

Master of the Tower

A STORY OF WITCHKIND

AUTHOR'S PREFERRED EDITION

BOOK TWO

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For Shandra...
Thank you.

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Prologue

No, it wasn't what most people would consider a wonderful life.

I suppose there were bright moments, yes. I mostly enjoyed the solitude, although I realize not everyone would.

But it's not like I had a choice. The past isn't something you can just walk away from.

You can, however, choose where you're going.

Yes, I suppose that's as good a place as any to pick up the tale.

Foraging

You know what became the most monotonous about the Tower? The thing that, after five years of learning and a year of mourning, finally drove me out into the world?

The food.

Don't get me wrong, the Tower's little shadow-lizard servants, the *driežai*, did their best. With access to a huge magically sustained garden on one of the Tower's many basement levels, they always had access to a variety of fresh produce. Plus there were the still chambers where meats and other foodstuffs were kept fresh—after appearing magically from some unknown source, of course. Yes, with that abundant stock, the *driežai* could seemingly prepare any dish you could ask for.

I just didn't know *what* to ask for.

Abbygail, the brownie leader in my old family home, had been forced to work with a much more limited pantry after Mother had been taken, and at that age, I doubt I'd have appreciated gourmet cooking, even if it had been accessible to us. Those limitations had shaped my culinary world, giving me a

fairly stunted food vocabulary and quite a narrow menu of things to ask for: stews, soups, casseroles, the occasional roast, and lots of steamed vegetables. I ate healthily enough, I imagine, but there sure wasn't much variety.

The Tower's libraries were also oddly devoid of any books on food, cookery, or anything even closely related.

There had been a brief period—when I was maybe sixteen or so—when I'd decided to experiment, making up dishes by poking around the garden and naming various ingredients for the *driežai* to combine into meals. The results had been . . . interesting, if not spectacularly successful. One especially disastrous effort involving spiced *bulvių šaknis*, pork shoulder, and unexpectedly sweet *citrinžolė* convinced me to go back to asking for more familiar things.

It just got *boring*.

And so I was out that day in one of my favorite food cities, Nworlins. The seaside town stood proudly astride a hilly region at the southeastern tip of the continent, giving it access to beautiful warm-water seafood, starchy root vegetables, sweet, silky grains, and some of the most succulent fruits in the world. Today, I knew, would be difficult, so I wanted to start it on a positive note.

I browsed the town's central market, strolling slowly among the rows and rows of stalls that offered everything from fully cooked meals to raw bagged ingredients. Some of these I could simply gather from the Tower's magic-powered gardens deep in its lower levels, but many of the items could be found *only* here. And even the more familiar ingredients here seemed fresher—more alive.

I'd spent plenty of time in my Tower feeling less than alive. The smells, textures, and tastes of Nworlins—in a way, they kept me living.

It was early morning, with the sun still climbing lazily from

its slumber beneath the sea, its first orange-yellow rays just beginning to spill over the low buildings of Nworlins' docks. A human merchant called out, successfully attracting my attention to the neatly arrayed collection of fish he'd brought in just an hour before. Chips of ice surrounded the produce, and my eyes swept over the runes carved into the wooden trays displaying the day's catch. I grinned at the precision and detail of these constructs—they'd been carved by hand, lovingly and carefully. Whatever man or woman of witchkind had made them was likely a partner in the fishing business, and they'd taken pains to ensure these trays would keep the ice cold and the seafood fresh. These constructs would need re-empowering at least weekly, I guessed, and the human seller was oblivious to it all. He likely thought the shady spot he'd chosen, or some other incidental cause, explained the longevity of his produce.

This was by design, of course. Witchkind's contributions to human successes were always subtle, always critical, and always unrecognized by their beneficiaries. Humans hated the idea of magic, which is why we took such pains to make sure humans never knew witchkind existed. One of the previous adherents, Plaktukas, produced a complex bit of magic that Ended the relationship between humans and witchkind. We called it the Veil. Humans forgot we existed, and the Veil served to cover the small clues or careless displays of magic that might have raised humans' awareness of us. The humans' Hunts for us stopped overnight, and the senseless persecution and killing of witchkind ended with them. That had been centuries ago, and the Veil had hidden us ever since.

"Freshest sea bass," the man said as I approached and ran my fingers gently over the scaly sides of a large black-and-silver specimen. "*Jūros ešeriai*, one of the oldest species in the world!" he added proudly.

My eyebrows twitched. "I don't know that I've ever heard

that name for it,” I said casually. I had, of course: the True Language of witchkind was our language of history and magic; I’d just never heard its words come from a human’s lips.

“Ah, my business partner drilled it into me. Says it’s important that we consider the history of the fish—what it’s meant to everyone for so many centuries. First fish ever cultivated in the world, he says. First one that fed people along this stretch of coast.”

I nodded. “I’ve heard as much from . . . friends.” *Books*, I meant, but saying it would feel like admitting I had more books than friends. Being locked in a tower during your formative years does that.

“Then can I interest you—” he began, but my attention was suddenly stolen by a ringing sound in my ears and an itching at the back of my neck.

A Summons.

My mood darkened as the magic swept over me. I could ignore it, of course. Almost any of witchkind could empower the rune that begged for an audience with the adherent of the Sixth Axis, but they couldn’t *compel* my cooperation. Still, I’d gotten into the habit of considering these requests. I let the subtle breeze of the magic gently caress me, drawing in information of the caster’s intent.

I frowned and stepped away from the display of seafood, overcome by the Summons. It was a simple one, empowered by an individual acting on their own. It carried some sense of . . . not *urgency* exactly, but . . . resignation? I felt a true need in the call, but it wasn’t dire.

When I first ascended to my full power as an adherent, I answered every Summons that had come my way. I resolved property disputes, political arguments, and more. It had become tiring, especially once I realized how much of witchkind was willing to take the easy way out—the lazy way—

and simply ask an Axis to make their decisions for them. As an adherent, that meant *I* decided. They would present their case, I would ask a few questions, and I'd impose Judgment. My Axis enforced my decision, Ending the dispute in a way that no other force in the world could. My petitioners didn't have to negotiate, try to see each other's perspective, or do anything else.

It got boring and more than mildly frustrating.

So not long ago, perhaps a year or so, I stopped answering most Summons. I wanted to deal with the *big* ones, the ones that *only* an adherent of the Sixth Axis could handle. Decisions that I'd need to weigh with great deliberation to change the world for the better.

What I was feeling now wasn't one of those Summons, but it was the other type I'd promised myself to always answer.

I pulled the Axis around me, invoking its Form of Travel. The humans bustling around me in the market would imagine that I'd slipped away through the crowd. The merchant I'd approached might even blink a few times and crane his head to pick me out of the crowd. But he wouldn't. That was the power of the Veil. Confronted with actual magic, humans would nearly always find more reasonable explanation.

"I hope you don't mind," the man said, his voice rough. "I didn't know what else to do, who else to call."

The Axis followed the Summons like a trail, and I appeared outside a small wooden cottage deep in the Great Northern Wood. I'd come here only once before, answering a Summons similar to this one. No humans lived in the Wood; the Wood-witches who called this vast forest home saw to that. They were a quiet, firm lot, living largely solitary lives, as far as I knew. The Wood contained no villages, no towns, not even a small hamlet.

The few inhabitants had spread themselves out, building tiny cottages like this one and disturbing as little of the surrounding Wood as possible. They knew, as I did, that the Wood was special. Some said the Wood was where witchkind had originated—where magic had first come into the world.

