, a moje wysiłki jasne i zaznaczone."* As the local magic complied, the fuzziness in her mind faded. She realized Ed had been reciting the spell with her, and she could *feel* the local manifestation of Time sharpen and still. Ikwity's face seemed to sharpen as well, becoming more real, more present.

The old woman sniffed, a shrewd expression sharpening her features further. "Learnt a trick or two, have we?" Her kaftan had settled into a solid hunter green. She looked exactly as Clara's admittedly dazed memory recalled her: white hair in tight curls piled atop

her head, her brown eyes bright and sharp, the dark skin of her face deeply lined with age. "Tell Ikwity why you've come."

"We know what you are," Clara began. "We—"

"Oh, we *knows* things, does we?" She sniffed again. "Well, if we *knows* so much, why's we bothering an old woman?"

"You're helping the Paladins. Helping them attack witches." Clara reinforced the Studying Spell as Ikwity's kaftan began shifting to a paisley pattern, and it settled back to hunter green. The strain of holding the thin local magic in place was considerable, and Clara felt her shoulders begin to tighten.

The old woman frowned. "Witches be perfectly safe here," she insisted. "Come here, be safe. All of us."

All of us? "What do *you* need to be safe from?" Clara asked.

Ikwity looked toward the fire, but said nothing.

"You've been dropping magical artifacts throughout time," Ed said, withdrawing a small wooden cross from one pocket. Clara had broken the Blood Magic on this one, rendering it inert. Ed held it out for Ikwity to see.

She turned back and looked down at the cross for a moment before shrugging. "May be I seen it, may be I ain't."

"But you *have* seen it. This dates as almost two thousand years old, but look," Ed said, turning it over. *Hencho en Mexico* was stamped into its back. "It was made recently."

"There's no such thing as time magic," Clara insisted.

Ikwity's eyes flew open. "No *such?*" She pointed a finger at Clara. "Tell *me* no such? Magic *is* time, child. Tell me *no such.*" She snorted and leaned back in her chair, lowering her hand to her lap. "Mab and her courts played with time plenty. Stole from me, they did. Twisted and shifted like it was a toy." She looked back at the fire. "Tell Ikwity *no such,"* she grumbled.

Clara's brow furrowed. "Witches don't have time magic."

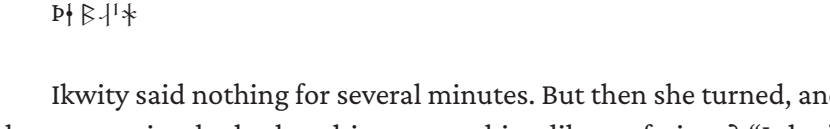
Ikwity continued staring at the flames. "Likes witches a whole lot more than dem Fae," she muttered.

Understanding dawned. "Because we don't mess with time."

"Not yours to mess with."

A bead of sweat rolled down Clara's forehead as she pulled more magic around them as Ikwity's clothes tried to shift to a yellow-and-pink checkerboard. A cold stab of alertness settled her mind, and the kaftan sullenly settled back to dark green. "Why are you helping them?" she asked softly. "You're taking their artifacts, and taking them back in time. They're passing them off as ancient holy relics. They're using Blood Magic. You have to have known."

Ikwity stared at Clara for a long moment, as if sensing the magic she and Ed were invoking. *She must feel it,* Clara realized, her stomach clenching as she drew even more of the sparse local magic into the construct. It swirled at the edges of her vision, thick, solid equations of marigold and cornflower, caressing the local haze of Time and locking it into place through sheer brute force. The strange symbols of Time wove between the magic's equations, spelling out a declaration that Clara could see, but not understand.



Ikwity said nothing for several minutes. But then she turned, and her expression had relaxed into something like. . . fatigue? "I don't condone Blood Magic," she muttered. Her tone was sharper, younger somehow, and she'd dropped the pidgin that Clara now realized had been nothing but an affectation.

"But you took them anyway," Clara insisted.

"Witches belong *here,"* Ikwity insisted.

"So you helped them. . . herd us? Scare us? Force everyone to Underhill to get away from the Paladins?"

Ikwity shrugged. "Little trinkets, here and then. Whether it's magic now or magic then, it makes no difference. It's all the same."

"Yes, but *why?"* Clara pleaded.

"You want answers to your questions?" Ikwity said in a sly tone.

"We're paying no price," Ed said firmly. Ikwity raised an eyebrow. "You've put us all in danger. Even yourself. Do you know about the Rot?"

Ikwity spat to one side. "Don't speak of that."

"But that's what *happened,"* Ed said coldly. *"*They staked one of the Borders, Clara's first one, with spikes imbued with Blood Magic. The Border was *rotting.* She had to cut it off, blast it out. It destroyed the school."

Ikwity frowned.

"Tell us *why* you did it," Clara asked quietly.

Ikwity looked away, looked back, and then sighed. "I can't live over there."

"In the Ordinary, you mean?"

"They never *made* me, over there. Here, the silly, stupid Fae woke me up. There. . . I'm just watches and clocks, over there. Not Ikwity."

Ed's eyes widened. "The humans never personified you," he breathed. "Never tampered with you. You. . . you're only *sentient* here."

Ikwity didn't correct him, but her frown deepened.

"You need us to believe in you," Clara whispered.

Again, the old woman stayed silent, but her expression was all the confirmation Clara needed.

"But then why do you insist on being alone out here?"

"Don't like to be messed with," Ikwity grumbled. "Might have been *made,* but Ikwity is nobody's slave." Her voice had gone grumpy again, slipping back into her rough grammar.

"The earliest humans. . . they had no concept of time," Ed mused softly. "They knew sunrise, sunset, but the hours in between didn't mean anything to them. Time. . . it doesn't exist unless it's observed."

"You can't exist there," Clara realized, putting it together, "but you need witches *here* or you can't exist here, either."

Ikwity looked away, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You've been helping the Paladins chase us here to. . . believe in you?" Clara finished uncertainly.

"Witches don't belong there," Ikwity said in a low voice. "Witches are *here.* All witches. Always have been."

"No we haven't," Clara insisted.

Ikwity shrugged. "Have been, are, will be. All the same to Ikwity."

Clara blinked. "You're. . . saying we do all come here. In the future."

"She doesn't see the past or the present or the future," Ed said slowly. "It's all the same to you, isn't it?"

Ikwity shrugged, and at the edges of Clara's sight, the odd symbols of Time began melting into one another.

"It's already in motion," Clara realized. "Even Mom knows it, I think. Or feels it. It's gone too far, the Paladins know too much. We *are* all going to come here."

"But we can't survive here," Ed reminded her.

Ikwity's eyes snapped back to them. "What you talk about, boy?"

"We can't survive here," Clara explained. "As a species. We can't conceive children. That only happens in the Ordinary. So we have to be able to go back."

Ikwity mulled this over. "Creativity."

"Yes," Clara nodded. "It's real, isn't it? A Power, I mean. An incarnation, like you."

"Battered and beaten, him. Mab and her courts, they hurt him the most," Ikwity said in a low, gravely declaration. "Ran as soon as he could."

"This Border, the one you helped me place—it's different, isn't it?" Clara asked, shifting subjects. There was a connection here. She *felt* it.

Ikwity nodded slowly. "Shaped it. From the other side."

"You mean Creativity did."

The old woman nodded again. "Thought he'd come back." She sighed. "Thought if he made his own door, thought if he stayed here with Ikwity, thought he'd feel safe." She shook her head. "Exists

outside of Time, him. But loves him some people. Loves him some humans. Bright sparks of minds, them." She sighed again. "Won't come back."

"Could we convince him?" Ed asked.

Ikwity barked a laugh. "I doubt it," she said sadly, once again dropping her broken grammar. "He hates it here. Hates me. That's the problem with time, you see? Time means having memories. Scars. Things you can't forget." Her tone grew contemplative. "I don't have memories. Ikwity *is* memories." Clara had the odd, disjointed sense that Ikwity—this persona that the Great Power had adopted—was little more than a face it wore. That it slipped in and out of the persona at need.

That realization sparked a thought in Clara's mind. "Did you ever help any of the other mathemagicians raise Borders?"

Ikwity's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Math-ah-what, child?"

Clara's eyes itched as Ikwity's features alternated between sharp and vague. "Mathemagicians. What I am."

"Witch is what you is." The old woman still looked confused.

"Not exactly," Clara explained. "I don't have magic *in* me, like the rest do. But I can *see* it. Manipulate it. That's how I raised the Border, here. Only mathemagicians can do that."

"Heh, heh," Ikwity chuckled softly. "No, child, never helped with their fairy rings, never helped with their rings of light." She tilted her head to one side. "You want some tea, children?"

Something rushed to the top of Clara's mind. *Drink your tea, girl. Rooibos. Red tea, not black, not green. A favorite of Aunt's. Native to Africa. Also a favorite. Old people there, old ways. Old stories. Drink.*

"Rooibos," Clara mumbled.

"What?" Ed asked.

Ikwity's eyes widened a fraction as her features sharpened. Her eyes held a sly, wary glint. "You *do* want some tea, child?" she said softly.

Something more rippled in Clara's mind: *Followed some dreamer*

boy into a place that never should have been. Forget her, even if she is your long-distant ancestor.

"Mab. . . we're her people. . ." Clara murmured, her brain grasping at the tendrils of memory.

"'mpossible," Ikwity said more loudly, her eyes widening further.

What's for dinner, Clara Thorn?

"I remember," Clara breathed.

"No!" Ikwity barked leaning forward in her chair. Her eyes were flashing with anger. "Tha's Ikwity's time! *Mine!"*

"I remember!" Clara shouted back.

And then she *did* remember.

Everything.

The time Professor Dannegal had clapped when Clara had finally gotten her first translocation spell to work.

The cheers as the eleventh-year team—*her* team—won the annual Finals Cup in Wizard's Rules Football.

The fear she'd felt when Phoebe and her clique had managed to corner her alone.

The satisfaction she'd felt when she'd taken their magic and broken their spells.

The even greater satisfaction when Brinley Marsh socked Phoebe in the jaw and walked away from her.

The taste of Bumbleberry Pie from the shop in Linginham.

Visiting her adoptive parents in Las Vegas for Christmas, and watching their eyes light up when they unwrapped the presents she'd brought them. Presents she'd *made.* Earrings for her mother, a heavy ring for her father, both subtly enchanted to never need cleaning.

The pounding of her heart as she, Ed, and the triplets raced away from a Paladin who'd happened to see them suddenly appear in the alley.

The first kiss she'd shared with Ed.

"No," Ikwity whispered, settling heavily back in her chair. "Those were Ikwity's years." Then she shook her head. "No witch, you."

"I told you," Clara said, her voice suddenly gritty. She cleared her throat, but it didn't help. "I'm a mathemagician."

Again, Ikwity shook her head. "Fae blood thick in you, child."

"Clara, are you all right?" Ed asked softly.

"I'm okay," Clara replied as her heart slowed to something closer to normal. She hadn't even realized it had been racing. "It all came back, Ed. My memories. All of them."

His eyes seemed to light up. "Even—"

She smiled. "Everything."

His soft, shy smile nonetheless outshone her own. "But how?"

"I don't know. It just—"

"Fae blood thick in the girl," the old woman said more loudly, as if that explained everything. "How could Ikwity not know?" she asked herself, sounding genuinely puzzled. "Unless Ikwity *doesn't* know." She shook her head in confusion, her eyes downcast. The fuzzy symbols of Time scurried madly in Clara's sight, dipping and roiling as Ikwity considered what was happening. Clara hauled the scant local magic into shape, strengthening the Studying Spell. Next to her, she felt Ed doing the same.

"It's the tea, isn't it?" Clara asked. "That's how you do it."

"Got to seal agreements," Ikwity mumbled.

"But you gave me the tea before I—oh. Right. The order doesn't matter to you, does it?"

Ikwity shrugged.

"I didn't raise this Border by myself, did I?"

Clara felt Ed stiffen beside her, but she didn't take her eyes off of Ikwity. Eventually, the old woman shook her head.

"I've never been able to, before. I can't pull together enough magic. Someone has to help me. But you didn't help me, did you?"

Another shake.

"It *was* Creativity, wasn't it?"

Ikwity started to shake her head, then shrugged. "Reached out. Thought. . . maybe if he shaped it, he'd come home."

That's what she meant, earlier. "It *is* different," Clara said thoughtfully.

"How so?" Ed asked.

"It's. . . hard to describe. What I see, I mean. It's what I told you earlier. The other Borders, they're like fountains. Magic comes through them—it's white, pure. Like when the triplets do their Voltron thing. But it's wilder, almost untamed. Raw power, just rushing through. Underhill. . . *breathes* it, in a way. It comes out rainbow-colored, all loose equations and symbols. To me, at least. That's what we all use."

"But we can still use magic in the Ordinary," Ed pointed out.

"I don't know how it all works, I'm just telling you what I see," Clara said. "But this Border is different. Magic flows through it more gently. It's calmer."

"Shaped it to suit hisself," Ikwity grumbled. "Then stayed away anyhow."

"But his power could come through here, though. If he let it."

Ikwity's eyes flashed as she considered it. "Maybe. Child might be right."

"So if we can't bring him back, maybe we can. . . convince him? To send his power through? Through *this* Border?" Ed sounded doubtful.

"I think so," Clara mused. "Maybe. But. . . I don't know if he'll trust me. Do I really have Fae blood in me?"

Ikwity looked up at last, nodding slowly. "Thick in you child. All witches, but you're thickest I've seen. How could Ikwity not know?" she murmured, shaking her head again.

"Will Creativity. . . hate me? Hate us all?"

Ikwity sighed, and her features shifted back to the sharper, slyer version that Clara was beginning to associate with Time itself. "There are Fae, child, and there are *Fae.* Mab, she's the queen, mother to all the Fae. She's capricious. Malignant, even. Selfish, for certain. But. . . some of her children. . ." Ikwity sighed. Clara blinked—the old woman

was holding a half-full cup of rich-smelling tea, and she hadn't even seen her make it. Hesitantly, she pulled more magic around her, feeding it to her Studying Spell, but the teacup remained in Ikwity's hands. "Some of her children were *angels,* child," Ikwity continued, her voice softening. "Aubrette, she was a favorite of mine." Her eyes seemed to refocus on Clara, even as her features slumped into the version that represented the *personality* Time had adopted. "Fae didn't use no magic, child. Fae just *willed* what they wanted. But witches use magic to get their way. Takes *Creativity* to do that. Delights him. Hates the Fae, but loves him some witches. You find him, you'll see."

"You think he'll help us?"

She shrugged again. "Ikwity should *know.* Ikwity should have seen it already. But. . . that's that thick Fae blood. Hides things from Ikwity. Keeps them out of time." Another shrug. "Ikwity can't charge for answers Ikwity doesn't have." She sounded mildly frustrated.

"We have to try it, then. If we can get Creativity, or at least his power, back in Underhill, then we *can* live here. Safely," Ed said.

"Already does," Ikwity muttered at that, although she still sounded annoyed.

"If it can come through this Border," Clara thought aloud, "it'll spread all over Underhill."

"Have to keep this place secret," Ikwity mused. "Sacred. No witches, no spells. Pure Creation. . . dangerous. Let it out, let it trickle. . ."

"Pure Creativity combined with magic," Clara breathed, realizing the danger.

"Imagination come to life, child," Ikwity agreed solemnly. "Make you like the Fae. Dangerous. Keep away from the source, let it spread."

"We could make this place off limits, couldn't we?" Ed said. "The entire forest?"

"Yes, I'm sure we can find a way. But we still have the Paladins to contend with," Clara reminded him. "We have to keep them from

poisoning the Borders, bringing back the Rot. And we still have to *find* Creativity and convince him."

"The Blood Witch," Ikwity said.

Clara's eyes widened. "You *do* know it's Blood Magic."

"Ikwity knows much she doesn't say," the old woman admitted. "Didn't know Blood Magic caused the Rot."

"Wait, have you *seen* the Blood Witch?" Ed asked. "Where is he? Or she? Clara, Blood Magic only works while the Blood Witch *lives.* If we could find them—"

"The boy asks a question," Ikwity said, a sly expression creeping over her face. "Answers have prices."

"No!" Clara snapped, feeding more magic into the Studying Spell. But this time, it met with resistance. The ambient magic was insufficient to hold it much longer—she could actually feel the equations slipping from her mind's grasp. Her heart began to hammer in her chest as she wrestled with the magic, but the inexorability of Time was starting to win. Her eyes darted around the room as she began to panic, and she—

Breathed a sigh of relief as magic began flooding into her. It was Ed: he'd placed one hand on hers, while his other gripped one of the fully charged crystals he'd kept in his pocket. The Studying Spell firmed, threading itself through the ambient Time, settling it in place.

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The interior of Ikwity's cottage became sharp and hard, the colors brightened, and even the flames in the fireplace seemed to prick into acute angles. "No prices!" Clara all but shouted.

"Child," Ikwity said, her expression gentling, "all answers has prices. Not Ikwity's rule."

"We'll find the Blood Witch ourselves," Ed said.

Ikwity shrugged.

"And Creativity."

Another shrug.

"He's through this Border, isn't he?" Clara asked. "No, you don't have to answer. I can tell, now that we're near. Now that I know. That's part of what makes this one different, Ed. It's. . . smoother. Bigger. Like it was made to carry. . . more. We go through, and Creativity is somewhere on the other side."

"We're not going alone," Ed insisted.

"No, we're not," Clara agreed. Then, to Ikwity, "Look, we'll keep this place off-limits. I have some ideas on how. Maybe we'll encourage some people to live along the edges of the forest, act as wardens. They can keep people out. But we're going to have to bring our team here. Just this once. We have to go through it."

"Do you know where this one goes?" Ed asked.

Clara shook her head. "No. I don't think I ever knew. It. . ."

Another memory surfaced. *Reaching down, down into the roots of the world, just as she'd done with every Border. A surge of powerful, pure magic rode behind her, although it had a taste she hadn't encountered before. Fresh, but ancient, like lavender over moss. She discarded the thought, forced herself to focus. She reached down with her "hands," deeper and deeper, until. . . a pair of hands reached back. She hesitated. That had never happened before. But they were clearly from the other side, from the Ordinary. They stopped as well, waiting for Clara to continue. But the magic that had carried her this far was beginning to thin, and Clara knew it wouldn't last much longer, so she pushed forward, her "hands" grasping the other pair. The moment she made contact, she was flooded with light, with energy. With ideas, with questions. Their power combined, flowing easily between the worlds, and a Border began to form.*

Clara shook her head. "I remember creating it. But I don't know where it goes. I—something helped me. Creativity, maybe. Maybe. It reached up from the Ordinary, and I never saw where this Border anchored itself. Or if I did, I don't remember."

"No time, no memories," Ikwity whispered as she turned back toward the fire. Clara could feel Ed's crystal emptying rapidly, the

amount of magic needed to hold Time in place growing by the moment. As her grip on the magic weakened, the Studying Spell began to falter, and the interior of the cottage darkened a bit. The color of Ikwity's kaftan began to waver. Clara reached for more power, but the ambient magic around her had thinned, and Ed's crystal was down to its last ergs.

"Ed, we should go," Clara warned. She'd didn't think she could hold the Studying Spell for much longer. Already, the angular symbols of Time were melting, insinuating themselves into her equations, breaking down the carefully balanced mathematics. Past was becoming Future, Future becoming Present.

"Find the Blood Witch, find Creativity," Ed said, nodding slightly. He sounded as tired as Clara felt. "But all witches are still coming here, aren't they?"

"The Paladins aren't going to give up," Clara said, shaking her head sadly. "They've had too many wins. They know our weaknesses. Even if we break every artifact they have, they'll just come up with something else. I wonder if they even know about the Blood Witch."

"Yeah."

"Witches *belong* here," Ikwity insisted. "Always *been* here."

"You've said," Clara muttered, standing. "Fine. Looks like you'll get your way. But you know, you could at *least* give us a pointer or something. You're the one who caused the Rot, you know."

The old woman frowned. "Killing the Blood Witch won't change anything," she said, looking hard at Ed. Her features sharpened again, the Ikwity persona fading for a moment.

He frowned. "What do you mean? Blood Magic can't persist—"

"Cause, effect, cause, effect, phfft," she said, waving a hand in the air. "You talk about persistence to me!" Her features shifted again, the aged and recalcitrant persona coming to the fore. "Ikwity knows *persistence,* boy."

Ed's eyes widened as he stood. "Taking the artifacts back in time. . . they existed *before* the Blood Witch. So they're not tied to each

other." He looked at Clara, and she saw the panic rising in his eyes. "Clara, we can't—"

"Hush, boy-child," Ikwity said sharply, leaning forward. She focused intently on Clara. "Ikwity feels bad about the Rot. Ikwity didn't know." She blinked hard, and shook her head, as if trying to clear it of cobwebs. "Don't know how Ikwity didn't know. But Ikwity gives you one answer for free. Makes us square up, yes?"

"The answer to what?" Clara asked hesitantly.

Ikwity's sly smile returned. "You knows when you know."

"Fine," Clara said rolling her eyes. "Ed, let's go." She took his hand and led him toward the cottage's only door. "We'll be back with our team," Clara said. "Soon. Today, if possible. Tomorrow at the latest." She put her hand on the doorknob. "Just stay out of our way and we'll stay out—"

CHAPTER 10
VILNIUS

"—Of your—oh." Clara stopped and looked around. "She did it again." Then she squinted. Everything in front of her was. . . a sketch. The walls were pure white, with furniture and even a door and window sketched in thick, black lines. "Um, Ed?"

"Turn around," he said with a chuckle.

Clara did so, and realized that the other half of the room was normally colored. A set of low shelves ran down the middle, colored black and white on one side and, she realized, a deep maple on the other. An artificial plant sat atop, its pot and half its leaves painted to look like a monochrome sketch, the other half cunningly detailed to look like real, green stalks and leaves.

"I suspect it's some kind of art installation," Sandy murmured, looking closely at the "sketched" wall. Clara turned at Sandy's voice, frowning.

A vaulted skylight took up most of the ceiling, admitting a rich, golden light.

"Late afternoon?" Reuben ventured.

Clara turned to him. “Reuben?” She swung her head around, and realized she and Ed weren’t alone. “Latoya? You’re here, too?”

“And Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna,” Ed said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the triplets. “Yeah, she did it again.”

“Who did what?” Johanna asked.

“Ikwity,” Clara sighed. “What was the last thing you all remember?”

“Um,” Idalia said, chewing her lip. “You’d called us all. We met up in Wisding, at that inn. You said we were going through the Final Border.”

“And when was that?” Ed prompted.

“A. . . minute ago?” Harriett ventured, her eyebrows scrunched together.

“No, it had to be last night,” Idalia countered. “We had dinner.”

“I don’t remember having dinner,” Sandy said. “I mean, I remember. . . at least, I think. . .” Her voiced trailed off in confusion.

“Aunt Ikwity,” Clara confirmed. “At least she only took a night or so from us this time. Must have been her ’price’ for letting this many of us into her woods.”

“So we went through the Border?” Latoya asked. She was still looking around the room curiously.

Clara hesitated before responding, "That seems to be the case." She paused, looking around as if searching for an answer. "But I can't see where it would fit in."

“Ar galiu jums padėti?” a new voice asked.

Everyone turned to see a young woman standing at the far end of the long room, smiling at them. Her dark hair was gathered into a neat ponytail, and she was dressed in a conservative gray skirt and blazer.

Clara quickly twisted some of the local magic into a translation spell, and heard the others muttering, *“Omnia verba unum”* to achieve the same effect. But at their blank stares, the woman quickly switched to English. “May I help you?”

“Um,” Clara stammered. “Can you tell us where we are?” Her

words were clear enough in her own ears, but she also heard a quiet, *"Ar galite pasakyti, kur mes esame?"* as the translation spell did its job. She knew from long practice that the spell would include a glamour around her lips, making them seem to match the words that she herself couldn't understand.

"Mmm," the woman said, her lips twisting slightly. "Could you turn that off, please? I find the echo disorienting."

Clara released the magic. "Sorry. We just—wait. You're a witch?"

The woman nodded, her expression settling back into a smile. "Yes. And you're witches as well. We assumed as much when you appeared out of thin air on the security cameras." She turned her head up and slightly to one side, and Clara tracked her glance to a discrete security camera mounted on the ceiling. *"Kol kas šią parodą palikite uždarytą,"* she said, adding, "I have asked my colleagues to keep this exhibit closed for now." Then her expression turned a bit more serious. "You did not set off any of our translocation wards. May I ask how you arrived here?"

"The Border," Ed said. "From Underhill."

The woman paled a bit, but nodded. "I see. That is. . . unusual. You are. . . very certain?"

"Oh, very," Clara assured her. "And it was probably quite the argument on the Underhill side, but thankfully we don't remember that."

"I. . . do not understand," the woman said.

"It's an incredibly long story," Clara assured her. "But we definitely came through this Border."

"I see."

"People don't use it much."

"No," the woman agreed. "Better to say *at all.* I have been here since it was. . . created. Installed. Whichever. Six, almost seven years." Then she tilted her head and looked at Clara. "You are her, are you not? Clara Thorn?"

Clara nodded. "We needed. . . that is, it was important for us to know where this one came out. And yes, I'm Clara. This is Ed. My

friends, Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna. And that's Latoya, that's Reuben over there, and this is Sandy. My mother is—"

"Jessamine Holdaway, yes," the woman said. "I am Aldona Balkus. I am one of the curators here at the museum."

"Excuse me," Reuben said. "Which museum, exactly?"

"The Museum of Illusions," Aldona said.

"I'm assuming not the one in Boston," Sandy said.

Aldona chuckled. "No, the one in Vilnius."

As one, the triplets frowned. "Vil. . ." Idalia began uncertainly.

"Vilnius," Aldona repeated. "The capital of Lithuania."

"Oh."

"It is in Europe. Near the Baltic—"

"Got it," Ed said. "Sorry, we're just. . . a little disoriented."

Aldona turned back to Clara. "May I ask, then, why you came through the Border to here?"

"This Border is. . . special," Clara began. "There's. . . have you been having any problem with Paladins? Here, I mean?"

Aldona shook her head firmly. "No. We are aware, of course, and we have received the warnings, but. . . Lithuania is a little special, in that regard. Vilnius even more so. And we are very careful with Anchor placement. And obviously this Border isn't used. Does this Border have something to do with it, then? These problems?"

"In a way," Clara sighed, her shoulders slumping. "It's complicated." She looked around the room, but didn't see any of the telltale signs of a Border, even with her vision slipped into magic-mode. "I don't see it, though?"

"The Border? No, it is just behind that wall," Aldona said, nodding to the black-and-white sketched wall behind Clara. Then she tilted her head. "How is it that *you* would not know where it is? And where it comes out on this side?"

Clara sighed again and glanced at Ed. "Again, it's. . . complicated. This was the last Border I raised. Underhill itself had. . . opinions. On where the Borders went, I mean. It's slightly. . . I guess you could call it sentient." She looked for a reaction from Aldona; most people

other than her friends and her mother's counter-hunting team tended to give her odd looks when she talked about Underhill's sentience, but Aldona simply nodded and waited for her to continue. "This Border, the last one, had to go in the woods. In the upper left of the map."

"Northwest," Ed supplied at Aldona's slight frown. "They're calling it the Great Northern Wood, now."

Aldona nodded slowly. "That is. . . very isolated. My parents considered the area when they relocated, but said it felt. . . discouraging. You said Underhill. . . does it *speak* to you?"

Clara nodded. "Quite literally. It always has. It started when I first went there, before the old Borders started coming down."

"And it has. . . opinions. On Borders."

"On their locations, yes. You know how its geography has stabilized?" Aldona nodded. "The Borders do that. These ones are connected, very deeply, to both the Ordinary and Underhill. So deeply that the Ordinary's own stability, I'm thinking, is what's making Underhill less variable."

"Convenient, with so many witches moving there now," Aldona said.

Clara blinked.

"So convenient," Ed murmured.

Clara turned to him. "You don't think she—"

He spread his hands. "I'm assuming she *did.*"

Clara stared at him for several long moments.

"I'm sorry, what are we talking about?" Aldona said.

Clara turned back to her. "Sorry. It's. . ."

"Complicated?"

Clara raised an eyebrow, and then shrugged. "To say the least."

"And it has something to do with why this Border isn't used?"

"Yeah. It's where it comes out, in the Great Northern Wood. There's a Power there," Clara explained. "And she wants to be left alone. But the last Border is there, *wanted* to be there, and it's different from the others. Its creation involved. . . another Power. A

different one I wasn't fully aware of at the time." She realized that the experience hadn't been included in her recently unlocked memories. "I'm still not, actually. I didn't know where this one came out. But we think this one may be part of the solution. For the bigger problem." She paused for a moment. "Can I see it, please?"

"The Border? Of course," Aldona said. "We just. . . a Power, you say. Hmm." She thought for a moment before continuing. "We wondered why you had chosen this location, but it seems you did not."

"I didn't really *choose* where any of them connect on this side," Clara said. "The magic does. Underhill wanted them in specific places on that side, but when I start raising one, the magic kind of. . . seeks out a place. It prefers populated places, places where—" she stumbled a bit, suddenly uncertain if going into the whole "magic comes from humans" bit was going to cause an argument. "Places where there are lots of people," she finished lamely. "But I've never actually seen this one." She blinked. "Actually, I've never seen it in Underhill, either."

Aldona frowned. "How is that possible, if that is how you came through to this side?"

Ed rolled his eyes. "It's complicated."

"I thought it might be."

"The Power in the Great Northern Wood *really* values her privacy. And she has a way of. . . *affecting* memories," Clara warned.

"Interesting."

"Please. I'd really like to see this one. I suspect maybe I can't see it from the other side, but. . . I need to see it here. I need to make sure it's okay, see if there are any. . . clues. Please," she repeated.

Aldona nodded and strode past Clara. She laid her hand on the wall, in the middle of the sketched doorway. She muttered something low that Clara didn't catch, but Clara did see the local magic spin in response. The wall developed seams along the rough edges of the sketch lines, and the door swung open into the room. Aldona stepped to one side. "Not very many of us have seen it," she said, her

tone cautioning. "And I would suggest only two of you go through at a time. Also. . ." she paused, and then shrugged. "Some find the experience unpleasant. I did."

Clara and Ed exchanged worried glances, but stepped forward. "Is there anything dangerous?"

"No, no," Aldona assured them, taking another step back to give them room. "It. . . we would say, *mane šiurpuliuoja."* She considered for a moment. "Gives me the creeps?"

"Oh good," Clara muttered. "Great. Ed and I will go in. Everyone else, hang out here for a minute."

Rueben opened his mouth to protest, but Ed grabbed Clara's hand and stepped through the doorway before he could say anything.

Immediately, Clara felt the wobbly, sheet-of-gelatin sensation of stepping into an expanded space. She'd gotten used to the feeling since nearly everyone building homes in Underhill used the magic to some extent, giving themselves palatial, expansive homes that magically fit within the neat, medieval cottage-like exteriors everyone seemed to favor, but she hadn't expected it here. Borders tended to distort set-magics like that, scrambling the equations of magic and making it more difficult to keep persistent spells stable.

"Wow," Ed breathed. "It made a meadow."

Clara's eyes widened as she took in the vista before her. This space-within-a-space was *enormous.* The Border was far ahead of them, a granite monolith rendered small by the distance, and it was surrounded by a flat meadow of ankle-high, brilliantly emerald grass. Yellow flowers were scattered here and there, and the sky overhead was a deep, cloudless azure. "This is bonkers," she said quietly as she and Ed took another step forward. "I wonder if it works because the space is so—"

Another wobbly feeling rippled over their skin as the scene changed. Now they were on a stony, windswept mesa. Red dust filled the air, and they both squinted and shielded their faces against it. The Border was markedly closer now, but it had taken the form of a

jagged pillar of burnt umber, with scraggly gray-green scrub growing out of its crevices.

"They're. . . *nested?"* Ed said with disbelief, raising his voice over the whistling wind.

"I didn't think that was possible!" Clara sneezed, wiping grit from her face with her free hand.

"It's not with the classic *Spazio Nello Spazio,"* he replied, blinking furiously. "But there's an Egyptian variant that—"

"Yeah, yeah," Clara interrupted, stepping forward and pulling him by the hand.

The next sensation felt less like the soft wobbly of gelatin and more like stepping through the wall of a giant latex balloon. The air itself resisted them for a moment, stretching slightly until it *snapped,* almost popping them into the next scene.

"Oh, this has to be the Egyptian one," Ed said, ruffling his hair and raising a thin cloud of red dust. *"Almajalat Almutadakhila,* I think it's called. It—"

"Not relevant," Clara interrupted. They were now in a dense forest, one entirely different from the quiet majesty of the Great Northern Wood. This forest featured a heavy, dense undergrowth, and an almost constant rustling from creatures Clara dearly hoped would stay where they were. The Border itself was several steps closer, a soaring sequoia, towering hundreds of feet over them. It had pushed its way through the canopy of its more diminutive neighbors, so that they couldn't even see its upper boughs.

"This still shouldn't be possible," Ed mused. "The amount of magic this must take. . ."

Clara shifted her vision and gasped. "Oh, it's a lot," she said. "The equations. . . they're so *tight* here. I can barely even make out the individual glyphs. And they're *bright."* Her mind offered up words to describe the intense, off-white colors. "Eburnean. Tyrian. Puce."

"Are you naming people, or things?" Ed chuckled.

"Colors," Clara grinned back. "I've got *hundreds* of color names."

"Fair enough. Do we step forward?"

"We've come this far." She and Ed moved forward as one this time, but pulled back sharply. "Ow. What was that?" The sensation had been less *latex balloon* and more *thick sheet of rubber.*

Ed shook his head. "I didn't feel anything different. I don't think."

"Wait, you haven't?" Clara looked up at him. "Not the whole Jell-O feeling when we first stepped in, even?"

He shook his head. "Don't know what you mean."

"Anytime I step into one of these space-within-a-space things," Clara insisted. "It's like. . . rubbery."

Ed tilted his head, and then his eyes widened as comprehension dawned. "Oh. Oh, I get it."

"Sharing is caring."

"It's your magic. Well, you're *not* magic, if you know what I mean."

Clara frowned. "I do not."

"All of these space compression spells are like bubbles, right?"

"Sure."

"So you can't just walk through a bubble. It'll pop."

"Right."

"Every time you cross a threshold, a little of your own magic goes into opening the way and then closing it behind you."

Clara's frowned deepened. "I don't have magic inside me."

"Right, that's what I mean."

"So how've I been going through these things all this time?"

Ed shrugged. "You're probably hauling enough ambient magic with you to make it work. It doesn't take much. But I *did* feel the drain on that last one. It was tiny, but enough to feel it. I'm betting you're not dragging enough ambient magic with you to do the job. The further into these we get, the thicker the bubbles' walls have to be, to keep supporting it. Stands to reason it'd take more magic."

"So how do we get through?" Clara shifted her vision again and scanned the way ahead, but she couldn't see anything. No surprise: she'd *never* been able to see these spells before, and she'd certainly

tried. From the outside, at least. She turned, and could make out the last spell they'd walked through, the one they were now inside.

"I have an idea," Ed said after a moment. "Here, stand in front of me."

He released her hand, and she stepped in front of him. He pressed closely against her back, wrapping his arms around her. She had a sudden feeling of disorientation.

One of the Linginbaum's professors had described Clara's sense of magic as *synesthesia*. It was a human condition that, as Clara understood it, cross-wired the senses in someone's brain. People affected by it would taste colors or see smells. It was a good analogy for Clara's ability to see magic, a set of forces that most witches only felt in a vague and gauzy way.

But as Ed embraced her more tightly, she *tasted* the soft whisper of wind blowing across cold mountain stones. She *felt* the crisp, soft, earthy scent of fresh-cut lumber. And she could *smell* his solidness, the firmness of his chest against her back. A frisson of electric sharpness shivered up her spine, and she found herself smiling.

"This okay?" he asked softly.

"This okay," she answered just as softly, crossing her own arms over his.

"Left foot first," he whispered into her ear.

They stepped forward together, and this time Clara felt the thick sheet of rubber in the air melt and part around them, slipping across her skin like a warm breeze. Then they were through.

She gasped at the sudden heat, and they found themselves in an endless desert, its blue-white sand blowing gently, rolling itself into dunes that unrolled themselves just as quickly. This time, the Border was a pillar of the same sand, grains tumbling from the top even as more crawled up its sides. It was all constantly shifting, constantly moving, yet somehow enduring and the same.

"It's beautiful," Ed said behind her.

"Creativity." If nothing else, this for her was confirmation that

something infinitely powerful and endlessly different had helped create this Border. "Let's keep going."

The next step was harder, and Clara imagined she could feel the energy leaving Ed's body as his magic interacted with the space to let them through. The sensation this time was like pressing through a heavy quilt, which eventually yielded with a rough, starched-sheet feeling on her face.

"That was harder," Ed said, panting slightly.

Clara nodded. This time, the Border was a worn granite fountain, the kind you saw in European travel brochures. What had once been delicately carved faces were now worn and smoothed, and trickles of clear water dripped from gaping mouths into the algae-covered base of the monument. It sat atop gray cobbles that stretched off in every direction, with no other buildings or structures in sight.

"Again?" Ed asked.

Clara nodded, and they stepped forward.

It felt like pressing through a wall of earth, individual grains reluctantly releasing each other and sliding past her ears and eyes. She squinted as they took the two steps forward, blinking furiously as they emerged until the sensation faded.

"Oh," Ed said quietly.

Clara finished blinking, and then her eyes widened as her heart began beating faster.

They were underwater.

Soft fronds at their feet waved to and fro in an invisible current, rising from a soft floor of fine-grained white sand. Ripples of sunlight gleamed and flickered, filtered through the clear-blue waters all around them. Clara's heart slowed a bit as she realized she was breathing normally, and then she couldn't even feel the water against her skin. The Border rose before them, a vertical reef a hundred feet high, its sides covered with gently waving anemone and intricately curled corals.

"There seems to be one more," Clara pointed out, peering at the

Border. It was almost close enough to touch, but something inside her told her they'd need to take two more steps to get to it.