I'd never ventured into the Wood—nobody did—without a Summons or an invitation from the Woodwitches who lived there.

It was night in the Wood, and I stepped into the cottage, following a low, flickering fire. The fire was real, not fueled by magic, which struck me as odd—until I saw the man lying in his bed.

"It's fine," I assured him quickly. "But . . ." My voice trailed off. The man before me was clearly of middle age for witchkind. Substantially younger than—

"I'm eighty," he said gruffly.

Ancient for a human but still young for one of us. "Nonetheless, I—"

"Can you see it in me? Feel it?" I heard the resignation in his voice, the defeat that had colored his Summons.

I couldn't see anything amiss about him, but my Axis could certainly did. Like invisible smoke snaking out of me, it sniffed hesitantly about the man, dipping toward him and then recoiling suddenly, as if blighted by a foul odor or sharp taste about him. The man was sick with something.

"I could find an adherent of Sea," I offered. They and the adherents of Earth were renowned for their healing prowess.

But he shook his head. "Won't do. I've had Meilene come to me already, and she's as strong with Sea as any adherent I've met."

Then he had not met many adherents, I guessed. "But—"

"It's magic, this sickness—" He grimaced as a wave of pain seemed to stab into him, and gasped slightly as it subsided.

“Not unheard of in these Woods. Incurable, it’s sapped my strength. If Jonotan from down the way wasn’t stopping by to feed me, I’d already have wasted away.” His eyes, clear and intelligent, bored into mine. “I just want to end it.”

I could sense my Axis drawing back from the man, satisfied that his End was already near. Would have happened days ago, but for his friends’ nurturing.

This was the kind of Summons I swore I’d never refuse. People who were dying, who were brushing up against their own Endings but for some reason or another couldn’t go further. They suffered, existing in a way they’d never accept as a true life, and were sensible and sane enough to ask for help.

My heart tightened, and as it always did, Mother’s face flickered in my mind.

I kneeled beside the man’s bed. “*Liepsna tebūna tavo draugas, jūra švelniai sūpuoja, mėnuliai apšviečia tavo kelią, kol vējas tave išlaisvins,*” I whispered, offering him a benediction in the True Language. *May the Flame be your friend, may the Sea rock you gently, and may the moons light your way until the Wind sets you free.*

“My name is Jarrod,” he whispered. A modern name not of the True Language. A name much like my own.

I nodded solemnly. “I’ll remember.” And then in my mind, I held the rune for *galas*, the most fundamental and simple expression of the Sixth Axis’s power:



The Axis slid forward gently, whirling slowly about the man, giving him his End.

I stood for a long moment as his chest settled. Still. I always felt awkward standing beside someone who'd just been alive seconds ago. But caring for them after their End wasn't my lot.

I found myself no longer interested in breakfast and bade the Axis to return me home.

Mother would have been on my mind regardless today, but my encounter with Jarrod had brought forth all that roiling emotion.

I'd taken myself to the little beach at the foot of my island rather than to the Tower itself. As an apprentice adherent, I'd run the narrow path between Tower and ocean over and over for exercise, but now I walked it slowly. The hard-packed soil crunched beneath my boots, the tall, rocky spires that covered the island soaring above me, looking as hard and as sharp as my thoughts.

My father was unkind to Mother and me, to put it gently. My father had passed when I was quite young, after one of his fits of physical rage. He hated his marriage, hated the family he'd married into, and resented the loss of his clan. He turned it all on us, and though only nine years old, I'd had enough. Mother went mad in the head after I ended him. They hauled her off to Witchhold, the prison-asylum of our people. I'd been informed that she'd died there, raving until the end.

They lied.

Mother had, in fact, been taken *from* Witchhold and put to a horrifying use. She was made into a tool for doing harm, and I'd remained innocently oblivious for years.

As an apprentice in the Tower, I could only project my

spirit beyond the Tower; my physical body was incapable of leaving the little island on which the Tower sat. That was the original purpose of the Tower: to imprison the living adherent of the Sixth. A loophole had been found almost immediately, as an apprentice could fully take up the mantle of the Sixth only if they moved past their own End. Not death, exactly; my own Ending was more metaphorical than anything else. I was still alive but in a new way. I just wasn't the Daniel that had come to the island. I'd moved past that person, Completed my apprenticeship, and accepted my role as adherent. But I was beyond death—I'd serve until I didn't want to anymore, just as all my predecessors had. And by being beyond death, I was also beyond life, and therefore beyond the Tower's ability to contain me.

"Death isn't the only kind of Ending," Kirmin, my mentor, had taught me.

In my spiritual explorations, which had begun simply as a way of easing my loneliness and boredom, I'd discovered that the Karal clan of witchkind—my father's original clan—had added Mother's unique identity rune to machinery my father had created, producing a device capable of siphoning ambient magical energy from humans. For whatever reason, the process weakened, sickened, and even killed its targets. As an adherent beyond death and capable of leaving the Tower, I made it my business to stop them.

To End their work. To End what they'd done to Mother.

In retrospect, things might have turned out better if I hadn't interfered. But the invisible hands of fate pull at all our strings, and so I suppose what eventually happened would have found a way no matter what I'd decided.

I walked the last few feet to the Tower and pushed open the enormous door. I wandered into the entry foyer, letting the heavy door sigh shut behind me as the Tower's magic illumi-

nated the broad, round room. I shuffled down to the small dining room, where a small, brightly decorated cake sat waiting for me. My heart clenched.

Kirmin had begun the tradition of having the Tower present me with a small cake on my birthdays. Today was my twenty-first birthday, but that detail hardly mattered. It was also very near the anniversary of Mother's Ending, making it a bittersweet holiday.

Just bitter, really.

I should have ended the tradition a year or two ago, but I'd used these festive cakes as a kind of milestone, and a reminder. A reminder that I was capable of selfishly using the Axis's power. A reminder that, deep down, I knew one thing might drive me to do it again.

Revenge.

CHAPTER 2

A Ritual Hobby

I stood before the map table on the Tower's second upper level. This was a powerful tool: I could name any person or clan in the world, and the map would show me where they were and where they'd been.

"Clan Fiseris," I said. A huge clan, one that worked probably half of the fishing fleets in the world. The image on the map table changed swiftly, the map itself shrinking until I could see the entire continent. Motes of light began glowing, concentrated largely along the coastlines to the west, south, and east. My eyes were drawn to a collection of lights so dense they nearly blocked the map itself. I touched the map, placing a finger on either side of that large glowing mass, and moved my fingers apart.

The map zoomed in so I could see the town of Nworlins, where the many members of Clan Fiseris resolved into individual motes of light. I zoomed in again until I could make out not only individual buildings, but the people of the town. I watched them walk to and fro as the still-glowing members of

Fiseris scurried around the docks, helping unload the morning catch.

I sighed and steeled myself for what I knew would come next. “Clan Karal,” I said, surprised at the chill in my voice.

The lights of Fiseris winked out, and the map zoomed out. It seemed to hesitate as it searched for my target.

And remained dark.

The *entire clan* had ceased to exist.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. Clan Karal and I hadn’t been on anything approaching good terms, and I held them fully responsible for Mother’s torture, her imprisonment, and ultimately, her death. A death they’d forced *me* to enact. Ultimately, that’s where much of my cold, simmering rage came from, I think: the fact that I’d been unable to find any other solution. That the only way to stop Karal’s atrocities was to End my mother, whom I’d only just reunited with.

I was owed *justice*.

And thus, my birthday tradition. Since Mother’s Ending, my birthdays had been about more than marking another year gone by, about more than just remembering Mother and grieving her. My birthdays had been a milestone, a reminder to keep trying to track them down. Today was a reminder that our business remained unfinished, that I had to find Karal and . . . I don’t know. I’d never allowed myself to think about what I’d do if I managed to locate them again. But if I was honest, I wanted them to pay.

Mother had, of course, been central to Clan Karal’s plan and operations. All of the women in my family possessed some distinct personal quirk, and Mother’s was the ability to effortlessly Gather magic from humans, so long as she was close to them. Mother’s unique relationship with humans depended on humans’ relationship with magic. While humans grounded magic directed at them—that is, rendered it ineffective—they

gave off an ambient aura of magic. They were completely unaware of it and utterly unable to touch or manipulate it in any way, but it was there—and Mother benefited from it.

What made Clan Karal's actions even more personally painful was that my own father had been the one to make their plan possible. Father was originally of Clan Karal—something I hadn't known until, as a teenager, I'd begun studying the clan and its activities. Now, my family was by all accounts a little strange, but when it came to marriage, we were particularly odd. Usually in a witchkind marriage, one person gives up their clan identity and formally joins the clan of their spouse. It's a big deal, as clan identity is deeply interwoven with personal identity, and it affects how witchkind relate to the world around them. But my family wasn't part of a clan. That in and of itself isn't terribly rare, but my family insisted that Father also become clanless rather than allow Mother to join Karal.

That may have been the beginning of his moral descent.

As far as I'd been able to research—and that wasn't much since my family was also ridiculously secretive—the women in my family *always* married someone from a clan, and that person *always* gave up their clan identity to do so. I didn't know if it was my family's money that enticed them, if they truly fell in love with our women, or what, but it went on as far back as I can find.

I'd been told that changing your clan identity is one of the most profound and unsettling things that can happen to witchkind, which was why our marriage ceremonies were designed to ease that stress. But to simply *lose* any clan identity whatsoever? Well, it was obviously too much for Father. As far back as I could remember, he'd always been sullen, angry, and resentful. Tinkering with his machines was his only escape.

Those machines were also an obsession of Clan Karal, and once they learned about Mother's unusual connection with

humans—something I presumed they learned through Father—they were determined to make use of it.

By the time I arrived at the scene, they'd perfected their machines: tall cylinders of brass and copper, carved all over with runes, powered by a rune construct bearing my mother's identity rune. These machines scooped up the ambient magic surrounding nearby humans, storing it in blocks of magic-friendly metals like copper, brass, and bronze. Set to a more aggressive mode, the machines would draw in so much magic that the drained humans would grow ill. Left nearby long enough, they could die.

I'd seen it happen.

Ending Mother's identity rune had seemed like the only way to stop them. I erased the rune from existence, and it could *never* exist again. No living person could even remember the rune or what it looked like, so thoroughly had the Axis and I Ended it. Clan Karal's machines depended on the rune, and by Ending the rune, I'd hoped they'd never work again and, too, fall from all memory. The cost: Mother's life and my eternal enmity. With her identity rune Ended, she passed from this world. By my hand.

Karal had threatened the Veil. Their skimming off excess magical energy probably wouldn't have raised any eyebrows, but once entire villages faced sickness and death, even humans knew something was wrong. Human leaders, healers, and worst of all, witchkind-hating priests would have started wondering if something was afoot. Something *magical*. And once they started looking for magic, the Veil would thin, and they'd *find* magic.

Human priests seemed especially willing to blame any unexplained situations on magic. They were, in a way, the keepers of human memories, writing tomes that detailed the ills and harms that magic had caused before the Forging. Many even had

grown jealous of witchkind's power and influence and sought our power—or at least the ability to control it—and initiated the Hunts to do so.

And that's why Karal had to be stopped: too much attention from the humans, too much threat to the Veil. That and, frankly, because they were killing people. I'm no monster: my Axis might have represented Ending and Completion, but that didn't mean I took any joy in wielding it on so many.

So I'd stopped them, losing Mother in the process.

But there remained two troubling things, and this is where we come to my birthday ritual. I simply couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that an entire clan had ceased to exist. How could any group of people, easily numbering in the hundreds, vanish?

Obviously, the simplest—if unsettling—answer was that every man, woman, and child of Clan Karal had used magic to rewrite their clan identities, effectively removing Karal from the world. It had been months after Mother's passing that I'd thought to look for them, and by then they were gone. The effort must have been huge, but with their clan identity changed or gone, they were, in a very real sense, *different people*. Even if I'd had a roster of the clan's members, those names would no longer serve to locate them.

That brought me to my second concern: I still had no idea what they'd planned to do with all that stored power. They'd been collecting magic from humans for years, and I couldn't even guess how many machines they'd run simultaneously. They must have gathered enough magic to fuel dozens, if not hundreds, of witchkind for their entire lives.

What could they possibly need all that power for?

And so every year on my birthday, a day so near the anniversary of Mother's death, I searched for them.

I closed my eyes, breathed slowly and deeply, and let myself *stretch*.

As I breathed out, my consciousness joined that of the Axis itself, and I was *everywhere*.

I could sense all the life in the world, from tiny shrubs on the edges of meadows to the plodding cart horses that dragged merchandise and produce from one end of the continent to the other. My sense of it all was distant and diffuse, like suddenly becoming aware of every tiny hair on your arms.

The Sixth Axis spanned the world, it's smoky tendrils snaking around everything and everyone. It grew interested whenever it sensed an Ending nearby, and if I listened carefully, I could feel it eddy and swirl across the continent, drawn to the natural, everyday Endings that were all around us all the time. This was the Axis's outer self, diffuse and omnipresent.

I stood for over an hour, casting my awareness here and there, waiting for something that *felt* like Clan Karal. I imagined that, having known Father so well, they would all have some flavor of his anger, his resolve, his cleverness. And so I listened, tasted, and smelled, my senses drifting across an entire world, hoping for some small clue.

It was tiring, remaining so *still* for so long, pushing my mind along paths that only the primal energies of an Axis could walk. I breathed in, drawing my mind back to myself, and opened my eyes. My legs were shaking, and a line of sweat trickled down my neck and spine.

And I hadn't found anything. Clan Karal was gone as thoroughly as if I'd Ended it myself.

I'd actually considered doing that, back then. It certainly would have put a stop to their predation on humans and the threat they posed to the Veil. But again, I'm no monster. I couldn't have known, and didn't imagine, that all of Clan Karal shared in the guilt. I couldn't bring myself to just End an entire

clan, despite how easy the Axis would have made it. In the end, relatively few lost their lives: the handful who'd fought me that day, and Mother.

I hadn't expected the entire clan to just divest their identity to escape my future attentions. Back then, I didn't even realized such a thing was *possible*. But it bothered me a great deal that they were still out there, and at times I even doubted my choice. I now felt that the entire clan was indeed partially guilty. Why else would they *all* have removed their clan identity? An entire clan had committed atrocities and made an enemy of one of the most powerful magical forces in the world—and they were still at large. Somewhere out there were crates of metal ingots charged with stolen magic, waiting for . . . what?

I took myself back to my little dining room. The Tower always had a bowl of fruit there, and so I munched a tart *žalias-fera* and thought.