"Give me a sec," Ed said. Through her back, she could feel his heart continuing to beat hard, and she knew he was drawing more of the local magic into himself, replenishing what the spell had taken. "I might be able to—"

Clara yelped as the air—water—around her blazed with light. Equations written in impossibly small, brilliant glyphs swirled madly, and a sharp, roaring sound filled her ears. Her skin had gone electric, as if every molecule in the atmosphere—ocean—was giving her static shocks.

"What's happening?" Ed cried.

"I don't know!" she answered, leaning back into him as his arms tightened around her. Then she recognized it: an eerie, three-in-one sensation in the energy around them. "It's the triplets!"

Before them, the Border seemed to shudder violently, pushing the water away from itself. Clara's hair streamed back into Ed's face, and both of them closed their eyes and turned their heads as the current whipped up the sandy sea floor. Then, with a sudden *pop,* everything stopped. They watched as the fronds on the sandy bottom stabilized and returned to their gentle swaying, and as the grains of sand settled around them, returning the water to its former clarity.

Clara's eyes widened. "It moved!"

The Border had moved a half-dozen paces away from them, although it didn't seem to have changed in any other way.

"Let's keep moving," Ed said grimly.

Clara nodded and they stepped forward. Now it was like stepping through clay, and Ed grunted as the spell seized a sizable chunk of his personal magic. The clay slithered around them, and they found themselves in an urban playground.

Clara frowned. "Weird."

The Border was a rusted, pitted basketball hoop, the last remnants of a dirty and tattered net hanging limply from the scarred

rim. Beneath their feet was an asphalt court so old it had faded to nearly white, its chipped and bleached paint markings all but a memory.

They stepped forward again.

The feeling of passing through the spell was almost unbearable, even for Clara, and she could feel Ed's muscles tightening as more of his magic fed the spell that let them through. It was like stepping through solid brick, with thick, heavy chunks of sensation scraping along their skin as they forced their way through.

"Oh," Ed said, panting a bit as he reached for more ambient magic. He dropped his arms as Clara lowered hers, running his hands along her sides as she took a step forward.

"This is the last one," Clara said. "I can feel it."

They were in a space of endless darkness. The only thing present besides them was the Border, which was illuminated by some unseen source. It had manifested as a small, metal bistro table. Its red enamel paint was chipped and scratched a bit, and atop it was a single, empty white espresso cup. Clara stepped forward and, careful not to touch it, leaned over. A ring of dark, dried liquid sat inside the cup's bottom, testament to some long-gone beverage. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she caught the telltale slickness on the surface of the cup and the table, telling her that this was indeed a Border to Underhill.

"This is it?" Ed asked softly.

"Yeah. It seems fine. Other than. . . all that." She waved behind them.

"Definitely Creativity, then."

Clara snorted. "That's an understatement."

"So we go back?"

"Yeah. I just want to look, first." She turned back the way they'd come, and crouched down. To Ed, it looked like Clara was focusing intently on a tiny spot of air. "Wow," she breathed in wonder. "Ed, you should see this."

"Would that I could," he said wryly.

Clara flashed him a quick smile. "Right. Sorry. But it's. . . incredible. It's gone beyond equations. It's. . . geometry. I've seen magic do this before, when it's made into complex structures. But this. . . it's like a honeycomb. The cells, the individual hexagons, they're endlessly small." She leaned forward on the balls of her feet, peering at thin air. "And they're *made* of tiny little hexagons. It seems to go on forever, smaller and smaller."

"Fractals," Ed said.

"That's it. Ed, there's *so* much power here."

"I suggest we get back before the triplets do something even worse."

"Right."

Clara stood, and Ed stepped behind her again, wrapping his arms around her. "Ready?" he asked. She nodded, and they stepped—

—into the Museum of Illusions.

Clara turned, twisting out of Ed's arms to see the sketch-door close quietly behind them, its seams vanishing.

"It's about time," Sandy said crossly. "We kept trying to do a Sending, but you didn't reply."

«So we tried,» the triplets said in their eerie three-in-one voice.

Clara glared at them. "Bit much," she growled, and the three had the grace to look abashed.

"What happened in there?" Rueben asked.

"How long were we gone?" Ed asked back.

"Maybe ten minutes," Aldona said. "I warned them that time is a little strange in there. How many layers?"

"Layers?" Reuben frowned.

"It's a space-within-a-space spell," Ed said. "Only several of them, all nested, and each one a little harder to get through than the last. There were what, Clara, six?"

"Seven, I think, until Voltron here blasted us with magic," Clara said, still glaring at the triplets. "Then the Border retreated and made another shell around itself. So now it's eight."

"Oh?" Aldona asked with interest, raising one eyebrow. "When I

first saw it, there were only two. A year later, just three. I have not been in there since."

"So it's adding more," Clara said.

"Those spells don't support that kind of nesting," Reuben objected.

"Is this a problem?" Clara asked Ed.

"Actually," Ed mused, "I wonder if this might be a good thing."

"How so?" Clara asked.

"Well, clearly, only witches can get through, right?"

"Sure. Because you need magic."

"But it's *layers* thick. So even if a Paladin stakes the outer spell. . ."

Clara considered it, and then nodded. "You'd have a lot. And the way that structure was built. . ."

"So definitely not just a normal space expansion spell," Reuben said.

"No way," Ed agreed. "Not even the Egyptian one. It's too deep."

"I've never paid much attention to the normal ones, but this can't be that," Clara confirmed. "They're incredibly complex, more precise than almost anything I've seen. The magic layers on top of more magic, it's like. . . I don't know. Nothing I've seen. And there's enough power there that if you forcibly took down the first layer, I believe they'd all just expand outward to fill the. . . space, I guess. The Border could then construct another inner layer. That's what it did when you blasted us," she added, sending the triplets another glare.

"We just," Idalia started.

"Did a," Johanna continued.

"Big Sending," Harriett finished.

"You get used to it," Clara sighed, seeing Aldona's confused expression. "It's synergistic magic. Triplet thing. But all that came through was a giant burst of magic. Which the Border either fed on or rejected, but regardless, it set up *another* shell around itself."

"Fascinating," Reuben murmured. "Even the Egyptian construct—"

"That's what I said," Ed agreed. "It's something more than that."

"Way more," Clara agreed.

"So you have seen what you needed to see?" Aldona asked.

"This Border's fine. I don't think any Paladins are going to attack it, especially if nobody here uses it," Clara said. "There'd be no way to find it, and I don't think any amount of artifacts could take down all those layers. So long as nobody calls attention to it, it should be safe."

"We do not let anyone use it," Aldona said. "It is obviously a little off-putting. And with that many layers. . . I don't know why anyone would even want to. We have a good Anchor network here, and we are careful where we put them. There is another Border in Prague we tend to use, and we have Anchors directly to London for an alternative."

"Okay," Clara said with relief. "So that's good."

"May I ask," Aldona said carefully, "why *this* one is so special?"

Clara sighed and exchanged glances with Ed. He shrugged. "It's complicated."

"You say that a lot."

"My life is very complicated," Clara agreed.

"Can you. . . I would love to understand more. If you can tell me."

Clara sighed. "Do you. . . are you aware that magic comes from humans? Like, raw magic? All of it?"

Aldona's eyes widened, but then she nodded slowly. "I know it is a theory. I assume you have confirmed it."

"More than," Clara said heavily. "So the Borders let raw magic leak from the Ordinary to Underhill. That's why, years ago, when the Borders were all collapsing, Underhill itself was so damaged. Without humans, there's no magic."

"Without humans," Aldona mused softly.

"Exactly. So with all these Paladin attacks. . . look, it's a long story, but it looks like most witches are going to wind up in Underhill. Permanently."

"All witches," Latoya murmured.

"Probably," Clara sighed. "But that way, we still have magic."

"But the other Borders. . ." Aldona asked, confused.

"The Paladins have artifacts made with Blood Magic," Ed said. "There's. . . they call them holy relics, that's how they're justifying them to their followers. It's pretty involved."

"That word again," Aldona said with a smile. "But yes. It sounds like it."

"But if they use some of those relics against a Border—an unprotected one—it starts to suck the magic *out* of Underhill," Clara said.

"Like the Rot in the Fae legends," Reuben added.

"Remarkable," Aldona breathed. "I had not heard as much."

"The Council in Underhill is trying to keep it quiet," Sandy said.

"But it means we're going to have to cut off a lot of the Borders," Clara said. "All but this one, probably."

Aldona's eyes widened further. "But the conception problem. . ."

"Exactly," Clara said grimly. "But we think we have the answer to that, which is the real reason we're here."

"But. . . how?"

"I told you this Border went up differently, and now that I've seen it, I'm convinced. Creativity—the actual personification, that's the other Power we mentioned—helped raise this Border. It—he—is *here*, somewhere nearby, we think. If we can find it, convince it that the Fae are gone, that we don't want to abuse its power anymore. . . we want to convince it to send its power back through. Through *this* Border, along with all the magic. Or to come with us, even, to return to Underhill. Then we'll have both magic *and* Creativity. Witches will be able to conceive. In Underhill."

Aldona's jaw worked silently for several moments. *"Dieve mano,"* she said softly. "That is a lot."

"I said my life was complicated," Clara grinned.

"You did not exaggerate. So this Creativity. . . it is a person?"

"A *personification*," Clara corrected her. "Some of the Great Powers, when the Fae were manipulating Underhill so much, they developed sentience. They took on human forms."

"And one of them lives in the Great Northern Wood."

"Yes, and stay away from that one, trust me," Clara grimaced. "But Creativity *left.* Came here, to the Ordinary. *Here* specifically to this city, we think. And it cut off Underhill when it did so."

"So you are here to find it."

"Exactly."

"You said earlier," Ed put in suddenly. "Something about Lithuania being *different.* Vilnius even more so. We were talking about the Paladins. What did you mean?"

Aldona met his gaze for a long moment. "I believe," she said at last, "you need to speak to our Minister for Cultural Affairs."

"I'm sorry," Clara blurted out, suddenly confused. "Your *what?"*

"Our Minister for Cultural Affairs," Aldona repeated.

"Like, in your government?" Clara asked.

"Yes. Her name is Egle Alekna."

"But why?"

Aldona smiled. "She is a witch."

CHAPTER 11
THE CULTURE WITCH

"Thank you so much for joining me. We obviously did not expect you, and we are at such a critical stage with this project, I simply couldn't get away."

Aldona had led them on a twenty-minute walk through the city to meet Egle, who they found standing in the middle of a large, irregularly shaped courtyard within what appeared to be some kind of palace. Egle was a severe-looking woman with sharp features, dark hair shot through with thin streaks of white, and piercing green eyes.

"What is this place?" Clara asked, craning her neck to look up at the tall building surrounding them. It featured smooth, pale-colored walls, tall windows, and looked vaguely like something she'd seen before. *Paris,* she decided. They'd been forced to watch a dreadful documentary about the city during her last year in Ordinary school. A film she'd practically slept through, contributing to her eternal worries about passing History finals.

"The palace of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania," Egle answered with a wide smile. "One of our many cultural heritage projects, nicknamed 'Little Versailles' for its architectural style. Remodeling of the interior was completed last year, and we are just placing some

finishing touches on the courtyard." All around them, workers knelt on the ground, tapping at the stones around the courtyard's perimeter with small chisels.

"What exactly are they doing?" Sandy asked.

"Mmm," Egle murmured, her smile turning sly. "Let us get to that in a moment. I would love to know more about your visit here, if you do not mind." The Americans glanced uneasily at the workers. "You may speak freely," Egle assured them. "Everyone here is a witch."

Clara's eyes widened. "Everyone?"

Egle nodded. "You will find witches more. . . out and about here, than perhaps in America. Where is it you are from?"

Clara shrugged. "Philadelphia? Las Vegas? Depends on which set of parents I'm with, I guess."

"Ah," Egle said, giving her a knowing nod. "Yes, I believe I had heard as much. And Paladins, they have been a concern for you there, yes?"

Ed snorted.

"Something of a problem, yes," Harriett said, rolling her eyes. "If by 'problem' you mean using magical artifacts to stake anchors, take down Borders, and infect Underhill with the Rot."

Egle's smile faded. "We received the warnings." Across the courtyard, several of the workers' quick, precise activities had paused as they turned to look at the group. "Fortunately, Lithuania in general, and Vilnius in particular, have been somewhat. . . mmm, sheltered. We have experienced no Paladins, for example. No problems with them, at least. But you came here through the Border, Aldona said?"

"The final Border I raised, yes. The one in the Great Northern Wood."

Aldona whispered something in Lithuanian, but Egle held out a hand to stop her. The older woman's eyes never left Clara. "Nobody has ever used that Border before. We have. . . attempted to keep it to itself." She tilted her head. "It is a bit odd."

"Yeah, we got that," Clara agreed as Ed snorted again. "It's a bit

odd on the other side as well. But we needed to come through. I don't. . . raising that one was strange. I don't remember doing it." Egle cocked her left eyebrow. "And something helped me. That's what made this one so strange. So different."

"Something?" Egle prompted.

"We believe Clara was assisted by a Great Power," Reuben put in. "Creativity itself."

Egle's right eyebrow joined the first for a moment. "I see," she said thoughtfully. "That could. . . explain much."

"Like what?" Johanna asked.

Egle waved the question away. "And you are here to. . . what, exactly?"

Reuben answered. "The Paladin threat is global. At least, everywhere but here. The Council will be. . . *suggesting* that all witches retreat to Underhill. Permanently."

"Most of my other Borders will be cut off," Clara pointed out. "This one. . . well, it's special."

Egle frowned. "But we cannot live permanently in Underhill. To do so would be a. . . death sentence. Witches cannot. . ." she trailed off, and her eyes widened as she put it together. "Creativity."

Clara grinned. "Exactly."

"You wish to take it to Underhill."

"Maybe. It—he, maybe—may not go. But at least to send its power back through. Back through *this* Border."

"Yes," Egle mused. But then she shook her head. "It will be difficult to convince the witches here to leave. We have had little to fear. Even the Paladins seem to be less of a threat here."

"How is that, exactly?" Sandy asked. She'd been staring at the workers, most of whom had returned to their efforts.

"Let me show you," Egle offered. She led them to a section of the courtyard perimeter that appeared to have been finished. She pointed one long finger at the stone. "See?"

They clustered around, staring down at what the workers had wrought. "I don't get it," Sandy said.

"I do," Clara breathed. She leaned down, her hands on her thighs, as her eyes flicked back and forth. "It's the *magic."*

"You understand it?" Egle said, surprise evident in her voice.

"Clara sees magic," Ed said softly.

"Mathemagician," Egle said even more quietly. The workers nearest them looked up sharply, and the word was repeated in hushed tones, spreading around the courtyard like a gentle breeze.

"One in a generation," Idalia said proudly, breaking the sense of awe.

"Not exactly," Egle said, shaking her head. She was looking at Clara, still hunched over and staring at the carvings in the stone, but a look of respect had taken over her eyes.

"What do you mean?" Ed asked.

"There were at least *two* in the previous generation," Egle said, still staring at Clara.

"Professor Risewell," Idalia said.

"Yes, the one who raised the previous Borders," Egle agreed. "And Ilse, born not far from here."

"Another mathemagician?" Reuben said. "How?"

Egle shrugged. "It must happen now and again. She was thought mad, at first, until someone realized what she was. But it was *she* who developed *these."*

All eyes returned to the tiny, precise carvings.

"The magic just slides into them," Clara whispered. "It just *fits.* They don't move, but. . . they're the same." She looked up. "I've never seen anyone *write* magic before. Or carve, I guess. Either."

"Wait," Ed said. "this is what you *see* all the time?"

Clara stood. "Almost exactly. I mean, it's not letters and numbers and symbols. It's. . . these." She looked again at the tiny symbols. They *weren't* like the math she saw, but somehow. . . they *were. It's like math, written in a different language,* she thought. Then a word surfaced in her mind. *Runes.* She shook her head in wonder. "Not the same, exactly. But when I look at them, somehow, they *seem* the same. They just. . . fit. Sorry. That's not very clear."

"It's clear enough," Ed murmured.

"Ilse spent most of her life developing these," Egle said. "This spell was her masterwork. We have spent five decades since installing this same construct in various places throughout Lithuania. My predecessor began the work, and this is one of the last ones we've planned. A keystone, really. It ties many of the others together, amplifies them."

"What's it do?" Sandy asked, still staring at the complex, sinuous little carvings.

"Ilse called it—" Egle began.

"—a Veil," Clara finished, her voice full of awe.

Egle's eyes sparkled. "Exactly."

"Wait," Latoya said sharply. "Clara, this is the thing you adapted from my memory-wipe spell?"

Clara tilted her head. "Not exactly. There's something different."

"So what's this one do?" Idalia asked.

Egle grinned. "It's probably ready to try. We just need to empower it, and you can see for yourself."

Clara shook her head in wonder, her eyes wandering back to the intricate carvings. "I can't believe you're the first ones to *write* magic."

"Agreed," Sandy said emphatically. "Nothing in the existing tradition even suggests this is possible. I've created hundreds of artifacts, but this. . . this is a whole other level."

"Ilse never really engaged with the witch community," Egle said. "And I suppose we never considered this all that revolutionary. And we have never been able to repurpose much of Ilse's work. This spell, this Veil, is one of the few fully realized spells she left us."

"Do you have the entire thing?" Clara asked. "Written down, I mean?"

"Oh, certainly. Benas?" One of the workers looked up. "Do you have the book?"

Benas rose, stretched, and walked briskly to one side of the courtyard. A crate of equipment sat there, and from it he withdrew a

large, slim book. He brought it over, opening it so that they could see the diagram.

"Wow," Sandy breathed.



Clara frowned. "But where's the rest of it? The middle part?"

Egle smiled. "Under our feet."

Everyone looked down.

"Oh," Clara murmured. "I see it."

The stones throughout the entire courtyard were—not *carved,* exactly. Clara knelt again and ran her fingers gently over the surface. "It's like the symbols were kind of buffed in."

"More or less accurate," Egle said, crouching next to Clara. "It is a sandblasting process of a sort, although I am told they use small glass beads instead of sand. Much of the process is controlled with magic, of course. Far more efficient than machines, and we were able to do all of the work on-site." She tilted her head back and forth. "It is difficult to see the entire design all at once unless you look out from one of the upper windows and the sun is catching it exactly right."

"Subtle," Sandy agreed.

"How do you empower it?" Idalia asked.

Benas sighed and spoke for the first time. "It will take many dozens of us and several days. It requires a great deal of magic, and it must be fed in very precisely."

Clara and Egle rose as Clara shot the triplets a grin. "Egle, would you mind if we helped?"

Egle looked confused for a moment and then shrugged. "Your help would be welcome, of course, but I don't see how—"

"Benas," Clara interrupted, "do you know how the magic gets fed in?"

His brow furrowed. "I supervise the process, yes. Why?"

"Ladies?" Clara called. "Let's form Voltron!"

The triplets rolled their eyes as, in Clara's vision, power began swirling around them. **«You know we hate that,»** they said in their eerie, three-in-one voice.

"o Dieve," Egle breathed.

The air began shimmering under the pressure of the magic the triplets were gathering. Clara pushed her eyes into magic-mode, squinting at the intense, blue-white brightness of pure magic that the girls were weaving. The symbols and shapes within it were all but drowned out by the magnitude of power, but Clara nodded with satisfaction as she saw them holding the thick stream of energy with careful precision. "Benas," she said. "You're going to start to feel a *lot* of power coming."

His eyes had widened. "I already do."

"Start feeding the construct," she instructed. "Just whatever energy you feel comfortable with. I'm going to watch you, and I'll do the rest."

"Watch?" he asked, but Clara could already see him begin to trickle power into the carvings.

"Mathemagician," she replied. She quickly caught the pattern of his working, and began replicating it at much larger scale, using the immense magic that the triplets were feeding her. It wasn't so much *feeding* the magic into the carvings as it was laying them on top of it. She guided a dozen rivulets of power, shepherding the iridescent equations until they settled into the delicate etchings. Then she added a dozen more, and then a dozen more after that. In her mind, the triplets had used their synergistic powers to create a small, blazing sun of magic above the courtyard. Bright, thin streams

snaked down from it, touching the courtyard's pavers in three dozen places, smoothly feeding magic into the construct.

With a *whump* that was almost physical, the spell caught.

"Dievas danguje aukščiau," Benas said softly.

"That's enough," Clara said unnecessarily—the triplets were already detaching themselves from each other, their burning sun of energy beginning to dissipate overhead. "Egle?"

The older woman blinked a few times and then nodded. "I can feel it."

"There is no way you could *not,"* Benas breathed. "This will cover far more of the city than we had planned. We will have to do tests to find the extent of it, but. . . this is amazing." He grinned at the triplets. "May I have your phone numbers, please? For the next one?"

"Don't you need to make sure this one will work?" Johanna asked.

Egle chuckled. "Oh, it will. But yes, let me show you."



"You're certain this will work?" Idalia whispered.

"Benas?" Egle said, looking toward the worker who'd walked over. The others had stopped working, and were standing around the courtyard in small clusters, talking in low voices.

"Certainly. It should have had time to fully settle by now."

"It has," Clara said confidently, her eyes tracking slowly across the courtyard. The effect of the carvings was subtle but obvious, and the symbols themselves gleamed and glinted with rainbow lights.

"Let them in," Egle said. Her fingers twitched, and Clara saw magic scamper down her arms, forming a Sending.

She's notifying someone, Clara thought.

They waited in quiet anticipation until the gates at the far end of the courtyard—located in the only break in the irregularly shaped building—swung open. A crowd of a half-dozen tourists strolled in, led by a gray-suited, brown-haired guide that looked eerily similar to

Aldona. The guide was speaking in a strong, loud voice, but because she was facing away from them, all Clara and her team could hear was an odd echo. The tour group continued toward the middle of the courtyard, eventually getting close enough that Clara could make out the spiel.

"—in 1692 by Giovanni Pietro Petri. The estate is in a baroque style, and was originally intended as a residence for Casimir Jan Sapieha, a revered military strategist from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the end—"

Egle walked confidentially toward the group, a wide, professional smile painted across her face. A few of the tourists turned to watch her as she approached. With a flourish, she raised her right hand over her head and snapped her fingers. A tiny, firework-like burst of sparks erupted from her fingertips, cascading to the ground and fading quickly.

As Clara watched, the tourists who'd seen the spell—*there's no way they could have missed it,* she thought to herself—blinked a few times. They smiled vaguely, squinted a bit, and then turned back to the your guide.

"—served as a residence for various favored nobility, well into the eighteenth century. It even served as a sanctuary and hospital during times of conflict. Our recent restoration has restored and preserved its baroque splendor after years of neglect, and it now stands as a cultural crown jewel, amidst the Church of Saints Peter and Paul and Sapiegos Park."

Egle turned back and nodded, her smile tighter. "Did you see?"

Clara nodded slowly. "It's touching them all the time. It's soft—I can barely make it out. Hazy, almost." Her brow wrinkled. "It reminds me of something, but I can't think what. But yeah—I see it."

"It's the same memory spell?" Latoya asked.

"No. I mean, yes, at the core, the structure is the same. But it's different, too. It's not *removing* their memory, it's just. . . stopping it from happening. Like it's working *around* them, not *on* them. Does that make sense?"

"We're told," Reuben recited quietly, "that the Veil was the thin separation between Underhill and the Ordinary world. Pierced only by the Borders erected by the Fae and their chosen. The fairy rings, the standing stones. The barrows. The Veil hid Underhill from the Ordinary."

"Underhill is a lot further away now, trust me," Clara pointed out. "But the magic still works."

"And this will run. . . indefinitely?" Sandy asked. She was their expert in magical devices, and was clearly skeptical. "With no further input?"

Egle shrugged. "The oldest constructs have been operating continuously for fifty-two years, and no witch has fed them even the slightest bit of power."

"Amazing." Sandy shook her head. "And Clara, you can't see why?"

"Mmm," Clara murmured. Her sight was still in magic-mode, and she was captivated by the magic she was seeing. *Smooth, but sharp at the edges. The colors are so deep, but they're fuzzy.* "No. It's. . . there's something there. It's pulling ambient magic, just the slightest amount." She frowned. "It's gone hazy at the edges. I swear, it's familiar, but I can't think from where."

"Let us perhaps go inside and discuss," Egle suggested.



"So how did a witch come to be in government?" Reuben asked.

Egle had taken them into the palace, through several long corridors, and into a room that had clearly been refurbished only recently. They could still smell fresh paint, and a few tarps were folded neatly on the floor. A rough, serviceable table made from plywood and lumber sat in the center, surrounded by battered metal stools. "Please, sit," Egle invited them. They settled onto the stools. "It is simple enough. This is *our* home as well, *our* government. It makes

no sense not to participate. There are numerous witches in public service."

"Does anyone know?" Idalia asked. "Humans, I mean?"

"Yes. My neighbors. A few other ministers. When confronted with it directly, when we explain it, when it is someone we know and see every day. . . the Veil fades from them."

"It's delicate," Clara said. "If you gave them a strong memory, it would stick."

"And is that usual here?" Reuben asked. "For witches here to have human friends?"

"Yes. This is our home, after all. They are our neighbors. You do not do the same? You live always in secret?"

"Some of us tell," Ed said. "A few trusted people. Clara's adoptive parents are human."

"Oh? I did not know that," Egle said.

"My birth parents had to. . . run. They left me with them to be safe." It was easier to discuss after all this time, but it still made Clara just a bit sad. "I'm hoping they—my adoptive parents—decide to move to Underhill. I'd. . ." She stopped and bit her lower lip. Ed reached over and took her hand, and she gave him a smile and a quick nod.

"Our people have never been terribly interested in Underhill, to be honest." She shrugged. "It has always seemed something more of an English fairy tale place."

"Not untrue," Reuben acknowledged with a grin.

"This Veil," Latoya asked. "When did she develop it? What exactly does it do?"

"Ilse developed it as a child. It began as a spell of forgetting, a way for her to protect herself. Her parents passed when she was quite young, and as she tells the story, it was a way to help her blend in with the humans more easily. It was always a project of hers, finding a way to extend it to all of us."

"It *is* almost identical to the spell you use, Latoya," Clara mused.

"The core of it, at least. But they've expanded it, like I did. And figuring out how to carve it. . . that's pretty different."

"You have done such a thing?" Egle asked.

"Sort of. Made it cover a bigger area. Cover more people, I mean." She glanced at her friends. "If you feed it enough power. . . it can remove things. Physically, not just from memory."

"Ah, but we rely on it using so *little* power, once it is activated."

"Yeah," Clara acknowledged. "I never thought of making it. . . big, like you have. Really big. And so. . . *fuzzy.* But I think your Ilse has the same idea I did. She just went the other way with it."

"Interesting," Egle said. "Great minds think alike, I suppose. You have developed a way to make it persistent as well?"

"Well, no, not that part," Clara admitted, shaking her head.

"The Veil is obviously what helps us live alongside the humans. Openly," Egle explained. "It is difficult for us to ensure we never use magic in front of them, especially in small ways. With the Veil raised, they simply. . . see something else. A spell of light becomes a glint of sunlight. A poorly judged translocation is simply a lack of attention. Items that suddenly vanish were never there to begin with. It is a simple idea, but powerful."

"Like I said, it's like they never actually see it. Like it somehow stops the memory before it even happens," Clara said. "It's smart." *Although. . . the magic is so strange.* Something was bothering her about it, but she couldn't figure out what.

"We believe," Reuben said, "that the basis of the spell actually originates in the Celtic tradition. The spell we use, at least. That it descends from the original Veil that separated the worlds."

"You said as much. And yes, our research supports such a theory. Ilse. . . well. I met her only a few times, and by then she had become quite. . . distracted. Depending on her frame of mind, she either invented the basis of the spell herself, or it simply came to her. Many of her greater works were based on some of the oldest magic. *Feral magic,* she called it once."

Clara's chest tightened slightly. Risewell had also been *distracted*

the first time they'd met her. Was that the fate that awaited Clara as well, as a mathemagician?

"Deep magic, our scholars would call it," Reuben replied. "Over the decades and centuries, our own magic has become more structured. More codified. The older magic is usually described as. . ." He trailed off, searching for the world.

"Free," Latoya murmured.

"Creative," Idalia said solemnly.

Reuben gave her a sharp look, and then nodded. "Perhaps."

"Perhaps," Egle echoed. "More primal. More adaptive. But regardless from where it came, we have evidence that it affects your Paladins as well."

"They're hardly *our* Paladins," Ed muttered.

"Apologies. Still, they *have* come here. They tend to wander about for a few days, and we keep a careful eye on them. Then they leave. It has been some months since any have arrived."

"They see nothing?" Latoya asked sharply. "Even with their goggles?"

"Yes, we have seen their head gear," Egle assured her. "They wander about, looking strange and drawing very many odd looks, to be sure. But no. We have seen no suggestion that they find anything of interest."

"Their trenchcoats," Ed spoke up. "They're lined with iron plates. That's never disrupted your Veil?"

Elge shook her head. "As I said, they have never shown any interest in anything."

"It's the fuzziness," Clara said softly. Ed looked at her but she didn't notice—her mind was on the magic. *Where have I seen that before?*

"How so?" Ed asked.

"I don't know. At the edges, the symbols kind of just fuzz together. It's like the magic is different, somehow." She looked around the room. "It's not even drawn to the iron hinges on the windows. It just kind of slides around them."

"It still won't hold them forever," Reuben warned. "If they come back in full armor, or with some of these so-called 'holy relics' they carry around, it's hard to say if your Veil would hold. You seem to imply it's rather delicate."

"Why would they bother, when they have seen nothing here in the past?" Egle asked.

Reuben sighed. "You have me there. But still. . . the danger exists. Surely they've taken more. . . *action* in neighboring countries."

"Yes, I suppose," Egle acknowledged. "And we tend to keep to ourselves, perhaps. But yes, we have heard reports. Although nothing like what we have heard of from America."

"The cell there is more active," Sandy said. "Cells, really. They're everywhere."

"I just think it's a matter of time before some of them try to come here," Reuben insisted.

"Maybe," Egle acknowledged. "Still. . . this is our home. I fear it will be an upward battle to convince people to leave their home." She considered for a moment. "Could we not duplicate our efforts elsewhere? Perhaps, with enough effort, we could induce all of the Paladins to simply forget that they have seen magic?"

Clara shook her head. "I don't think these would work elsewhere." Her eyes unfocused, and she gazed at the hazy effects of the spell as it danced through the air before her. "There's something *extra* here. The core of the spell is the same one I can cast, but this one. . . is extra. It's not even *magic."* She shook her head. "I can see it, but it's hard to explain. It's just. . . fuzzy. No, hazy. But also sharp, in the middle. It's drawing the ambient magic into itself, and that's what's powering the whole thing, now. A lot of the magic is pure, too —blue-white, like it's. . ." She paused.

"What is it?" Ed asked.

"It's fresh from humans," Clara realized. "It's using *raw* magic, somehow." Then she frowned. "But it isn't exactly that. The fuzziness. . ." Her frown deepened.

"That's how you described Ikwity's power," Ed reminded her.

Clara's eyes flew open. "That's it! Ed, this is Creativity! It has to be. It—he, whatever—fed this. It's perpetual now that it's going, but this is what a Great Power looks like!"

"Meaning he—it—is here?" Reuben asked, leaning forward.

"I. . . maybe. It must," Clara said hopefully.

"And also meaning this would absolutely not be replicable elsewhere," Sandy sighed. "Pity. For a moment there. . ."

"Then could not witches come here? Especially outside the city, we have ample room," Egle said. "At least for those who do not wish to live Under—what?" She stopped as Clara firmly shook her head.

"It won't work. The Border here—we can't use it. Ikwity—that's the name she uses. She's an incarnation of Time. A Great Power. The Great Northern Wood is her home. She won't tolerate people coming in and out." She gave Egle a careful, hard look. "The Borders *will* close. She's seen it. Lived it already, I guess. It's kind of all the same for her. She says witches live in Underhill. Maybe not *all* witches," Clara admitted, "but most of us. The Borders close. Or we stop using them, I'm not sure which. But this one stays, and we have to convince Creativity to let his power back into Underhill. But there won't be any back and forth. She won't tolerate it. So any witches on this side *stay* on this side."

Egle's jaw tightened. "I will trust your assessment. And I certainly would not look forward to angering a Great Power. But still. . . there will be many who choose not to go."

"I don't think anyone will try and force them," Reuben offered. "But from everything we know about this Great Power, this Aunt Ikwity. . . Clara is correct. And she is also correct that the other Borders *will* close, if we can convince Creativity to lend its power to Underhill. And even if it doesn't. . ."

"Witcher," Clara muttered.

"I do not know this—wait, do you mean Adolfus Witcher?" Egle asked.

"His son," Latoya said, her lips twisting with disgust. "If we can't convince Creativity, the Council will still close the Borders. Most of

them. They'll keep a few, and Witcher will control access to them. For—"

"'Honeymoon trips,'" Egle said, her expression mirroring Latoya's. "Yes, I see." She thought for a moment, and then shook her head. "I do not have a solution. I have a certain amount of influence, obviously. We can open our borders for witches who wish to resettle here. Amnesty claims—"

"That's hardly different from resettling in Underhill, ma'am," Ed said heavily. "All due respect. And in Underhill we don't need to rely on a Veil."

Egle hesitated for a moment, and then nodded slowly. "True." She sighed. "And *some* will follow you to Underhill. Older couples, those without children, perhaps. Or those whose children are grown, but not yet looking to start a family of their own." She gave them a wry grin. "Those who no longer wish to pay taxes, I suppose." Her grin faded. "But to leave everything behind. . ."

"Some may *need* to stay," Clara said suddenly. Everyone turned to look at her. "This Veil. That's the trick to it."

"I don't get it," Ed said.

"The Border. This one *has* to stay, right? And Creativity has to be protected. The Veil *does* that, right? So Lithuania, or Vilnius at least, becomes the. . . what's the word. . ."

"Beachhead," Reuben offered.

"Firewall," Idalia countered.

"Either," Clara agreed. "The Veil stays. There will be witches here to maintain it. Like, what if those carvings get damaged?"

"In that case, the spell would fail, yes," Egle acknowledged. "And yes, the plan has been to include maintenance in the budget for this facility, as well as the other key locations. The statue of John Lennon, the statue of Frank Zappa, the—"

"You have a *statue* of *Frank Zappa?"* Reuben asked with a chuckle.

"He was very creative," Latoya pointed out with a grin.

"All of them are in carefully selected locations," Egle continued. "They create an overlapping effect. Even the smaller outlying villages

have some sort of cultural monument with this spell engraved into them, or under them, or otherwise attached to them."

"Shrines to Creativity," Ed mused."

Egle shrugged. "Perhaps. Very little of the country, even the countryside, is unprotected, now. We have two more minor projects to complete, and our coverage will be as complete as is possible."

"Protecting the Border," Clara repeated. "Protecting Creativity."

"Assuming it, or he, or whatever, doesn't just return to Underhill."

Harriett snorted. "I wouldn't."

"What do you mean?" Latoya asked with a frown.

"Why would he? Clearly they love him here."

"Okay," Clara said as Latoya opened her mouth to respond. "Problem one solved. The Border here is fine, it's protected, and there's a plan to keep it protected. Fine. Problem two, find Creativity and convince him to allow his power back into Underhill. Right?"

The group thought about it. "I guess that's about it," Ed said.

"And if there are witches who refuse to go, perhaps they can still come here instead. Where it's safer."

"I will speak to our leadership about it," Egle offered.

"Fine," Clara said. "Creativity, then. Where do we start?"

Egle gave them a bright smile. "I have an idea."

CHAPTER 12

THE SEARCH FOR CREATIVITY

"Uh, wow," Harriett said as the world resolved around them.

"It is impressive, no?" Egle asked.

"We actually meant how we just. . . appeared. In the middle of. . . this."

"Ah, yes," Egle smiled, shaking her head. "We have gotten quite used to it, of course. This is J. Basanavičiaus aikštė, more or less the town square of Marijampolė."

"So interesting," Clara said softly. Her eyes were unfocused, and she was tracking the hazy, half-magic-half-Creativity that was floating everywhere. "When we appeared, I could *see* it, Ed," she continued.

"See what?"

"The Veil. It was. . ." She paused a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it to someone who couldn't see it for themselves. "It was like a sheet of rubber. When we appeared, it kind of vibrated." She pointed to a small knot of tourists who were photographing the square's central monument with their smart phones. "Those people

over there saw us. One of them even started to point, but the Veil kind of. . . *bounced.*" Already, the group had finished taking selfies and were moving on, oblivious to the witches that had just translocated into existence in front of them.

"This is one of the oldest installations," Egle said, nodding to the tall monument. "That is called 'Tribute to the Nation and Language.' It was erected in 2009, commemorating the millennial anniversary of Lithuania's name. But Ilse worked on the Veil construct personally in 1976—can you see the diagram?"

Everyone peered intently at the flat, smooth pavers of the square. "Oh," Johanna said, pointing down. "It's done in dots!"

Egle smiled approvingly. "A much easier technique at the time. The diagram spans the entire main square, although it is less powerful than the one we just left. The pointillism technique was easier and faster, but it does not bind the magic as tightly. Modifications were made when the monument was planned, which further weakened the construct. Two additional ones have been installed since then to restore the Veil's coverage in Marijampolė."

"Why do you think Creativity is here?" Clara asked, still half-distracted by the silent dance of magical symbols through the hazy, glowing, rainbow-colored mist.

Egle shrugged. "Marijampolė is known for its public works of art, more so than anywhere else in the country. There is a cultural center, Poetry Park, several old manors, and uncountable murals, al frescos, and so forth. If Creativity is anywhere, it is here."

"Odd that the Border didn't touch down here," Clara frowned.

"If Creativity is here," Reuben mused, "perhaps it didn't want the Border exactly on its doorstep. How far are we from Vilnius?"

Egle considered. "Two hours by automobile, perhaps. Three by train. Almost the width of Lithuania's southern portion."

"Close, but not too close," Clara said, nodding slowly. "Maybe." She looked around, switching her vision out of magic-mode and taking in the plaza. A few small bunches of people walked slowly

here and there, and a couple of children on skateboards rolled past the monument, laughing loudly. "It's actually kind of sparse, here."