I glanced at the colorful little birthday cake still sitting on the table and came to a decision. "No more birthday cakes," I told the Tower. Through the Axis, I could feel the magic acknowledge the order. "No birthday observances at all." Three birthdays gone, and each time I'd searched for Karal. Each time, I'd come up not only empty-handed, but feeling frustrated and powerless. It made no sense to continue doing so. These feelings, my pointless searching—it was time I closed that chapter of my life. I finished the fruit and tossed the core into a bin.

I wasn't powerless, and focusing on the past was no useful exercise of my power.

I was adherent of the Sixth Axis, a wielder of one of the world's primal forces. And there was good I could do in the world, ways I could use the Axis to make a difference.

It was time to stop lingering on the past and start working on a future.

The Activist Adherent

I had several projects to attend to—all things I felt would improve the lives of witchkind in small but important ways.

My biggest hurdle was the limited scope of my Axis. I might command one of the world's primal forces, but it didn't always seem *useful*. As an adherent of another Axis once pointed out, my main function was to reign in the Sixth Axis and prevent a return to the time before the Forging, when all these primal powers ran amok, causing incalculable damage.

But I wanted to be more than preventive. I wanted to be, well, useful. Though it wasn't clear how I could do that. I wasn't the adherent of the Axis of Building Bridges or the Axis of Bringing in the Harvest.

My Axis could handle conceptual Endings on a small scale. If I were soaking wet from a downpour, I could End my wetness. I could End cold around myself to stay warm—a handy trick, as I'd long since outgrown the coat I'd worn to the Tower as a thirteen-year-old. But conceptual Endings at larger scales seemed to confuse the Axis. I'd tried to make winters

more bearable in a northern town and End a drought in a southern one. Neither attempt had worked, and the Axis had seemed put off and perplexed. It reminded me of when I once considered Ending a powerful businessman who underpaid his workers. I obviously could End him, but that wouldn't necessarily solve the problem. The scope was too large, the real cause (or causes) obscured.

For this reason, the projects I'd been considering were important but more targeted. No world-changing efforts this time. Indeed, with Clan Karal's horrors fresh in my mind, I was firmly disinclined to try anything world spanning. My fear of changing too much, of Ending something that could have unknown repercussions, was a cold presence in my gut.

But the projects I'd been considering would make a difference in some people's lives, and all of them seemed straightforward enough as far as the Axis was concerned. Two projects felt especially solvable as I reviewed my sketches and notes in my basement workshop. I'd even done some small-scale experiments to confirm that the Axis would understand what I wanted from it.

The first project involved a vast wheat farm in the west. An insidious parasite, an insect of some sort, had made its home in the field and begun reproducing prolifically. Its offspring were hungry, and they all seemed to love the unharvested wheat. Field after field was being devoured, and the farmers—human and witchkind alike—were struggling to contain the pests. The humans had some luck with smoking pots of bug-repelling herbs, but deploying enough of them and keeping them burning required immense labor. The witchkind among the farmers had tried to repel the pests with magic but hadn't had much luck. Such magic was better suited to keeping rodents out of a pantry than pushing millions of insects from sprawling wheat fields.

I'd considered simply Ending the pests. Capturing one would be easy enough, and the Axis was well suited to killing at that scale. It would actually be the first beneficial use of the Axis's *demonu orda*, the Demon Horde, in the entire history of the Axis, as far as I could tell. I could easily deploy that powerful magic to wipe out the pests. I'd said as much to one of the witchkind farmers in the area, but she'd been dubious. "I'm pretty sure this is the same bug that they have in the corn fields of the north," she'd mused. "Up there, the weather controls their population, and they eat other pests, not the crops. Do you have any way of just killing the ones down here?"

I didn't. The Axis was a little hazy about geography, especially when executing something as deliberately wide-ranging as the *demonu orda*. The possibility of wiping out a beneficial insect, which would then let other pests run wild, worried me.

I looked at the sketches I'd made of the western insect and the ones the farmer had drawn of the northern species. They were just too similar.

So I turned to the second project. This one focused on Pottenham, a tiny village next to a river just an hour's walk north of Spurham. The river linked Pottenham to Spurham, with Pottenham's people using it to deliver goods and produce downstream for trade. Pottenham's main export was fish caught by fishers using huge nets stretched across the river.

That was all well and good, but just downstream of Pottenham sat a large rock formation, smack in the middle of the waterway. This formation caused the river to churn and froth most of the year and back up the river during the rainy seasons, flooding its banks and threatening the town and everyone who lived there. The rock also made traversing the river incredibly dangerous without the secret aid of the local fisherwitches.

If you were not an adherent, your access to magic was

limited. Most witchkind trained from childhood to Gather magic while they slept, then carefully husbanded their power throughout the day. Most crawled into bed all but depleted, ready to begin the process anew. But magic's scarcity fell especially hard on the fisherwitches. In Pottenham, they spent their power to reinforce the hulls of the town's ships, secretly scratching runes into the timbers when the boats are reworked each season. They must also burn magic to strengthen fishing nets, push back the waters during floods, and more. They are among the hardest-working witchkind in the world—and also the most stout hearted and uncomplaining.

I very much wanted to help them.

I reviewed my notes about when I'd brought the matter to the attention of Gilioj, the senior adherent of the Axis of Sea. He'd declined to help, saying, "I could command the waters to beat harder against the rock, but breaking it down would still take centuries. My people work more in the open sea than on these rivers for a reason: the riverbanks constrain the water, and the riverways dictate its behavior more than we could."

Mesla, senior adherent of the Axis of Earth, had offered little help as well. She and her people could easily break down the rock formation, I suggested. She'd frowned a bit and agreed to take a look. But once we'd gotten within shouting distance of Pottenham, she shook her head. "That's bedrock, and it runs deep. Breaking that down would be difficult, and it's hard to predict what the river would do. I could easily wind up fracturing the underlying strata, which could trouble the riverway even more." She'd given a great shake of her head. "I think this is best left as it is."

I'd held my tongue, for Mesla had been one of the only adherents to help me when Mother and I had needed it, but I was angry. Other adherents, all of them gifted with more power than they could possibly use, seemed content to do nothing.

They would sit back, wring their hands and shake their heads, and tell me to leave well enough alone.

This was honestly the problem with much of witchkind. With so little power to effect great change, my people leaned instead on tradition and “this is how we’ve always done it.” Nothing ever changed. That same attitude afflicted the older adherents as well. How did they spend the immense power at their disposal? To keep the world as it is. To allow lives to remain difficult.

Much of what Mesla had said about bedrock and strata was over my head, but I’d managed to read enough to understand the basic gist of what she was saying: if she went about solving the problem as an adherent of Earth, she’d be physically moving and rearranging that rock. Doing so could cause other damage that might create unwanted consequences. Fine. Obviously, she and the other Earth adherents could just take their time and do it without damage, but I’m sure they had some book-preservation charms that needed their attention more urgently.

My way wouldn’t involve moving earth and rock, and so there wouldn’t be any risk of damage to the “underlying strata.”

I studied my notes and sketches for a while longer, then used the Axis’s power to take myself to Pottenham.

The river was in full churn, bashing itself against the rock formation in question, spraying up a fresh-smelling mist. The bedrock thrust up directly in the middle of the river, leaving two narrow channels to either side where the water passed by swiftly. The nearer channel had been reserved for upstream travel, and the humans had—with stealthy assistance from witchkind—constructed a system of wooden winches and pulleys, all strung with stout rope, to aid in the otherwise impossible passage. Sailors would sail and row as close as they could to the upstream channel, and then land-based crews would toss over ropes for lashing up the ship. Then began the

laborious process of cranking pulley systems to lift the boat and guide it through the channel. I'd watched it once—it took *hours*. All the while, witchkind among the crews would subtly feed power to the runes they'd carved on the undersides of those winches, taking more of the weight and making sure nothing shattered in the process.

It seemed so wasteful. Surely that magic could be used more fruitfully.

No ships appeared to be scheduled at the moment, as all the winch works along the bank were unmanned. No children were playing, nobody fished along the river's edge. I'd be unobserved.

Reaching out with the Axis, I held in my mind one of its lesser runes of Ending:



This rune wasn't intended to End a life but rather remove conflict. It wasn't a rune of destruction so much as a rune of enforced cooperation. My intention wasn't to End the rock itself; the other adherents might think me young and arrogant, but I knew enough to heed sensible advice. Ending the rock might have consequences far beyond what I intended—the “underlying strata” and all that.

Instead, I Ended the *obstruction*. I focused my mind and emotions on the blockage that made the river so dangerous. I let myself long to see the river flow smoothly, peacefully, and without barriers.

The Axis understood.

I felt its magic flow in and around the river, touching the rocks and understanding why the river was restricted here. It's magic poked and prodded for a moment, finding its way.

The rock formation crumbled.

Within moments, the river calmed. The current, no longer forced to blast through two narrow channels, evened and slowed.

The next crew to sail this way would surely be surprised.

And more than a few fisherwitches would seek their beds with more than a little power left in them—for once.

I returned a week later to check on my improvement. I was surprised to find both Mesla and Gilioj there, accompanied by several junior adherents. As I scanned the group, I noted a couple of fisherwitches among them.

Mesla caught sight of me as I walked toward them. She sighed. "I assume this is your doing?"

"Removing the obstruction? Yes," I said firmly, proud of myself.

The fisherwitches' eyes widened, and they said nothing.

"Then you have doomed Pottenham," one of the other Sea adherents muttered. Gilioj gave a hard look that cowed him.

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, heat rising in my voice. What did that *junior* adherent know? It had worked. The river was smooth and calm, exactly as I'd intended.

Mesla held up a hand to forestall any reply. "The pinkfish Pottenham catches relied on the narrows. They fought their way upstream to spawn just past the village. It's spawning season now, but with the obstruction gone, they're swimming far farther upstream. One of the other villages will have that catch from now on."

Fish? “But—” I began to object.

“Navigating the ships is much easier,” one of the fisher-witches said. “We don’t need to use the winches to return home anymore.” He smiled and nodded.

“But the overall current is swifter,” Gilioj said. “Given that the river is no longer forced to push its way through the choke-point, the entire body of water wends its way more willfully.”

“The nets have been a harder to maintain,” the other fisher-witch admitted. “The river pulls at them more.”

“I—”

“It’s also causing some real problems for Spurham downstream,” Mesla said. “Two of their docks are already starting to give under the strain, and I’m not sure we can help reinforce them. The riverbed there is more silt than rock, and we’re having trouble moving enough solid earth without compromising it all.”

“But—” I tried again. My face and neck were hot, and I knew I was flushed, a reaction all too visible through my pale skin. I hated, *hated* being spoken down to in this way. Hated being thought a child.

Hated that I’d made such a stupid error.

But how could I fix it? I couldn’t “End” the rock formation back into existence: Endings were permanent. Irreversible. I couldn’t End the too-swift current, even if the Axis were able to comprehend something so abstract. That current was eternal, as far as I knew, without beginning and therefore without end. The Axis wouldn’t be able to understand. Therein lay the problem: the Axis was *literal*. It was also very *one-time*. After an Ending happened, the Axis’s work was done. Even if it could comprehend slowing the river’s current, its attention would immediately drift away, and the current would resume. The Axis was flighty, almost like a child who poked something with a stick and then instantly forgot that the thing existed at all.

"You should have left it alone, Daniel." Mesla sighed, pulling me out of my thoughts. "All of these systems, all of these interactions in the world—they're all more complex than you'd see at first glance. It's why we don't meddle."

"We're here to reign in the Axes, not use them," Gilioj agreed, his voice sad. "I know it's tempting, but they were Forged to *stop* chaos and damage. And that rock formation has been here forever. It's essentially eternal. If we just go around—"

"No," I snapped. Gilioj's eyebrows rose, and he slowly closed his mouth. "That rock formation may have been here for a long time, but it was *not* eternal. It had a beginning. At some point, it didn't exist. Otherwise, I couldn't have Ended its obstruction."

Mesla blinked. "I don't understand."

"I can't just End things," I said angrily. "Only things that have Begun can End." How could they not understand this? "Those rocks would have faded away on their own at some point. I simply made it happen now."

"But—" Gilioj started.

"But nothing!" I shouted, feeling more heat rise in my face. "The world changes! Things Begin, and they End! You all just stand around and act like everything is eternal and all you need to do is watch it go by, but you're *wrong!* They—"

"It isn't our place to bring about that kind of change," Mesla said quietly, her eyes darting to the fisherwitches who'd begun backing away slowly. "Our—"

"It's *my* place," I growled, glaring at her. How much damage had I really caused? I ground my teeth in frustration.

"But these people—" Gilioj tried to interject.

"Never mind. I get it," I snapped. I took myself back to the Tower before anyone could say more.

I had no idea how far down I'd gone. It easily could have been down at the roots of the world. The Tower, despite the many years I'd lived in it, remained a mystery, even here at the bottom—the Foundation.

Housed in a soaring cavern and rising from a floor of heavy, dark bedrock, the Foundation was a tall column of obsidian-colored rock. A dim, magical light barely lit the space, and even that couldn't reach the upper limits of the Foundation. Although I could easily see sixty or seventy feet up, the Foundation continued up into the darkness. I'd never touched its highest point.

The Tower of Endings sat atop it. My entire island rested on it, in fact, perched like a bird's nest atop a tall, stout tree trunk.

But closer up, the illusion of the Foundation's solidity gave way to the unfortunate reality: the rock was damaged. Thin cracks and fissures, each thin enough that I struggled to wedge a fingernail into them, ran everywhere.

Those were *our* fault.

Every fissure was the result of an unjust Ending. A mistake made by an adherent, a misuse of the Axis's power. I scanned the Foundation, my attention instantly going to the one fissure that had been my fault. If I'd caused another, I'd know. I'd see it all but glowing in the murky gloom. But none of the cracks were new. No new lights lined the monolith.

Removing the obstruction in the river hadn't been unjust.

I suspected that my mentor Kirmin's explanation of the Foundation was a little simplistic; there had to be more to the cracks than simply "unjust Endings." Even now, staring up into the darkness, the Foundation had a *feel* to it. Taken along with the cracks, it exuded a sense of duty.

And regret.

This titanic pillar had stood there since the time of Adherent Galas, when the rest of witchkind had first decided to build this prison for the adherents of the Sixth Axis. It was timeless. Solid. Unchanging.

Nothing I could do in the world could ever do anything but *damage* the Foundation. I couldn't heal it, and I couldn't take back the wrongs my predecessors and I had committed. Certainly, I could act without causing more damage, but that was the only balance I could hope for.