"That is a well-regarded hotel," Egle said, pointing to the tall building behind them, "and the Cultural Center is across that street. But this is not a traditional European square, no. Shops and so forth are located a bit further along. And there is a much larger green park just a couple of blocks to the west, along the river."

"So where do we start?" Latoya asked impatiently. "Do we have a plan?"

"Let us head toward the river," Egle suggested. "It is the weekend, and there are often artists painting. Once there, we can turn toward the park. There are nearly always artists selling paintings, musicians, and other creative types."

"Sounds fine to me," Clara agreed. "I wonder if—"

She was interrupted by a *whump* that was almost as physical as it was psychic and magical. She took two steps back and flung her arms out for balance, as if the earth itself was shaking. Ed caught her by one elbow, although he'd tumbled as well.

"What was that?" Egle said, her face suddenly pale.

Clara quickly shifted her vision. All around her, the ambient magic was vibrating, as if someone had struck an enormous tuning fork set to some mystical frequency that affected magical energy directly. The iridescent colors were pulsing between brighter hues and more somber tones, threatening to give her a headache if she gazed too long. Throughout, the fuzzy-sharp she'd come to associate with the Veil spell was glimmering with orchid streaks.

Her eyes flew open as she recognized another, darker smear of magic that had insinuated itself. "It's Blood Magic," she hissed.

"Here?" Reuben asked, alarm in his voice.

Clara nodded. "It's fading, but. . . we were hit by a spell. Or one of their artifacts. Maybe both." The Veil energy was folding itself in and around the thick Blood Magic, lightening burgundy to crimson, and olive green to emerald. "The Veil countered it somehow, but it's

weakened right here, around us." Indeed, Clara could already see the spell drawing in gossamer threads of blue-white magic, reinforcing itself from the pure magic produced by the humans nearby. "It's healing, though."

"You did not mention *kraujo magija,"* Elge said in a low, urgent voice.

"I assume that means Blood Magic," Reuben said, nodding. "And yes. We mentioned the artifacts the Paladins use, the ones they pass off as holy relics to their people. They're powered by Blood Magic. By a single Blood Witch, we believe, given the similarity of the spells."

"This is an abomination," Egle said, her jaw clenching as her face regained some color. "Why here? Why now?"

"It's safe to assume we're the targets," Reuben said heavily. "Clara?"

Clara shook her head. "It's mostly gone, now. It might have been a Finding. Something like *Aimsigh mo Chreiche,* maybe. It's pretty broadly scattered right here, what's left of it."

"Someone's looking for us, then," Ed said.

"The Blood Witch," Harriett spat.

"Or one of the relics," Ed corrected her. "That seems more likely. Something like a quarter of the artifacts we've recovered involved detecting and pinpointing magic. Stands to reason they'd have something for finding specific people."

"Such spells ordinarily require something personal to target," Egle pointed out.

"They've had plenty of opportunity," Sandy said grimly. "We've been caught in their traps more than once, invaded one of their research facilities, even—"

"Did you say 'research facilities?'" Egle interrupted.

"Indeed," Reuben said. "Over the past few years the Paladins have become more organized and focused."

Clara's expression darkened. "They were using my father as a lab rat."

Egle's lips thinned. "Then this is more serious than we have been

told." She looked down the street. "Come. Helping you find Creativity is a priority, but I can see how we all need to commit to helping with this Paladin threat." She began walking, and they all fell in behind her. "If they are *researching,* and using artifacts empowered with *kraujo magija,* with Blood Magic. . . this cannot be ignored." Her fingers twitched a quick spell, and Clara caught the edges of another Sending.

They walked in silence for a short ways. The southern end of the plaza narrowed to a short pedestrian mall, lined with a few shops, a cafe, and a bar. That ended in a street, where Egle turned right. A bookshop, a small boutique, and another coffee shop occupied a modern-looking building that would have been at home in nearly any American city. The tall buildings housed what looked like offices or apartments on their upper floors.

They continued another block, and Clara realized they were walking directly toward a church, the oldest building she'd seen so far. "The Basilica of Saint Michael the Archangel," Egle said quietly, noticing Clara's interest. "Originally built in 1824, and enlarged in 1882. Somewhat after your American Civil War, I believe. The style of the towers is very popular in this part of the world." She slowed as they approached the church, and everyone gathered around and behind her on the sidewalk.

"What?" Clara asked. Egle's shoulders had tightened beneath her jacket, and the muscle of her jaw was twitching.

"There," she said in a low, tight voice, nodding toward the church.

A moderately high wall stood between the sidewalk and a generous courtyard in front of the church. But the sidewalk they were on led directly to the wide gates set into the wall, which were fully open. Past them and up a few steps to the church's main entrance was a priest, clearly identifiable in his vestments.

He was talking to a man in an immaculate black trenchcoat that hung to his ankles. Heavy, glossy black goggles hung around his neck, and a black leather fedora sat atop his head.

"That's a Paladin," Harriett said.

Egle turned to look at her, and then nodded slowly. "One unlike the cowboy versions we have seen before, though. That man is dressed as a *raganų medžiotojas,* a Hunter of Witches."

"That's what Paladins are," Idalia pointed out.

"Yes, but *this* particular group is native to the Baltic nations." Her frown deepened as she turned back to the church. "That *they* have become involved speaks even more to the urgency of your mission."

"The Veil will still protect us, won't it?" Ed asked.

Egle opened her mouth to reply, but Clara answered. "His coat has iron in it. It's grounding the magic right around him. But it's not a huge amount like I'm used to. Probably not plates. The Veil. . ." She hesitated as she examined the area. "It seems fine. It's not drawn to the coat."

"Leisk man išgirsti tokiu atstumu," Egle muttered, her fingers twitching at her side.

"What—" Johanna started to ask, but Egle silenced her with a raised finger. Her eyes were locked on the priest and his visitor.

"He is telling the priest that they have found evidence of dark magic. That he is calling on the ancient partnership between the Hunters and the church. The *Aljansas už blogio panaikinimą,* the alliance against evil." She paused, listening. Clara could see the thinnest threads of magic carrying the men's words directly to Egle's ears. "The priest says they have had no reports, but. . ."

"What?" Harriett whispered.

"The Hunters are welcome to use the chapel," Egle said. She frowned. "I do not understand the significance."

"What's in the chapel?" Rueben asked.

"The remains of Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis," Egle said, still focused on the men. "A prelate of the church from. . . oh, the early 1900s, I believe. He was instrumental in reviving the Marianists in the Baltics during the Russian regime." Her frown deepened. "He—the Hunter—is implying the church has something they can use.

Some tool. *Šventojo kraujo kardas,* he is saying." She paused a moment in to translate in her head. "Sword of the Sacred Blood."

"Sounds like a Blood Magic artifact again," Sandy said grimly.

"I would suggest we try to get it ourselves, before he does," Reuben said with urgency.

Egle hesitated, and then nodded firmly. "I agree. But let us take care of this." Her fingers were already flicking through another Sending. "Come, let us wait in that book shop."

The sign over the shop read *Pegasus,* accompanied by a stylized logo of a winged horse. They hurried across the street and ducked inside. A coffee counter occupied one corner of the shop, and Egle led them over. She waved for them to sit, and stepped up to the counter to order. After a few moments, she began shuttling small cups of espresso to them, her expression still tight and troubled. At last, she sat next to Clara, blowing on her espresso to cool it. "A team has been dispatched," she said quietly.

"You seem well-prepared for something like this," Reuben said just as softly.

Latoya was already casting a cocoon of silence around them, and the already quiet bustling of other customers in the shop dimmed to a muffled whisper.

"Thank you," Egle said, nodding. "I find myself distracted. And no, I would not say we are well-prepared. The Veil has kept the Hunters from being interested in us for half a century. We are simply fortunate that the team at the Palace is still finishing their work, cleaning up and moving their equipment out. Two of them are from Marijampolė and know the church. We should hear back shortly."

They sipped in silence, and Clara could feel her shoulders slowly tensing. As she finished her last sip of espresso, she said, "Do you think we should—"

Whump.

"Šūdas!" Egle swore. Her espresso cup clattered on the table as she stood.

Clara was already scanning the air around them, rising from her

seat and, with Ed's assistance, hurried outside. "Definitely Blood Magic," she muttered. "And it's definitely targeting *us*. Maybe even me specifically, I can't tell. The Veil is absorbing it pretty quickly." Runnels of pure magic were already funneling from the nearby humans to help the Veil reinforce itself.

"Tracking spell?" Reuben asked as the rest of the group joined them outside.

"Definitely." Clara could still see the thick stain of Blood Magic in the air, its tendrils twisting madly as the Veil sought to absorb and dissipate it. Its bruise-colored magic snaked toward their group, but the Veil acted just as quickly to end it. "They have to suspect we're here. At least generally. I can't think of a spell that could contain so much power across a worldwide search."

"Depending on the spell," Sandy mused, "the fact that the Veil is absorbing it could *look* like something. If they were doing light region-by-region probes and hit the Veil, that alone might have made them try again."

"That is possible?" Egle asked.

Sandy thought about it, then shrugged. "I'd struggle to do something like that myself, in a construct. But Blood Magic. . . it works differently. Intent, willpower, the pain and suffering that went into gathering it. . . that all matters more than the construction or even the precision."

Egle opened her mouth to reply, but snapped it shut and looked to one side. "They have it."

"Where can we meet them?" Clara asked quickly.

"The Cultural Center. There are offices in the basement that won't be in use now. They are taking it there already and will meet us."

"Which way?" Reuben asked. "Back to the plaza?"

Egle hesitated, then nodded. "I am reluctant to use translocation magic in the open if the Veil is under attack."

"It's a short walk," Clara assured them, taking Ed's hand and setting off at a brisk pace.

They moved swiftly, retracing their steps to the plaza and making their way to the Cultural Center's staff entrance. Egle unlocked the door and let them in, carefully securing it behind them before leading them down a utilitarian hallway lined with doors. She stopped at one labeled *Eksponatų Priežiūra,* opened it, and let them in.

Two other witches were already in the room. A large table occupied most of the space, and white cabinets lined the walls. They'd cleared the table—a small pile of tools and paperwork on the floor said as much—and in the center was the artifact the two witches had recovered.

The sword lay on the table, its ancient blade gleaming dully in the dim light. Made of sturdy, heavy steel, its age was evident in the slight wear along the edges and the tarnish creeping up the hilt. Despite this, the weapon had been meticulously maintained, with a well-oiled grip and a blade sharpened to a keen edge. Signs of past battles were etched into its surface—nicks and scratches that spoke of countless clashes. To any ordinary observer, it was a relic, remarkable more for its history than any present power.

But as Clara let her eyes slip out of focus and gaze upon the sword, she saw more than just an old weapon. Her eyes widened as the Blood Magic revealed itself, a spectral stain the color of deep bruises spreading across the blade. It pulsed with a malevolent energy, a mixture of pain and anger seeping into the air around it. The magic was raw and palpable to her senses, a dark current flowing beneath the surface.

"Can you tell what it does?" Latoya asked quietly.

Clara could see it clearly: The spell imbued in the sword was unique, enabling it to slice through magic itself. Clara watched in awe and apprehension as tendrils of ambient magic sparked and died along the sword's edges, the blade's presence causing a ripple in the magical field. The sword was a paradox, ancient and mundane to most, yet a potent instrument of destruction to those attuned to its hidden power. "It's made to slice magic."

"Tikrai ne," Egle gasped. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't know," Clara said, her eyes still glued to the weapon. "But I can see it sparking against the ambient magic, even just laying there. If someone held it, the spell would activate."

"Could it slice the Veil?" Reuben asked softly.

"I—" Clara hesitated, scanning the blade. Then she nodded slowly. "I believe so. Again, even just there on the table, it's doing it. The effect isn't spreading, but everything touching it just turns to smoke." Glowing equations degraded into flaring motes of light, and the hazy sharpness of the Veil itself was sliced to vapor as it drifted across the worn blade.

"Reuben!" Ed snapped.

Clara's vision snapped with it, the flows of magic vanishing into the background. She blinked at the sudden, unwanted adjustment, and saw Ed with a hand on Reuben's forearm.

The older man had been reaching for the sword's hilt. "I. . . don't. . ." he stammered, withdrawing his hand and quickly shoving it in a pocket.

Clara forced her eyes back to magic-mode and looked at the sword. It seemed to stare back, tiny wisps of Blood Magic curling from the pommel, curling back toward the leather-wrapped hilt as if. . . *beckoning.* "It wants to be used," she said with a shudder.

"Can you break it?" Sandy asked.

Clara forced herself to look harder, then shook her head. "It's *old.* It's. . . it feels *sly."*

"I can't believe Ikwity took this one back," Ed growled.

"What?" Egle asked sharply.

Clara sighed. "Long story. This sword was made, or at least enchanted, in modern times. Probably quite recently. The Paladins have a pet Blood Witch. They might even be passing her off as. . . we don't know, a priestess or something. But she's been enchanting these artifacts, and then. . . *somehow,* Aunt Ikwity is picking them up and scattering them in ancient times. That way, when they show up again *now,* they can be holy relics."

Egle stared at her, aghast. "But why?"

"It's. . . convoluted," Ed said, putting an arm around Clara's shoulders. "Ikwity isn't a person, remember. She *is* Time. We think, in her head, she's everywhere—well, every *when* at once. She sees the Paladins as a way to drive witches to Underhill. She needs us there, in a weird way. She can't be sentient if people aren't aware of her, and the Fae tampered with time so much in Underhill that it's kind of a constant presence."

"But to carry something like *this,"* Egle said with disgust.

"She's. . . got some gaps in her knowledge," Ed said wryly. "She also carried back the 'holy relic' they used to attack the Las Vegas Border. That's the one that started the Rot in Underhill."

"She remembers the Rot from the Fae time," Clara added quietly, "but she says she didn't know the Paladins' relic would cause it again." She looked into Ed's eyes. "I believe her."

He hesitated before nodding agreement. "She seemed genuinely upset about it."

"But that still doesn't help us with *this,"* Sandy said, jerking her chin at the sword. "We can't just shove it in an iron box."

"Whyever not?" Egle asked. "We have human friends, remember. I can have an iron box brought over quite quickly." She scowled at the sword. "And then encased in concrete and dropped into the Baltic Sea."

"Blood Magic isn't affected by iron," Clara pointed out. "Iron is *in* Blood. It's an entirely different kind of magic. Still, dropping it in the ocean might not be a bad idea."

"It'll find a way to be found," Sandy said, shaking her head. "All the enchanted weapons in legends, they were almost all empowered with Blood Magic. Excalibur, Gramr, Durendal, Harpe, you name it. Tossing Excalibur in a lake certainly didn't help."

"And if it can slice magic," Reuben said, his eyes still locked to the old weapon, "what could it do to a Border?"

Clara's eyes widened. "Destroy it."

"Could it cause the Rot on the Underhill side?" Johanna asked quietly.

Clara considered it. "It might," she allowed. "Underhill *is* magic, in a lot of ways. Something like this would. . . *break* that."

"Then we *must* either destroy it or hide it somewhere it can never be found," Egle insisted.

"Silk insulates it," one of the two men who'd retrieved it said. He held up a thick silk blanket. "We used this to take it from its case."

Everyone stared at the sword for a few moments, thinking.

"Wrap it up," Clara said suddenly. "I want to see what it does."

The men complied, careful to pick the sword up through the silk and roll it over and over until it was swaddled in multiple layers of material.

"Well?" Ed asked.

Clara studied it carefully. "That's doing it. I think it—"

Whump.

"Another one!" Latoya cried, bracing herself against the edge of the table.

Everyone else started talking quickly, but Clara ignored them. This time, she'd had her vision fully in magic-mode when the Blood Magic spell hit, and she was able to see its effect clearly for the first time. "Quiet!" she snapped. "Sorry," she said in a softer tone when the conversations abruptly stopped. "I can see it this time."

"What's it doing?" Ed asked.

"It's definitely a tracing spell. But it's not the Irish one. This one's definitely more targeted. It's trying to sniff around. It washed over the silk like water. The Veil's dismantling it already, although it's taking longer down here for some reason." She realized why at once. "No humans. No pure magic. That's the trick. But it's definitely targeting at least one of us."

"Can you tell how broad it started?" Reuben asked.

"I'd have needed to be outside," Clara said. "But it came through really evenly. At the very least it targeted the entire building."

"Probably far broader than that," Egle mused. "Jokubas, Gytis,

take charge of the sword. Assuming nobody minds?" Everyone else shook their heads. "Good. Secure it back in Vilnius. Use the vaults. Then have someone contact Salomėja. She's a mage-smith," she explained to the rest of them. "Very experienced forging artifacts. She'll have ideas for destroying this."

"Melting it should do it," Sandy suggested.

"There'll be backlash from the spell," Clara warned.

"She'll know how to shield against it," Egle assured them. "You two, go." The two men gathered up the sword and vanished in a sparkle of translocation magic. "Now, we need to find Creativity. I suggest we begin along the riverside, as I suggested earlier. There will be more humans there as well, many more, in the event there are more attempts to locate you."

"The Veil will hold better and heal faster," Clara agreed.

"Then let us go quickly," Egle said. "If you do not mind me taking us?"

Nobody objected, and they vanished in another swirl of magic.



"Do you think splitting up was a good idea?" Ed asked.

Clara shrugged. "We can cover more ground. And Ikwity certainly didn't like a crowd—what if Creativity is the same?"

"Point."

They'd left the riverfront to other and moved quickly to the park—Poetry Park, Egle had told them. Neat paths crisscrossed the park, which was a mix of open lawns and shady areas.

"Jackpot," Ed said, pointing.

Near a set of tennis courts were a dozen or more small tents, each featuring an artist selling their works. Everything from oil paintings to watercolors was on offer, and Clara and Ed made a slow but deliberate beeline for the gathering.

"You think it's one of them?" Clara whispered as they wandered between the tents.

Ed shook his head. "Ikwity doesn't make clocks. Creativity inspires these guys, but I'm guessing it's somewhere nearby." He stopped at the end of a row of tents and scanned the rest of the park. "There. See that old man, sitting on that bench?"

Clara squinted. The bench Ed seemed to be pointing at—the only one sitting in that section of open ground—was occupied by a woman that strongly reminded Clara of her adoptive mother. She wore a pair of comfortable-looking jeans and a plain gray hoodie.. "I see a bench, but that's more a middle-aged woman than an old man."

Ed frowned. "I don't see—ah."

"Oh," Clara said, realizing what he meant. "Yeah. Let's go."

They took an indirect route this time, but Clara glanced toward the bench in question a couple of times as they went, and saw the woman tracking them. Finally, she grabbed Ed's hand and just headed straight over. "Mind if we join you?" she asked as they approached.

The old man smiled, the corners of his bright eyes wrinkling. He nodded, setting the loosely knotted bowtie at his neck bobbling. "Of course not, little witches." He slid to one end of the bench and patted the empty space. "Please, please. Be seated, enjoy the day. Inspiring, isn't it?"

Clara eased herself down next to the Power. "I suspect you're a bit more inspiring than the day itself?"

The girl's eyes narrowed slightly, then she smiled and shrugged. She looked down and brushed an imaginary speck of dust from her light-blue sweater. "Found out, am I?"

"My name is Clara. Clara Thorn. I'm the one who raised the Border to Underhill. The one that's in Vilnius, and comes out in the Great Northern Wood."

The boy shifted in his seat, his orange t-shirt glowing in the midday sun. It put Clara in mind of citrus, and she stole a quick look around to see where the scent of oranges was coming from. "Oh. You're her. I guess. . . Ikwity would have sent you, then."

Clara smiled, and turned her gaze back to the old man's brilliant blue eyes. They'd seen a lot, those eyes—she could tell. They were full of depth, and she found herself falling into them. *"Alerto, nakaangkla, mulat,"* she whispered as she tweaked some of the local magic into a spell of alertness. Next to her, Ed did the same. "She did, yeah."

The woman smiled and gently brushed her purple headscarf, settling it against the stiff, fresh-smelling breeze. "I'm not doing that, you know. Not like she does. It's your own mind. Your imagination."

Clara blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Urania, Polyhymnia, Melpromene, Thalia, Clio, Calliope, Euterpe, Terpsichore, Erato. Those names mean anything to you?" The wizened old woman peered over a pair of horn-rimmed glasses into Clara's eyes.

"The Greek Muses," Ed said.

Her eyes shifted to Ed's as she nodded. "I am all of them, and more. To be near me is to see possibilities, to hear new rhythms, to feel emotions new and old." She turned to look at the tents of artists. A small crowd had developed around them, and several were doing a brisk trade, exchanging money for canvases. "They come here to feel me." He grinned, and Clara swore his shining eyes were purple. "One little spark of imagination, and all that. That's what you're seeing. Your imagination, and from there you create reality. That's why they come." Then she turned back to Clara, pushing her hood back and shaking out her long, black braids. "Why have you come?"

Clara considered the question. "When you helped me raise the Border, Ikwity had hoped you'd come back. Join her. In Underhill, I mean."

The man nodded slowly and looked away, his sharp jaw clenching a bit. "Yes, she would. But. . . no."

"She said you'd probably say that," Ed said.

He turned back to Ed, his sharp green eyes piercing and bright. "Did she say why?"

"The Fae," Clara answered, and the girl's soft brown eyes shifted to meet Clara's. She'd braided her hair into cornrows, Clara saw, and her brightly colored kaftan rippled softly in the gentle breeze. "They abused you. Hurt you."

She frowned at the memory. "And created me, for that matter." Her rose-scented perfume drifted gently to them on the still air.

"They're gone," Ed said. "They've been gone for a long time."

"I know," Creativity said, scratching his salt-and-pepper beard. "But even so. Ikwity knows better than most the power of memory. And why would I return?"

"We need you," Clara said simply.

Creativity cocked one long eyebrow. Looking at their narrow face, androgynous black hair, and dull gray eyes, Clara wondered if she and Ed had any chance of success. "Need?"

"Do you know about the Paladins?" Ed asked.

"The witch hunters," she said with a sigh, folding her hands in her lap. "Yes. I know of them." She looked down at her own gray trenchcoat, seeming to reflect on the similarity to those the Paladins wore.

"They're forcing us into Underhill. All of us. All witches. Forever." Ed sighed. "Ikwity's. . . lived it, already, I guess."

"I surmised as much might happen," the boy said, his high voice at odds with the seriousness of his tone. "I'm sorry, for what it's worth. The Ordinary is a wonderful place."

Clara smiled. "I kind of suspect we're resigned to it. But there's a problem."

"Problem?" the little girl lilted, tilting her head. Her red plastic headband sparkled in the sun. "What prob—oh." Her small blue eyes widened. "Oh, I see." She looked away. "I felt you, you know. When you raised the Border." She dimpled a bit. "You had fun making it different. Do you remember?"

"No," Clara said sadly. "Ikwity. . . she took that time. Most of it's come back, but not that."

"Too bad," the little old lady said, tucking her knitting into her

lap. "The act of creation is one of the most joyful in existence." She sighed. "So what's next for you?"

"We're going to close most of the other Borders. But this one—well, the one in Vilnius—needs to stay. It'll pull magic through. And. . . we need your power, too."

"Yes." The old woman's gnarled fingers twisted around each other as the entity considered. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you."

Ed and Clara at in silence for several long moments. "Will you help us?" Clara asked at last.

"Hmm?" the man said, turning back to them. "Oh, of course," he added, fluttering one hand. Clara noticed that his fingers were covered with brightly colored rings. "Yes, I can ensure my power flows through your Border. Honestly, I would have done so sooner, had someone asked, I suppose. I've just been very focused on. . . *here.* Human's capacity for me is astonishing."

"I don't think we knew you were. . . *you,"* Clara admitted.

Creativity shrugged, her thin bare shoulders covered by a lightweight, pink shawl. "I'm not offended. Most don't. But yes, I'll—"

Whump.

"I hate that," Creativity said, frowning so deeply the ends of his lips seemed to almost touch his chin. "Destruction. Oppression." He shook his head angrily. "Is this something to do with you?"

"We think so," Clara said quickly. "But it's being done *to* us, not *by* us."

"The Hunters?" Clara nodded. "I see. You understand what it is?"

"Blood Magic," Ed murmured.

"Yes. Hateful, destructive power. Born of derision." She tilted her angular chin up a bit, taking in the crowd. "All the more reason to help you. So yes."

"Do we. . . need to do anything?" Clara asked, unsure of how to proceed.

"No," she said, smiling warmly. "In fact, I've already seen to it. Nothing more than taking down a barrier, really." Then she tilted her

head again. "My word, there *are* more of you there now, aren't there?"

"You can tell from here?" Ed asked.

He winked, the dark freckles on his face undulating as he did so. "I am the widget missing from the easy-to-assemble swing set," he said with a small grin.

"Come again?"

"Wherever someone has to come up with a creative solution to something, I am there. You'll feel me more, now." Then she frowned. "I suspect you'll be in need of a few creative solutions, by and by."

"Tell me about it," Clara agreed. "Thank—"

"Clara!"

Clara whirled at the familiar voice. "Mom? What are you doing—"

"Clara how can the two of you just be sitting here? This is serious! And dangerous!"

"Mom, I'm not—" Clara turned back to find the space next to her empty. "Oh."

"Where are the others?" Jessamine demanded.

"I'll call them," Ed said, his fingers already flicking through a Sending spell. "We found Creativity, Jess. That's solved."

"Yes, but have you not felt the Blood Magic tracing spell? It's been slamming into every major city on the planet, apparently."

"We've felt it," Clara said. "There's a spell here that—"

"The Paladins are up to something," Jessamine interrupted. "Tell everyone to get back to Philadelphia. Quickly. Something's happening, and it's major. We need to consult a Blood Magic expert."

Clara and Ed stood. "Is there even such a thing?" Ed asked.

"There was," Jessamine said tightly. "At Linginbaum's. So we'll need to track them down. We'll regroup at the house, and then use the Boston portal."

"A bunch of the faculty were going to be meeting to set up a new school," Ed said. "Professors Castella and Duoteny were heading it

up. Those two won't be hard to find, and maybe they'll know where the rest are."

"Then let's go," Jessamine ordered. She looked around quickly. "We need to find someplace—"

"We don't, Mom," Clara assured her. She grabbed the local magic and began forming it into a translocation spell. "That's what I was trying to tell you. They've got a thing here. We don't need to hide."

"A thing?" Jessamine frowned. "What do you mean, a—"

The three of them vanished in a shower of rainbow-colored lights.

CHAPTER 13
PROFESSOR CASTELLA

"I'm glad we found you, professor," Ed said. "It's pretty urgent."

Finding Professor Castella had, in fact, been straightforward: once in Underhill, Ed had simply cast what he called the "phone book spell," a bit of Pacific Islander magic called *E ʻimi i koʻu hoahānau.* That had taken them—via translocation spell, rather than the Anchor network—to a spot in the South-Midwest of Underhill, to a tiny village where a group of professors were planning to build a new school.

"It's the Paladins," Jessamine grumbled. "They're using Blood Magic."

"Oh, my," Professor Castella said, her face going pale.

The triplets had elected to go see their parents, and the rest of the team wanted to rest and run some personal errands. They'd collected Alex Holdaway, Finlay, and Wolfgang before heading to the Professor's location. Fortunately, the tiny settlement already had a small pub, and they'd commandeered a large table just in front of it. The weather was warm but gray, the thick cloud cover mirroring Clara's own state of mind.

"They've been doing it for a while," Clara added, giving her mother a concerned glance. Jessamine's expression was drawn and ashen, and she kept tapping one finger anxiously on the table. "Their Blood Witch—or Witches, we're not sure—has been creating constructs, and the Paladins are passing them off to their people as holy relics intended to hunt witches."

"But what they're doing now is a little bigger-scale," Ed continued. "They've been launching some kind of tracking spell, we think intended to find us. And it's been. . . well, if not global, then they've certainly been directing it to a lot of major cities. We felt it in Lithuania at the same time Clara's Mom felt it in Philadelphia."

The professor's frown deepened. "Nasty business."

"The Council's already sending their recommendation for all witches to come to Underhill," Wolfgang said. The Professor nodded. "Permanently."

Another nod. "Which should keep us safe enough. Underhill will reject Blood Magic almost like an immune response."

"Yes, but we *need* a connection to the Ordinary," Clara explained. "The conception issue."

"Oh!" Professor Castella said, her eyes widening. "Oh, I hadn't considered that. Never wanted children myself. That does put a wrinkle on it. Could we—"

"We've solved the basic problem," Clara said. "Creativity. The actual incarnation, the Great Power. He—or she, whatever—won't return to Underhill, but he's agreed to let his power back through the final Border. The other end is in Vilnius, in Lithuania. It's reasonably protected. . . but Blood Magic could take it down."

"And bring back the Rot," Finlay added.

The professor nodded slowly. "Yes, I very much recall what happened at Linginbaum's. So you're looking to turn the hunt on the Blood Witch."

"Or Witches," Clara said.

Professor Castella shook her head. "No, it will only be one. It's impossible for them to work together. If there's more than one,

they'd be operating in completely different styles, likely from entirely different continents."

"We haven't seen evidence either way," Wolfgang said uncertainly.

"Rely on it, there'll be only one," she assured them. "Hmm. A tracking spell, you say?"

"That's what it seemed like," Clara said.

"I could feel it *tugging* on me," Jessamine said in a low, gravely tone.

"Well yes, it would," the professor said easily. "It would *literally* target your blood."

"Wait, are *you* the Blood Magic expert?" Wolfgang asked, leaning forward over the table. "We thought we were coming to you to *find* the expert!"

"Oh, I don't know about being an expert," Castella said with a snort. "My partner, Professor Duoteny, is the real expert. Wrote the book on the subject, but she's back in the Ordinary wrapping up her affairs there. But you know, you pick up a thing or two." She frowned again. "But a tracking spell on the scale you're describing. . . that would require immense power. Blood Magic is actually more well-suited to wide-area effects than our magic, but even so—that's a *very* wide area." She shook her head. "It's a shame we let the humans discover that path, you know. Could have stopped it, back in the day. But once that cat came out of its bag, there doesn't seem to be any putting it back."

"So it's likely to be a human, then?" Clara asked.

"Normal witches can't do Blood Magic, dear," the professor said kindly. "It's purely a human thing. Entirely different type of magic. Well, power. It's not even magic as we understand it."

Jessamine had stopped fidgeting and was giving the professor her full attention. "What do you mean?"

"True magic, our magic, is born in the human spirit." She snorted lightly. "Although don't go bandying that about, you won't be thanked for it. Hoity-toity types don't like to think we owe anything

to humans. But it's a symbiosis, or was always meant to be, I believe. Born in humans, tempered by witches. True magic mainly affects the physical world, yes? Glamours, translocation, stasis, light, levitation, and so forth."

"We have memory-altering magic," Ed pointed out.

"Yes, there's crossover," she said with a mild nod. "Although there's an argument that we're altering the brain *physically,* you understand. If you read a bit on human cognitive science, neurons and such, you start to accept that the *only* way to change memories is physically."

"Oh," Clara said softly. *That makes the Veil make even more sense, then. It's* physically *stopping* memories from happening.

"So Blood Magic is what, the opposite?" Alex asked.

"Essentially, yes. It is born of physical pain and suffering, generally. That power is used by a Blood Witch to mainly affect the *spiritual* world. Which makes it particularly effective at interfering with our own magic, I'm afraid."

"Because our magic is born of spirit?" Clara asked.

"Precisely so," the professor said with a quick smile. "Centuries ago, there was actually an attempt to stamp out Blood Magic."

"The Exquisition," Wolfgang said.

The professor beamed. "You were always such a quick student. You have it on the nose. And as far as we know, the last few Blood Witches were indeed killed." She sighed sadly. "But Blood Magic is. . . primal. And unsubtle. Whenever there is suffering, that power comes into the world, and inevitably finds someone sensitive to it. And just as inevitably, they go quite mad with it."

"Wait, mad?" Clara asked.

"Oh, entirely," she assured them. "Mad with power, to begin with, which is why Blood Witches won't put up with another Blood Witch. Make any two of them aware of each other and they'll go at it hammer and tongs until one's dead. But left alone, the power rots their mind. They become egomaniacs, sociopaths, misanthropes, everything."

"Oh, good," Finlay murmured.

"So could we use the tracking spell to go backwards?" Ed asked. "To find the Blood Witch?"

Professor Castella blinked sharply and considered it. "Hmm." She paused for another long moment, staring at them owlishly. Then, suddenly, she snapped out, *"To vivlío pou chreiázomai, parakaló!"*

Clara recognized the spell immediately, even before she saw glimmers of magic dart out from the professor's hands. A moment later, a large, thick book appeared in a burst of sparks, *thump*ing heavily to the wooden table. "That's the Library spell from Linginbaum's! I thought that was specific to the school?"

"It is, dear," Castella said mildly, her attention already on the book's pages as she levered the volume open to its halfway point.

"But Linginbaum's was destroyed," Finlay said.

"Oh, not before we evacuated the Library," the professor said. "Imagine leaving all those books behind?" She clucked gently as she turned a page. "Never would have done."

"But that would have taken. . ." Wolfgang started. "Wait, did you have a *Torna Indietro* already in place?"

"Of course. Standard procedure for school Libraries. Never know what's going to go wrong with that many students lobbing spells about."

"Sharing is caring," Clara said.

"It's a Snap Back spell," Wolfgang explained while Castella leaned forward studying the book intently. "Takes ages to put them into place, but once they are, you can trigger them in an instant. It would have translocated the entire library to a backup location."

"A large cavern right beneath this village," Castella murmured before falling silent again.

"Convenient place to put a new school, then," Alex chuckled.

The professor looked up and gave him a smile. "Professor Duoteny and I had always wanted to start a research school in this area. After the geography began settling, we began thinking even harder about it. The fact that this was also Linginbaum's backup

location simply made the decision easier." Her gaze returned to the book, her eyes flicking rapidly back and forth as she scanned the tightly packed text.

"What book is that?" Wolfgang asked, tilting his head to try and read some of the crabbed, hand-written words.

"Tractatus de Magia Sanguinis et Falsae Maleficarum qui eam exercent," Castella murmured, still reading intently.

Wolfgang blinked a few times as he translated in his head. "A Treatise on the. . . on Blood Magic! And the. . . False Witches who practice it?"

"Exactly so," Castella said, stabbing a finger at the book. "Written at least a hundred years ago by one Esmerelda Duoteny."

"Your partner?" Clara asked.

"The very one. Long before we met, of course, and she'd just been made a professor. But this!" She thumped the page she'd been reading and looked up. "Much of what we know about Blood Witches comes from tracking them down and. . . well, destroying them, usually. Not much else to be done once they're deep into it. Can't just capture one and study it, you know. Esme spent decades studying the lore, although she was never on the trail of one herself. But this," and again she stabbed a finger at the book, "is the spell most often used to trace them down. Isolates a portion of their own power and works it backwards." Her eyes dropped to the page as she frowned. "But we need a theopholous, and I haven't the foggiest idea where to obtain one."

"A theo—" Ed started to ask.

"I have one," Jessamine said in a low voice.

"You do?" Castella asked, looking up in surprise.

"What is it?" Finlay asked in the same breath.

"One of the few tools usable by witches that contains iron," Alex said. "We keep it in the basement, in one of those silk-lined boxes."

"Iron?" Ed asked.

"Wait, I read about these," Wolfgang said slowly. "Weren't they developed by human alchemists?"

"In the early 1100s," Castella nodded. "We discussed them briefly in Ancient Magics. Do you remember what they do?"

Always a professor, Clara thought with a smile.

"Legend says they were extracted from Underhill itself," Wolfgang said slowly. "Which is impossible, of course, with the iron, but—"

"Underhill has iron," Clara interrupted. Everyone turned to look at her. "What? It does."

"Whatever are you talking about, dear?" Professor Castella asked.

"It's down there," Clara said, pointing to the ground. "At Underhill's roots. I felt it every time I raised a new Border. It's the beginning of. . . whatever separates us from the Ordinary."

"Fascinating," Castella breathed. "I can see we benefit from having a mathemagician who is so. . . *grounded,* if you will." She gave Clara a grin. "And that actually justifies the legends a bit. Go on, Wolfgang."

"A theopholous is steeped in magic. Absolutely loaded with it," Wolfgang said. "It—"

"You mean like a storage crystal?" Ed asked.

Wolfgang shook his head. "No, you can't draw the magic out. But it can help direct magic." He frowned. "In class, you never said specifically how, Professor. Or what kind of magic."

"Yes, well, Blood Magic wasn't so much in the curriculum. But that's its main use. Or one of two." She peered at Jessamine. "I'd be curious to know how a Counter-Hunter used one."

Clara's parents exchanged a wary glance. "It's quite heavy," Jessamine said slowly.

"And because it's so full of its own magic, it doesn't absorb more," Alex continued. "You can manipulate them, physically, quite easily."

"And it doesn't like to let its magic go," Jessamine added even more slowly. "And it. . ."

"Pushes other magic aside," Castella said, her eyes growing wide. "Goodness, I'd never considered that. Three uses, then."

"I still don't—" Wolfgang started.

"You used it as a projectile," Clara said. "Against Paladins."

Her parents nodded.

"Oh," Wolfgang said, his voice going soft.

"I've never seen you use it, though," Ed said.

Jessamine shrugged. "It takes two. And there's a. . . knack to it." She looked at Alex, who turned away. "And it's not. . . comfortable."

"Needs must, dear," Castella said softly. "But it would have blocked any Blood Magic protections quite neatly, I would think."

"We didn't run across those, back then," Alex murmured.

Clara's vision caught a glimpse of her parents hurling a rock, its trajectory imbued with a magical force that shattered through the Paladins' armor with a sickening crunch.

"I would imagine," Castella said in a very low, very quiet voice, "it has come into contact with more than a little blood, then."

Jessamine nodded mutely, looking back at her husband. He looked away.

"So how does it interact with Blood Magic?" Wolfgang asked as the tension between Clara's parents seemed to thicken.

"Given its history," the professor said, "I would imagine quite strongly. Carefully used, they can isolate aspects of Blood Magic and trace them back to their source, leaving a trail of ordinary magic that we can follow." She tapped the book again. "Esme found a specific set of constructs used for this exact purpose, including a modified translocation spell designed to follow that trail."