I wasn't even supposed to *leave* the Tower. That was the whole point of this mighty pillar: to keep us here. Only a loophole in the magic allowed us to leave and apply our power—the Axis's power—to the world.

My mood grew even fouler.

I was *supposed* to stay in the Tower. Those rocky spikes outside my windows were *supposed* to keep me here. All the change I wanted to make in the world—all of it went against the intention of those who came before me. And none of my work would matter. At best, it would make things worse.

The adherents of the other Axes had never even tried to make change. Perhaps that's why they'd never been jailed.

Maybe the builders of the Tower knew that something would be different about the adherents of the Sixth. That we'd be inclined to meddle and would need to be locked away. Keep the Axis reigned in. Don't do anything. Stay here. Leave well enough alone.

I took a last look at the Foundation, craning my neck to penetrate the infinite darkness above.

Shaking my head, I took myself back to the Tower, just as the sound of a bell echoed off the stone walls.

I had a visitor.

Holding the Line

“Mister . . . that is, uh, sir—”

“Daniel is fine,” I growled. The young woman standing before reeked of an Axis’s power. She was an adherent. Of Earth, if I had to guess, based on her loose, dun-colored clothing and the way my Axis seemed to nose around her feet. A turquoise ribbon bound her tightly curled brown hair into a short, puffy ponytail, and her brown eyes were wide and bright. She looked very close to my own age.

“Uh . . . Daniel,” she stammered, my name apparently not quite fitting in her mouth.

“How can I help you?” I tried to tamp down my anger and bitterness but still felt deep impatience.

She looked anxiously from one side to another, then leaned slightly to her left, looking past me into the Tower’s dark foyer. “Can I come in?”

No! my mind roared. *You people are part of the world’s problem!* Aloud, I merely asked, “Who are you?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Adherent. I mean, Daniel.” Again, she stumbled over my name. “That is, my name is Essa. I’m an

adherent of Earth. Not a senior one, obviously. I mean, I've been—"

"Come inside, Essa," I said stiffly. I turned and walked inside, not bothering to see if she was following. The outer door thumped shut. Long used to the Tower's layout, I didn't wait for my eyes to adjust to the foyer's gloom and instead stalked through the single inner door. This led to the Tower's central hub, where the wide circular staircase provided access to its upper levels. I skirted the staircase and ducked into my public workroom. Another round room with the exact dimensions as the foyer, it contained a bulky black worktable covered in dust. Several chairs surrounded the table, and I let myself slump into one. Essa scurried in behind me and after quickly looking around the room, timidly lowered herself into a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You don't have to do that," I snapped, slightly louder than necessary. She jumped a bit before nodding. "Why are you here?" Visitors to the Tower were uncommon, and while I found myself curious, I wondered how quickly I could get her to leave.

"Yes," she said, taking a deep breath. She looked down at her lap for a moment, composing herself. When she looked back up at me, her nervousness had seemingly disappeared. "I need your help. That is, *we* need your help. Several of us. Earth adherents, I mean." Her composure hadn't filtered into her speech.

No adherent had ever *asked* for my help before. Most seemed eager to keep me locked in my tower. My shoulders unknotted a bit, and my mood eased along with them. I decided to try and put her more at ease. "I figured as much," I said wryly. "I don't get many social calls."

She blinked. “No, no of course not. I mean, not that you shouldn’t. I didn’t mean it that way, it’s just—”

“Look, Essa.” I sighed, leaning back into my chair. “I’ve had a bad start to the day. Let’s dispense with . . . whatever this is. I’m not going to End you. Just speak plainly. What do you want?”

“End . . . uh.” She breathed in as her eyes widened. “No, of course not.” She shook herself, nodded firmly, and continued in a stronger voice. “How much do you know about the iron roadway?”

It was my turn to blink. “I know that it exists?” It was a major feature of human civilization and one of the humans’ most incredible mechanical achievements. Stretching across the continent from east to west, the roadway consisted of two parallel sets of iron rails. Upon these rails rode enormous iron carriages, the lead carriage belching gray smoke as it hauled a long line of carriages behind it. Loaded with goods, the carriages traveled town to town all along the roadway’s expanse.

I actually found it difficult to reconcile the iron roadway’s engineering with the incredibly poor architecture the humans exhibited everywhere else on the continent.

“And do you know what the roadway does to witchkind?”

“I’d never thought about it,” I admitted. “I imagine it would be problematic.”

“Problematic is an understatement,” she growled. “It’s bad enough that humans themselves ground magic. At least they only do so when it’s directed at them. But their iron? Those rails stretching across most of the continent? It *consumes* magic.”

There was heat in her voice.

“It’s purified, concentrated earth. It draws magic to it—siphons it off. Stand near it, and you’ll hurt. It breaks our magic

and shatters our constructs. And the more of it there is, the wider an area it affects.”

Now that I’d thought about it, I couldn’t imagine any of witchkind even coming close to the roadway. It would indeed drain the very magic from their souls, killing them in short order. I shuddered, remembering Mother in her cage of iron bars, imagining the constant pain she must have felt as the iron licked at her life force.

“So yes, *problematic*,” she said. I shook myself out of my reverie and looked at her with new interest. All timidity had fled her expression, and she looked at me with a deep, angry intensity. “Witchkind didn’t understand what the iron roadway was when it was first being built. But by the time the first iron carriages were rolling on it, it was too late. It devastated the homes of witchkind that were too close, and it’s created a magical dead zone across the entire continent. It’s a danger. If the roadway is allowed to expand, more and more of the world will become deadly to us. Without even knowing they’re doing it, the humans will force us out of the major towns and villages. They’ll corral us like livestock.” Her eyes flashed.

“Are they looking to expand it, then?”

She nodded fiercely. “They have been for years. Decades. We’ve been trying to stop them, but the techniques available to us are . . . limited.”

“Limited how?” She was still an adherent with access to nearly unlimited power.

“The iron. We can’t affect it directly. We can’t even do anything in close proximity to it, unless there are a few of us working together. We’ve tried. It takes at least two of us to overwhelm it, and even then we can’t act for long before we’re simply exhausted.” Then she gave me a cold smile. “That’s why we thought of you.”

Interesting. How could I help if they’d failed on their own?

Was there an opportunity here for me to atone for my error at the river? I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the worktable. “Tell me everything.”

What I imagined to be hope flitted across her face. “Would you have any tea? I came straight here, and I haven’t—”

“Tea,” I ordered, not looking away from her.

“Yes,” she said, her brow wrinkling in confusion. “Unless it’s an impo—” A shadow darted through the room, leaving a steaming cup of tea in its wake. “Oh.”

“Anything to eat?” I asked gently. The *driežai* had startled me, too, when I’d first arrived at the Tower.

“Seed biscuits?” Her eyes darted around the room.

“Seed biscuits,” I ordered with a grin.

Essa inhaled sharply as another shadow zipped across the table and a plate of seed biscuits appeared before her. “Fascinating.”

“An amenity of the prison this Tower was intended to be.”

She looked up. “Ah. Yes. I hadn’t—that is, I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s worked out. Now, you were about to tell me everything. About the humans’ iron roadway.”

“Yes.” She sipped the tea and continued. “There are three mines where they bring the iron ore out of the earth. We can do almost nothing to those; the concentration of iron is too much for us to overcome. The ore is smelted nearby and poured into stone molds to form lengths of rail. Those are transported by carriage—normal ones with horses—to Twynsits. That’s where they’re trying to start a new line that will run north to south. The rails are all stacked up—we assume until they mold enough of them. That’s what we’ve been trying to stop.”

“How?”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “Even though they’re of the earth, adherents obviously can’t affect the rails directly. It’s

simply too much iron. So we've been trying to do things *around* them."

"Such as?"

"We've created sinkholes. Some beneath the stacked rails, sometimes on the roads as they're being hauled to Twynsits. A rockslide, once. We managed to shut down one of the mines for the better part of a year, but even with our Axis's power, our strength was sapped for a month. And the humans eventually dug it back out anyway. We've been careful," she added hastily. "Everything's looked like a natural disaster. Because of—"

"The Veil," I finished, nodding solemnly.

"The Veil," she agreed.

Plaktukas's legacy. If a human saw something that could be explained by any kind of natural or normal means, the Veil would ensure that was how the human explained it. But show a human something truly extraordinary, something that could have happened or existed only through powers outside their understanding of nature, then the Veil would falter. They would *see* magic for what it was. The great fear of witchkind was that once the Veil was pierced, it would quickly tear apart. Humans would begin to see *all* of our small magics and that it is once again loose in their world. The Hunts would resume, and witchkind would be forced to fight an enemy wholly immune to our powers.

"So where do things stand now?"

She slumped back into her chair, her fingers idly pushing a seed biscuit around on its plate. "We've run out of ideas. We can only cause so many sinkholes before they start to suspect something. And no matter what we do, they just seem to accept their losses and keep trying. There's a new stack of rails piling up in Twynsits as we speak. The mine nearby seems to be bringing out more ore, and they've been making new molds. We think they're preparing to build new iron carriages."

“Which means they are preparing to lay that rail.”

She nodded glumly. “Once they begin, it will be more difficult for us to stop them. Laid end to end, the rails ground more magic than they would individually, and already more of witchkind have been forced out of their homes.”

I tilted my head. “How so?”

Essa’s expression was miserable. “We created the first sink-holes fairly far outside Twynsits. But once those sites were unusable, they put the next piles closer to the city. With magic nullified in those areas, our hidden spaces nearby began collapsing.”

“Ah.” My encounter with Mesla and Gilioj at the river rushed back into my mind. Unintended consequences. “Can you show me?”

Twynsits was one of my favorite towns. I’d never given any attention to the iron roadway running through its outskirts, as I tended to keep to the town’s wealthier districts far away from the clattering, smoke-spewing iron horses. More options for dining.

“Oh, that’s a handy way to travel,” Essa muttered as we appeared near the river that cut through town.

“To be fair, how you move through the earth remains a mystery to me,” I admitted.

“I can’t take someone with me, and it takes much longer. Your Axis’s Form of Travel is much more practical.” She looked around. “We’re on the wrong side of the river, though.”

“Ah. I wasn’t sure. I’m more familiar with this side. Over there, then?” I gestured toward the opposite side, closer to Twynsits’s outermost buildings.

“At least. Closer to the eastern side of town, if you can. That’s where they’ve been stacking rails.”

I wrapped the Axis’s power around us, and the world briefly faded to gray. Endings existed everywhere, in ways both massive and minuscule. From my perspective, I wasn’t actually traveling as such. I was simply shifting my position within the world-spanning power of my Axis, traversing the many small Endings it constantly observed and facilitated. As fast as it had faded to gray, the colors of the world reemerged, swimming and twisting as we appeared beyond the river.

The Axis growled in my mind as something sharp pierced my spirit. “Iron,” I grumbled.

“You can feel it this far out?” Essa asked. I nodded. “I need to be a few steps closer. But there it is.” She jerked her chin forward, and I looked where she’d indicated. A dozen stacks of long iron rails, separated by rough-cut planks of wood, were piled as high as I was tall.

Not far away, a stone building had crumbled. The wall nearest the iron rails had collapsed into a loose arrangement of rubble. The roof had fallen in as well. “Is that what you were talking about?” I asked, pointing at the ruin.

“Yes.” Essa’s voice was grim. “That was a human stonemason’s shop. Two families of witchkind lived within the walls. When the stacks of rails grew too high, too close, the magic unraveled. The families’ spaces collapsed in on themselves. And without that magic to hold it together—”

“The entire building failed.” Humans’ grasp of architecture and engineering was incredibly primitive. Stone buildings were often little more than squared-off rocks literally stacked atop each other with nothing to hold them together. Mud, at most, and even that was more to keep out the weather. The buildings’ stability came from the hidden spaces that witchkind built

using the same magic that created our larger-on-the-inside homes and businesses.

That such a people could build the iron roadway . . . it defied imagination.

“And so what would you try now?” I asked.

Essa’s jaw clenched for a moment before she answered. “We don’t know. We—”

“You keep saying we. Who else is with you in this?”

“Other junior adherents. Arun and Mica of Earth, mostly. Lanna of Sea has helped us once or twice.”

“You were telling me what comes next?”

“We don’t know,” she spat, exasperated. “It’s why we thought to come to you. Can’t you just . . . make it go away? Iron rusts eventually. Isn’t that an Ending?”

“I can’t act directly against iron.” I’d learned that lesson well enough with Mother. Even now, the Axis was urging me to take a step back, muttering and whining in my mind. “My Axis’s power is absorbed just as easily as yours. Especially with this much of it.”

“But what about the Veil?” Her eyes were bright.

What could the Veil have to do with anything? It wouldn’t let either of us cast magic directly against iron. “What do you mean?”

Now her eyes widened in eagerness. She’d really thought about this. “Couldn’t you make the humans just forget about the iron roadway? Forget it exists? Like Plaktukas did with magic when he created the Veil?”

“I—hmm.” I’d never considered that. I prodded the Axis, but it was too focused on the iron to pay much attention. “I’m not sure. I don’t think so. We’d still have all of this here,” I said, waving toward the piles of iron. “Not to mention the existing roadway. The Veil only works in the absence of evidence, but this is a little hard to

overlook. And frankly, I'm not sure how Plaktukas managed to create the Veil, much less ensure it existed in perpetuity. It's not how Endings work—at least not how I understand them.”

Essa's face fell, but she nodded as if she'd expected as much. “Then maybe we do something more . . . dramatic.”

I frowned. “Dramatic how?”

“Beneath the surface, far beneath, the earth is hot. Molten. Even the iron ore that's deep below is in an almost liquid state. Our magic can reach it. It's dangerous, but we can manipulate it in that form in a way we can't when it's cooled and solid.” Her mouth stretched into a grin. “So we've got a few ideas.”

Intriguing, but this use of magic could have consequences, perhaps ones far greater than the ones I'd caused at the river. “Such as?”

“We've had some luck working with Lanna at the humans' foundries. We can introduce small globules of water into the iron when they've melted it, as they're pouring it into molds.”

“What does that do?”

“Generally, it makes it explode.” Her grin deepened. “With all the solid iron around, it will take an immense effort. The humans will chalk it up to an accident, but we can't do it consistently enough to make them give up.”

“Okay.” Where was this going?

“But we *can* reach down into the earth and bring up the magma there. There's actually a pool of it here that's closer to the surface than in most places. We can bring it up *here*, let it burst to the surface *right here*. Lanna can spray it with water from the river. It will be difficult to forget.”

It sounded supremely dangerous, and perhaps she knew what she was talking about. But still—just one such event? “You really think this will stop them?”