"So these. . . a. . . theopholous," Ed said, struggling with the strange word, "it was designed to trace Blood Witches?"

"Oh no, dear. Not specifically," Castella said, smiling softly.

"You said it had *two* purposes," Finlay said.

"Well, three, I suppose, given the Holdaways' experience. But its *first* purpose was to *destroy* Blood Witches. It's the iron, you see."

"But. . . blood *contains* iron," Wolfgang frowned.

"Blood Magic is very nearly the opposite of regular magic," the professor reminded them. "As ours is ordinarily drawn to iron, grounded by it, Blood Magic is quite *repelled* by it. Unless the Blood Witch is *extraordinarily* powerful and skilled, a theopholous can *displace* their power, rendering them vulnerable to more conventional attacks."

"And you can do this spell?" Jessamine asked.

The professor looked intently at Clara. "It would be straightforward, with our young mathemagician, here."

"You can show me how?" Clara said, hope rising in her chest.

But it fell as the professor shook her head. "Not directly, no. Not even Professor Duoteny could *show* you. But *with* you, yes, I believe we could do it. It's just a matter of visualization, which you're obviously quite good at." Then she frowned. "But for a spell being cast on a worldwide scale. . . it will take even more immense power. An order of magnitude more power than being put into the tracing spell to begin with. I don't know where—"

"I know some people," Clara interrupted with a grin. "We can do immense power."

"We're going to need the whole team," Alex said to Jessamine.

"Agreed. Clara, call the triplets. Elsie, too, we could use her firepower. I'll get the team. Once we find this Blood Witch I suspect we're going to need everyone to deal with it."

"If you time it right," Professor Castella mused, "you can give yourself an advantage."

"How so?" Alex asked.

"This tracing spell, as I said, requires *immense* power. The caster should be quite depleted for a good amount of time after casting it."

"The waves were coming about ten, maybe fifteen minutes apart," Ed said.

The professor frowned. "That's far quicker than I'd have expected." She was quiet as she considered. "There aren't any documented ways to store Blood Magic, as it is so spiritual in nature. But your Blood Witch may have found a way."

"Or there *is* more than one, and they've found a way to work together."

The professor shook her head. "I'd put money on a heretofore-unknown storage mechanism before I believed two Blood Witches working together. And remember, Blood Magic is a zero-sum game. There may be too much suffering in the Ordinary, but it isn't an *infinite* amount, and a Blood Witch can only draw from their immediate surroundings. Two of them would simply be sharing that same amount of power. No, I'll wager you're dealing with one, and that it's found some means of hoarding power for at least short periods of time."

"Or they're causing immense suffering," Jessamine said darkly.

The professor hesitated, and then nodded slowly. "Sadly, that is the most reasonable theory." Then she turned to Clara. "So, when do we leave?"



"I DON'T KNOW why we couldn't just go straight in," Jessamine grumbled. The seven of them, at Professor Castella's insistence, had translocated from the Border in Spring Green, Wisconsin, to an alley behind a small market in Philadelphia, several blocks away from Jessamine's row home.

"Abundance of caution," Alex reminded her. He'd agreed with the professor and even suggested the market. "If they've been sending tracking spells down, there's no telling if they actually detected you or not. We need—"

"Crap," Jessamine said in a low, tight voice.

Clara's eyes snapped ahead, and she saw the door of her mother's home standing open. A Paladin was standing outside, his arms crossed, his heavy goggles slung around his neck.

Clara's heart began beating faster.

"Is there any chance—" Professor Castella began.

"No," Jessamine growled. "It locks itself magically." Clara could see burn marks around the door's frame. "This way."

They'd been approaching the house on the other side of the street, and now Jessamine turned sharply and headed up another house's short flight of stairs. The rest of the group hesitated only a moment before following her up to the small, covered porch. "And I insisted we each bring a dish, but Marceline wasn't having it." She placed her hand on the door handle, muttering, *"Wehe ma ka inoa o kahi hoaaloha.* Says she's got the whole spread all taken care of." The door cracked open and they all filed quickly inside. "The Burns' are off visiting family in Florida," Jessamine said as she closed the door behind them. "They're friends."

"They *know,"* Alex added.

Jessamine was peering past the sheer curtains over the window next to the front door. "I need Latoya. She's better at this skulky stuff."

Alex' fingers twitched a Sending. "If she's in the Ordinary, she should—"

He was interrupted by a swirl of light as Latoya appeared. She was dressed in an oversized t-shirt and baggy sweatpants, looking more casual than Clara had ever seen her. Her hair was bound up beneath a worn-looking headscarf. "What is it?" she asked quickly, her hands rising to an attack position and magic building around her fingers.

"Paladins in the house," Jessamine said quickly. "I need to know how many."

Latoya peered through the curtain. "Not taking it very seriously, are they?"

"Probably the only reason we weren't caught," Jessamine agreed.

"One sec." Latoya pulled the curtain aside a bit more, and then held her hands in front of her face. Her thumbs and index fingers formed a rectangle, and she peered through it. *"Oprava doli, daruy meni zir poza mezhamy zoru."*

"I don't recognize that one," Wolfgang said. Clara could hear the frown in his voice.

"Should have stayed for post-graduate studies," Professor Castella chided him. "That's a perfectly done *Thundera* spell if I've ever seen one. Ukrainian version too. Very effective, but the pronunciation is a bear."

In Clara's sight, the rectangle between Latoya's fingers was glowing and flickering with green-blue light. It held for several long minutes before Latoya dropped her hands, dismissing the spell.

"Well?" Jessamine asked.

"You've got a half dozen of them tossing the place," Latoya said sadly.

"What about the basement?"

"Didn't see any down there. They haven't got to it yet."

Jessamine grinned, although the expression lacked any hint of mirth. "They won't. The door isn't there unless *I'm* there. Or Alex, or Clara."

"I mean, every house here has a basement," Clara pointed out. "They'll figure it out eventually."

"We don't need *eventually,*" Jessamine said, vanishing in a cascade of light. She was back a moment later, triumphantly holding a heavy, silk-wrapped *something* in her hands.

Latoya was still at the window. "You've set them off," she said mildly. "That one pulled his goggles back up and ran inside."

"Magic detector?" Finlay asked.

"Has to be," Alex said. "They've had various means forever, even before the Blood Witch." He frowned. "They'll start canvassing the block, next. We should move to the back of the house."

"We won't—" Jessamine began.

Whump.

Whump.

Whump.

Clara, her vision still in magic-mode, saw it all.

Three waves of mud-colored energy, tinged with threads of

brick-red miasma, pounded down from above. They were far thicker, far more intense, and far more *physical* than what they'd experienced in Lithuania. They slammed down, ignoring the physical world entirely, although Clara was sure the witches would have been crushed by them.

If not for the theopholous, that is.

The greedy, sickened energy *broke* just above the group of witches, who were still standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the small entryway. Each wave seemed to split like a piece of cardboard slammed onto a spike, tearing and fracturing around and away from them. Ragged edges of bruise-colored power flapped in an invisible wind, tearing and shearing as it was forced down around them, until it vanished through the wooden floorboards of their sanctuary.

Clara looked at her companions, and their expressions made it clear they'd felt something: their eyes were wide, their faces pale and ashen, and their shoulders tense. "You felt it?" she asked.

"Saints and sinners," Professor Castella muttered.

"It felt like my *veins* wanted to fly out," Alex said, wrapping his arms around himself.

"And that was with the theopholous thing breaking it up," Clara said. She'd felt the power as well, a sticky, oily slick that had seemed to—*make my veins fly out,* she thought. *Good description.*

"But it did?" Wolfgang asked.

Clara nodded emphatically. "I saw it. Three waves, and they all split—no, *ripped* is a better word—right around us."

"That in itself may be a signal," Castella warned. "We should be ready for another probe." She turned to Clara. "We don't have much time, and this is going to feel strange. Weird, even. Maybe creepy."

"What?" Clara asked, taken aback by the professor's sudden intensity.

"You're the only one of us who can *see* the magic, dear," the professor said, speaking quickly. "I need to see what you see. There's a spell."

"Oh."

"It's going to feel very odd."

"You. . . said. I'm okay."

The professor jerked her chin sharply and put her hands on Clara's shoulders. *"Ko taku titiro ki to kanohi. Taku tikanga ki to whakaaro,"* she chanted softly.

Clara's eyeballs began to itch, starting from the very back and spreading quickly to her pupils. They shifted into magic-mode, the delicate, iridescent symbols and equations of the ambient magic flaring to life. She was distantly aware of Castella's hands dropping from her shoulders, but the buzzing sensation in her eyes occupied her full attention. Her tongue started to taste purple, her skin tingled with the metallic sharpness of copper, and she could distinctly hear the crispness of salt.

"Oh, that's quite beautiful," Castella breathed beside her. "I hadn't expected—"

Whump.

WHUMP.

WHUMP.

Time seemed to slow as three more waves crashed down, each stronger than the last. Clara was dimly aware of smelling her father say, "Where is she getting all that power?" before her attention was caught up in what Professor Castella was doing.

As the first wave impaled itself on whatever field the theopholous was projecting, the professor was already gathering her magic. It pooled thickly along her arms, shining with tiny geometric structures that were connected with thready, precisely balanced equations. As the wave of Blood Magic tore itself around them, Clara could see it impinging on the ambient magic. Loose, gentle equations split and re-formed, rainbow colors fracturing into bright primaries that flickered and flared against the foulness that was passing over them.

At the second wave, Castella was ready, releasing her magic in a sharp spear toward the theopholous. Still in Jessamine's hands, its silk wrapping fell away, and Clara could see the power lying within

it. Dense beyond brightness, it pulsed dully as the professor's magic touched it. But then it seemed to rear back, and a glowingly dark cloud of power expanded from the shiny, steel-black rock. It reached upward just as the third—

Professor Castella's magic collapsed. The tight geometric forms shattered, the equations unbalanced and skittered away as the last, most powerful wave of Blood Magic thundered down around them, tearing itself like a greasy bedsheet. The theopholous held, but its energy retreated back into the rock, settling down with the grumbling of a long-asleep dragon who'd twitched with an ancient, unseen dream.

"Damnation," Castella swore. "I knew I wouldn't have enough power, but still—"

"Already on it," Ed said.

Clara's senses were still crossed and abuzz, and the arrival of the triplets in a hazy orange cloud of cinnamon tickled her ears. She was distantly aware of Ed hastily explaining the situation, and then the room lit up with an eerie chorus, ringing against the back of Clara's neck, rushing through the room with the sweet-tart taste of the Lemon Impossible bars they'd all enjoyed in Linginham's—what was it, a thousand years ago?

"Give me everything you've got, children," Castella was instructing them.

«It's a lot,» the triplets replied confidently.

"We'll need it," the professor assured them.

WHUMP.

The Blood Magic came down harder this time, and Clara's eardrums popped under the pressure. This time, she smelled the power hit the spike of the theopholous and *stretch,* like a thick sheet of plastic wrap.

And this time, the professor was ready.

Fueled by the pure-white sound of the triplets energy, the professor's magic jumped into the theopholous. Its own power, heavy and ancient, expanded outward and upward, shredding the first wave of

Blood Magic. In Clara's ears, the professor's spell was precise and angular—but not perfect. Clara quickly took up some of the triplets' power, reinforcing the professor's working, rebalancing the delicate equations, and thickening the razor-thin edges of the geometry. The triplets, long accustomed to working with Clara in this way, responded instinctively, their power slipping in and around the professor's design, bolstering the overall structure and lending it an almost impossible strength.

WHUMP.

The second wave fell even more heavily, but the theopholous was ready. Its stony power surged upward like a fist, grabbing a hank of Blood Magic and isolating it. The remainder of the wave shattered this time, a paper-thin sheet of scab-crusted ice that broke into a million fragments and fell, tinkling, all around them.

W H U M P.

The theopholous caught the third wave, holding it like a dripping velvet curtain. The Blood Magic seemed to bunch into a twisted, rough ball, balanced on the broad tip of the stone's old, canny energy. It was if the dragon had awoken, found itself under the thick, stifling cover of a foreign duvet, and gathered the bedding up into a ball, examining it with a keen, centuries-old curiosity.

And then the Blood Magic exploded upward.

It fountained in a waxy column, syrupy ropes of power twisting in and out of each other as it reached upwards.

Professor Castella continued to feed the triplets' magic to it, pushing the Blood Magic faster and faster, higher and higher.

Clara felt her eyebrows raise as the triplets' three-in-one plait of pure, synergistic magic. . . *attenuated.*

«Um,» Clara felt them say.

"Don't stop now!" Professor Castella shouted.

Clara was vaguely aware that the other witches had all crouched to the floor, covering their heads with their hands.

«You asked for it,» the triplets said with determination.

All of Clara's senses seared as the triplets called forth an *impos-*

sible amount of magic. Ambient energy was being sucked into the house like motes of dust into the world's biggest vacuum, energized through whatever triplet magic the three possessed, and cast back into the world purified, enlarged, and intensified.

Clara's mental "hands" burned as she fought to keep the professor's spell intact. Precision and accuracy were out of the question at this point; Clara felt like she was holding everything together through sheer force of will and the magical equivalent of duct tape and baling wire.

But it was working: the Blood Magic continued to fly upward, turned back on its own source.

It was over in a literal flash.

The room simply contained too many spells and too much power to go on for long. Clara smelled a *pop* as the Blood Magic connected with its origin, and then everything simply collapsed.

Including herself.



"Will she know we know? The Blood Witch, I mean?" Wolfgang was asking as Clara's eyes fluttered open.

"Oh, she'll know," Professor Castella said, her tone exhausted but triumphant. "Arrogant as they all are, I expect she'll take it as a challenge?"

"You okay, baby?" Jessamine asked.

Clara realized that her head was lying in her mother's lap. "Yeah, I'm good," she said after taking a brief mental and physical inventory of herself. "Also, ouch."

"I need a Gatorade," Harriett complained from somewhere across the room. "And a Big Mac."

"A case of each," Idalia said wearily.

"Will there be more?" Finlay asked.

"Doubtful," Castella said thoughtfully. "First of all, I can't even imagine where she's getting that kind of power. She must be some-

place positively *steeped* in misery. But secondly, and most importantly, we have her attention and she knows she has ours. She'll wait for us to go to her, now."

"Which we're. . . doing?" Ed asked.

"Have to," Clara said with a sigh. "Where is it exactly we're headed?"

"I'm just fiddling the last bit," Castella said. Clara sat up and, rubbing her temples, look at the professor. She was working a small spell of some kind, one Clara was too tired and sore to try and identify. But the outcome was obvious: a single gold thread of magic stretched upward through the ceiling. "There. Ah. . . interesting. I'd have put money on us going to a war zone or something."

"Where is it?" Ed asked.

The professor gave him a tired smile. "New Orleans."

CHAPTER 14
NEW ORLEANS

They did not head directly to New Orleans, much to Clara's relief. Instead, they gathered the team.

The *entire* team.

The triplets, who made a hasty trip back to their parents' remaining apartment in Paris to gather a bag full of fully charged storage crystals. Ed, who let his parents know he was heading back to New Orleans—and why. Elsie, who'd been spending as much time as possible helping her mums settle themselves in a new Underhill home. Even Finlay and Wolfgang had insisted on coming, although Alex Holdaway had, after much guilty deliberation, decided not to go.

"I can't," he'd said in a harsh whisper to Jessamine. "You don't know what—"

"I know," she'd interrupted, stroking his cheek. "I know. Stay here."

Jessamine's team of Counter-Hunters came as well: Trevor, Latoya, Reuben, and Sandy.

Thirteen to one, Clara had thought as they'd gathered near the Border from Underhill to Wisconsin. *Hopefully that's enough.* They

knew the Blood Witch was powerful, and it was reasonable to assume she'd be well-protected by the Paladin organization. Everyone except Clara was carrying at least two charged crystals as a hedge against stasis magic or other attacks, and Sandy had issued a handful of constructs to each of them. Each was designed to trigger a specific attack or defense, and she spent almost an hour drilling them on each one's proper use. *Hopefully that's enough,* Clara kept repeating in her mind.

They stepped through the Border.



"Hey, I know this place," Clara said with surprise as the completed translocation magic swirled gently away from them.

"Yeah, I figured this would be a safe spot," Ed said.

They'd arrived in front of Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop bar, the exact location where, several summers ago, Clara and Ed had sought refuge from pursuing Paladins. While the bartender had seemed ready to challenge the Paladins' claim over two then-teenagers, what had really done the trick was the ghost of Jean Lafitte himself.

"So where do we go from here?" Jessamine asked.

"Professor Castella gave me some ideas," Reuben said, looking up and down the street.

"Pity she couldn't come with us," Latoya said.

"Into what is almost certainly going to be a battle?" Trevor snorted. "She's a complete academic, not a combat witch. She's barely left Underhill in six decades. I don't blame her at all."

"We've got this," Sandy said confidently, holding up the theopholous. "She said it should still be tracking to the same origin as it did in Philly."

"It is," Clara confirmed, shifting her vision. A thread of copper magic stretched out from the black stone. Then she frowned. "But it's going a little hazy." Even as she watched, the tightly braided

magic was unraveling, individual gossamer threads pulling away and heading off in their own direction.

"New Orleans," Ed said grimly. "I was worried about that."

"I don't get it," Elsie said.

"There's been a *lot* of suffering here over the past couple hundred years," he explained. "And a lot of. . . well, maybe not blood magic, but there's definitely a tradition that leans toward the more shadowy side of things."

"So what do we do now?" Clara said. "There's like a hundred threads now, and they're going everywhere." Many of them, she realized, were beginning to fade. "I don't think the theopholous is going to be helpful."

WHUMP.

Clara's eyes slammed shut as a wave of dismal brown magic washed over them. "Another tracing spell," she grimaced. "It's got to be close, though. It didn't come from above."

"I felt it," Jessamine said through clenched teeth. "It came sideways."

"The theopholous lit up," Clara said as she blinked her eyes to clear the muddy after-glare. The stone's magic had threaded itself back together, and once again a gleaming rope of magic stretched off. "It's that way," she added, pointing in a direction that cut diagonally across the neat grid of streets. "But it's fading fast." Already, thin, floss-like strands of yellow energy were separating from the main stream, drifting off to other destinations in the city.

"Then let's move," Sandy said, holding the stone in front of her.

They hurried northeast up Bourbon Street for a block, and then cut southeast down Ursulines.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ed muttered as Clara indicated they should turn up Royal Street.

"What?" Finlay asked.

Ed shook his head. "Maybe I'm wrong."

"It's there," Clara said in almost the same breath. "That corner."

"I'm not," Ed said in a low voice.

"That" corner was half a block away, at the intersection of Royal Street and Governor Nicholls Street.

"What is it?" Latoya asked. "Whatever it is. . . I can *feel* it. Something." She shivered. "It's creepy. Look," she added, holding one arm out. The skin on her forearm had gone tight with goosebumps.

Clara squinted at the imposing mansion that occupied the corner. "It's. . . like it's on fire," she said slowly as she followed the rest of the group to the opposite side of Royal Street. "But the fire is dark. It's all black flames, shot through with red and purple."

"That," Ed said quietly, "is the LaLaurie Mansion."

"Never heard of it," Jessamine said with a frown. She absentmindedly rubbed the back of her neck.

"I have," Wolfgang said. "Turn in here." He pointed to a driveway on the same side of the street as the mansion, which led to a small parking area serving several of the homes along the street. They hurried back across Royal and into the driveway.

"Madame Marie Delphine LaLaurie," Ed said as they clustered against the side of one building. "Early 1800s. She's pretty famous around here."

"For torturing and maiming her own slaves," Wolfgang added.

"Slaves?" Clara said, her lip curling with disgust.

Ed nodded sadly. "Yeah. New Orleans was a major slave port. And I mean, it *is* the South. You didn't have to get very far out of the city and it was all plantations. But Madame LaLaurie was something. . . else."

Clara looked up. "I can still see the fire," she said quietly.

"The original mansion burned in 1834," Ed said. "We learned about it in Ordinary History. The reports at the time said an old woman, a slave in the kitchen, started the fire. She said she didn't want to be moved into the attic rooms." He shivered slightly, and wrapped his arms around himself. "Nobody came back from those rooms."

"But if it burned," Reuben asked, "why is it still. . ." he trailed off.

"Haunted?" Finlay said softly.

"There was a poem," Ed said, his voice distant and his eyes unfocused. "We had to read it in class. It was in Creole French." He hesitated, and then began to recite in a low, rough tone.

À la Nouvelle-Orléans, où les ombres rampent,
Les secrets du manoir LaLaurie s'infiltrent.
Une maison renaît de l'embrasement,
Pourtant, les ténèbres persistent dans ce lieu tourmenté.

Sous les murs, les murmures gémissent,
D'agonie et de plaintes sinistres.
Cent âmes en tourment ont saigné,
Leurs cris d'angoisse, à jamais dispersés.
La cruauté de Madame, un art pervers,
Arrachant l'espoir de chaque cœur.

Le sol en dessous, il boit la douleur,
Une tache maléfique qui dure à jamais.
L'incendie du manoir, un brasier courroucé,
Mais le mal dansait au sein du feu embrasé.

Bien que briques et poutres furent calcinées,
La malédiction elle-même ne pouvait être chassée.
L'air autour, si épais de peur,
Une brume fantomatique d'un rouge meurtrier.

Chaque pas à l'intérieur, un appel hanté,
Des esprits torturés, condamnés à ramper.
Ils errent dans les halls, invisibles, mais proches,
Dans une douleur constante, à jamais proches.

Leur souffrance, un souffle empoisonné,
Un cri silencieux qui chuchote la mort.
Aucune paix ne trouvera ce terrain maudit,

Car le temps lui-même a depuis longtemps oublié,
Non toucher purifiant de la lumière du matin,
La morosité de LaLaurie, une nuit sans fin.

Prenez garde à l'emprise lugubre du manoir,
Où la sanité commence à glisser.
Pour ceux qui osent entrer là,
Ils trouveront leurs âmes piégées dans le désespoir.

Clara was so unnerved that she didn't think to gather the local magic into a translation spell until near the end.

No peace will find this cursed plot,
For time itself has long forgot,
No cleansing touch of morning's light,
The LaLaurie gloom, an endless night.

Beware the mansion's eerie grip,
Where sanity begins to slip.
For those who dare to enter there,
Will ever find their souls' despair.

They were all silent as Ed finished.

"Their suffering is still there," Wolfgang whispered. "In the earth itself."

"Sang éternel," Latoya said. "Eternal blood."

"The perfect energy source for a Blood Witch," Reuben said grimly. " Ever-renewing. It makes sense now."

"So how do we—"

Ah know y'all dere, cher.

The voice, deep and smooth, slipped into each of their minds. Gorge rose in Clara's throat as the taste of copper oozed across her tongue and the smell of ash and sulphur filled her nose.

It's only good manners to make y'all's acquaintance.

They exchanged wary glances, and Clara's heart started beating faster.

Pas faire moi rentrer là-dedans et chercher t'es. Don't make me come in dere und get you.

As one, their faces paling and adrenaline beginning to leak into their blood, the witches turned and walked back to Royal Street. They turned right and saw a woman in a long, flowing black dress waiting for them at the corner. Her hands were by her side, and she met their eyes with a confident, feral smile.

The rest of the street was empty of both people and vehicles, and a thick, muffling silence had settled over the area. *Magic,* Clara thought, even as her eyes picked out the signs of it. A bruise-colored haze lingered along the street, stretching out past the intersection ahead of them.

"I am Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte, *cher,"* she said, her voice low and slick, sliding across Clara's ears in a way that had nothing to do with physical sound. *"Très content de faire ta connaissance enfin."*

"We know who you are," Jessamine growled. "And *we're* not happy to meet *you."*

"Aw, ya don't know *who* I be, cher. Ya know *what* I be. But I know who y'all are." The woman's smile broadened into a grin.

Through some unspoken agreement, the witches spread out, arranging themselves across the breadth of Royal Street, facing the woman.

"So who are you?" Jessamine asked. Her voice remained quiet and hard as stone, but her words carried easily to the woman standing in front of the mansion.

"As I done told ya, I be Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte. Holy woman, voodoo witch, keeper of the mystè, guide to the lwa, protector of the people. *Dizzième gran fòt de Madam Delphine LaLaurie, manman vwayaj vre nan sa kote sa a ak pouvwa li."* Her lips twitched in a mocking half-smile, and she translated, "Tenth great-granddaughter of Madame Delphine LaLaurie, true heiress to this

place and its power."

Clara felt the triplets begin to pool their magic.

"Protector?" Latoya snorted. "You've killed many, and put more in danger."

"Protector of the *people,* I said. Y'all ain't people. Y'all ain't even human."

Magic was swirling thickly around the witches now, bright equations marching with such bold determination that Clara didn't even have to shift her vision to see them.

"You're a Blood Witch," Elsie said in an almost casual tone. "You're evil. I don't see how *you* qualify as human."

"*Tout moun ki kayon par le sang, cherie.* All humans is powered by the blood. Blood is in us all, through us all. Blood is what binds us. Y'all. . . y'all are abominations. Y'all are against the natural order. That's why y'all must go."

"Pretty bold to be out here all by yourself," Trevor mused, casting his eyes around the buildings that surrounded them. "No Paladins here to protect you."

"C'est moi qui protège mon troupeau. Une grande prêtresse n'est pas protegée par sa propre." She paused, adding, *"Moi, je suis le protecteur ici."*

I'm the protector here, not the protected. Clara could barely follow the words, but the meaning was clear in the woman's voice.

"And so you've helped the Paladins against us," Jessamine said, more loudly this time. "Created their fake holy relics. Driven us from our homes."

Madame Laliberte snorted. "Fake? How dey can be fake, when dey was made by a true voodoo priestess? I am dey prophet, dey angel." She tilted her head. "An' when dey disappeared on dey own?" Her smile deepened. "Dat's when I knew ma wo'k was holy."

Interesting, Clara thought.

Laliberte chuckled. "Dey simple lil chilluns, an dey kno' to worship dey betta." She tilted her head. "Pah go takin' on airs, t'inkin' you bettah dan me. Dis be my home, my centah, my city. You

be guests here. Behave yo'selves." She flicked one hand in roughly Clara's direction.

The triplets, who'd fanned themselves our behind Clara, grunted. Clara felt their magic, already approaching apex synergy, skip a beat.

Madame Laliberte frowned and flicked her hand more firmly at them. *"Agis-toi, je t'ai dit."* Clara didn't understand that, but she saw another gout of thick, disgusting power dart toward the triplets.

It hit, and the girls' magic *thrummed* as the three young women inhaled sharply. **«Enough of that,»** they said as their three-in-one magic solidified. A sharp ringing in Clara's mind deepened into a resonant gong, as if a single, tiny bell had suddenly grown into a finely tuned carillon.

The Blood Witch's eyes widened at that, and her lips tightened into a cruel frown.

"You insult voudoun," Latoya snapped with disgust. "You insult the loa. You're no priestess. You're nothing but a leech, a thief of power, a stealer of life." She flicked her own hand at Madame Laliberte, and Clara squinted as a bright lash of magic whipped out, striking the Blood Witch across the face.

Or at least making the attempt. Just as the magic reached their enemy's skin, it cracked. Bright colors dimmed to gray as the equations unbalanced and earthed themselves at the woman's feet.

"Mud witches, mud chirren. Playin' wit dem toys left by yo betters. Playin' wit dat fairy magic while you ignore de heritage of humanity." She pointed at Sandy, and with a *crack,* the theopholous crumbled into shards that thudded dully onto the battered asphalt of the street. *"Jenet ant montre respe,"* she added, shifting her finger to Latoya. A beam of hard light slammed into the witch, driving out her breath. She doubled over at once, gasping for air, her eyes wide as she fell to her knees.

"Latoya!" Jessamine cried, darting to the fallen woman's side and lifting her head from the filthy pavement.

"Stop it!" Wolfgang shouted. He shrugged off the hand Finlay put on one shoulder. "Why? What's in it for you if we're all gone?"

The Blood Witch shrugged. *"Mieux mort, mais parti c'est bien. Plus de pouvoir pour moi, cher enfant. Pas de magie de fée dans le monde, alors Madame Laliberte règne suprême. Madame Laliberte c'est la loa, la grande prêtresse. La déesse, mon chou."*

She wants to be a goddess, Clara thought, managing to follow some of the older woman's speech. She quickly reconfigured some of the local magic into a wide-area translation spell.

"Ah yea, ah dey supreme powa. Ah dey goddess. Ah dey everytin. An' wit you gone, wit you filty fairy magic gone from dis world, only de true human magic remain. Only me, an' my chiren."

"Well, she's as egomaniacal as any Blood Witch," Trevor muttered.

"But it's not enough power," Sandy said with a frown. Then, more loudly, "Where'd you get it all? The artifacts we've seen, these so-called relics you made—where'd you get the power? And that tracing spell—I don't care how much suffering this city has seen, it's not enough for that."

That's what Professor Castella said, Clara recalled. *No way one Blood Witch could command enough power, no way they could hoard enough. And no way more than one of them would work together.*

Madame Laliberte sneered. "Sha's plenty pain in de world. An' you can't buy holy relics at de corner sto'. A big price to pay, even wit' dat spirit takin' dem into de past. But Madame Laliberte foun' de power! Dey brough' to me, a sacrifice to dey priestess!"

"This is disgusting," Jessamine growled as she helped Latoya back to her feet.

"It's still not enough," Sandy insisted, jabbing a finger at the Blood Witch. "You can't hoard power, and I don't care how much this mansion feeds you!"

Slowly, Madame Laliberte's grin widened, until it was almost ear-to-ear. *That's more than a human face can smile,* Clara realized, her

stomach roiling with discomfort and disgust. *She's not fully human anymore.*

"Toute mes sœurs, toute dans ma tête. Toute mes mains, toute dans mes bras. Tous mes petits souffrant, envoyant leur douleur à moi," Madame Laliberte said softly, her grin widening by a millimeter with every word.

All my sisters, all in my head. All my hands, all in my arms. All my little sufferers, sending their pain to me, the translation spell offered.

Clara's eyes widened as Latoya gasped. "There *is* more than one," the older woman whispered. "She's got them in thrall or something. That's where she's getting it all."

"The Paladins," Jessamine spat. "They did this. Otherwise they'd have fought each other."

"Mr. Holdaway—that's how they held him," Finlay blurted out. "That's what they're doing—the other Blood Witches must be in comas, or something."

The Blood Witch shrugged, her grin diminishing to normal human proportions. *"Mais gens,"* she said, giving them a slow wink. *"Ils ont fait eune panthéon, cher. Avec moin en haut."*

They made a pantheon, with me at the top, the translation spell whispered.

"Mab's bones," Reuben murmured. "They're mad."

"How," Trevor wondered quietly, shaking his head, "can our existence in the Ordinary be worse than *this?"*

"Notwithstanding," Jessamine said loudly, pointing at the Blood Witch. "This ends here. Now. *You* end here."

Laliberte laughed, and the sound sent sharp chills sliding down Clara's spine. "Last chance, *soeurs de la magie feerique! Courbez la genou devant Madame Laliberte. Elevez vos sacrifices vers moi, et je ne ferai que vous bannir de ce monde. Acceptez la pitie de Madame Laliberte quand c'est offert."* The Blood Witch shrugged. *"Mais j'te fauche et prends ta souffrance comme mon sacrifice. Ça m'importe pas beaucoup."*

Surrender or die, Clara's spell translated succinctly. *I don't care much.*

"None of the above," Jessamine spat.

And as if they'd rehearsed that as their cue, the witches attacked.

Clara recognized the glowing haze that erupted from Sandy's hands as one of the artifacts the woman had explained to them. Shielding magic, specifically designed to abate—if not totally block—spiritual attacks. *Old Atlantean magic,* she'd called it. *Very rare.*

Latoya, Trevor, and Reuben unleashed a well-practiced joint attack, an ancient spell that was part illusion and part physical. *Tilsløret ildspyd*, it was called, a Danish magic dating back to the time of the Vikings. Its physical form, a tight, sharp line of deadly equations, was masked by a bright, billowy illusion designed to distract the enemy and make them focus on anything but the actual weapon.

Wolfgang and Finlay's construct was right behind it, a construct of unmistakable Celtic origin, all knotted equations in clean, tripartite geometric shapes bound in an implacable framework of Austrian design. Clara hadn't realized they'd been practicing cultural fusion magic, but the result was impressive: gunmetal-colored symbols spun in tight circles within the larger shapes, whirling dangerously toward the Blood Witch.

Ed and Elsie cast independent spells. Ed's was classic New Orleans, derived from the true voudoun magic that had formed much of the local magical traditions. Equations of bright gamboge, brilliant viridian, and deep Tyrian lashed out in thick ropes, neatly unbalanced in such a way that they were drawn to the Blood Witch in a primal need to complete themselves by surrounding her.

Elsie, of course, went with a huge gout of fire, followed hotly by javelins of bright power cast from Jessamine's fingertips.

For her part, Clara reached out and seized the intense blue-white magic that the triplets had woven together. The sheer amount of energy was almost incalculable, and Clara struggled for a moment as her mental "hands" burned with cold as she forced the wild, primal symbols into shape. *Umbusi Wezulu,* it was called, the Ruler of the Sky. It was a spell from the Zulu tradition, a body of work that Clara had found especially resonated with her. The magic resisted at first,

but in less than an eye blink, yielded to her will, leaping for the Blood Witch with a hungry, sub-primal growl.

But Madame Laliberte clearly wasn't going to stand there and take it.

Already, Clara could see the thick, muddied smears of magic swirling around the woman's arms, spurting upward from the ground like geysers of rotted arterial blood. More sickly power gushed from the mansion itself, pooling wetly at the woman's feet, anchoring her and dripping upwards in the beginning stages of some kind of shield.

The witches' magic—founded in the spirit of humanity and shaped through millennia of tradition, ordered through their shared Fae ancestry and refined through years of practice—rushed toward the Blood Witch. *Her* magic, born in centuries of suffering and human cruelty, pounded into form through little more than malicious instinct and terrible intent, surged forward to meet the attack.

Clara retched as she fell to her knees.

Through vision that had become thick as pitch, she could see Madame Laliberte stagger, spreading her arms for balance. She smelled sulfur and feces as the Blood Magic cracked beneath the witches' onslaught. She *heard* the dueling energies howl and screech as they collided.

Her lungs seized as Reuben was slammed backwards, a strike to one shoulder sending him spinning to the ground, a spray of blood arcing out as he fell.

Madame Laliberte was crouched low, her arms outstretched, hot smoke pouring up from her palms. Her jaw was open in a wide, animalistic grin, and Clara realized that her front teeth had all been filed down to sharp points. The woman's dark eyes were gleaming, and her chest was heaving with effort. *"Premier sang c'est à moi, les z'enfants. Et sang nourrit sang."*

First blood is mine, children. And blood feeds blood.

"I'm not a child," Clara growled, taking up more of the triplets' inexhaustible power—energy which, she realized, was being supple-

mented by every charged crystal the witches had brought with them. Crystalline structures filled the air, icy-blue power glowing with cold, irresistible command. The witches' magic might begin the spirit, but as Professor Castella had told them, it manifested in the physical world. Clara abandoned any attempt at subtle constructs, and instead smashed at the Blood Witch with the simplest combat spell she knew: *Malleus,* the Hammer. But her take on the spell was fueled by the triplets' uncanny synergy, ballooned to a hundred times its usual size and moved with a thousand times its traditional force.

It cracked through the air, ionizing the air and spreading the sharp reek of ozone as it fell on the Blood Witch's shoulders.

Madame Laliberte shrieked as the spell hit her, and the hazy gloom of magic surrounding them vibrated in sympathy. She went down hard, her left leg audibly cracking even as she tried to force herself to remain upright. A slick of energy roiled from the mansion, curling itself protectively around her leg as she struggled back to her feet. "Mais cher, what foolishness! A priestess don't bow down! You little mortal, you 'bout to meet your end now!" She thrust her arms forward, and shouted, *"Sang de l'enfant, viens à moi, ta maitresse!"*

Blood of the child, come to your mistress.

A blunt mass of Blood Magic, dense enough to be visible even to humans, shot from Madame Laliberte's outstretched arms. Its leading edge bloated into a caricature of a demon's head, with wide, sparking eyes and a yawning, fang-filled mouth. Clara was stunned for a critical second, her mind shocked by the gruesomeness that was headed *directly* for her.

That critical second was all the attack needed to cross the short distance between Clara and the Blood Witch.

But a hairsbreadth before it crushed her skull and devoured her blood, a crimson shaft of light interceded. *Thógfainn piléar duit,* some distant, rational part of Clara's mind informed her. An Irish spell of loyalty and protection, powerful enough to stop a bullet.

But the Blood Witch hadn't fired a bullet.

Her attack had been one entirely of spirit, and whichever well-meaning friend had cast that defense, they hadn't shaped it to intercept a *spiritual* attack.

Madame Laliberte's oily-skinned demon head shattered the Celtic defensive spell.

But Clara had more than one friend.

A second defensive spell had leapt behind the first, this one an ocean-blue *Verteidigung des Geistes* of the German tradition. *Wolfgang,* Clara's brain managed, even as the demon's head ripped through with a single bite.

«Tai mūsų draugas, su kuriuo tu maišai», the triplets' three-in-one voice intoned, accompanied by a strange magic in slate gray. Its equations interlocked tightly into a zocchihedron, its hundred-faced shape spinning almost lazily. The Blood Magic construct smashed into it and was flipped up and backward by the defensive spell's rotation. It paused. The demon head seemed to shake in confusion—*is that thing actually sentient?* Clara wondered—and then its eyes narrowed. It growled something that Clara and her friends could only *feel* and then surged forward.

Back toward its mistress.

"T'as ga'obéir à moin et arrête ça!" Laliberte shouted as her magic rushed toward her. She waved her hands at it, and Clara could see more Blood Magic pooling thickly in her hands. *"Sang arrete sang!"* she ordered.

Blood obeys blood, Clara's magic translated.

The demon dissipated, leaving the Blood Witch covered in oily flecks and breathing heavily.

«Fussilade», the triplets ordered. This much, they'd planned for: when the battle got thick, as they'd expected it would, the triplets—a step back from the front line and better able to shield themselves and the others—would call the next wave.

Fussilade meant to overwhelm the Blood Witch with a rapid-fire series of distinct individual attacks. They'd coordinated enough to ensure they *weren't* coordinated: each witch would launch their own

unique strike. Clara shook her head to clear it and, ignoring the bright, multi-hued flashes of light on either side, seized more of the triplets' augmented power and engaged her own assault.

Of the thirteen of them—eleven, with Reuben down and Sandy desperately casting a healing spell to seal his wound and immobilize his ruined shoulder—only Clara could actually *manipulate* Blood Magic.

It was difficult: the dull, filthy energy was slippery in her mind's hands, and even reaching out for it made bile rise in her throat. She clamped her jaw shut and tried to breath in short, hard bursts, ignoring the miasma that filled her nose and throat. The triplets' magic helped, letting her form "gloves" that kept the worst of the Blood Magic at bay. But it was a hundred—no a thousand, maybe a million—times more difficult than breaking the artifacts they'd found. Here, the Blood Magic was *fresh.*

But as the first of the other witches' attacks began to land, as Madame Laliberte began deflecting them and responding with counter-attacks of foul gray ripostes, Clara seized the fetid energy that oozed from the mansion and up through the streets.

Seized it. . . and *t*ook it.

The Blood Witch let out a low, guttural moan as she felt her power abandon her. Clara swallowed heavily as she held it all back, fighting its very sentient-seeming desire to return to its mistress.

Desire. . . and revulsion. Something *inside* the Blood Magic was *helping* Clara. It squrimed and writhed in her "hands," at once hungry to return to Laliberte and determined to stay away from her. *"Ce sang pa t'appartient pas, voleur,"* Clara muttered, distantly aware that she barely knew what the words meant or where they came from. *This blood isn't yours, thief,* her translation spell, somehow still active in the chaos, offered.

"Mae llosgi gwaed yn arogli fel copr," someone near Clara spat.

Has to be Elsie, she thought as she continued to fight the Blood Magic. Her friend had grown enamored of Welsh fire-magic, said to

have been given to witches by the oldest dragons, before they and humans had become mortal enemies. Her guess was confirmed a quarter-heartbeat later as a dense gout of sharp-smelling fire shot forth.

Madame Laliberte screamed, and the Blood Magic in Clara's mental hands recoiled, roaring in sympathy. Whatever had been working with Clara was overwhelmed. The magic ripped free, streaking back to its mistress. *"Sang améliore sang!"* Laliberte shouted, and within seconds, Clara watched the putrid energy fill the Blood Witch. Burned skin sloughed to the ground, instantly replaced by fresh, supple, gray skin. Wet runnels of blood dried and flaked off.

«Ritual,» the triplets commanded.

They'd known things would have to be bad to come to this point. Despite everything Hollywood would have humans believe, witches didn't work well together–the triplets being a notable exception. Ritual magic was complex, precise, and required every witch involved to bury their ego and work toward the good of the group. Effective rituals took months of patient practice, and they'd had just minutes to rehearse this one.

Twelve throats—Latoya's still raspy—shouted the complex Gaelic words:

Le solas geal na gealaí agus solas bog na réalta,
Ceanglaím do chuid fola, díscaoileadh do scéim.
Maireann do chumhacht, tá d'fhearg gan déanamh,
I ngreim an scátha, tá do mhallacht sníofa.

It was an ancient spell designed specifically to bind inimical powers. The triplets fed every erg of their gathered energy into it, and Clara took up the whole thing, tweaking here and adjusting there, until the entire ritual locked together in a ten-pointed star and rushed toward Madame Laliberte. Professor Castella had helped them select this spell, equal part spiritual and physical magic. It was

designed to lock down their enemy's powers while also constraining them physically.

The Blood Witch grinned. "Ya blood sing to my tune, sha!"

And it did. Clara's vision narrowed into a tunnel, her blood pounded in her ears, and she felt both light-headed and overfull at the same time. She staggered, and lost control of the ritual. Next to her, the other witches were experiencing the same thing. Their concentration was shattered, and the ritual shattered as well, unable to sustain its shape.

That's a physical attack, Clara thought as her head started to clear. *She's calling our blood directly.* But as her vision righted itself, she could see that Laliberte was tired. The Blood Witch's face was ashen, and one eye was twitching madly. *Maybe we've got her on the ropes,* Clara thought hopefully.

But they only had one more contingency plan.

«Monsters,» the triplets ordered, their normally strong synergistic voice wavering and weakened.

This was their attack of last resort. At Linginbaum's they'd been taught that while this kind of magic wasn't officially outlawed, it was very much Highly Frowned Upon, and had any other witches been around to see them, they'd have been called to account later.

Assuming they survived this confrontation, which made the risk of having to justify themselves rather acceptable.

"Breithiúnas an tSluagh!" Finlay commanded. The Sluagh couldn't exist for long in the Ordinary world—but in this case, they didn't need to. These souls of twisted, fallen Fae were quick to judge, and with a Blood Witch standing immediately before them, their decision was quick. Their gray, gauze forms fell upon Madame—

"Höre auf mich, Glöckler!" Wolfgang cried. These Austrian vanquishers of evil needed even less time to identify their target, leaping on the—

"Draai jou oë op ons, Sango!" Latoya screamed, her throat raw and her voice hoarse. They'd argued about this one: Commanding the attention of one of the spirit world's most powerful spirits of

vengeance was a significant risk. But as a cold presence settled over them, its focus clearly on the Blood Witch standing before it, a grim sense of disapproval quickly—

"MÔN VILLE! MÔN MONDE! Go away, créatures de l'éther! You have no place ici!" Laliberte roared. Dank, fetid energy blasted from her, obliterating the Sluagh and the half-formed Glöckler. The sensation of a slamming door accompanied an angry sense of bewilderment as Sango's presence vanished. Clara blinked fiercely as she appraised their foe.

The Blood Witch stood, although barely. Her legs were quivering, but her expression was one of utter triumph. She was breathing heavily, tears of blood trickling down her face. Her jaw was hanging open, and her pointed teeth were glistening with something thick and black.

But she stood.

«Retreat,» the triplets suggested.

"Sang de ma cité," Madame Laliberte panted, *"viens à moi."*

Blood of my city, Clara's translation spell recited, wavering a bit as its magic weakened, *come to me.*

"NO!" Clara screamed.

Next to her, bright red blood burst from Ed's nose, flying in a thick stream toward the Blood Witch. One hand flew to his face, but more blood erupted from between his lips.

He fell to his knees, choking as his throat filled with his own life.

Clara was aware of almost nothing except the triplets' dense, comforting magic. She twisted it almost effortlessly in her hands, the circle-and-triangle shape of a translocation spell forming almost instantly. *"Namai ir šventovė,"* she said, the words of the Lithuanian spell tripping easily from her lips, giving purpose and form to the precisely balanced equations in her vision.

Thirteen witches disappeared in a swirl of light, and the Blood Witch's final howl faded quickly.

CHAPTER 15
WITCH HUNT

"I hope your friend is better," Professor Castella murmured, reaching across the table to pat Clara's hand.

"Friends," Jessamine emphasized in a low growl. Then she sighed and shook her head. "Latoya will be fine. Turns out she had four cracked ribs. Reuben. . . he's with three healing specialists. He'll live, and they say he'll be able to use the arm again, but his shoulder is a mess."

"And Ed will be fine," Clara added as her mother fell into a dark silence. "They gave him a transfusion. He's already awake. Elsie's with him. The triplets are out cold. I don't know how they managed to manipulate that much magic for so long."

Alex, Wolfgang, and Finlay had joined them to meet with Professor Castella and Professor Duoteny, who'd finally returned to Underhill. The rest of Jessamine's team was with Latoya and Reuben.

"What you're describing. . . is unprecedented," Professor Duoteny mused. She looked at her partner. "We've certainly never recorded anything like it."

"The Paladins had kept Alex under some kind of sedation for most of the time they held him," Jessamine said, still staring at the

rough-hewn table they'd taken in the pub. "But they were still exposing him to iron, trying different things with his magic. I guess this is where it led."

"We've certainly never heard of a *site* containing residual power a Blood Witch could access," Professor Duoteny said. "I'm quite familiar with the LaLaurie Mansion, and as gruesome as its history was, the suffering that feeds Blood Magic doesn't stay around."

"I could *see* it flowing out," Clara objected. "There had to have been—oh."

Duoteny grinned. "I suspect you saw the emanations from the other Blood Witches."

Jessamine's eyes widened. "You're saying they were *there.*"

"I *saw* the power coming out," Clara repeated. "If it wasn't from the mansion itself, then. . . that's the only explanation."

"Unless they were torturing people inside," Finlay pointed out.

Professor Duoteny shook her head. "It doesn't work like that. A Blood Witch's rituals take time, and it takes even more time for the power to accumulate. We've plenty of past observations on that. But this. . . *harnessing* of other Blood Witches. . ." She exhaled slowly. "This is novel, and wholly unwelcome."

"We barely winded her," Jessamine mumbled.

"I'd say we did more than just wind her," Clara countered. "But yeah. . . and there were thirteen of us."

"Ordinarily more than enough to counter a single Blood Witch," Professor Castella agreed, looking to her partner for confirmation.

"A half-dozen should have been plenty. That thing you said she did to your very blood," Professor Duoteny said. "That shouldn't have been possible. Not for a group that large. That's a *physical* manipulation. We've stories of a Blood Witch attacking a *single* witch that way, and being exhausted and vulnerable afterwards. In fact, that was a specific technique used to hunt them: Send in someone with a strong constitution, take that first hit, exhaust the target, and then send in four or five more witches to contain."

"Even creatures of the ethereal plane weren't enough," Wolfgang noted. "She shrugged them off."

"Which confirms that this is no ordinary Blood Witch," Duoteny said firmly. "The Sluagh alone should have been more than sufficient."

"Which leaves us where, then?" Jessamine said with exasperation. "An invincible Blood Witch, aided by an incarnation of Time?"

"I don't think Ikwity was helping her directly," Clara put in. "You heard her. She was confused when her artifacts started disappearing. I think Ikwity saw an opportunity."

"To aid a *Blood Witch?"* Jessamine snapped.

"Ikwity isn't human, Mom," Clara snapped. "She's not a witch. She's not Fae. She didn't even understand where the Rot came from. She just wants us all here, in Underhill. For her own reasons."

"Let's set that aside," Professor Castella said gently. "We're left with a real problem in this Blood Witch, and whatever the Paladins have done to enhance her."

"Real shame time magic isn't a thing," Finlay sighed. "You could just go back and. . . I dunno. Keep her from being born or something."

"You'd just need to stop her from becoming a Blood Witch," Professor Duoteny mused. "It's always some deep personal trauma that unlocks the potential, which is usually accompanied by enough suffering to activate the ability. Typically, as a child"

"Doesn't matter," Wolfgang said glumly. "Time magic isn't a thing."

"Isn't it, though?"

They all whirled at the new voice.

"Ed!" Clara cried, leaping from her bench and wrapping Ed in a fierce embrace.

"Easy, easy," he chuckled wearily. "You'll knock me down. But I'm fine. I'm good. Just super tired."

Professor Castella waved to a server. "A loaf of bread and some of

that wonderful stew, please," she called. "Wonderfully restorative," she added as she turned back to the group.

Clara released Ed, and they slid onto the bench. "Thank you," he said gratefully.

"What were you talking about?" Wolfgang asked as Ed settled in.

"About what? Oh, right. Time magic. It *is* a thing, isn't it?"

"It isn't," Professor Castella chuckled. "Though it's been the subject of no small amount of study over the centuries."

"But Clara *saw* it," Ed insisted.

All eyes turned to Clara. She nodded slowly. "But that was up in the Great Northern Wood. Where Ikwity lives. It was. . . *thick,* up there."

"But you could *see* it?" Castella breathed.

Clara tilted her head. "Yes. But it wasn't. . . like, equations. It wasn't math. I don't think I can just. . . manipulate it."

Duoteny leaned closer. "But you've said the Blood Magic wasn't math, either, right? And you can manipulate that."

"I don't know. It *looks* like magic. If you're squinting. But it felt like I was more. . . you know, using magic to manipulate it."

"This wouldn't have to be any different," Ed pointed out.

"Are we actually discussing time travel?" Jessamine asked. "That's insane. Everyone knows it's impossible."

"Well, no," Professor Castella corrected her calmly. "We've always believed it isn't possible, but that's not the same as impossible. Not precisely. Not when it comes to magic. It just means we've never found a way." She turned to Clara. "Could you look now? Can you see whatever it was you saw in the Wood? Here?"

"I'll try," Clara said. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, and looked slightly over the professors' shoulders.

She let her eyes slip out of focus.

Underhill's ambient magic sprang to life. Wobbly, comically distorted numbers and symbols skittered through the air. As Clara watched, a decent number of them settled on the other witches'

shoulders, settling into their bodies, an autonomous act of continuous recharging that seemed to happen as naturally as breathing.

Clara relaxed into it, letting her physical surroundings blur as the magic sharpened in her sight. She could now make out the broader patterns in the ambient magic, the ebb and flow of the masses of loosely balanced equations. They wound through the air like gusts of wind, the odd symbol occasionally detaching itself from one band and drifting to join another. This was magic in its purest form, without purpose, without form.

She frowned. Not its *purest* form. Pure magic was white, tinged with an intense, barely visible blue. Ambient magic wasn't pure: it was bright reds, intense emeralds, shining violets, and every color in between. *Roy G. Biv,* she thought, smiling softly. *All the colors of the rainbow and more.* Over the years, she'd started to associate specific colors, or small palettes of them, as being aligned to specific types of spell. Reds and oranges went with magic that was sudden and often violent: fire, attacks, and the like. Magic for translocation and levitation leaned heavily on the spectrum between indigo and violet—the colors of air. Every shade had a type of spell it seemed to prefer, or maybe it was the other way around.

Witches had colors too, she realized. The glowing lights settling around Elsie were firmly in the orange-red range, which was hardly a surprise given her friend's attachment to fire magic. Ed seemed to attract greens and blues—stable, steady magic that perfectly matched his personality, suitable for the precision of translocation and other big spells.

But relaxed as she was, she could see a faint, hazy shimmer of purity. Almost like a gauze, hidden teasingly within the bright primary colors of the ready-to-use ambient magic. *That* was the pure magic, winding in from the humans who'd already followed friends to Underhill, and from the Borders that carried magic out of the Ordinary world. It seemed to cuddle alongside the ambient magic, and as it did so, it became tinged with the colors it touched. *So that's*

how it works. Pure magic comes from humans, mingles with the ambient magic that's already there, and picks up its color.

But where did the colors come from in the first place?

Her smile faded as she set the question aside and focused, looking for Time.

"It's more of a haze," she'd said.

She tried to look *through* the ambient magic, *past* the gauzy strings of pure magic. It would be thin here, she knew, but it *should* exist.

There.

ᛏᛁᛗᛖ ᛁᛋ ᛗᚢᛗᛒᛚ ᛟᚠ ᚦᛖ ᛗᛇᛇᛗᚾᚲᛗ; ᛏᚱᛁ ᛏᛟᚹᛖᚦᛖᚱ ᛗᚢᛗᛒᛚᛁ ᛏᛖᛋᛏ, ᛏᚺᚨᛏ ᛁᛟᚢ ᛞᚨᛁ ᚲᛚᛟᛇᛖᛁᛟᚢᚱ ᛞᚨᛁ ᛁᚾ ᛈᚱᚨᛁᛖᚱ, ᛞᛁ ᛞᛖᚱ ᚷᛟᛞ, ᛁᚷᚢᛖ ᛞᛟᚾᛖᛞᛁ ᚦᛖᛇᛏ.

She couldn't decipher it, but now that she could see it, it gave her a sense of. . . not *finality,* exactly. *Inevitability,* she thought quietly. *But not in a bad way. Just. . . things are going to happen. And then more things. And it'll never end.* It actually felt a little hopeful.

As she peered closer, almost looking one way and hoping to catch more in the corner of her eye, the power slipped into another shape:

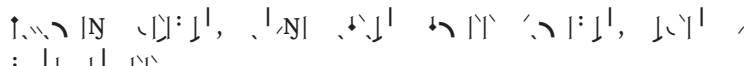
ᚱᛁᛉᛁᚾᛏᛁᚾᛈ ᛋᛈ ᛁᛉᛒᛁᚾᛏᛁᚾᛈ ᚴᚱᛁᛉ ᛋᛈ ᚴᚼᛁᚢᚢ ᚾᚴᚾᛁᚾᛁᚾ ᛁᚾᛏᚢᛁᛋᛋ ᚴᚼᚾᛁ; ᚾᚢᚢ ᚲᚾᛏᚢᚢᚱᛁᚷᛋ ᛉᛋᚱᛏᚾᚨᚢ ᛁᛏᛉᚾᚾᛁ ᛋᛁᛁᛉ; ᛏᛁᛉᛁ ᛉᚾᚱᚴᚼᛁᛋ ᛋᚲ ᛏᛋ ᚴᚼᚾᚨᛋᛁ ᛁᛏᛋᛏᚱᚾᛉ, ᛋᚾᚨᛋᛋᚲᛋ ᛋᛏᛁᚴᚴ ᚢᛁᚴᚾ ᚾ ᛒᚢᚾᚨᛁᛁᚲᚴ ᛏᚾᚾᛉ.

That felt grimmer, somehow, but also aloof. *Time is its own thing,* she realized. *It's not something that happens to us. It's something we're in. It's. . . like the air, only more consequential.*

As she watched, the strange shapes seemed to stretch out into the distance, fading gently as they did so.

Not the distance, Clara realized with a start. *The past!*

She followed the fading stream.



There.

"I think I can—"



The blue elf-creature tilted its head. "What are you doing?"

Clara blinked furiously. "What happened?"

The elf shrugged. "It felt as if you were calling."

It was. . . firmer than the last time she'd seen it. More detailed. Even its speech was more human-like. Its pointed ears thinned to more graceful tips. Its deep blue skin was more shaded, giving it more depth. Its eyes were clearer and sharper, glinting with curiosity. Even its limbs seemed more filled-in, its lean muscles larger and more defined. "I don't. . . maybe I was." Clara looked around, but it was the dreamscape she'd become accustomed to. Only the elf had changed. "I was looking for Time."

Its eyes widened, and its shoulders tensed. "A cousin." Then it frowned. "But she has never imposed herself here."

"Really?"

It shrugged. "Perhaps a sibling. Something Ma'ab and her court brought to life. Or at least to awareness."

"Like Creativity?"

Its expression fell. "We miss it. So much sorrow, but so much hope. So much life."

"I met him. Her. It."

Eyebrows raised. "Truly?"

Clara nodded. "He's—she's—sending her power through again."

The elf's eyes slowly widened. "That is what I have felt. But why Time? It is better. . . alone."

Clara snorted softly. "Yeah, I got that. We met."

The elf seemed unsurprised at this. "It is. . . apart. It prefers to be. It hated how Ma'ab and her children abused it."

"Do you mean Mab?"

A nod. "She had many names. More names than faces, the Queen."

"And the Fae abused Time."

Another nod. "Bent to their will. *Her* will. A hundred years Underhill could be a day in the Ordinary. On a day of anger, the opposite."

Clara took a deep breath. "We need to go to the past." She ignored the elf's expression of dismay. "We need to. This isn't a whim. There's a Blood Witch—" she took a step back as the elf hissed and bared its teeth, its countenance shifting to that of a terrified, feral animal. "—in the Ordinary. Helping the Paladins, the humans who hunt witches. We want to go back and. . . stop her. From becoming a Blood Witch."

The elf's expression relaxed slowly, and it eventually nodded. "Virtuous." But then it shook its head. "Futile."

"We have to try. Is it possible?"

The elf stared at her for several long moments, and Clara felt as if it was trying to look inside her brain. She felt *weighed,* and held her breath for its next words.

"Yes."

"How?"

It sighed. "You have already seen. But take only a few. Only *one.* It —*she*—will know. She will be angry."

"We *need* to do this," Clara repeated.

"You have seen the way."



Clara grabbed Ed's wrist, although she kept her vision locked on the strangely shaped, gently vibrating runes of Time. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "I mean, I could sleep for a week, but—"

"You'll have time."



The Time energy wasn't math. Of that much, Clara was absolutely certain. It was. . . *sensation.* Feeling.

Memories.

Aunt Ikwity had said as much, hadn't she?

Time maintained a memory of all things, of everything that had ever happened, or would. Clara risked a look back, and saw Time stretching the other direction as well. She shuddered at the creepy, cold feeling it gave her. *This is coming, and you can't stop it.* She turned back in the other direction, gripped the flow of Time with her mental hands, and *pulled.*

Through time's clear lens, the past unfolds,

In shadows deep, its stories told.

A whispering wind, a ghostly cast,

Revealing truths that ever last.

Clara pictured the Blood Witch's face. The ashen skin, the crazed, focused eyes. She imagined her tight dreadlocks, gathered into a thick bundle at the back of her neck. She recalled the simple, elegant black dress that had sat so simply on the woman's broad shoulders, and fallen so loosely to all but touch the ground at her feet.

Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte.

Time seemed to. . . hesitate.

Clara became aware of a cold, burning anger. Of a pair of ancient eyes slitted in distaste, watching her pull herself along the strands of Time. *Not for such as you,* a voice—no, less than a voice and also more. . . an *intention*—seethed in her mind.

We need to do this. We need to stop her from becoming, Clara replied as calmly as she could through the pounding of her own blood in her ears. *We need to do this.* She held onto the phrase like a mantra.

The intention grumbled, but pulled away.

Clara hauled on Time, pulling herself further and further back.

Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte. The time before she became.

In the distance, a pinpoint of light, impossibly bright and almost tangible, flared to life. As Clara pulled herself along, hand over hand, it grew larger and larger, improbably fast. She gasped as it blazed into signal fire, then an all-out conflagration, then a sun.

It swallowed her, and she was only distantly aware of Ed's solid, comforting presence as they fell.



"WHO YOU?"

Clara blinked. "Clara," Ed said softly beside her. She realized she was gripping Ed's wrist tightly—probably painfully—and let go at once. He pulled his arm back and began massaging his wrist with his other hand.

"Who you?"

The question came from a small child, not much older than Clara had been when her powers first starting causing problems. Eight years old, maybe, although this little girl had clearly lived a far more difficult life than Clara had. She was thin almost to the point of emaciation. Her face, stretched tightly across sharp cheekbones, was covered with purple bruises. Her sticklike arms wrapped around her bony torso, and they, too, showed signs of abuse. Thin gray scars marked the skin here and there, and more bruises were evident on her forearms.

"I'm Clara. Are you. . . Marcelite?" The girl's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "If you are, we're here to help you."

"Who's been hitting you, Marcelite?"

"Marcy," the girl muttered, ducking her head and lowering her eyes. Her arms contracted more tightly around herself as she hunched in, trying to make herself even smaller.

Clara's vision shifted, and already she could see the rancid smears of Blood Magic sniffing tentatively around the girl.

"Would you like something to eat, Marcy?" Ed was asking. Clara shook her head, forcing her vision back to the physical world. "What's your favorite?"

"Gumbo?" Marcy said in a small, hopeful voice. She tilted her head up enough for her eyes to meet Ed's, and Clara could all but hear the growl in the girl's stomach.

"I know a great place for Gumbo," Ed said reassuringly. He looked up and around, taking his bearings. "We're on the west side of town," he murmured to Clara. "Not far from the zoo." Then, louder, he asked, "Do you live near here?"

"Pas retour," Marcy snapped, shrinking into herself.

"Pas ramener to," Ed assured her, slipping into a matching accent. "We're not taking you back. Chère, you want your gumbo ici, or somewhere else?"

Marcy stared at him, considering. "Someplace else."

Ed smiled. *"Pas de problème.* Y'all know 'bout Brigtsen's?" Marcy's head raised a fraction of an inch more, and her eyes widened. Clara assumed Brigtsen's was well-known.

"Dass too fah," Marcy said, although Clara could hear the hope in her voice.

Ed shrugged. *"Quarante minutes de marche, peut-être.* Tout droit. Forty minutes, maybe," he added for Clara's benefit. Then he crouched in front of Marcy and grinned. Sha, tu veux voir un tour? Do you want to see a trick?"

Clara's grabbed his shoulder. "Ed!"

He put a gentle hand atop hers. "It'll be fine," he said softly, not looking away from Marcy. *"Tu crois dans la magie?* Do you believe in magic?"

Marcy shook her head, but there wasn't much conviction in it. "Ain't real."

Ed tilted his head. "I think you know it is."

Clara let her vision shift, and saw the Blood Magic curling softly

around the girl's feet. It knew her, and somehow Clara could tell that she knew it. A quick flick of Marcy's fingers confirmed it. "It's real," Clara assured her, "but there's good magic and there's very bad magic. Very bad. You've been using it, haven't you? To protect yourself?"

Marcy's eyes darted to Clara's and narrowed with suspicion. "Just push him off, is all. *"M' pa b'en content quand li bat."*

"People shouldn't ever hit each other," Clara said firmly.

Ed nodded. "She's right. But maybe we can talk about it over that gumbo?"

Marcy hesitated, then acquiesced. "Sure."

Ed extended a hand, palm up. "Hold my hand? *Tu vas tenir ma main?* You just have to touch it, I won't grab you. *Juste un p'tit coup."*

Slowly, with great hesitation, Marcy extended her hand toward Ed's. She touched the tip of her index finger to the center of Ed's palm.

"Emmenez-nous là-bas," Ed whispered. It was one of the more obscure translocation spells, and as the bright sparks of magic surrounded them, Clara wondered if he'd chosen it solely because it was French.



Marcy stared wide-eyed at Ed and Clara, seated across from her at a rickety old table on the restaurant's porch, as she shoveled hot gumbo into her mouth.

"The thing is," Ed said as he waved the server for another bowl, "is there are two types of magic. What we just did is. . . I guess you'd call it normal magic."

"I can learn it?" Marcy asked around a mouthful of food.

Clara shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid not, sweetie. Only witches, like us, can do it. You're human."

"But there *is* a power you can. . . touch, right?" Ed said softly.

Marcy paused long enough to look deeply into Ed's eyes. She

jerked her head and then resumed eating—albeit at a more reasonable pace.

"To protect yourself," Clara added.

Another quick jerk of her head.

"The problem with it," Ed said with a gentle sigh, "is that power comes from suffering. From pain. Not only your pain, but other people's pain. Sure, eventually, you'll get good at using it, and nobody will try to hurt you again. But then you won't have any power. No pain, no power."

Marcy chewed more slowly.

"So you know what you'll do then?" Clara asked.

Marcy's jaw stilled.

"You'll start hurting people for their pain. So that you can have power again." Ed shook his head. "You'll become just like whoever's been hurting *you*. Only. . . probably worse."

Probably? Clara snorted to herself.

"Ah cain't stop," Marcy said quietly, swallowing and lowering her spoon to her empty bowl. She looked at it mournfully for a moment, but brightened a bit as the server slid a fresh bowl in front of her. *"Il va pas me lâcher."*

"Who is it that's been hurting you?" Clara asked. "Is it. . . your father?"

Marcy shook her head firmly.

"Does your mother have a. . . boyfriend?"

"Mawmaw done gone."

"Who do you live with, then?" Clara asked, confused.

"Gang."

"Drugs," Ed said gently, nodding. "It's drugs, right? You. . . you're too little to be selling them. You run them. Deliver them, right? *Vous les achevez, non?"*

Marcy nodded.

"Hellfire," Clara swore quietly, shaking her head. "And it's the dealer, then? The. . . drug lords?"

Ed snorted. "You read too many novels."

"I do not," Clara objected.

"They'll have a gang runner. That's likely all he does, give them orders and keep them in line." Then Ed's eyes narrowed. "He's not. . . it's not *you,* is it? You're trying to stick up for the others, aren't you?"

"Pitié que moi. Faut."

"They're littler than her. She has to," Ed said, shaking his head. "Right. You stick up for them, he takes it out on you. Got it." He turned to Clara. "This is a little thicker than I'd expected."

"We can just. . . take care of him," she pointed out.

"Who's oldest in your gang?" Ed asked Marcy. *"Qui c'est le plus vieux?"*

"Jensen a quinze ans. L'est le plus âgé."

"Fifteen? Gods," Ed cursed. "But that's the problem. The house boss is how they get fed. That's his hold on them. Food and shelter, right?" Marcy nodded.

"We could just get her into a better. . ." Clara trailed off as Marcy's expression hardened. "Okay, okay. Not leaving them behind. Got it. And I guess there aren't shelters, or some kind of government. . . no, fine," she sighed as Marcy's lips thinned. "So what do we do?"

"We can't just glamour the house boss," Ed mused. "It won't hold long, and he'll be in regular contact with the rest of the gang, anyway."

They sat quietly for several minutes as Marcy resumed eating. It was her fourth bowl, and she was starting to slow, but seemed intent on stuffing as much good food into her belly as humanly possible before these two strangers abandoned her.

"I believe," Ed said slowly, "I may have an idea."

"Sharing is caring," Clara teased.

"Marcy, you're comfortable with magic, right? You don't seem scared of us."

"Ma mama tait une voodoo femme."

"What? Really?" Ed asked, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

"What?" Clara asked.

"She says her mama was a voodoo woman."

"That isn't possible. Marcy, you mean like, a *real* voodoo woman? With real magic, like us?"

Marcy shook her head. "Only for dah tourists."

"Ah," Ed said as Clara nodded understanding. "Got it. But. . . if we introduced you to a real *Vodou* woman? A *manbos,* a *voduisante?"*

Marcy's eyed widened, and she leaned forward eagerly. "She can teach me?"

"How does this solve the gang problem?" Clara asked at the same time.

"Teach you, yes, but not magic, *cher,"* Ed said. "But teach you to support yourself. Your entire gang." He considered that for a moment. "How many are you?"

Marcy counted in her head. "Ten and one."

"Eleven. Yeah, I think that'd work," Ed said slowly.

"Ed, what are you thinking?" Clara asked.

"If I'm doing the math correctly, there's a descendant of Marie Laveau still in the city around now. The family business uses a *lot* of human kids. They kind of run messages, and the run the touristy voodoo shops and such. The older ones filter out the tourists from the truly needy, and bring the latter to the actual witch. It's a good-sized enterprise, but as the kids grow up most strike it out on their own, so there's almost always room for more."

"And she's. . . good to them?"

Ed grinned. "She's the *best* to them. Amazing meals, real beds, sturdy homes. She teaches them to run the actual business, the retail shops and whatnot. Reading, math, money, the whole deal."

They turned to Marcy. "Would that work?" Clara asked. "We talk to this. . . Vodou witch for you? If she can take on the whole gang, we'll take care of the gang boss?"

"House boss," Ed corrected. "We won't have to. The Laveau family *hates* drug gangs. They'll leave them be if they stay low, but if they're using kids to do their dirty work, we just have to point the way."

"Ah can point," Marcy said firmly.



"Well, that seems to wrap it up," Clara said, giving Ed a hug. "I'm so glad you thought of that."

"Celeste is sending people for the rest of the kids," he said, squeezing back. "I was right, she's furious about kids being used that way. She'll take good care of them."

"So we can head back."

"I guess so. I don't know what more we can do here."

"Okay." Clara took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I have a feeling this is going to be. . . different. Than the trip here, I mean."

"How so?"

"I've felt it tugging at me ever since we got here. Time doesn't *want* us here. It wants us back where we belong. I. . . maybe. . . I just need to let go."

"Okaaay," Ed said slowly, squeezing a bit harder.

"Ed, you'll smoosh me," Clara chuckled.

"I'm not letting go until we're home."

"Yeah. Good call. Well. . . here goes."



The trip back was indeed faster, as if Time couldn't return them to their proper place fast enough. But even as quickly as it happened, Clara had a. . . *sense* about something. They were moving toward the future, technically, coming out of the past. But the thread they were following didn't go on forever.

Makes sense, she thought sadly. *Everything comes to an end, I guess.*

Time was an infinitely thick web, everything that ever was, is, or will be all connected to it by these impossibly thin, fragile-looking strands. Some ended, while others began, all woven together into a bundle of threads that, collectively, seemed to fill the universe.

Clara and Ed slid into their proper place, and Clara was careful not too look to far down their own thread.



"—EVEN MEAN?"

Clara and Ed blinked rapidly as the pub resolved around them. Clara's heart was pounding, and Ed looked even paler than usual. "How long were we gone?" she asked quickly.

Professor Castella gave her an odd look. "What do you mean 'gone?'"

"You haven't gone anywhere, yet," Jessamine said, her expression confused. "We were just talking about it."

"No, we've gone. We went. Into the past I mean," Clara said, willing her heart to slow. "We met her. Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte. Marcy. She was young, she was in a—"

"I'm sorry," Jessamine interrupted. "Who?"

Clara stared at her mother for a moment. "Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte. The Blood Witch. That was her name."

"Clara, her name was Larissa Vitória da Silva Sangue. She said it enough, I'll never forget it."

"What?" Clara's brow wrinkled. "Mom, we *just* saw her in New Orleans. That's where Ed and I—"

"Clara, that Blood Witch was in Rio de Janeiro. We were just *there*." Wolfgang was giving her the same weird look her mother was.

"You cast the spell to translate from Portuguese," Finlay said, nodding agreement.

Clara slapped the table. "That can't be! We just—"

"Clara," Ed interrupted quietly, putting one of his hands over hers. "Think about it."

"Think about what?" Clara retorted. "We were *just there*. And then we went back, and. . . oh."

"Yeah."

"What, if I may know, are you two talking about?" Jessamine asked, her tone filled with annoyance.

"We did it," Ed said quietly, looking at Professor Castella. "We

remember fighting the Blood Witch in New Orleans. Madame Marcelite Pâquerette Aury Laliberte. Then we came here. Then Clara figured out Time. . . or something. We went back. We met her—Marcy—as a kid. She was in a drug gang, and we got her out. She and her friends."

Jessamine stared at him. "That didn't happen."

"No," Professor Castella said slowly, "no, it didn't. But it *did."*

Jessamine threw her hands up in the air. "Nobody's talking sense."

"Think about it, Jess," Professor Castella said. "That *did* happen, but then these two went back, and so it *didn't* happen. Not that way."

"We got a different Blood Witch," Clara said miserably.

"I suspect history isn't so easily changed," Professor Duoteny said gently. "Not for something so. . . momentous."

"So we saved Marcy, but another Blood Witch took her place," Ed groaned. He leaned forward, resting his forehead in his hands. "We can't win."

"There's a lot of suffering and pain in the Ordinary," Professor Castella said, reaching over to pat his arm. "And if this is an outcome that. . . well, I'm not a big believer in fate, but this is pretty strong evidence for it."

"So we literally can't win?" Clara said in a small voice.

"I'm not sure I follow," Jessamine said, her tone calmer now, "but with Sandy and Trevor still in comas, the triplets passed out in bed, and Latoya's legs broken, we're certainly not winning *anything* anytime soon."

"Sandy and—" Ed started, but then stopped and shook his head. "Yeah. I get it. We can't win, and in some ways we made it worse." He looked up. "So then, what do we do now?"

A tear trickled down Clara's cheek, but she wiped it off as her expression firmed. "We don't lose."

"What do you mean?" Finlay asked.

"We don't lose. We just change the game. Change the goal. We've

been fighting to stay *here,* stay in the Ordinary. But we're like the only witches who want to, right?"

"Other than the Lithuanians," Ed pointed out.

"Okay, they can have a different game. They can stay and guard the Border." She sniffed once and then looked defiantly at them all. "We've been thinking of this as such a hard decision, but I guess it's not. We let the Paladins have the Ordinary."

"Let them win," Jessamine grumbled.

"Win?" Clara said mockingly. "Win a world where there's so much suffering that the creation of a Blood Witch is basically inevitable? No. Retreating to Underhill *was* defeat, but it isn't anymore. We've dealt with Time. We've negotiated with Creativity. We have Underhill, where no Blood Witch can come. We can start over here. No suffering. We have magic, and the Ordinary won't.

"*We're* the ones who win."

She looked around the table, meeting each set of eyes in turn. "Let's go talk to the Council."

CHAPTER 16
A Hard Decision

Clara was surprised. “I didn’t think it would take so long." Disappointment tinged her voice. They’d gone directly to the Council with their findings, and after a brief consultation, the Council had decided to have a formal hearing and debate in four days’ time. Clara had complained about the wait, but they’d distracted themselves by helping other families move their belongings to Underhill. “Besides, it’s starting to feel like a foregone conclusion. Everyone we know is already moving.”

Ed shrugged. “I’m actually glad they took the time to notify everyone. This isn’t a decision the Council should be making on their own. And even if everyone we know is moving, there have to be plenty who still don’t want to.”

Elsie kicked at a rock on the sidewalk. “I don’t get the fuss. It’s not like it’s permanent or anything.”

Jessamine grumbled. “It very much is.” She’d insisted they return to Philadelphia so that she could assess the damage to her home there. The triplets had begged off, saying they were expecting their entire family to show up for the hearing and wanted to fill them all

in first. Finlay and Wolfgang had also stayed behind to keep Alex company, and to start pulling together some facts for the hearing.

Clara sighed. "She's right. If we're going to really protect everyone, I'll have to make all but the Final Border unusable. And Ikwity isn't going to let people tramp in and out of the Great Northern Wood. So if we do this, it is pretty permanent. Witches who relocate to Underhill will stay there, and anyone who doesn't will be stuck here in the Ordinary."

Everyone fell silent.

"At least they closed the door," Jessamine growled as they approached her home. From the outside, nothing looked at all amiss, but they each cast a variety of quick spells to ensure the house was unoccupied. "Looks clear to me."

"Me too," Clara confirmed.

"And me," Ed said.

Elsie added, "Looks empty to me, although for what it's worth I'm terrible at these spells."

Ed murmured as they crossed the street. "I'm a little surprised we haven't gotten hit by a tracing spell."

Clara sighed. "Why bother? She knows we know she's there, and she's got a pretty good idea we can't do anything about it. She has to know she's got us on the run."

"Oh, she does."

They whirled at the new voice. There, on the front porch of the house next door, stood Laura Deuxm, head of the Paladins' US operation.

Clara blurted out, "You're alive." On either side of her, her mother and friends were preparing spells.

Deuxm waved a hand. "Don't. Whatever you're preparing to do, don't bother. I'm alone. And yes, alive, no thanks to you."

Jessamine snapped, "How did you know we'd be here now?"

Deuxm shrugged. "I didn't. We've been staking the place out since Larissa told us she'd detected witches here. We were about to give up. I just. . . had a feeling, this morning."

Ed said flatly, "What do you want?"

"Just that you're right. We do have you on the run. I suppose you've come back to clear the place out?" She gave them a sly smile when nobody replied. "Thought so. Please do. We've given Larissa a month off. You've got that long, and then we start coming for you in earnest. All of you."

Elsie said in disbelief, "So you're just going to let us leave?"

Deuxm shrugged again. "Why not? Genocide wouldn't be efficient. It would take us forever, and you'd fight back. All we need to achieve our goals is to make our world too uncomfortable for you. Fear will do what a hundred thousand Paladins never could."

Jessamine pointed out, "We could still fight back."

"Sure. But it would be ugly. And you've never be able to hide it. And then all of humanity would rise up against you. Well, most of them. We know you have friends amongst us."

They stared for several quiet moments.

Clara spoke first. "So that's it."

"That's it," Deuxm said with a slow nod. "Take your things and. . . go."

Ed asked, "And you're comfortable having a Blood Witch on the loose?"

Deuxm snorted. "She's hardly loose. We can cut her off from the majority of her power any time we want to—technology is a wonderful thing. And once she's weakened, we have numerous layers of contingencies. Once she's no longer needed. . ." She shrugged again.

"You'll just discard her," Ed said.

"She's an animal," Deuxm replied. "We know that. But we needed a counter to your magic. The work we did with your husband showed us that, and helped us figure out how. Once we understood that certain humans could have access to magic under the right—"

Clara hissed, "It's not magic. It's an abomination."

"Sure," Deuxm allowed. "We get that. She's a means to an end."

She stepped off the porch, and stood eye-to-eye with Jessamine. "As I said, you're free to go. So go. We've won."

Clara smiled and stepped up onto her mother's porch. "You haven't. You have a Blood Witch, with all the suffering it took to make her." She shook her head sadly and turned the doorknob, slowly pushing the door open. "You haven't won at all."

Deuxm tilted her head but said nothing as they filed into the row house. Clara let the others walk past her, and as she closed the door behind them, Deuxm was already walking briskly away down the sidewalk.

Jessamine cursed softly. "Dammit."

Clara pushed the door shut and turned.

The house was a wreck. The Paladins had left not a single stick of furniture intact, not a single drawer or cabinet un-emptied. Jessamine's admittedly meager belongings were scattered everywhere, cushions had been sliced and pulled apart, and the refrigerator had been emptied and left hanging open.

Ed said softly, "I'm so sorry, Jess."

Elsie offered, "I can go get her. She can't have gotten far."

Jessamine sighed, shaking her head. Her shoulders slumped for a moment, but then she pulled herself upright. "No, it's fine. Elsie, Ed, why don't you go see what clothes you can salvage upstairs. Alex and I left about half our stuff here. Leave everything else. Clara, let's you and I start emptying the basement. That's where the important stuff is."

As her mother spoke, Clara saw the basement door haze into existence and swing open. Its magic had protected it from discovery —the Paladins clearly hadn't even known it was there. As she followed Jessamine down the stairs, she asked, "How much of your stuff do you want to move?"

They stepped down onto the basement floor. "All of it, honestly. Except the iron stuff, obviously."

The basement was narrow but long, running the entire length of the row house above. The long walls were lined with shelves that

were completely packed with books, artifacts, trinkets, small chests, and more. An empty work table ran down the middle of the room for most of its length, leaving narrow aisles between it and the shelves on either side.

Clara asked, "Do you have any wooden crates?"

Jessamine looked around and then pointed to the far end of the room. "I believe those two are empty. Check them. Why?"

"I know a compaction spell," Clara offered, a hint of pride slipping into her voice. "It's like the space-expanding spells people use on their houses, but it's for storage."

"Oh. How convenient. I was never good at the geometric stuff. You know, there are two or three empty suitcases upstairs, if—"

"Ed knows it, too."

"Perfect. Will all this stuff fit in two crates, do you think?" Then she frowned. "Will we even be able to lift them?"

"It manages the mass as well. The stuff won't technically be in the crates. They'll just be, like, access ports to get to the stuff."

"I'm in."

Clara worked the magic on the two creates, and they each took one side of the room. As they stuffed item after item into the now-bottomless crates, they chatted. Clara couldn't actually remember a time when she and her mother had chatted. Jessamine told stories about the artifacts she was packing, most of which had to do with Counter-Hunting Paladins. Clara shared stories of the different towns her adoptive parents had taken her to, and the odd story about memorable events at Linginbaum's.

During a lull in conversation, Clara said quietly, "You know, I've been wondering something."

"What's that?"

"Why is. . . all this so important to you? The Ordinary, I mean?"

Jessamine sighed and paused packing to consider it. "I was born here, I guess. This is home. More than Underhill ever was." Then she looked at her daughter. "Why isn't it more important to you? You seem to have given up pretty quickly."

Clara snorted. "Hardly. I've been going after Paladins with you since I graduated. Before then, really, right?" Then she too sighed. "But I guess it's because I never had time to get attached to places. Home was wherever Mom and Dad—other Mom and Dad, you know what I mean—were. It was just. . . us against the world. We never had much, but we always had us, and so that's all I needed."

They both resumed packing.

"It's not a bad way to look at it," Jessamine admitted after a while. "And I guess if I'm being honest, I miss your Dad. Bio-Dad, I mean. He's just. . . he can't leave Underhill without getting an anxiety attack. Maybe. . ." She paused again and looked around the basement. "Maybe leaving this old house behind is worth it. He and I can be together. No more Paladin-hunting."

"It'll be nice to just relax."

"Easy for you to say. I'm going to need a hobby."

"You could probably get a job teaching."

Jessamine laughed. A loud, genuine laugh, right from the belly—the kind of laugh Clara had heard only once or twice before from her. "Me? Teach? Are you kidding? Teach what?"

"I mean, you've got all these books," Clara pointed out, shoving another handful of them into her crate.

"True," Jessamine allowed. "And you know, a lot of them are about artifact construction. Nobody ever really wrote books on Paladin-hunting. And we wouldn't even need those, now."

"Do these all have spells on them?" Clara asked, turning one volume over in her hands. Thin, sparkling equations flowed slowly through its cover and spine, their deep browns and bronzes almost blending into the book's worn leather cover.

"Most. Spells for preserving them, mostly. Some of those are a century old. A few are twice that."

"Earth magic," Clara whispered, giving the book one last look before slipping it into her crate.

"What's that?"

"Earth magic," Clara repeated more loudly. "Anytime you see

magic for preservation, for slowing things down, for building things up, for reinforcing. Anything like that, it's always the same colors. Very. . . earthy."

"Huh."

Packing the basement took another half hour, and they resumed sharing stories. They'd just finished when Ed and Elsie clambered down the basement stairs. Ed said as he saw the nearly empty shelves, "Oh good, you're almost done."

Jessamine chuckled. "Took you longer than I expected. I didn't have that many clothes."

"We had to fold them all," Elsie said. "And I wouldn't let Ed use magic to do it. Magically laundered clothes always smell funny to me."

"I found a couple of suitcases and did a compaction spell," Ed said. "See you had the same idea."

Clara dropped the last few artifacts on her side the room into her crate. "It'll make it easy to carry all this outside. We can translocate to the Boston Border. I guess so long as we're seen leaving, the Paladins won't bother us."

"Yeah." The mood in the basement became more somber. "It's weird."

Jessamine asked Ed, "Did your parents move everything, yet?"

He nodded. "Yeah. They're giving the house to some friends."

Elsie said, "That's what my mums are doing with their cottage. It took forever to convince them, but once they realized the gardening opportunities in Underhill, they were sold."

Jessamine said, clamping the crate's lid on, "That's it for me, then. You all ready?"

Clara asked as they climbed the stairs, "What do you plan to do with the house?"

"It's actually titled to a trust. There's a family a couple doors down who are trustees. I'll send them a note letting them know they can do whatever they want with it. They won't mind having to clean it up."

Ed asked, "Have you known them for long?"

Jessamine mounted the top step and sighed again as she looked at the mess. "Long, but not well," she said slowly. "They're friendly, but Theo and Arlene were our only real friends. Everyone else was just. . . you know. You need someone who knows."

Elsie teased, "In case you need to duck into their house in an emergency."

Jessamine's expression grew sad. "Yeah."

Elsie's eyes widened. "Oh."

"I know, you were joking but. . . yeah. They were pretty much one backup plan or another." Jessamine took one last look at her ruined home. "They'll put this place to better use than Alex and I did, I suspect. Let's head out."



Jessamine called, "Someone get the door!"

They'd returned to the house she and Alex had built in Underhill, a quaint-looking cottage that was far larger on the inside than on the outside. Alex had already constructed a library of sorts, and he and his wife were busy unpacking the crates she'd brought from Philly.

Clara called as another round of urgent knocking echoed through the house, "I got it!" She hauled the door open and—"Oh. It's you."

Phoebe Witcher stood there, flanked by two young men wearing a similar uniform. "Clara Thorn, you're under a detention order," she said gleefully. "On multiple counts of using unlicensed translocation magic, multiple—"

"Knock it off, Phoebe," Clara said tiredly. "I don't care if your family gets rich off your Anchor network here, but I'm not going to—"

"Multiple counts of endangering—" Phoebe tried to continue.

Ed came up behind Clara. "Who's at the—oh." "Is she arresting us?"

Clara shook her head wearily. "She's trying. Phoebe, enough. Stop. You know we're not going anywhere with you."

Phoebe said smugly, "Matt and Jeff are here to make sure you do."

Clara raised an eyebrow as magic began swirling around the young men's hands. She reached out and tweaked a couple of equations, and a moment later both of them were wrapped neck to knee in thick, sticky ropes of goo. "You truly never do learn, do you?"

Phoebe's face flushed bright red. "You can't just—"

"You know what, Phoebe? I can," Clara snapped. Ed laid a hand on her shoulder and she forced herself back to a semblance of calm. "I seriously resent your father somehow outlawing magic just so he could profit. We're witches, Phoebe. We don't need Anchors."

"The safety of—" Phoebe began.

Ed said quietly, "Let it go Phoebe. You know those Anchors are the only thing keeping your family in any kind of position, so you're hardly unbiased, here. Besides, the Council never approved actual punishments for using translocation magic."

"We were authorized to—"

Clara asked, turning to Ed, "What do you mean 'in any kind of position?'"

Ed smiled. "There are so many more witches here now that the old social norms have kind of become irrelevant. Nobody needs money here. You can just magic up whatever you want. Who needs any kind of aristocracy?"

Phoebe's face was practically glowing now. "You just don't know your—"

Clara quickly wove a spell that swallowed Phoebe's words as soon as she uttered them, "Hush." "So is it all the hoity-toity families?"

Ed smiled. "Basically. With so many more people here, they care a lot more about who's on the Council. Like, it matters to them. And nobody has any patience for the fake upper class that's always

treated Underhill like their personal fiefdom. Even the schools are taking down the private residences to make room for more dorms."

Clara's eyes sparkled. "You know, when we were traveling through time," and she paused to chuckle as Phoebe's eyes widened, "Yes, Phoebe, Time Magic is a thing, although I'm pretty sure only mathemagicians can do it. But as I was saying, I got a good look at Time, and I'm pretty sure I know a trick or two."

Phoebe paled.

Clara let her eyes slip out of focus. As always, Underhill's ambient magic danced brightly before her, pure magic mingling and tinting itself amongst the intense, primary-colored equations that witches used. And there, beneath it all, were the gauze threads of Time.

Clara tugged at one. Anchors, she thought intently. She became aware of the Anchor network, the tight and admittedly elegant equations that made them work, that connected them all, stretching here and there across Underhill. Time lingered beneath those equations as well.

Ignoring the quiet grumbling she heard in the back of her head, Clara let her consciousness slide down one of those pale, gauzy threads. She didn't have to go far before the Anchor equations winked out—she'd gone past the point where they were created. She quickly reversed directions, but instead of following the Anchor magic into the future, she stopped at the present. A heavy, brooding presence made her strongly suspect that Ikwity's forbearance wouldn't extend to messing with the future.

Clara examined the individual symbols of the Anchors' connective strands. There, she thought with satisfaction as she spotted it. It was the tiny equation that was, amongst all forms of translocation magic, unique to Anchors. It was what helped make them stable over long periods of time, but also what tied them to a single location, and made it possible for them to connect to only one other location. It was the equation most uniquely Anchor in nature.

And it had its own thin, ethereal connection to Time.

This elegant little equation had been invented, once upon a time, and Clara knew that if she asked, Professor Castella could probably summon up a book that identified the equation's original author.

And if something had a beginning, then it would also have an end. Perhaps it wouldn't always have had an ending, but with a quick twist of her mind, Clara severed the gossamer wisp of Time that connected the equation to reality.

The grumbling at the back of Clara's mind turned into a chuff of amusement.

Reinventing that equation exactly as it was would be impossible for anyone but a mathemagician who'd seen it—for anyone but Clara, in other words. Other witches didn't think in equations, they thought in feelings, in somatic gestures, in key phrases, all of which helped shape their intention. To create Anchors again, some witch with a good deal of creativity would need to find just the right mindset.

It could take years. Decades, even. Centuries.

And Phoebe's family wasn't known for its creativity, despite the resurgence of Creativity's power in Underhill.

Clara opened her eyes.

"Why don't you go get some reinforcements, Phoebe?" she said in a mock-sweet voice.

Ed asked, "Clara?"

"It's going to take her a while to get home," Clara said, her smile widening. "Unless she uses translocation magic. But you're not very good with translocation, are you?" Clara asked. "I seem to remember you all but failing the subject at school."

"Isn't that why her family set up the first Anchors to begin with?"

Clara dismissed the magic that had been damping Phoebe's words. "What are you talking about, you stupid excuse for a—"

"Insults, Phoebe?" Clara said, shaking her head. "Tsk tsk. Be on your way." She slammed the door in Phoebe's face, leaving her to deal with her cocooned companions.

Ed asked as they walked back to join Clara's parents, "What did you do?"

"I believe," Clara said cheerfully, "I just deleted the bit of magic that made Anchors work."

Ed stopped and stared at her with wide eyes. "You can do that?"

Clara's smile faded a bit as she nodded. "It's connected to Time. Everything has a beginning, so it has to have an ending, too. Sometimes, that's a long way off. But you—I mean, I can bring it forward. I felt it, when we were time traveling."

"And Ikwity. . . let you?"

Clara's smile returned. "I'm pretty sure she thinks it's hilarious."



Johanna whispered, "Wow, they weren't kidding." They followed the directions of a harried-looking older man, who was waving them toward a particular section of seating.

Ed said, waving a thanks to the man, who offered a weary smile in return, "It's a big decision."

To say that the Council Chamber had been expanded for the occasion would have been an egregious understatement.

The grand entrance doors, once adorned with ornate carvings and gilded handles, now stood plain and unassuming. The interior of the chamber had undergone a complete transformation since Clara's last visit. Gone were the imposing thrones, replaced by a simple, long table that sat a dozen councilors. The once pearl-white walls now sported a gray stucco finish, and the opulent gold trim had been swapped for dark wood accents. Despite these changes, the room still retained an air of authority and power.

The sheer size of the chamber was overwhelming. As Clara's eyes scanned the room, she felt a buzzing sensation in her head from the intense amount of magic that had been deployed. The domed ceiling had been raised to towering heights, at least a hundred feet or more. And as if that wasn't enough, the circumference of the room had also

been expanded, making it easily the size of an Ordinary soccer stadium. Tiered sections of seating stretched up and back so far that Clara could barely make out the features of individual witches seated in them. It was a sight to behold - an incredible display of magical prowess.

She nodded to a floor-level section, where Jessamine and Alex had already been seated. “This is us.” She took Ed’s hands and smiled to the rest of her friends. “See you all afterwards.”

Elsie was saying as they headed off, “I don’t see why we can’t translocate up there. They let us all translocate here, after all.”

Idalia said, “That’s only because all the Anchors suddenly quit working.”

Clara suppressed a grin as the rest of the the conversation was lost in the general din. She and Ed had decided not to tell anyone about her role in that particular failure of magic. Phoebe surely suspected, but would have no way of proving something that most witches likely couldn’t imagine even being possible.

Clara said, “You know, it’s a lot less ostentatious than last time.” The Chamber had been stripped of most of its ornamentation, and even the councilors, seated at a simple marble table at the front of the space, were dressed in demure, dark-colored robes.

“The old lot got voted out,” Ed said. “Dad was telling me about it. Quite the coup for democracy, he said. Too many people felt the old Council was beholden to people like the Witchers.”

Clara said, “I never understood how Underhill got an upper class.” “I’m glad they’re going away.”

Ed explained, “It had a lot to do with their business interests in the Ordinary. And some businesses they set up here. And a lot of blackmail, and a lot of artificial scarcity. Like, not everyone can make it into the top schools, not everyone has the magic to build mansions, that kind of thing. And they’d use pressure and the threat of force to keep those things scarce.”

“Sick.”

“Yeah. But like I told you, it’s falling apart, now.”

"Good."

It only took fifteen or twenty minutes for the rest of the audience to find seats, and the Council session began. The lead councilor stood and, using magic to ensure she could be heard by everyone in the space, briefly explained the situation. "So we have come here," she concluded, "to hear from some of the people who have been on the front lines of this fight. You have all received the recent history, but this is our opportunity to ask questions." She paused and surveyed the crowd. "A momentous decision lies before us. Make no mistake: if we proceed as proposed, there is no way back. As such, we will require a majority of at least seventy-five percent of those witches present. Anything less and. . . well, we do not yet have a solution for that eventuality. But less than that means the ways between Underhill and the Ordinary world will remain open. . . for better or for worse."

Everyone had fallen silent for the Councilor's remarks, but that silence took on a heaviness at her closing words.

There was a chiming noise, and one of the other Councilors spoke up. "Our first comment, and it is as concise as we could wish. 'Fight back.'" He looked to the section where Clara and her parents were seated. "Who would like to comment?"

Jessamine said, "I will," and stood. She stepped down to the floor and turned to face the audience. "It's a no-win situation. The Paladins have amassed multiple Blood Witches." A low mutter swept the room. "They've found a way to. . . harness them. Many, feeding power to one. One Blood Witch in Brazil held off a dozen witches, half of whom have been using combat magic for decades. Plus my daughter, a mathemagician." She shook her head. "Maybe two dozen of us could do it. Maybe it would take a hundred. But the point is that we'd be noticed. That kind of battle doesn't go unseen. I'm frankly surprised we weren't noticed in Rio, and I half-wonder if the Paladins themselves didn't have something to do with it. But the kind of force we'd need to prevail would inevitably turn into an all-

out fight with all of humanity. It just won't work." She turned back to the councilors and nodded.

The councilor who'd read the comment added, "I will note that we've had more than a few people looking into this over the last few days. This level of Blood Magic is frankly unprecedented, and we have no reason to imagine the Paladin organization couldn't field more Blood Witches if necessary."

Another wave of quiet muttering washed across the room, followed by a chime.

Another councilor said, "Our next comment. This may not be popular, but we will hear all relevant comments. 'We cannot simply abandon the humans.'"

The wave of sound that swept the room this time was far less quiet, and Clara had a definite sense of anger and conflict.

Alex said, "We will not. We will not abandon them. Not all of them. The ones we know, the ones we trust, the ones who have become as family to us—those are welcome to join us here in Underhill. The rest. . . many of them would burn us, if they knew about us. But most of them won't notice anything has happened. We don't believe the Paladins will continue using their Blood Witch—she's just as dangerous to their organization as they are to us. And none of this changes the fact that we simply cannot win a fight in this situation." He sat.

"Something to consider," the councilor said as another chime sounded. "This one is a suggestion that we could maintain safe spaces in the Ordinary." He looked to his fellow councilors, who nodded. He cleared his throat. "Let me be clear that this is not an option. Perhaps Miss Thorn could speak to this?"

Clara stood, releasing Ed's hand. "I can." She stepped down to the floor, nodding to her mother as she headed back to her seat. "The Paladins know about Borders. They may not be able to use them, but their Blood Witch has given them artifacts—they present them as 'holy relics'—capable of finding our Borders. When they find them, they stake

them with yet more artifacts. The result is the Rot." An angry grumble filled the room, and Clara waited for it to subside. "If we make this decision, if we go this direction, I will fast-age all but the Final Border. Every Border will still conduct magic from the Ordinary, and still conduct the power of Creativity, but they will be useless for traveling between worlds. Only the Final Border will remain, and I assure you—the entity who guards it will not tolerate its use. If we make this decision," she repeated, "then we will remain in Underhill forever. There's no going back." She turned, nodded to the councilors, and returned to her seat.

Another chime. "Ah," a councilor said. "We'd expected this one. It simply says, 'babies.'"

Ed said softly, "I've got this one," and stood, making his way to the floor. "Centuries ago, when the Fae ruled Underhill. They abused the Great Power known as Creativity. He, she, or it fled, and withdrew their power. That is why witches have never been able to conceive here. But that has changed." He glanced at Clara, who smiled encouragingly. "We found Creativity—the actual incarnation of the Great Power—in Lithuania. It does not wish to return to Underhill, but it has already been sending its power through the Final Border, as Clara said. In time, there will be sufficient Creativity here to not only permit conception, but to sustain itself. Already, the magic here feels fresher, doesn't it?" A susurrus of agreement slipped through the chamber. "Part of that is Creativity." They'd practiced this response, and decided to avoid the issue of magic coming from humans. That was a touchy subject amongst witches, and more likely to derail the conversation as anything else.

He nodded to the councilors and returned to his seat.

"Good job," Clara whispered, taking his hand.

"Thanks."

Another chime. "And here we get to the point," a councilor said, reading the comment that had appeared before them. "'How do we do this?'"

Without rising, the Grand councilor said, "I believe I can answer this one. It is quite simple. Should we decide to proceed, notice will

be sent by magic within the hour to every witch in the Ordinary. There will be a deadline—a week at most. We are informed the Paladins will give us that much time. At the end of that period, the Borders will close. Anchors seem to be functional in the Ordinary, still. . .”

Clara bit her lip a bit at that. She couldn’t imagine why what she’d done hadn’t taken effect in the other world. Different histories, different futures? No way to tell.

“. . .travel will be straightforward,” the councilor continued. “Trusted humans to be included, of course, with whatever possessions we can manage to help them bring.”

Another councilor added, “Plans have already been laid for new homes and other necessary developments. With plenty of magic to work with, there should be few problems accommodating everyone in comfort.”

Another chime. “Ah,” the Grand councilor said, reading the note. “Very tactical. Thank you. It says, ‘Who will protect the Final Border?’”

Clara stood. “A plan has been laid, and is already well into execution. This is. . . a tricky part.” She took a deep breath. “A spell has been created that will remove the memory of magic from the Ordinary. It is persistent. Self-sustaining. We believe. . . our theory is that, as it settles, even the Paladins will forget about magic. Even Blood Witches should forget, in time.” Another deep breath. “There is a good chance that any witch who remains will also forget magic. We think. There’s a possibility, at least.” The latest messages from Egle in Vilnius had raised that: as they moved to larger and larger carvings, the spell seemed to start affecting *everyone.*

A collective gasp rose from the audience.

“I know,” Clara continued. “But it is the only way to ensure the Final Border remains. To ensure that we still have one critical connection to the Ordinary. A passage for magic to flow between the worlds, as it must. A passage for Creativity’s power, until it is strong enough to sustain itself here. The worlds cannot be safely severed,

but we can limit the connection to this one defensible location—and we can make everyone in the Ordinary forget it exists." She sat, and Ed took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

The councilors waited a few minutes in silence. When no more chimes sounded, the Grand councilor simply said, "It is time to vote."

"If I may," Clara said quickly, standing. She looked to the Grand councilor, who nodded.

She stepped back down to the floor. "I've heard the comments. A lot of you think this is. . . losing. That we're giving something up, that we've. . . well, lost." She hadn't planned this speech, but something was pushing it out of her. "I disagree. It's like. . . imagine if you're standing in a tall building. Like a skyscraper, in the Ordinary. And let's say you open the window and you drop something out. Without magic. It's going to fall, right?" The few people who's eyes she could see look confused. "That's gravity. Whatever you dropped, it's going to fall, and probably be smashed to pieces. But that doesn't mean you lost to gravity. Gravity isn't the game. It isn't the contest. Gravity is part of the rules." A few people were beginning to nod. "We're outmatched in the Ordinary. But not by Blood Witches. By the rules. The humans outnumber us. They always have. They always will. Even over there, it isn't. . . easy for us." More nods. "Maybe we've never belonged there. Maybe we've just been cheating at the rules. But we haven't lost." She took a deep breath. "I moved around a lot, as a kid. You know how it is, for our kind, as a kid. And I didn't have magic parents to help me. So I never got attached to places. Maybe I just learned to be more pragmatic. How I grew up, the rules were hard, and for most of that time I didn't have magic to cheat with. For me, winning was just being in the place I belonged. With my parents. That's what this is, for me." More heads were nodding slowly. "We win when it's us. When we can be us. We can't, over there. You all know that. Because we're against the rules, right? Because maybe we weren't ever supposed to be there. So this isn't losing.

"If anything, for me, being able to be here, in Underhill, with all of you. . . with my human parents, who raised me, with my friends. . . and to be able to be who we are, all the time. . . that's not losing.

"That's winning."



The councilors had asked everyone to hold their translocation spells until they were outside, to avoid potential conflict between so many people casting spells in such a tight area. Clara took Ed's hand as they filed out of the chamber, "So it's done." The vote had been near-unanimous in favor of abandoning the Ordinary. Everyone was buzzing with the news.

Ed nodded to one side. "The Witchers are certainly done."

Clara looked and saw Aaron Witcher gesticulating wildly at one of the councilors. Phoebe, pale and miserable, stood behind her father, her arms crossed. She looked over and spotted Clara and Ed, and simply hugged herself tighter.

Jessamine said softly, "The messages are already going out. But we've got a bit of work to do, don't we?"

Clara nodded. "Vilnius. First thing in the morning. We'll check on the Veil."

Ed put an arm around Clara's shoulders. "In the meantime, I could eat."

CHAPTER 17
DREAM FOREST

Clara had no trouble at all falling asleep that night. The moment her head hit the pillow, she was out—but it was only a few moments before she found herself in Underhill's dreamscape. The elf was waiting there, smiling gently.

The dream forest unfolded beneath a sky painted with the softest hues of twilight. Cool air, scented with the faintest whisper of wildflowers, caressed Clara's skin. Beneath her feet, the grass shimmered not with sunlight, but with an inner luminescence. It pulsed faintly, like moonlight caught in a million blades, casting an ethereal glow on the landscape.

The trees, too, seemed to partake in this silent symphony of light. Their leaves, impossibly still, held pockets of color – sapphire blues, emerald greens, and wisps of lavender – that pulsed in time with the grass. The effect was mesmerizing, like a living tapestry woven with moonlight and starlight.

The air itself vibrated with a profound peace. It was the kind of quiet that settled into your bones, a silence so complete it felt like a gentle embrace. Here, in the Underhill, worries seemed to fade like

smoke, leaving only a sense of calm serenity that seeped into your very soul.

"I will miss you," the elf said quietly.

"Miss me?" Ordinarily, Clara would have found the statement alarming, but for some reason, at this moment, it was almost. . . comforting.

The elf's smile grew and it stood straighter. "There are so many more voices, now. I have grown so much larger. Stronger. I do not think we will meet again."

"They're all going to come now," Clara nodded. *I'll miss the place.* But she still couldn't manage to feel sad about it. "We can't find the Blood Witch."

The elf didn't move, and its expression didn't change, but a sudden wind blew through the trees like a hiss. "No Blood Magic here."

"Why is that?"

Its expression grew thoughtful. "The Queen of the Fae detested pain and suffering. For herself, of course, and for her children. She excluded it when she built this place. Built me. The potency of pain doesn't exist here, doesn't create energy here. And the iron blocks it, just as it blocks true magic."

"The iron?"

The elf nodded and its soft smile returned. "You have seen it. Felt it. At my roots, at the bottom of the world, iron. It connects me to the Ordinary. Your Borders let the magic in. Unused magic sinks into the land, where it is grounded by the iron. Where it returns to the Ordinary." It spread its hands. "A great circle."

"The Borders won't carry as much," Clara said, managing to feel a little sad.

The elf nodded. "I have seen how it will be. Would you like to see?"

She nodded.

With a suddenness that stole her breath, the ground fell away.

One moment she was standing knee-deep in the glowing grass, the next she was falling. But it wasn't a terrifying fall, it was a weightless descent, as if she were being cradled by an unseen hand. Her eyes flew open wide, taking in the dreamscape from a whole new perspective.

The world stretched out beneath her like a color-soaked canvas. The glowing grass shimmered like a vast, emerald sea. The trees, once towering giants, were now miniature specks of color dotting the landscape. The horizon, once barely visible, now curved away in a breathtaking sweep, revealing a tapestry of glowing meadows and inky black forests that shimmered with distant, dreamlike lights.

Clara's gasp caught in her throat, a mixture of surprise and exhilaration. The world had transformed around her, and she was suspended in the midst of it all, a weightless observer in this fantastical dreamscape. The cool night air rushed past her face, carrying the faint scent of wildflowers and something else, something magical and unknown. It was a feeling of pure wonder, a sense of limitless possibility that stretched out before her like the endless expanse beneath her feet.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"See the magic."

Clara's vision shifted, and the quilt of Underhill's magic revealed itself. Soft colors blanketed the land, flowing like a gentle river across it. And there, in what she knew was the Great Northern Wood, was a beacon. Shining like a miniature sun with pure, blue-tinged power. The Final Border.

Clara looked, and could see all the other Borders she'd raised, but they were glowing far more gently, almost dully in some cases. "Creativity is still making it through?"

The elf chuckled. "It tickles. I like it. I missed it." It tilted its head. "It is going to be strange there, where it comes so strongly."

"We're planning to keep people away."

"Good."

They watched for several more long moments before the elf spoke again, its tone now somber. "You have brought something new here."

Clara's shoulders tensed. "Something good?"

The elf considered. "Perhaps."

"What?"

"You see the magic coloring itself as it winds away from the origin?"

It pointed, and Clara's eyes were drawn back to the glowing Final Border.

She gasped.

From that incandescent core, tendrils of magic unfurled, each one taking on a distinct hue as it spread.

Crimson tendrils, like licks of a mythical beast's tongue, surged outward, their edges flickering with an infernal gold. They pulsed with a life of their own, a vibrant ember red morphing into the fiery orange of a dying sun. These tendrils whispered of heat and transformation, their essence as volatile and captivating as a blacksmith's forge.

Deeper hues pulsed in another direction. Sapphire tendrils, the color of a mermaid's jewel, flowed with a mesmerizing grace. They deepened into the cerulean blue of a calm ocean, then swirled with emerald green, mirroring the life that thrived beneath the waves. These threads carried the secrets of the deep, an invigorating coolness and a touch of the unknown.

Wispy tendrils, light as a summer breeze, drifted upwards. They shimmered with the pale azure of a first dawn, then deepened to the calming sky blue of a cloudless afternoon. These filaments held the essence of the boundless sky, light and airy, whispering of endless horizons and freedom.

Earthy tones snaked downwards, grounding the spectacle. Rich, chocolate brown tendrils flowed like molten chocolate, heavy and potent. They morphed into a steely gray, carrying the weight and

wisdom of ages. These tendrils spoke of stability, of the enduring strength and secrets buried within the very core of the world.

The magic flowed outwards, a vibrant tapestry woven from the very essence of existence. Each color, a promise, a whisper of the power that coursed through the land, the sea, the sky, and the earth itself.

"It's beautiful." But then her eyes narrowed. "There's something more."

A different tendril, unlike any other, pulsed into existence beside the vibrant display. It wasn't a single color, but a constant, mesmerizing shift. It shimmered with the faint, pearlescent sheen of a seashell at dawn, a fragile beauty that hinted at the fleeting nature of existence. Then, it would flicker with a charcoal gray, the color of a dying ember, a stark reminder of endings.

This wasn't the fiery passion of creation nor the cold finality of destruction. It was both, a swirling dance between the two. Fleeting bursts of the palest gold, the color of a newborn star, would erupt within it, a testament to the constant cycle of beginnings. These, however, would be swiftly chased by streaks of a deep, melancholic purple, the color of twilight, a poignant reminder that all things eventually fade and return to the dust.

It was the magic of time itself, a constant, ever-shifting current. It held the bittersweet beauty of a blooming flower, knowing it would eventually wilt. It carried the echo of laughter, tinged with the knowledge that even joyous moments vanish into the sands of time. This magic was a paradox, a beautiful and melancholic reminder of the finite nature of all things, a whisper that urged one to cherish each fleeting moment, each precious memory, before it slipped away forever.

"Beginnings and endings," the elf whispered. "You have brought Time to Underhill." It considered the display. "More than Creativity, I believe this will give witchkind a true home."

"Oh."

The elf turned to her, and once again she was standing amidst the long grass. “It is good, I think.”

“Thank you.”

“Be well, Clara Thorn.”

“You too.”

The dreamscape vanished as Clara slipped into a true, deep slumber.

CHAPTER 18
SHOWDOWN

"We are well underway," Egle said confidently.

Clara, Ed, and the triplets had returned to the Palace of the Grand Duchy and were standing with Egle in the courtyard. Shifting her vision, Clara could see the gauzy magic of the Veil lingering in the air, extending well beyond the palace walls to cover much of the city.

"We have made some refinements to how we are carving the symbols themselves—the runes, you would say—and they have proven even more effective." She frowned. "But we are beginning to believe that, once all the carvings are done and empowered, we will indeed be looking at the worst-case scenario. Or best-case, depending on your perspective."

"Witches forgetting magic as well?" Clara asked.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"We told everyone as much at the big hearing," Ed put in. "There actually *is* an argument for that being best-case, you know."

"Yes," Egle allowed. "The spell will take some time to achieve maximum effect, and until it does, any major use of magic will threaten it. Require even longer, at the least. So yes, having even

witches begin to forget magic, which would start to happen almost immediately. . . would be beneficial, from that perspective." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "That possibility—now a near-certainty, if I am being honest—has made many people here reconsider their plans."

"To stay here?" Clara guessed.

"Indeed. To abandon our homes and our nation is very difficult. But to live without magic. . . to know that we would forget it. . . that, for many of us, is worse. Most of us, I might say."

"So it's unlikely anyone would remain to guard the Final Border?" Ed asked.

"Unlikely. Besides, what could they do? When the spell reaches full effect, they would forget the Border anyway. And we estimate full effect taking less than three months."

"How much work is left?" Clara asked.

"The main installation at Tokyo will be finished today. A group of witches stands by to empower it. There is a large enough population there to provide sufficient ambient magic to power the construct for. . . well, forever. Once it is active, however, those planning to leave will need to do so immediately, or risk forgetting." She looked away for a moment, considering. "If I am correct, approximately four-fifths of those planning to leave Lithuania have done so, or will do so by the end of tomorrow."

"And the construct's network effect?" Ed asked.

"Tested and working," Egle confirmed. "Ambient magic not used to power the construct itself is funneled back here, to the main construct at the palace. Vilnius will be awash in magic, and most of that will flow into the Final Border, and then into Underhill itself. Ironically, within a few days, that will make the Veil even more powerful here than anywhere else."

"And are there more new constructs other than the Tokyo one?" Clara asked.

"Yes. Ten more, but all will be carried out by human stonemasons in our employ. There are two teams, and including travel time it

should take less than four months. We have supplied them with charged crystals to start each new construct, at which point they will draw the rest of the power they need from here, and then begin collecting local ambient magic."

Ed cocked his head. "Won't they forget, once the Tokyo construct goes live?"

"No," Elsa assured him. "*They* are not aware magic is involved. The crystals they carry were presented as decorative elements. They simply need to execute the designs they have, cement the crystal into place, and then move on."

Clara exhaled heavily. "Good. That's a huge relief. Backup on backup. I. . . well, I guess it's the most we can do."

"You will begin taking down the other Borders?"

Clara shook her head. "Not taking them down, exactly. Aging them, really fast. Once their basic form starts to break down, they'll stop being useful as portals between here and Underhill. They'll stop conducting magic as well too, but the Final Border should cover us there. In another hundred years, two hundred at the outside, they'll have decomposed enough to stop working entirely. They'll just be weather-worn stones."

The triplets, who'd been quietly looking around the palace courtyard, turned to Egle. "What are you going to do?" they asked in unison, their voices overlapping in a harmonious chorus. They'd slipped halfway into their synergistic magic, prepared for an attack. Deuxm and the Paladins might be giving the witches time to pack up and leave, but Clara wasn't so sure about the Blood Witch, no matter what kind of control the Paladins thought they had over her.

Egle smiled softly at the triplets, her eyes reflecting a mixture of determination and sadness. "I've decided I will stay behind to guard the Final Border," Egle replied, her voice steady. "It is my duty to ensure that the Veil remains intact, even as magic fades from the Ordinary. We have been preparing for this moment, and I will not falter now." She swallowed heavily. "I have some confidence that I will be able to maintain my memory, especially if I continue to prac-

tice small magics. And. . . this is my home. I have my job, even if I no longer realize I am a witch."

WHUMP.

The wave of Blood Magic poured down around them, and everyone's eyes flew open in alarm. Clara opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Ed was already at work. His hands sketched a complex pattern in the air, and the solid, earthen feel of a shield sprung up around them. In Clara's eyes, they were surrounded by dense, squared-off equations in mottled brown hues, shot through with bright copper and sturdy brass. She could sense the triplets falling fully into their synergistic union, magic spiraling around them in tight curls, amplifying itself as it wound through each of them.

With a sickening lurch, the air in front of them wavered and tore. It was as if the fabric of reality itself was being ripped apart by an unseen force. The six witches watched in awe and fear as the Blood Witch, master of translocation magic, made her presence known. Her spiritual energy pulsed and swirled, manipulating the physical world effortlessly. But her power was unlike any they had encountered before.

Unlike other witches who used translocation to simply convince the world they were somewhere else, the Blood Witch's abilities were rooted in the realm of spirits. She could not simply vanish from one location and reappear in another. Instead, she had to be "born" into existence, pulling herself together from the tear in reality that she created. A dull glow emanated from the humanoid shape that formed before them, slowly coalescing into a recognizable figure.

But it was not a peaceful or painless process. The Blood Witch's form was twisted and distorted as sinew and flesh snaked out from nothingness and wrapped around her spirit form. Bones cracked and muscles slithered and solidified while blood pumped through newly formed veins. It was a gruesome sight to behold.

And yet, there was no sound accompanying this horrifying transformation. Without lungs or diaphragm, the Blood Witch's screams

were silent, visible only through her contorted expression and writhing body. And then, just as suddenly as it began, it was over.

The Blood Witch opened her eyes with a triumphant gleam and tilted her neck left and right, cracking newly formed bones with ease. The tear in reality sealed shut behind her as she grinned confidently at the witches. She had been reborn, ready to unleash her full power upon them.

The last of her magic roiled thickly around her, settling around her shoulders and falling past her torso and legs to pool on the ground. Then the magic faded, leaving behind a heavily brocaded purple-red gown, liberally covered with wood and metal ornamentation, buckles, buttons, and trim.

«Larissa Vitória da Silva Sangue,» the triplets challenged in a unified voice that was colder and flatter than ever.

"Who—oh, right," Clara muttered. Next to her, Ed's fingers twitched in a quick Sending—they hadn't exactly expected to be attacked in Lithuania, but they hadn't ignored the possibility. What members of the team were functional would be here quickly. Egle's fingers were also twitching, and as Clara's vision shifted, she saw a similar Sending spell dart off in search of help. *Although she just told us most of the Lithuanian witches were already relocating!*

"You were supposed to leave us alone. You've won," Ed called across the courtyard. "We're leaving."

da Silva Sangue shrugged, her grin widening. *"Eles ganharam, será? Eu, cá pra mim, não."*

Clara's translation spell, already active to handle Lithuanian, kicked in automatically. *Perhaps they have won, but I have not.*

And with no further comment, the Blood Witch attacked.

In Clara's original timeline, Madame Laliberte had used her magic to directly affect the witches' blood. She'd pulled Ed's blood right out of him, and she'd done something else that had utterly affected their ability to concentrate on magic. So Clara was aware that Blood Witches could affect them physically. But whatever spell da Silva Sangue cast was of another order entirely.

A crushing, all-consuming wave of despair descended upon the witches, weighing down their souls with a combination of deep depression and hopelessness. Every ounce of optimism that had sustained them against the darkness evaporated in an instant, leaving them feeling helpless and drained. Clara's body trembled as she dropped to her knees, tears streaming down her face and sobs wracking her frame. Through tear-blurred eyes, she watched in terror as the Blood Witch's noxious power took shape before them, a vile creature rising from the depths of hell itself, ready to strike them down and deliver their ultimate demise. The stench of death hung heavy in the air, suffocating them as they prepared for the inevitable battle against this formidable and merciless foe.

End it, Clara thought miserably, even as a part of her brain wondered how this could have come over her so quickly, without warning, without any kind of sign.

Then the feeling vanished.

Clara's head jerked to her left, and she saw Ed, gritting his teeth. The equations around him were stable, centering shades of tan and forest green, and they snaked out over his companions. "You're shielding us."

He nodded tightly, his jaw clenched. "She's doing something to our brain chemistry, I think. It's nothing like the other one did in New Orleans."

"Something is preventing others from arriving," Egle panted. Her face was paler than usual, and while she hadn't sunk to her knees as Clara had, her legs were visibly shaking with the effort of keeping her upright.

«And leaving,» the triplets added. Clara could see the remnants of an attempted translocation spell unraveling around them.

Egle pulled herself erect. "Who is this creature?"

For a moment, Clara couldn't remember her name, but Ed did. "da Silva Sangue. Blood Witch. Brazil." He took a deep breath as their foe's magic subsided. "She's being powered by more than just herself, though."

"She's not, Ed," Clara realized. The slimy, slick, blurred equations of the Blood Witch's power had dissipated—but there were no more thick tendrils snaking toward her to refuel her. "She's nowhere near her base. She can't recharge."

«She'll have artifacts,» the triplets cautioned. They were back and on their feet, Clara noted as she clambered back to her own.

"That's all they can use," Egle agreed. Magic was spooling around her arms as she prepared an attack, and Ed was working to reinforce his shield.

«Clara?»

"What do you mean, that's all they—" Clara began. But then she remembered.

In Mom's row house, in Philadelphia. We'd just gotten out of the museum in Los Angeles. Dad was there. He was explaining.

"But it makes the most sense for what we're seeing, and what Clara is describing. It isn't ordinary magic. And a human Blood Witch can't cast spells the way we do—they can't access magic on the fly. They have to create artifacts and imbue them with magic. And, because they do so with blood, that magic can be very durable. And it can be renewed, simply by supplying more blood."

"Although they can have a lot of artifacts on them at any given time," Jessamine said ruefully. "Found that out the hard way."

"But Laliberte didn't—"

New Orleans. The other timeline was already growing faint in her memory. But Laliberte was there, in her simple black dress. Nowhere to conceal an artifact, but where was she—

Thick, ropy streams of Blood Magic, their equations hazy and slimy, flowed from the mansion into Laliberte. Recharging her, healing her, giving—

No.

Time slowed as Clara's mind focused.

Thick, ropy streams of Blood Magic, their equations hazy and slimy, flowed from the mansion. . .

. . .into Laliberte's legs.

"There were on her legs," Clara whispered.

"What?" Ed snapped, his jaw still tight.

"Be careful," Elge warned, "she's doing it—"

The Blood Witch struck again.

The atmosphere crackled with a grim, otherworldly energy as the Blood Witch channeled her ill-gotten powers. Her eyes blazed with an unearthly, malevolent gleam, and the air seemed to vibrate with her immense strength. Clara's heart pounded in her chest as she felt the oppressive weight of the witch's magic bearing down on them. It was a spiritual attack, a force that sought to penetrate the very core of their being. The purest form of Blood Magic clawed at Clara's soul, desperate to consume her own magic and leave her powerless. She could feel it tugging at her, threatening to tear it from her body like a predator ripping apart its prey.

Except I don't have any magic in me, Clara thought with cold satisfaction.

Beside her, Ed clenched his jaw, his shielding spell quivering under the powerful force aimed at them. Egle's magic crackled and sparked in a frantic effort to transform her attack into a shield, pushing back against the relentless assault of the Blood Witch. The triplets stood shoulder to shoulder, their faces set in determined scowls as they readied themselves for another round of battle. Their combined energy swirled and pulsed around them, sacrificing itself to da Silva Sangue's attack while simultaneously shielding their own personal magic from harm. The air hummed with the electric charge of their power, creating an otherworldly aura around the group amidst the chaos of the battlefield.

"Different attack," Ed grunted, raising his hands as he poured more magic into his shield.

"It's because she's using artifacts!" Clara's mind raced as she tried to find a way to overcome their foe. She remembered the lesson her father had imparted about Blood Witches and their reliance on artifacts imbued with blood magic. "She can't possibly keep this up forever!"

Sweat was pouring down Ed's face. "She won't need to."

«Céad spear a chroidhe!» the triplets shouted.

Clara was accustomed to harnessing the united, amplified power of the triplets, but she had rarely witnessed them using it on their own. Their attack was focused and forceful, radiating intense heat in Clara's mind. The intertwined strands of magic swirled and danced around each other, now deflecting the Blood Witch's parasitic assault. Quickly, the triplets unleashed a barrage of energy projectiles, each one shimmering in hues that Clara had rarely seen before: regal Tyrian purple, tranquil cerulean blue, delicate wisteria lavender, vibrant cobalt blue, and countless others whose names eluded her. The slender lances soared forward in a wide arc from the triplets' outstretched hands before converging with pinpoint precision on their enemy.

Da Silva Sangue made no move to defend herself. She didn't even raise a hand.

But she did smile—a terrible smile that showed long, sharp canine teeth and wickedly pointed incisors.

The triplets' attack impaled the Blood Witch with ferocious intensity, shredding through her heavy, intricate gown and piercing her flesh.

But instead of howling in pain or fear, da Silva Sangue threw back her head and let out a chilling laugh.

It took mere moments for Clara to see a slick film of Blood Magic rising from the wounds on da Silva Sangue's chest. It quickly spread across her entire body like an insidious disease, meticulously stitching her shredded garments back together and healing the injuries she had just sustained. Then just as quickly as it appeared, the thick mist dissipated into nothingness, hissing as it mingled with the breeze above the Blood Witch's head.

«Impossible," the triplets breathed, stunned enough that they lost their synergy, and their voices separated into distinct tones. Harriett shook her head and ground her teeth together, forcing

herself and her sisters back into sync. “No ar**tifact could possibly—»**

“Target her gown!” Egle cried, unleashing her own volley of green-yellow magic. Although less powerful than the triplets’, it carried the greater experience of the woman’s years.

Egle's attack veered off course, deliberately aiming for the intricate gown that clung to the Blood Witch's form like a thick second skin. Her magic twisted and writhed, taking on the shape of a serpent that slithered with deadly precision towards its target. The shimmering threads of Egle's spell wove together in a dazzling display of colors, each strand pulsing with raw energy as it sought to unravel the fabric.

The gown, Clara realized, was a masterpiece of Blood Magic. What Clara had taken for wood and metal ornaments were actually artifacts. *I can barely make out the individual lines of energy, it’s so dense.* She focused, intent on finding a flaw in the equations, something she could twist or break to end the Blood Witch’s advantage.

Da Silva Sangue's laughter turned into a snarl of rage as she realized the focus of Egle's attack. She raised her hands, her fingers curling into claws as she unleashed a counterattack aimed directly at Egle. The Blood Witch's eyes burned with a sinister light, and the very ground seemed to tremble beneath her as she channeled her malevolent power. In Clara’s eyes, a clasp stitched into the gown’s side flared with a red-black light as it powered the counterattack.

I see it now, Clara thought.

Thick, intricate numbers and symbols flowed from the clasp, curling up around the Blood Witch's shoulders and down her arms like vines. The energy pulsed and crackled with the same deep hue, resembling dried blood. As it surged towards Egle, its claws glinted in the light like sharpened steel, its spurs emitting a strong scent of copper and iron. The barbs that adorned the energy were a dark purple, reminiscent of a deep bruise.

It slammed into Egle’s chest.

She stumbled backward, her own magic sputtering under the

assault. The serpent-like threads of her spell faltered and dispersed in a burst of light, unable to further penetrate the resilient barrier woven by the Blood Witch's gown.

Clara's heart raced as she watched the scene unfold before her. She knew—could see—that Egle's attack had weakened the artifacts woven into gown, but there was still an abundance of power lingering within it. With a steely determination, Clara focused her mind and summoned all the strength she could muster. "Girls?"

«All yours.»

Clara reached out with her mind, and with the unique gift of her mathemagic, seized the triplets' combined energy. This wasn't the pure blue-white magic that they'd offered her before, filled with simple equations and symbols. This was power for a battle, gray-white shot through with peach and pink. Innocuous, innocent names for magic born of flame, heated to an intensity that almost exceeded Clara's ability to perceive it.

Her mind shot back to the museum basement. *A bolt of pure magic, no larger than a thumb but radiating with a searing violet glow.*

That's what I need. Exactly what she'd used in the museum basement, to destroy the Paladin artifact that had created the stasis field.

But this time she had everything the triplets could feed her.

The equations, sharp and precise, spun before Clara with increasing speed. She watched in awe as they transformed into intricate polyhedral shapes, collapsing in on themselves to form even denser forms. Soon, they descended into mesmerizing fractals, their patterns impossible for Clara to decipher. Ignoring the Blood Witch's malicious grin and her attempt to draw energy from another artifact, Clara focused all of her attention on condensing the triplets' power tighter and tighter. The intense light emanating from her efforts blinded her momentarily, forcing her to squint her eyes. But her mind remained fixed on piecing one equation to the next, determined to create a formula for hope, for justice, and perhaps even a touch of revenge as she fought against the Blood Magic.

The last symbol, a brilliant equal sign of hot orange, settled into place.

Clara opened her eyes and flung a hand toward their foe.

A hundred thousand impossibly thin bolts of yellow lightning arced out, every erg of energy that Clara had bound together expanding at once. Her shoulders tensed and knotted as she held the equations in her mind, forced the magic to flow to her will, locked the symbols that only she could see into a formula that only she could imagine.

Each narrow line of power touched a specific place on da Silva Sangue's gown.

The Blood Witch shrieked, a sound that curdled the air. Clara's protagonist's strike, a symphony of calculated blows, had struck true. Dozens of artifacts, each stitched carefully into the ornamentation of the gown, each filled with grotesque power, pulsed with a dull, oily luminescence. For a heartbeat, an unnatural stillness hung in the air. The energy from Clara's attack faded slowly, leaving softly glowing afterimages in Clara's mind's eye.

Then, with a crack that split reality itself, the artifacts shattered. A torrent of putrid energies erupted, a grotesque fireworks display of malevolent power. Oil-black tendrils lashed outwards, writhing like serpents birthed from an endless nightmare. Sparks of a sickly green spat and hissed, searing the air with the stench of decay. Violet arcs of lightning danced maniacally, seeking a target in the chaotic maelstrom.

The ground groaned under the assault, the thick pavers cracking and bending. The air itself seemed to curdle, choked by the sheer weight of the unleashed evil. The Blood Witch, once a figure of regal terror, was now a screaming silhouette at the heart of the storm, consumed by the very power she sought to control. It was a horrifying spectacle, beautiful in its destructive fury.

But amidst the chaos, a single note of defiance remained. Clara, rooted in her stance, held firm, backed by the triplets' swirling mass of magic, and shielded by Ed's stolid, implacable powers. A wall of

pure willpower, born of righteous fury and precise calculation, stood between her and the onslaught.

They stood for several long moments as the light, heat, and dust faded and settled.

A low cackle slid across the battered courtyard.

As the air cleared, they saw da Silva Sangue standing there. Her head was lowered, her eyes rolled upward to meet their own. The tatters of her gown hung from her shoulders. A black-gray blast mark surrounded her.

"Her skin," Egle whispered.

«We still can't leave,» the triplets warned, another attempted translocation spell dissolving around them.

Clara blinked her eyes back into focus, and saw what the older witch had seen.

The Blood Witch's skin was covered with a fine tracery of scars, running from her neck down to her ankles. And beneath each scar was a small, hard-looking lump.

"She's got artifacts under her skin," Ed breathed. He pulled himself straighter and began weaving more magic into a shield.

Da Silva Sangue spoke. The skin of her face cracked and peeled as she did, but oily mist rose from the wounds, sealing them almost instantly. *"Ela faz, criança. E ela os joga em você e cospe nos seus olhos. Arranca você da face deste mundo, arranca você do reino dela."*

The translation spell, miraculously still active, began to translate, but Clara quickly shut it out of her mind.

"Eu termino seu tempo."

I end your time.

Clara's eyes flew open, and she quickly shifted her vision. *That's it!* Time Magic! *If I can find her thread in it,* Clara thought, her eyes casting around, trying desperately to sink into the meditative state that made Time visible, *I can cut it. End her, here and now.*

But no.

Clara quickly realized that Time didn't behave that way here in

the Ordinary. *It's everywhere, it's in everything. Without Ikwity here, it's just. . . reality. I need to—*

The Blood Witch didn't wait.

From beneath the tattered gown, her hundreds of thin scars, pale against her nut-brown skin, began to writhe. From each scar, with a sickening crack, a sliver of something dark erupted. These weren't buckles or charms, but twisted fragments – bone, gnarled and black as night, and wood, splintered and oozing a sickly, luminescent ichor.

"Eu assumo o seu sofrimento."

I take your suffering.

The fragments ripped from her flesh, each one screaming with a voice you couldn't quite place—animalistic, yet laced with a chilling intelligence. They shot upwards in a spinning vortex, a cloud of purple-red miasma forming around them.

"Eu como sua dor."

I eat your pain.

The ground, already beaten, began to crack, spiderwebs of fissures racing outwards from the beneath the Blood Witch's feet. A storm of Blood Magic, a swirling vortex of amplified evil, seemed to reach upward for the very heavens, intent on ripping a hole in reality itself. Da Silva Sangue, at the center of it all, stood impossibly tall, her form momentarily obscured by the maelstrom, but her laughter, a high-pitched cackle devoid of all humanity, echoed over the devastation.

"Eu termino seu reinado."

I end your reign.

Clara felt the first tendrils of despair brush against her defenses.The sheer, unimaginable power unleashed by the witch threatened to overwhelm not just her body, but her very soul. The destruction of her gown may have been a tactical victory, but this. . . this was a primal war.

A bolt of violet lightning stabbed from the sky, reaching directly for Clara's chest.

I guess I had a good run? she thought irrationally as she watched it speed toward her.

«That's our friend. We found her.»

Somehow, the triplets were standing in front of her.

The lighting *cracked* into the triplets' massed energy—

—and overwhelmed it.

Clara's heart shattered as the three girls were flung backward, Idalia narrowly missing hitting Clara herself.

The Blood Witch smiled.

"Eu rejeito sua alegria."

I reject your joy.

Clara took a step backward.

Joy.

"Ed, Egle, cover me."

In a split second, a shield of earth magic formed around them, emanating a soothing energy that enveloped the witches. The triplets, still lying on the ground, somehow worked in unison to reinforce the shield, weaving it with threads of cerulean sky magic to add strength and stability. The air crackled with tension as they braced for whatever horrific attack was about to come their way. As they channeled their powers, the scent of damp soil and fresh rain filled their senses, grounding them in the present moment.

Joy, Clara thought.

She focused on the Blood Witch, letting her vision sink past the woman's skin, which was now a terrible canvas of hairline cuts. She looked past the writhing muscles, letting even the her skeleton fade away. She ignored the cacophony of magic howling overhead, ignored the thin shield that stood between the storm and her friends' destruction.

There.

She had seen it before, when she'd worked to help her friends improve their magic. *So many years ago, back in school,* she remembered fondly. It hadn't taken her long to realize that witches didn't just *use* magic, didn't just *store* magic, but truly *were* magic. Magic

was their soul, their being, their essence. Even though Clara didn't store magic the way the others did, she still had a web of it within her, a mathematically precise web that made her the mathemagician she was.

And every witch's innermost magic had a *shape.*

The triplets' was a triangle, glowing with iridescent color and threaded with equations that solved for unity and dependency. Together, they formed a trefoil, a three-in-one construct that took their individual power and made it *more.*

Elsie's shape was simple: the two small, flicking equations that represented flame. The flame of destruction, of course, but in Elsie it was the flame of a welcoming wood stove on a cold winter's night. A fierce defender, Elsie also *cared* fiercely.

Finlay's was pure sea: timid yet strong, likely to slip away if you weren't careful. Yet around Wolfgang, his shape had become a strong, steady current. Their magic held wisdom beyond their years, and an unyielding ability to flex and move to fit themselves into the world—and to fit the world around themselves.

And Ed. Ed's shape had been an acorn, back then. A tight, protected little ball of bronze magic. It took in everything—knowledge, techniques, praise, and yes, criticism—like they were nutrients. But over the years, that acorn had split and grown into a tree. An oak tree, dense with steady patience, its roots reaching impossibly far down into the world. Ed was no rock, to be rolled aside or worn by the wind and rain, but a mighty giant, ever renewing and ever present.

And his branches curled over *her.*

Larissa Vitória da Silva Sangue wasn't a witch.

She was a human, one who'd experienced such pain and suffering in her life that she'd come to cling to them as a strength, to feed on them. Who had eventually desired more and more of that power, until nothing but the pain and suffering of others could satisfy her. Who'd taken that pain and suffering into herself, and constructed artifacts from it. Artifacts of pure hatred, of despair, of

sadness, of fear, which she'd used to attack the true witches of the world.

But at the center of her core, a few dismal equations sulked uneasily against each other.

Clara could see them.

And right at their center, right in the very pinpoint of her spiritual nucleus, was a muddy, three-term equation for *nothing*.

Clara almost smiled. *She couldn't just have nothing, she has to have an actual equation for it.* Proof, perhaps, that Blood Magic was as much something you used as something that happened to you.

In a way, Clara wasn't a witch either. Clara was a mathemagician. A once-in-a-generation scion of magic, someone who could *see* magic in a way that no other witch could. Someone who experienced the emotional, wishy-washy, hand-wavy world of magic as a precise, elegant set of perfectly logical equations, each one balanced to its purpose.

And what she could *see*, she could *move*.

And ironically, if you just flipped this one symbol from the left side of the equal sign to the right, the equation no longer meant *nothing*.

It meant *joy*.

The awful storm swirling above Larissa Vitória da Silva Sangue dissipated instantly. A shower of bone fragments and wood splinters clattered to the ruined pavers of the courtyard.

The former Blood Witch's eyes stared widely at Clara, her jaw working in disbelief. Then her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed.

"She's going to need some help," Clara whispered. She stumbled backward, but Ed caught her before she fell. "Good tree," Clara murmured as her eyes eased shut.

EPILOGUE

"I have to admit, I'm starting to like it here." Arlene Thorn took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. "The air is just amazing. And this house!" Her eyes glittered with excitement. "It's so cute and perfect!"

"Hardly," Theo grumbled good-naturedly. "We very obviously didn't bring enough engineers or architects. Why, have you seen how the lintels are put in? These buildings would never pass their first inspection, back home. Even the worst contractor I've seen—"

"Theodore Thorn, this *is* home, and you stop your nitpicking," Arlene said sternly, punching him gently in the arm.

"It's hardly nitpicking when—"

"Dad," Clara laughed. "It's fine. There's plenty of magic here, and that's what's really holding everything together. The witches doing the houses just decide what they want them to look like."

"Big emphasis on Tudor cottages," Theo grinned.

"Everyone's medieval fantasy," Clara acknowledged. "You should see the fishing boats."

"I did," he sighed, shaking his head. "Gaps in the hull wide

enough to slide a sheet of cardboard through. But I guess if the magic handles it. . .”

“It definitely does,” Clara assured him. “Some of the Lithuanians have even started translating the spells into rune diagrams. I’ve been helping,” she added proudly. “It makes the magic easier to persist. Basically, every boat is a giant magic artifact, with runes carved right into the wood. In fact, you’d be shocked at how many people are learning Lithuanian, now.”

Arlene raised an eyebrow. “Lithuanian?”

Clara shrugged. “The rune system they came up with works really well, and it’s way easier if you start with a spell that’s already in Lithuanian. So everyone’s been translating their spells to that when they want them carved and made persistent.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Clara’s mom grinned. “So are *you* learning Lithuanian?”

Clara grinned back. “A little. Here and there. But I don’t need the words to the spell. Doesn’t really do me much good. I still pull the magic into the right shape directly.”

“And that’s what’s holding the houses together?” Theo sighed.

Clara laughed at his downcast expression. “Yup. Sorry, Dad, we just don’t need building inspectors when you can magic the building together the way you want. Or the boat!”

“I guess. . .” he said with another sigh.

“He guesses,” Arlene said, rolling her eyes and smiling. “What else have you been up to, baby?”

Clara blinked away a sudden tear. “Taking care of the triplets.”

“Oh my heavens,” Arlene gasped, “Baby, I had forgotten!”

Clara shook her head and wiped her cheek. “No, it’s okay. They’re okay. They’re actually doing really well. Not up to linking up again, they said, but otherwise they’re fine. It’s just. . . you know, remembering. . .”

“I know,” Arlene said, gathering Clara into an embrace. “I know, I know. I’m so sorry.”

Clara sniffed. “I thought they were dead.”

"They're not, baby."

They stood for a long while, Clara's face buried into her adoptive mother's chest. "Thanks," she sniffed at last, releasing her mom and stepping back. "I guess it's just that and. . . you know, the other thing. It's emotional."

Arlene frowned. "Other thing?"

Clara looked away. "Fast-aging the Borders."

"Oh," Arlene said gently. "That must be. . . difficult."

Clara considered that, and then shrugged. "It's getting easier. Ikwity hasn't been grumbling in my mind when I use the Time magic, at least. I've only got a couple more to do. It's just. . . it's like they talk to me when I'm doing it. I made them."

Arlene nodded in silent sympathy.

"That Time magic sure sounds interesting," Theo said.

Clara shook her head and settled herself. "It's dangerous. I can *feel* how dangerous it is. I'm glad nobody else can do it, and once the Borders are aged, I won't be using it anymore. Just being able to make these Borders degrade so much faster. . ." She shivered a bit. "It's a little bit like they're dying, you know. Ending before their time."

Arlene put an arm around her adopted daughter, but said nothing.

"It'll be all right." Ed walked out of the house, brushing off his pants. "I think I've got the last of your stuff settled, but you're going to have to get someone to help you with that dresser. Two of the drawers are stuck and I can't even figure out a spell to unstick them."

"Oh, you just have to thump them," Arlene said easily. "That dresser is close to a hundred years old."

"Everyone's magic is. . . okay, then?" Theo asked.

"Better than okay," Ed confirmed. "I don't know if anyone's mentioned it to you, but magic in the Ordinary always felt different. Fresher. It feels like that here, now. Clara says there's plenty coming through from the Final Border, and we brought over almost as many humans as witches before she started closing the others."

"And. . ." Theo started, before blushing. "The baby thing?"

"Creativity's power is coming through strong," Clara chuckled. "There won't be any problems on that score." Then she frowned. "Unlike translocation magic. That's been. . . unexpected."

"How so?" Arlene asked, her brow wrinkling with concern.

"It's not a big deal," Ed assured her. "Personally, I have a theory that it has something to do with whatever Clara did to make the Anchors stop working. Translocation magic just takes a *lot* of power, now. Like, enough that it's barely worth it most times. Which is probably fine. I mean, I hate to agree with the Witchers, but—"

"Ed," Clara warned.

He held up his hands to ward off her angry glare. "Hey, I said I hate to. But you have to admit, a few hundred thousand witches popping in and out all the time *was* getting to be a little dangerous."

"Maybe." Clara's glower didn't diminish.

"And all the less complex travel magics still work. Thousand-League Shoes, Wind Flit, all the others. So it's not like we need to invent cars."

"Having seen the houses," Theo said heavily, "I would very much vote against internal combustion engines."

"No petroleum here anyway," Ed chuckled.

"It's elemental, you know," Clara said softly. "It's not the amount."

"Huh?" Ed asked, confused.

"Translocation magic. It doesn't need that much *more* power than it did. It just needs a specific *flavor* of it. It's light-blue and cerulean. Very intense." She paused. "And. . . the other kind. You have to *stop* being at once place and *start* being in another. Stop, then start. It's backwards. I think. . . most people just can't get the hang of it."

"Sure," Ed said quietly. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

Arlene let her hand slide gently down Clara's back as she stepped away. Clara noticed a tear roll down her face. "Mom? What's—"

"Listen to the boy," Arlene said gently, a smile spreading across her face.

"Ed?" Clara asked, confused.

"I know it's too early," he said, and Clara's heart started beating faster when she heard the waver in his voice. "I mean, I know we're too young, and everything's just getting started, and—"

"Ed?" Clara's voice was thick with concern.

"—I know we've been fighting so much, and probably everyone just wants everything to be quiet for a minute—"

"Ed, what's going on?" Clara asked tensely.

"—so maybe not right now, but maybe someday—"

"Edward Langsdale, spit it out," Theo chuckled.

Ed swallowed heavily. "Clara, would you marry me?"

Clara's eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat. The world seemed to freeze around them as Ed's words hung in the air. She searched his face, seeing a mix of hope, fear, and unwavering love in his eyes.

"Ed, I. . ." Clara started, her voice barely above a whisper. She glanced at her mother, who nodded encouragingly, then back to Ed. "We're so young, and after everything we've been through. . ."

Ed's face fell slightly, but he pressed on. "I know, I know. But Clara, facing all of that with you. . . it made me realize there's no one else I'd rather have by my side. For anything."

Theo cleared his throat. "You two have been through more in the past few years than most people face in a lifetime. If that's not a solid foundation, I don't know what is."

Clara felt tears welling up in her eyes. She thought about their journey, the trials they'd faced, the moments of joy and despair they'd shared. Through it all, Ed had been there.

"Yes," she breathed, a smile breaking across her face. "Yes, Ed. Someday, I would love to marry you. But. . ."

Ed's shoulders tensed.

"I'd like that to be now," Clara finished.

Ed's face lit up with joy as he swept Clara into his arms, spinning her around as her adoptive parents clapped. As he set her down, Clara laughed. "We have to tell my other parents."

"Oh, I asked them already," Ed assured her with a smile. "Jess basically dared me to ask you."

Clara snorted. "She would. Then yes again, Ed. Yes."

Unseen to everyone but Clara Thorn, the magic of Underhill looped and danced with her joy.

Appendix: Peanut Stew

Obviously, use caution with this recipe if anyone in your group has a peanut allergy!

This is a West African staple, and the kind of stew you can make "perpetually." In medieval times, most inns or pubs would keep a large cauldron of stew on at all times. As they served customers from it, they'd simply top it off with more ingredients, stir them in, and repeat. That way, there was always plenty to sell. In modern times, Crock Pots and Instant Pots make these stews quick and easy. For this particular stew, you won't even need one of those—just a soup pot and a stove.

Ingredients

1 Tablespoon olive oil
1 large onion, peeled & chopped
4 – 6 cloves garlic, peeled & chopped
3 inches fresh ginger, peeled & chopped
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon turmeric
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
2 quarts vegetable or chicken broth

4 Tablespoons tomato powder (or 1 small can of tomato paste)

1 heaping cup chopped garden tomatoes (or canned)

1/2 cup peanut butter

3 sweet potatoes (about 2.5 lb.), peeled & chopped into 1/4 – 1/2 inch pieces

1 – 3 habanero or serrano peppers, seeds removed, chopped fine

3 packed cups of kale leaves, chopped

To serve: cooked quinoa or rice, fresh cilantro leaves, chopped roasted peanuts

Instructions

In a soup pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, and ginger and sauté until the onion is very soft and translucent. Add the cumin, turmeric and cinnamon and cook until the spices smell fragrant.

Add the broth, tomato powder (or tomato paste), tomatoes, peanut butter and sweet potatoes. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until the sweet potatoes are nice and soft and starting to fall apart. Stir in the kale and cook until wilted.

Serve hot over rice or quinoa topped with cilantro and chopped peanuts.

Get this and more recipes at http://www.sumptuousspoonfuls.com.

Appendix: Madame Delphine LaLaurie

Madame LaLaurie was a real person who lived from 1787 to 1849, and who for much of that time lived in New Orleans. She was a slave owner, and remains notorious for her torture and serial killings of her own slaves. You can read more about her at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delphine_LaLaurie but be warned—it's a pretty grim tale.

The poem in Chapter 14 is my own creation, and is presented in the text in Creole French. A rough English translation is as follows:

In New Orleans, where shadows creep,
The LaLaurie Mansion's secrets seep.
A house reborn from fire's embrace,
Yet darkness lingers in this place.

Beneath the walls, the whispers moan,
Of agony and chilling groan.
A hundred souls in torment bled,
Their anguished cries, forever spread.

Madame's cruelty, a twisted art,

Ripping hope from every heart.
The ground below, it drinks the pain,
A wicked stain that will remain.

The mansion's burn, a wrathful pyre,
But evil danced within the fire.
Though bricks and beams were charred and torn,
The curse itself could not be scorned.

The air around, so thick with dread,
A phantom mist of crimson red.
Each step within, a haunting call,
From tortured spirits, doomed to crawl.

They wander halls, unseen, yet near,
In constant pain, forever here.
Their suffering, a poison's breath,
A silent wail that whispers death.

No peace will find this cursed plot,
For time itself has long forgot,
No cleansing touch of morning's light,
The LaLaurie gloom, an endless night.

Beware the mansion's eerie grip,
Where sanity begins to slip.
For those who dare to enter there,
Will ever find their souls' despair.

The original LaLaurie Mansion, on Royal Street in New Orleans' French Quarter, was burned in 1834, by a fire that started in the kitchen. It was rebuilt some years later, and the building variously served as a public school, an apartment building, and more. It was for a few years owned by the actor Nicolas Cage, and remains

privately owned today. The current owners do not open it to the public for tours. Still, you can imagine that—as the poem suggests—the misery and suffering of those under Madame LaLaurie's dominion has soaked into the soil itself. New Orleans has a strong tradition of haunted homes, and I can't help but think that the LaLaurie Mansion must be one of them.

Appendix: The Poems

In Chapter 9, the strange symbols Clara sees are various forms of ancient runes. They range from Elder Furthark to Younger, and from Staveless Hälsinge Furthark to a Short-Twig variant. She also sees Medieval and Anglo-Saxon runes, all some of the earliest alphabets of Western European tradition.

The words themselves are snippets from poems about time. The first one is from Poem About How Time Flies, by Joe Massocco (https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/time-4):

Years fly...friends die...
and you never know when you'll say your last goodbye.

The next is from Time Goes Too Fast, by Ebony Black (https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/time-47):

Time is something you can never gain,
It only passes and brings new pain.
A warm spring shower turns to freezing snow,
People enter your life, only to leave you and go.

Next is an excerpt from Poem Reflecting on Life's Fleeting Moments, by Ophelia E. Shakesphere (https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/in-the-blink-of-an-eye-2):

We're born, we learn,
and sometimes we weep.
No thought of time,
it quietly creeps.

Next is an original verse, and I'll encourage you to see if you can translate it back to English. It's tricky: while rune translators exist (like the one at https://valhyr.com/pages/rune-translator), these ancient runes are essentially phonetic, making translating a bit of an art. Sometimes, it helps to squint as you read the direct translation!

ᛋᛁ ᚴᛁᛏᛁ ᛁᚴᛋᚴᛁ ᛁᚴᛁᚱᚹ ᚦᛁ ᛋᚴᛏᚼᛁᚠᚾᛁᚱᛁ ᚴᚾᛋᚴᚴᛁ ᛁᚢᛁᚱᛁᚦᛁᚴ ᛁᛁᛏᛁᚴᚼ ᛏᚼᚢᚢᛁ ᛁᚼ ᛁᚱᚼᚢ.

The next one is from Time, by Allen Curnow (https://poemanalysis.com/allen-curnow/time/):

I am the nor-west air among the pines
I am the water-race and the rust on railway lines
I am the mileage recorded on the yellow signs.
I am dust, I am distance, I am lupins back of the beach.

Finally, the last excerpt in Chapter 9 is from Eternity by Robert Harrick (https://interestingliterature.com/2020/06/poems-about-eternity-infinity-immortality/):

And these mine eyes shall see
All times, how they
Are lost i' th' sea
Of vast eternity

All of these excerpts are comments on the inevitability and omnipresence of time and its passing. We are all participants in it, but we're something like leaves in a fast-moving river, carried along by time even when we're not paying attention to it. These excerpts remind us to pay attention to time, and to our fellows who travel with us in its stream.

A few more are from Chapter 15. Being far away from Aunt Ikwity, these are more about time itself, and its relentless, ambivalent march through our lives. The first is by Yolanda Marin (https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-march-of-time/):

Time is ever of the essence;
Try to weather every test,
That you may close your day in prayer,
My dear God, I've done my best.

The next excerpt is by Aniruddha Pathak (https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-march-of-time-2/):

Reminding of impending grim
Of chill again in endless chain;
All Nature's mortal it may seem;
Time marches on to chase its dream,
Seasons stick like a playing team.

And the final is from https://korrektivpress.com/2015/11/two-very-short-poems-about-the-relentless-march-of-time/:

Following September, orange October guided
November, bitter and more sobersided.

Afterword

Clara's story, as with many of my novels, came to me in a vivid dream. I woke from it suddenly, the characters and locations swimming in my mind, and furiously took notes on my iPhone before it all faded. Everything, in particular Clara's unique approach to magic, was right there, along with the incarnation of Time that my friends helped me name Aunt Ikwity.



If you'd like to hear the actual living voice of Clara herself, I invite you to listen to the audiobook of Clara Thorn, the witch that was found. Clara was strongly based on my very good friend Amy Strong, as I remember her as a young child (and when I myself was just an Elder Teen). Narrating a novel—especially one liberally littered with words and phrases in foreign languages—is incredibly difficult, which is why only the first novel has received that treatment so far.



Finally, throughout the Clara Thorn series, I encourage you to use tools like Google Translate to see English translations of the many spells and cantrips introduced in the text. It's a habit that will add more interest and flavor to the stories. . . especially if you continue to *Daniel Scratch: a story of witchkind,* the far-in-the-future continuation of the story of Underhill.

You may also appreciate *The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae,* which tells the story of how the Fae left a damaged Underhill to heal and eventually open itself to the witches of Clara's time.

And finally, if you're after something a little lighter to read, I'll recommend *Pubs & Pegasi,* a "cozy" fantasy story that's first in a series called *Tales from the Broken Claw*.

You can read more about all of these books on my website, DonJones.com, where you'll also find five free, full-length e-novels (my first trilogy and my first duology) and several short stories. And if you like music, *Pubs & Pegasi* has a full playlist of short, AI-created songs you can listen to, right on my website.

PORTRAIT GALLERY



Clara Thorn



Arlene Thorn



Theo Thorn



Alex Holdaway



Jessamine Holdaway



Ed Langsdale



Finlay Addington



The triplets: Harriett, Idalia, and Johanna



Elsie Greene



Wolfgang



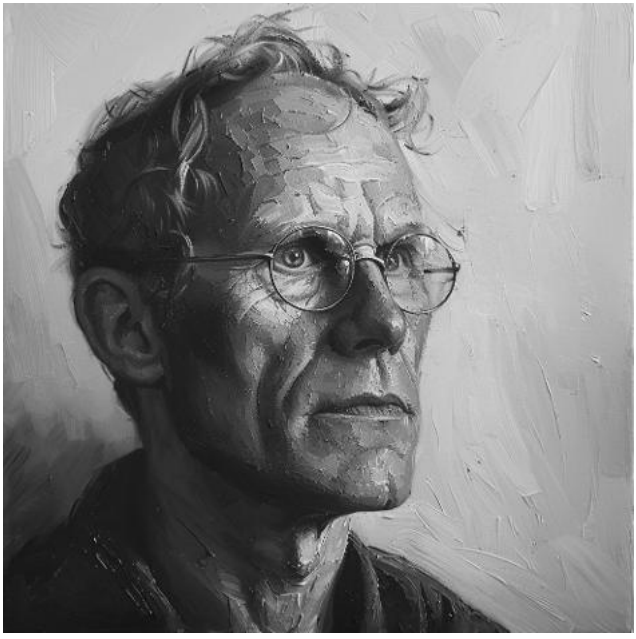
Latoya



Reuben



Sandy



Trevor



Aaron Witcher



Phoebe Witcher



Creativity (his first appearance)



Aunt Ikwity



Laura Deuxm

A PREVIEW OF PUBS & PEGASI

Meet Samantha Godsdotter-Sam, to her friends-a mercenary recently retired from Sasha's Vixens. Sam's seen her last battle, and she's ready for. . . something else. She's not sure what, but on a trip around Lake Evendiam, she rides into a small, oddly fortified village named North Pointe Common Towne. The proprietor of its pub, the Broken Claw, gives her a warm, friendly greeting-and then starts to act just a little odd.

Turns out Sam may have found her stopping point, in a place where she'll develop warm new friendships, be in a position to help travelers-whether they're treasure-seekers, folks simply passing through, or heroes on a quest-find their destinies. For North Pointe Common Towne has a special, subtle magic that runs on the mottos, "Come in peace, stay in peace, leave in peace" and especially, "Serve all."

Of course, she may have to help find a way to deal with the irritating, filthy, flying pests known as pegasi, and possibly help defend the village against a band of thugs and bandits looking for a new conquest. And maybe hunt an orc. But it'll all be worth it for, if nothing else, the delectable pastries.

Pubs & Pegasi is an unpretentious novel of minor magic, general geniality, pernicious pests, and delightful destinies, served with ale in a fancy glass stein, hearty stew from the inn next door, and the aforementioned delectable pastries.

Available wherever books are sold, or visit DonJones.com for more information.



Sam's horse trudged gamely along the wide, hard-packed dirt road. It had been a long day: she'd risen with the sun, packed her minimal camp into a saddlebag, and set out. Hersin, her horse, had gotten used to the routine, but after two sennights of riding, the poor old boy got pretty weary as the sun edged its way into the East.

She'd tried to plan this trip to include more stops in small towns and villages, where she could spend a night in a real bed and Hersin in a real stable. But the lands south of the Mistral Mountains were poorly mapped, especially around Great Lake Evendiam, where she was now. Human habitations came and went, often starting as safe and decently resourced stopping points for a band of travelers. They'd put down roots and form a settlement, which would grow into a village, and sometimes even into a small town. But between the harsh winters, the strange beasts that occasionally wandered down out of the Mistrals, and the near-continual raiding, many settlements and smaller villages simply didn't make it. As a result, mapmakers never attempted to document where lodging could be found, which meant she'd rough-camped for all but two nights of the past two-sennight trek.

It had, at least, been a pleasant ride for the past few nights. The road here curved along Evendiam, putting the cool lake breezes of Springtime on her right, and the thick, shady forest on her left. Further on her left rose the tall, cragged peaks of the Mistrals, their tips still gleaming white with the winter's accumulated snow.

She sighed. She'd heard that more villages managed to survive toward the east side of the—

Wait, what's this? she thought, sitting up a little straighter in her saddle.

A tall, sturdy looking stone wall crossed the road ahead, broken by wide wooden gates that were thrown wide open as if in welcome. As she and Hersin got closer, she realized that an even taller stone wall stretched off into the woods, and that the wall continued a dozen or so yards into the lake itself. Thin streams of smoke declared the settlement to be occupied.

Hersin clopped through the open gate, and Sam's eyes, schooled by years in mercenary companies, quickly noted key details. The gates weren't closed often: dirt and leaves had accumulated around their bases, and there were no telltale scrapes in the earth tracing their swing. But even taller stone turrets—perfect nests for archers defending the town supported the gates. Sam squinted as they passed, but she couldn't make out anyone atop the turrets. Built to be defended, she thought approvingly, but they haven't needed to for some time. Even better.

The trade road ran straight on, bracketed by buildings on both sides that blocked the view of the lake. Probably helps block the winter winds, too, she mused. The buildings themselves were made of heavy, sturdy gray stone, mortared tightly together. On her left was what looked like an outfitter's shop, followed by the unmistakable facade of the town gaol. She smiled at that. I wonder if they get that many criminals, here. More likely the gaol was a kind of alternate overnight lodging for travelers who'd had a little too much to drink.

The outfitter's shop and gaol formed a continuous building, and featured a deep overhang that sheltered a raised wooden walkway. She nodded, recognizing that the construction would help mitigate snowfall directly in front of the shops, and likely provide at least some access between buildings, even in the depth of winter when the snows here would drift deep.

On her right was a tall, wide building that extended a few feet into the lake. Boathouse, she thought, and nodded again as she passed a fishmonger's shop right next to it. The—

"Heyla, traveler." A raspy voice greeted her, and she swung her head back to the left. A grizzled, older looking woman in battered leathers stood on the decking in front of the gaol.

I'm one to talk about old, grizzled, and battered, Sam thought wryly. "Heyla," she answered, wincing a bit inside at the gravel in her own voice. "Are travelers welcome here?"

The other woman nodded. "So long as they come in peace, stay in peace, and leave in peace," she said easily, her eyes appraising Sam and her horse.

Constable, Sam thought. Or whatever stands for that here. "Peace is what I'm seeking, believe me." This woman was giving Sam an odd vibe. Suspicion, to be sure, but that was expected. This was. . . something else. Sam had learned to trust her instincts in these situations, and her instincts were telling her not to rile this stern-looking woman. Not that she intended to, but this constable looked easily riled. *Former merc, if I was a betting woman.* "Any chance of a pub or an inn?"

A perfunctory smile settled onto the constable's face, doing nothing to soften her countenance but helping play the role of polite host. "Of course. Keep on a bit, past the main gates, on your left. Pub's the Broken Claw, the inn next to it is the Weary Head. Staying the night, then?"

"I hope to."

"Stable's on the right, next to the smithy. Smith's boy, Darby, will likely run out as soon as he spies you." She tilted her head a bit, and Sam had the distinct impression that the constable was looking directly into her soul. "You can trust folk here," she said cooly before turning on one heel and stepping back into the gaol.

Good? Sam thought as she urged Hersin onward. *What a strange greeting.*

Past the fishmonger's was a long storehouse, and opposite that

was the town's main gate. Sam's eyes swept the view as she passed. These gates swung inward and also weren't closed much. They opened into a grassy field of sorts, which was surrounded by a long, continual building in roughly the shape of a lopsided rectangle. It's a fortress, she realized at once. Or once was. The back of the building was the thick outer wall of the village, and each section of the village rose two stories, some a bit more. With enough supplies, the people here could probably hole up for a long time—certainly through a rough winter—and the additional gates on the trade road would give them a formidable defensive advantage. Nestled tightly as it was between the foothills of the Mistral Mountains and Lake Evendiam, an attacking force wouldn't have much room to move and surrounding the village would be all but impossible. Sam picked out the small emplacements on the building's roofs where archers could perch, giving them excellent firing angles on the adjacent forest and trade road, while giving enemies very little to attack.

The unmistakable sounds of a smithy rang out on her right, and just as the constable had predicted, a young boy was dashing out from the adjacent stable. "Take your horse, ma'am?"

Sam nodded and slid from Hersin's back. "Do I need to worry about these?" she asked, slapping a saddlebag.

Darby's expression was one of affront. "Absolutely not, ma'am!" he insisted. "Safest place in the Mistrals. Constable Jen don't allow no crime, here. None at all. Ha-copper if you're just staying a while, full copper for overnight. Copper includes sweet hay, another copper gets hot mash and a rub-down, unless you'd rather see to it yourself."

Sam tossed the boy three coppers as he took Hersin's reins. "Take good care of the boy, he's earned it," she instructed.

"Yes ma'am!" Darby said with a grin as he pocketed the coins. "Pub's just there, the Broken Claw, if you're looking for refreshment."

"Very much so," Sam said with gratitude. She made a cursory attempt to brush some of the road dust from her leather leggings, promised herself a hot bath at the first opportunity, and stepped

across the street. The pub and inn were, like the rest of the structures here, essentially carved out of a single building, again with a wide overhang stretching over a wooden walkway. That walkway was deep enough to host a couple of benches and still provide ample room for pedestrians, and a couple more trestle tables sat just off the walkway in the waning sun. A carved wooden sign swinging from the overhang's edge proclaimed this to be the Broken Claw. An image of a stein sat atop the bar's name, and a crude dragon's foot, one claw broken off, arched beneath.

A bell on the door tinkled merrily as she pushed in.

Long habit forced her mind to scan the place almost without conscious thought. A long, worn wooden bar stretched across most of the back wall. A half-dozen empty trestle tables and benches were arranged between it and the door. Along the left wall, a rack of what were hopefully barrels of ale. Shelves behind the bar held bottles and jugs of what were likely more potent offerings. A large fireplace took up much of the the right wall, and a low fire crackled merrily within. A door behind the bar led to a back room. The—

"Greetings, traveler! Welcome to the Broken Claw. How may I serve?"

Sam's eyes snapped to the bartender, standing behind the center of the bar, offering her a warm smile. His hair was an unruly shock of white, and the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes suggested he'd spent a good amount of time wearing that smile. He was dressed in a simple homespun shirt under a heavy canvas apron. His eyes seemed to flick upwards for a moment before returning to hers.

"Ale, if you've a good one. And I wouldn't say no to something hearty for dinner."

"Please, sit," he said, his smile widening. Sam stepped forward and settled onto one of the wooden stools that lined the front side of the bar. "The ale's easy—I work with a brewer in the next town east of here, and he makes me something custom. We call it Dragon's Rest. Pale, cool, easy drinking, but still with a little character." He reached under the bar for a heavy glass stein, and then stepped to

the rack of barrels and began filling it. "Food, I don't do. Worst cook you've ever met. But Minnie, who owns the inn next door, makes the best stew that's ever lined your stomach. Happy to go grab you a bowl, if that suits. Copper for both."

"Suits me well," Sam said, her stomach growling eagerly. "It's been more than a sennight of road rations and what rabbits I could take, and if I never see a piece of hard biscuit again it'll be too soon."

The bartender chuckled as he sat the stein in front of her. Again, his eyes seemed to quickly dart up and behind her, and his smile faded a bit as he once again met her gaze. "I'll just grab that stew. Brown bread okay?"

"More than," she assured him.

He stepped through the door behind the bar, letting it swing gently shut behind him. She took a sip of the beer and her eyes widened in appreciation. It was good—light and somehow cool, but with a bit of sass to it. It reminded her of fresh spring water filtered through sunlight. She chuckled at herself. *Now I'm a poet.*

The bartender returned with a large bowl of steaming stew, topped by a generous hunk of rich-looking brown bread. Sam's mouth watered immediately at the savory aroma, and she had to force herself not to start pouring the stew directly from the bowl into her mouth. The bartender let her get a couple of bites in, and smiled as she nodded enthusiastically.

"I'm Nathaniel, by the way," he said, stepping back and picking up another stein and began polishing it with a clean white rag. "But please — call me Nate. Everyone does." Once again, his eyes flicked up and down. Sam started to wonder if it was just a tic of some kind.

"Samantha Godsdotter," she replied between bites. "Sam to anyone who knows me."

"So what brings you to our little village?" he asked easily, although his eyes once again darted up and back. "If you don't mind saying, of course."

"Spent the last thirty-odd years as a merc," she said easily. "Most recently with Sasha's Vixens," she added, jerking her chin toward the

scarlet badge on her left shoulder. "Our last engagement didn't go. . . well. That's how I got this." With her free hand, she ran an index finger along the twisted, puckered scar that ran from just above one eye into her hairline. "Goblin axe caught me when I should have been paying attention. Managed to jerk back enough to keep it from cleaving my skull in two, but still knocked me out cold. The others managed to drag me back, and the company medic did what she could to set me right. Once I healed up. . ." she shrugged as she took another delectable mouthful of stew. "Decided I'd had enough. Cashiered out and headed off."

"Came in from the west, then? I've heard of the goblin raids on the western kingdom."

Sam nodded. "Stormport brought in a half-dozen merc companies. Little buggers come pouring down out of the foothills of the Demonbane range, and it was our job to beat 'em back."

"And?" Nate asked curiously, his eyes once again looking past her. This time they stayed for a moment before returning.

She shrugged again. "Still going on, really. Goblin King thinks he wants some seaside real estate, and doesn't mind spending blood to try and get it. But they're primitive fighters. Axes and pikes, mostly. Vixens are mainly light horse and foot, but we were backed by Bard's Badgers, and they've got heavy siege equipment. Ballistas, catapults, that kind of thing. Mass of goblins comes roaring out of their caves, and Bard's boys would just hit them mid-mass. We'd pick off the edges. Lather, rinse, repeat."

"So you're off to find your retirement, then?" Flick.

"Seems so." She grinned. "Don't rightly know what that looks like, though. I've been swinging a sword since I could pick one up." She felt a cloud pass over her face, and when Nate's smile faded, she knew he'd seen it too. "You lose a lot of people, fighting that long."

He nodded slowly. "Happy to listen, if there's a tale to share."

Sam nodded slowly as she chewed a bit of bread. "Not much of a tale, I guess. But. . . I'd made a good friend, in the Vixens. Incredible swordswoman named Leeta, just a few years younger than me. She'd

been a merc her whole life, too. A real. . . a shieldmate. You know what that means?"

Nate nodded. "We get mercs through here now and then."

"She was my left hand, and I was her right. Fought back to back, side by side, for. . . gods, half a decade. Even Sasha said she'd never seen a pair so in tune with each other."

"I sense this doesn't end well," Nate said softly.

Sam set her spoon down gently, and shook her head. "No. Goblins managed to overwhelm us. Just for a moment. We'd already started to move out of their circle. But one pike. . ." She paused, looking down into the half-empty bowl. "It's why I got distracted. They almost got us both."

"I'm sorry." His tone suggested he meant it.

"Thanks." Sam picked up her spoon, but ate a bit more slowly now. "With her gone, I just didn't have it in me to keep fighting." I felt like I'd lost half of myself, she added to herself. "But I've been doing it for so long, I rightly don't know what's next. I've just been riding, hoping. . . I guess, hoping something would come up. Maybe some little town like this would need a constable."

Nate nodded silently, and slid another stein of beer up to her. Sam blinked. She hadn't realized she'd finished the first.

"So you'll stay the night?"

"Aye, by preference. Your constable said something about the inn next door?"

Nate nodded. "Minnie's place, yeah. She'll charge you a copper for an upstairs room, but she's empty right now. I'd ask for the bigger room on the ground floor. Half a copper extra, but it has its own bath. Boiler's right overhead, so you'll get the hottest, freshest water you could ask for. And she lays out an incredible breakfast, included."

Sam looked up and saw that Nate's gaze was now locked somewhere above her left shoulder. She turned, but saw nothing other than the pub's tables and door. An ornate clock of some kind hung

over the door. "You have somewhere to be?" she asked politely, turning back to Nate. "I can head—"

"No, no, it's fine," he assured her, his eyes snapping back to hers. "I don't get out much during the day, to be honest," he added with a lopsided grin. "Minnie and a couple of the others feed me. It takes a village."

Sam gave him a hard look as she spooned more stew into her mouth, but Nate's expression remained friendly and open.

"I'm actually open pretty late, most nights," he added unprompted. "Once folks start shutting their shops down, this is kind of the unofficial village gathering spot. Haven't had a bard by yet this season, but eventually one will wander through."

"So what's your story?" Sam asked softly, her eyes on Nate's. "Seems pretty far away from civilization."

He chuckled, but his eyes grew sad. "It is at that. I come from Elgindam."

Sam frowned. "Far East, isn't it?"

Nate nodded. "It's a journey, yeah. Grew up there, married my sweetheart. Never had kids, but we got. . . well, we grew old together. All we wanted, really." Sam's heart clenched for what she knew must be coming. "Lost her to the ague." Nate's voice had fallen to something just above a whisper. "Couldn't rattle around in our house anymore. It was. . . ours, you know?" He shook himself, and picked up another stein to polish. "So I joined a caravan headed. . . anywhere." His expression grew thoughtful. "Looking for someplace new to fit in, I guess."

"Bit like me," Sam agreed. "And you came here?"

"Funny story," Nate said thoughtfully, his gaze tracking more slowly up and back this time. He seemed to sink into his thoughts, his tone growing a bit distracted. "Caravan stopped here for the night. A lot do, in the season. Constable lets them line up their wagons on the trade road between the gates. Makes 'em feel a little safer. Came in here, obviously. Tough old lady named Greta ran the place, then. You remind me a bit of her," he said, then blushed as he

realized how that sounded. "Begging your pardon, of course, you're not—"

"Oh, I'm old," Sam assured him with a smile. "Tough, maybe. Battered, for certain."

Nate gave her a small smile. "Fair."

"I assume this Greta was looking to move on, then?"

Nate nodded very slowly, his eyes once again rising to look behind her, and then falling back to the stein he was polishing. "After a fashion, yeah. We got to talking, she and I, while the caravan master was wheeling and dealing with the locals. She suggested I spend a night here, get a feel for the place. Promised she'd have someone ride me out to the caravan if they left without me. Asked that I come back the next day and talk to her." He shrugged and placed the stein back under the bar, and tossed the rag over one shoulder. "So I did. Next morning, she told me she was. . . well, ready to move on. Like you said. But the village needs a pub, she said, and if I was looking for something new, something far from my old life, this was new and about as far as I could go." He paused, lost in his own thoughts for a moment. "She stayed for a couple of sennights, helped me get a feel for the place. Introduced me around, you know."

"You have a place here, then?" Sam's attention was locked on the bartender now, the last few spoonfuls of stew rapidly cooling in her bowl.

He shook himself and refocused on her. "Upstairs. All the shops here have living upstairs. 'Cept the village witch, I guess. I mean, she does have a bit of a shop downstairs, more of a parlor, really. You know, some tourists—"

"You have a village witch?" Sam said carefully. Magic wasn't always widely accepted in this part of the world—one of the many bigotries she'd observed in these smaller, more isolated communities over the years.

"Oh, absolutely," Nate said, nodding emphatically. "Leota's her name. She's nice. She. . . her magic is why we don't close the gates, much. Seems to keep the bigger critters out. We don't even really get

bandits through here. Those that do seem to move on pretty quickly."

"Don't know that I'd cross that constable of yours, either."

"Hah! No, Jen's pretty formidable. Say, you're spending the night?" Nate sounded distracted again.

"We covered that. Copper and a half, ground floor room, hot bath. Good breakfast."

"Right, right." He looked at the bar, and Sam followed his gaze, realizing that she'd somehow emptied the second stein. "Another ale?"

"I think," Sam said slowly, wondering where the time had gone, "I might turn in. Just next door, right?"

"I'll walk you over."

Nate seemed to regain his focus as he led Sam next door. The Inn's entry was cozy, with a fireplace burning happily along the left wall. Sam realized that it probably shared a chimney with the fireplace in the pub, on the opposite side of the wall. Two clean, well-polished trestle tables filled much of the room, and the rich, earthy smell of stew filled the air. The proprietress, Minnie, stood behind a low counter, humming to herself as she kneaded a large sphere of brown dough. She was a short, round woman with black hair now going to gray, tied up in a neat bun. She looked up as Sam and Nate stepped in, brushed her hands on a towel that was tucked into her waistband, and smiled. "Room for the night then, dear?"



"Oh, merciful gods," Sam breathed as she eased herself out of the heavy copper tub. She's stayed in the bath until the water had become tepid, seriously considering emptying it and starting again before finally deciding she was ready to sleep.

The room was, as Nate had promised, extremely comfortable. The sheets were crisp, clean linen, and the mattress was stuffed with feathers rather than hay. Aside from the low bed and the enormous

bath, the room offered a small vanity, a bowl for washing, and a polished piece of steel for a mirror. A tiny woodstove took the edge off the evening chill.

Minnie had pointed out the privy down the hall, told her that breakfast was served promptly at a candlemark after sunup, and wished her a pleasant night. She'd had Darby bring her saddlebags, along with assurances that Hersin was well-fed and being well cared-for.

Sam slipped into fresh underclothes, and spent a candlemark or so cleaning and polishing her riding leathers. She laid them out on the cool stone floor, slid under the sheets, and, in the way only seasoned mercenaries and civil servants could manage, was asleep the moment her head hit the soft, fluffy pillow.



Sam rarely dreamed, or at least rarely remembered doing so, but when she did, her dreams were intense.

She was in an inn or pub of some sorts, perhaps not unlike the Broken Claw. But the Broken Claw had been empty, whereas this place was full of people. They were smiling, talking, drinking, and eating. A minstrel or bard sat in one corner, strumming a merry tune and encouraging the patrons to sing along. Sam found herself grinning so widely her cheeks ached.

And there was. . . something else there. A presence, of some kind, unseen and only vaguely perceived. To Sam, it felt like a warm cloak, fitting snugly around her. She felt safe, protected. . . complete. A warmth filled her chest, a sharp contrast to the chilly void she realized had been there since. . . Leeta. But in this dream, even the memory of Leeta no longer made Sam sad. In this vision, life was the here-and-now, and the past was, however regrettably, the past. The future was tomorrow, something to be faced when it arrived, and joy was being held in the company of friends.

Sam looked down and was surprised to see a half dozen steins,

full of cool, golden ale, clutched in her hands. She shook herself and set them down on the table in front of her, to the cheerful appreciation of the people seated there. The minstrel struck up a new song, and the entire place roared with delight as they recognized a bawdy favorite.

Some dreams come and go, and when they're unpleasant ones you're grateful for a fleeting experience. But when they're pleasant, you want to sink into them, to live in their story for as long as you can. Still, they're often gone too quickly, leaving you feeling a bit regretful as your sleepy mind clutches at the dream's last remnants.

This dream lasted all night, and Sam smiled gently as she snuggled deeper under the crisp, clean-smelling sheets.



Sam stretched and yawned, and then sat up with a start.

Bed. Inn.

The smell of cooking bacon wafted into her nostrils.

Right, the inn. I'm safe.

She'd slept more deeply than she'd have thought possible in a strange new place. When rough camping on the road, she'd had to sleep practically with one eye open, always alert for creatures who'd enjoy making a meal of her, for bandits, and for the dozens of other dangers that awaited an unwary solo traveler.

But here. . . she'd slept. Soundly and completely.

I dreamed, she thought as the haze of sleep fell from her and the once-vivid dream began to fuzz into a half-remembered impression.

Sunlight trickled in through the room's tiny window, still tinted orange as the sun climbed its way out of the western horizon.

Good gods, I've gone soft, she thought wryly. *I've actually slept in.* She decided to give herself a break, as it was the first night she'd spent in a real bed in nearly a fortnight, and dispensed with further self-scolding. The ale and rich stew had certainly helped her feel

comfortable, and even as she stretched one final time and swung her feet to the floor, she realized she felt utterly refreshed.

She'd forgotten what that feeling even was.

She splashed cool water on her face, dressed quickly, and packed her saddlebags.

"Morning, love," Minnie greeted her from behind the counter as Sam stepped into the inn's common room. "Just you and me this morning, unless Nate pops in, so you can have your druthers. I've got fresh eggs, a rasher of bacon, and some lovely bread that's fresh from the oven. Or if you fancy cereals, I've got two kinds, and some fresh milk from Cole's cow."

"Eggs and bread would be magical," Sam said gratefully, easing herself onto a bench.

"No bacon?"

"Fine, twist my arm."

"Hah! You'd not catch me so bold."

"Any fresh water?"

"Right from the lake," Minnie said proudly as she began assembling the meal. "Whoever built this pile of rocks had the presence of mind to run a pipe all 'round it and right into the lake. Every shop and home has a hand pump connected. Something even filters the silt out before it gets to us—I say the witch's magic, but if you ask her about it she just gives you a kind of sly smile and changes the subject. Here you are. Butter? I've a bit left, expecting a wagon in today. But I've also winter preserves, if you prefer apple jam."

"Oh, the jam. And thank you."

"It's my pleasure, dear. Here you are." Minnie came from around the counter and slid a plate of food in front of Sam. The smell hit Sam's nose and her stomach growled happily in anticipation, as if it hadn't just been full of warm, hearty stew from the night before. Minnie went back behind the counter and returned a moment later with a clean, clear glass and a pitcher of the coolest, freshest water Sam had ever tasted.

Sam tapped the glass. "Not used to seeing actual glass in places this size. No offense," she added quickly. "Nate has real steins, too."

"We're a bit fancy all this way out," Minnie said with a laugh. "Honestly, rowdier towns, I'd stick with pewter and wood, for certain. But here. . . we don't actually have a lot of breakage. And our smith, Warren, fancies himself a bit of a glazier and glassblower. Sort of a hobby for him, when there's no call for metalwork. This is one of his new glasses he made over the winter, figured out a way to mold them so they come out real consistent."

"You seem pretty self-sufficient, here."

"Oh, have to be out here, love, especially in the winters. We all pitch in to fill the storehouses—we've two, you know, one's right behind the inn—and everyone crams their closets and sitting rooms to the ceilings before the first big snows." She leaned over the counter and called, "Trevor! Mind you get that loaf out before it burns!" She turned back to Sam, chuckling. "He's a delight, but at that age so easily distracted."

"Your son?"

Minnie nodded happily. "Aye, just sixteen this past moon."

"You and your. . . husband own the place, then?"

Minnie smiled gently. "No, my Tam passed ten years back, shortly after we moved here. This place had been closed up for a while, and he'd thought to reopen it when we passed through. We got all that done, but he took ill that first winter." She shook her head sadly, but her expression was still bright. "But the folk here took such good care of Trevor and me, we decided to stay on." She tilted her head a bit.

"You don't miss him?" Sam asked quietly.

"Of course I miss him love," Minnie said gently. "But time heals all, as they say. The hurt's not so deep, this long past. And we had such good years together."

Sam ate a few bites in a contemplative silence.

"You'll be moving on today, then?" Minnie asked.

"I should," Sam sighed, scooping up another piece of egg. "I don't

know. Your prices are certainly reasonable, you don't seem all that busy, and the room was perfect. I could see myself staying another night, perhaps. I've been rough camping, and I'm honestly getting too old to be sleeping on roots and rocks."

"We'll start seeing more trade coming through now that the snows are well-past. You're heading east?" Sam nodded as she bit off a piece of bread, briefly closing her eyes in appreciation of the sweet apple jam. "It'll be easier going, then. East side of the lake has a settlement every six or eight candlemarks or so. Ten at the most. Bit safer, as you're further and further from the Mistrals as you go."

"You're all right up against them," Sam pointed out. The mountains were well-known for a variety of dangers, including terrifying bands of orcs.

"Ah, but we've got this fine walled village to protect us," Minnie said, a twinkle in her eyes.

"And a village witch."

Minnie nodded firmly. "Leota's a blessing on us all. She found a warm welcome here, I can assure you but. . . well. Not my tale to tell. But we're all very glad she's with us."

Huh. Sam had always been a sucker for a good story, and it was seeming like this village had more than a few to offer.

"—before you go?"

Sam blinked as she realized she'd missed the first part of Minnie's question. "Sorry. Gathering wool. Occupational hazard of the elderly. What was that?"

"Just asking if you planned to stop in the pub and see Nate before you go."

Sam considered it. "Would he be open this early?"

Minnie considered it. "I think you'll find he's there this morning, at least. I'm fair sure I heard him knocking about when I put the last loaf in."

"Then I suppose I will. Who knows, maybe he can tip me off the fence and into staying another night."

"We'd love to have you, dear," Minnie assured her with a wide smile.



"Ah, I was hoping you'd stop in," Nate said with a smile as the front door tinkled and closed behind Sam. "Heading out today, then?" His eyes once again flicked upward, directly over Sam's head.

"I'm leaning toward no, honestly," Sam said, stepping up to the bar and settling onto a stool.

"Oh?" Flick.

"Well, it's not like I have anywhere to be. And to be blunt, I think this is the first time in a long time I've risen without a crick in my back. Or neck. Or both."

Nate focused on the stein he was slowly polishing. "So you slept well?"

"Excellent. Truthfully, more than excellent. Like a rock. It's been ages since I've slept this late. And Minnie's breakfast was wonderful, just as you promised."

"Good, good." He polished a bit harder, and Sam wondered what the stein had done to deserve such attention. "Any. . . dreams?"

Sam's shoulders tensed and her eyes narrowed. "Pardon me?"

"None. . . I mean, just asking. I didn't mean to pry. It's just sometimes, you know, in a new place, or after a good meal, sometimes I—
"

"I did dream, actually," Sam said evenly, her eyes locked on Nate.

He stopped polishing and looked up. "And?"

"I. . ." Sam stopped and considered. Last night's dream was hazier now, in the way that dreams are under the bright light of morning. But the feeling remained with her. The sound of song and laughter. The feel of the full steins in her hands. She held her hands up now, turning them in front of her as if they were new. Rough, calloused, and scarred, they'd served her well these many years. They'd certainly gripped more than their share of sword hilts, horse

reins, and shield straps. Never a half dozen heavy steins. "It's hard to describe."

She looked back up at Nate, and realized he was staring firmly at some point above her head. She turned slowly, but still couldn't see anything of interest other than the clock above the—"That's an odd clock," she said slowly.

"It's not a clock," Nate said quietly.

Sam turned back to him, and he met her gaze with a tired smile. "Hang on a moment." He walked to the pub's door, threw the bolt, and drew a curtain over the large, thick-glazed window that overlooked the front walk. "Never any customers this early anyhow," he said easily as he resumed his place behind the bar.

"What's this about?" Sam asked, an odd feeling running up and down her spine.

"When old Greta told me this, she beat around the bush for half a 'mark," Nate said, his face again relaxing into a self-effacing, lopsided grin. "But you seem like a pretty straightforward woman. And you don't seem to have any. . . prejudices around magic."

"On the contrary, I'm a huge fan. Sasha had two combat wizards in the company, and they saved our asses more times than I can count."

"Hmm. You might go. . . easy with that information, when you meet Leota. Some history there, I think."

"So what's the bush we're not beating around?"

Nate laughed, although it sounded a bit nervous. "Point. So look, the thing of it is, this pub is magic. The whole village, really."

Sam nodded slowly. "You'd said as much. Your witch's magic—" she stopped as Nate shook his head.

"It's not Leota I'm talking about. I mean the pub itself. Every building here. Every shop, every home—they all have. . . something. Look, see the thing over the door?" Once again, his eyes drifted upwards.

Sam turned and inspected the thing more closely. It was round, like a clock, but it didn't have hands. Instead, its face was divided

into four segments by two lines that cut diagonally over the surface. Each pie-shaped segment was painted a different, pale color—light pink in the upper section, a faded green on the right, pale blue on the bottom, and a barely visible yellow on the left. A tarnished, pitted steel ball was mounted in the exact center. "What is it?"

"Part of the pub's magic," he replied softly. "When travelers come in, I greet them. 'Welcome, traveler, to the Broken Claw. How many I serve?'"

"That's what you said to me." She turned back to Nate.

"I know. But. . . usually what happens is the ball there, the one in the middle, it drifts one direction or another. And then I get a. . . feeling. A sense."

"A sense."

"Of where that traveler's destiny lies. Sometime's it's a direction. 'You should head north into the Mistrals,' maybe. Or. . . this is hard to explain. But sometimes I'll just know things. Know that orcs were sighted on such-and-such a peak, or that bandits are blocking the road ahead, or that some princess I've never heard of is being held in a tower I've never seen, off to the east and into the foothills." His gaze drifted back up, and Sam thought he looked. . . sad? "If the ball goes into the top section, it's usually some kind of heroic quest. We get a lot of those. The bottom means someone's on something more personal. Revenge, rescue, that kind of thing. The left is treasure-seekers. Don't get so many of those. The right is for people who already know where they're headed, but might need some help. Or a warning." He shrugged. "It sounds crazy, I know."

"Rest assured, I've seen crazier."

"You seem to be taking it well."

"So then what," Sam asked very carefully, "did you sense when I came in?"

"That's just it," Nate sighed. "The ball didn't move."

"Which means?"

He sighed again more heavily. "It's what happened when I walked in. It means. . . the pub is telling me you're to be the

bartender here, now. I guess maybe I've put it off longer than I should have, but. . . it's time for me to see new things. To move on. And your destiny is to stay here."

"You can't possibly think—" Sam started with some heat.

"Oh, you can leave if you want to," Nate assured her, setting the stein on the bar and laying his rag across a shoulder. "And if you do, I'll stay. For a while, at least. Probably not long. Someone else will come along eventually, now that it's my time to go."

"And you're just going to. . . leave. Over a little ball."

He smiled, and once again Sam thought he looked ineffably sad. "I've learned to trust that thing. Trust what the pub tells me."

"And what's it telling you about. . . you?"

Nate shrugged. "It isn't, really. I just know that if you're here, then it's time for me to. . . you know. Move on." He coughed again.

Sam stared at the bartender for a long moment. "What is this place? Who built it?"

"We don't know. But we think. . . we think it was built to serve travelers. To be a safe place. Someplace they could re-equip. Rest up. Find out where to go next, what to do next. The pub senses their destiny, their direction."

Something clicked in Sam's mind. "And the inn sends dreams?"

Nate nodded. "Especially after you've been in the pub, we've noticed. They're linked. You dreamed about staying, didn't you?"

Sam nodded slowly. "I think so. Yes. And. . . something else." Warmth. Protection. Completion.

"Everyone who stays feels that. Cole, he runs the grocery and the little farm just outside the wall, he and his wife are the newest. They came in a beat-up old wagon behind two worn-out old horses, with their five children. Stayed one night in the inn and decided to stay. The space they took over hadn't been occupied for years, but by the end of the season they'd harvested enough vegetables to make the winter a lot more pleasant for all of us. Ask Cole about it. He'll tell you it all came to him in a dream that first night. His wife, Caitlin, she had it too. They didn't even talk about it the

next morning, they just asked if there were any open places in the village."

"And does every shop. . ."

"They all have some gift or another. Tyran, he runs the outfitter's you passed on the way in, he always has almost everything you need, even if it's not exactly what you want. And everything always fits perfectly, always works perfectly. Cole's fields produce more vegetables than should honestly be possible, even out of season. And none of it ever spoils."

Sam met Nate's gaze for another long moment. "You're not joking."

"No."

"And the pub thinks I'm its new bartender."

"It's offering. You've got. . . whatever it looks for, I guess."

"Huh."

"You're thinking about it?" Nate sounded slightly surprised. He quickly turned his head to one side and coughed again, more forcefully this time. "Excuse me, bit of a cold."

Sam frowned. Nate's coughs hadn't been the productive cough of someone with a cold. It had been the wet, thick cough of someone with a problem. "How long have you had that cough?"

"A sennight. A bit longer. Galhani, she's our herbalist, she's been making me a tea. It's been helping a lot. Truly," he added when Sam's frown didn't relax.

Sam considered. She had been looking for a place to settle, for at least a while. With her background, looking for someplace in need of a constable was pretty obvious, but. . . why not a bartender? "I assume 'moving on' means someplace a little warmer? It'd help with that cough."

Nate smiled. "Might be, might be."

"How long have you been here?"

"Twelve years this moon, in fact."

"And. . . how much would you be asking for this place?"

Nate's brow wrinkled in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if I buy this place from you, how—"

"No, no," Nate interrupted, shaking his head firmly. "That isn't how it works. We don't own these places, none of us. They just. . . welcome us in. We play a role. We support each other, we help what travelers we can. You're not buying the place."

Sam stared at him for yet another long moment. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

Nate nodded. "I am. I didn't pay Greta for it, and you're not paying me for it. It's not mine to sell." He paused and let her consider it. "Are you interested?"

"I—you know, I don't have anything else going on," Sam realized. The sound of laughter and bawdy tavern songs echoed in her ears. "So how does this work? I've literally never worked in a pub before, you know."

Nate laughed, and this time it was a full, hearty, genuine laugh. "I hadn't either. Fortunately, the pub itself does most of the work. But I'll stay on for a few sennights to get you settled in. Give me time to. . . gather myself. You know, get ready. I'll introduce you to the purveyors who supply me what we don't produce ourselves. Most of them should be in over the next sennight or so."

"Do you have a horse?" Sam asked.

"Nope."

"Do you want one?"

"Are you offering?"

Sam shrugged. "If I'm to become a bartender and you're to move on to new things, seems I'm less in need of a horse at the same time you find yourself in need of one."

Nate grinned. "So, a horse for the pub?"

"I suppose so," Sam said, matching his grin.

He laughed again. "We can call it a bargain." The two shook hands across the bar, and. . . something coursed down Sam's spine. Something bright and happy, tingling and sharp. Welcome, it seemed to say. Stay.

"So how do we begin?"

"Well, first of all, I'm going to move my things downstairs and into the inn. If you're doing this, the pub will want you sleeping here from now on. And then I should walk you around and introduce you to everyone. We should have a trade wagon in today, but we're not expecting any travelers."

"How could you possibly know?" Sam asked.

Nate shrugged. "The pub knows."

"Fascinating." She considered. "And how long am I obligated to stay?"

"You're not," he assured her. "But the pub will know when you're getting. . . restless. Ready to go. It'll find someone new."

"Fascinating," she repeated.

"Why don't you get your things from Minnie's and bring them in? I honestly don't have much—I'll get Trevor to help me pack it up later today. But everyone should be up and about by now, and you can meet your new neighbors."

Sam stood. "Okay," she said softly. Then, more firmly, "Okay. Yeah. I'm a bartender now. This is happening." She looked up at Nate and smiled. "Okay. By the way. . ."

"Yeah?"

"What's this place called?"

Nate grinned. "Samantha Godsdotter, welcome to North Pointe Common Towne."

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 and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

Connect, get free novels and short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by visiting Don's author website at DonJones.com.