Essa's expression grew more serious. “We think it's going to take out a good number of buildings. We'll evacuate those of

witchkind, of course, but it'll demonstrate the danger of working with all this iron." I wondered about the logic but nodded so she'd continue. "And we can *shape* the magma when it's at the surface."

"Shape it?"

"Into a dragon."

"A dra—" I chuckled, shaking my head. I certainly hadn't expected something so dramatic. But it wasn't a bad idea. It was certainly bold. "You're going to have to walk me through this."

"Humans have stories, myths about dragons."

"I've read a few."

"Then imagine! A dragon of molten rock and flame, rearing into the sky, breathing exploding gouts of magma, diving down to devour the stacked iron! We'll do it here—and in another location where they've been piling rails. Then we'll spread stories that the earth resents humans for digging up pieces of it and that the dragon was sent to reclaim the earth's own."

Any humans who spotted them would immediately suspect something supernatural. The magic they were talking about would be raw and visible. I was beginning to sense why I was here. "That's going to look like magic. Endanger the Veil."

Essa nodded. "It's going to be pretty obvious, actually. It'll only work if there are human witnesses, and they're going to *see* us doing the work. We have to be pretty close—as close as we can get without the iron interfering."

"You want me to make them forget."

"That they saw us, yes. Not the dragon, obviously. We want it to look like something natural. Something the earth did, not something *we* did." She studied my expression, which I'd carefully kept neutral during her explanation. "You can do that, right?"

I nodded. "Ending a memory isn't difficult. But I worry that this comes close to impinging on the Veil. A dragon is

going to seem . . . magical. Isn't it? Isn't the goal to not even put the idea of magic into their minds?"

"Humans think hurricanes are caused by angry sea gods," Essa pointed out.

"They do?" I'd never had more than passing interactions with humans, but their credulousness apparently knew no bounds. Sea gods?

"They do. We're already set to spread stories. There are two adherents of Sky, Tomas and Mali, who'll send whispers of an angry earth god through the city."

"I wondered how you'd spread the story. They can do that?"

"They say they can. Apparently it's an aspect of their Axis's Form of Communication."

"And where are they right now? Why are you bringing this to me?"

She chewed her lip and looked away. "Gilioj, well . . ."

My shoulders tensed. "You don't want the seniors to know you're talking to me." She shook her head. "Have they actually told you not to talk to me?" A quick, hesitant nod caused my entire back to tense. "I see. But you came anyway."

"We drew straws," she whispered.

I couldn't help the laugh that leaped from my mouth. "And did you draw the short one or the long one?" I chuckled and waved away her answer before she could give it. "No, I'm joking. All right. What did they say about your idea? The seniors, I mean? Have you told them?"

Essa gave an indelicate snort. "We did. They said—"

"Leave well enough alone? Don't tamper? We'll find a way to live with whatever the humans do?" I was surprised at the bitterness in my own tone. But they were exact answers they'd given me when I'd begged for help against Clan Karal. For help saving Mother.

“You’ve spoken to them, then.”

“It’s their refrain anytime I’ve suggested we use the Axes to improve the world.”

“At least they don’t send you back to the workshops to enchant more charms,” Essa grumbled, her bitterness rivaling my own.

“Glad I’m not the only one who hates those.” The focus on creating those charms disgusted me the most about my so-called peers. Between us, we commanded essentially unlimited power. We could do almost *anything*. But where did they counsel their juniors to spend that power? On trinkets. Charms to ward off pests, preserve food, make a fire burn hotter. And they *sold* these charms to witchkind. All that power, freely at their disposal, and they used it to make *money*.

“You have no idea. We have all this power. We can do all this good that the rest of witchkind can’t, and—”

“And we’re meant to just sit back and watch.”

I found myself liking this Essa. If she and other junior adherents were of my mind—that is, willing to engage with the world to do good—then perhaps I’d finally found some friends. “I believe I’m willing to help you in this,” I said firmly. “You said there are two locations?”

“We’d do this one first,” she said eagerly, her mouth widening into a happy smile. “The other a few days later.”

“When?”

“There’s a shipment of rails due in tomorrow. We’ve been tracking the caravan.”

“So there’ll be plenty of witnesses.”

“Two dozen men at least.”

“Tomorrow then.”

Dragonfire

“Stay low,” Essa whispered. She and the other adherents—Arun, Mica, and Lanna—hid behind bushes on a low hill that overlooked the stacks of iron rails. Two dozen men were slowly unloading more rails off carriages, creating a new stack alongside the existing ones.

“It won’t matter,” I reminded them. I kept my voice low but didn’t bother to whisper. I’d also remained standing rather than creeping across the dusty ground. “I’m going to End their memories of us anyway.” Already the Axis was sniffing out the humans, pulling back sharply when they neared the stacks of rails.

“You’re sure you can’t just turn the iron to rust?” Arun asked hopefully.

I chuckled. “I’m sure. My Axis is just as repelled by it as yours is.”

“Repelled?” Lanna asked, never taking her eyes off the laboring humans. “Mine is *absorbed*. The iron is like a pit. I send energy into it and it just vanishes.”

“That’s how it feels to us as well,” Mica agreed.

"I've never felt that," I said. "It just . . . pulls back. Like you would from a pot of boiling water once you realized it was hot."

"How strange," Lanna mused.

We watched for a few moments longer. I focused on my Axis, sending it twisting around the minds of the workers whenever they weren't near the huge stacks of rails. The Axis didn't seem to mind a single rail, but it seemed to leap backward whenever it came too close to the larger piles.

I realized, in a moment of panic, that I'd likely have to End these humans' memories of us as they were running away from us—they'd need to be well clear of the iron. The timing had to be right, or they might get away. I reminded myself that the magic was easy enough. Shouldn't be a problem. "When do we begin?"

"Are you ready?" Essa asked, looking at the others. All three answered with a nod, their eyes still locked on the humans.

"How will this work if your Axis's magic is absorbed by the iron?" I asked.

"Our magic won't be near the stacks," Essa said, taking one last, calculating look at the scene before us. "We'll push the magma up from deep below with enough force to blast clear of the iron's area of influence. We'll shape it in the sky and basically let it fall back to the earth."

"I should have enough of a hold on the magma to bring it back around and make it look like it's flying," Arun said. "As long as it's far enough from the iron, I won't lose my grip on it."

"The only thing hitting the actual iron will be the blasts Lanna and I create, and they'll be moving by their own force by then," Mica added.

I nodded. It sounded like they'd figured it out. Or at least they thought they had; this all hinged on the humans experiencing a living fire-breathing dragon and *not* attributing it to

magic. They'd need to be convinced it was—what did they say?—an angry earth god. I nodded again, this time more slowly. With our group this small, I could modify the humans' memories to not include us. Then the only possible explanation would be that the dragon was real. "Okay. You're certain the adherents of Sky can spread stories quickly?" That would be the key: giving the humans an alternate explanation that they'd accept.

"They can," Essa said. "Mali, are you ready?" She directed the comment away from us, looking toward the city.

"Yessss." Mali's reply was a whisper on the breeze. Quite the talent. She and the other Air adherents had already spread out in the city, ready to deliver rumors far and wide.

"All right," I said, gathering my Axis to myself. The rune for Ending a memory wasn't complex, but it did require concentration. I needed to eliminate just their memories of us, not of the dragon and the accompanying spectacle. "All right," I repeated, holding the rune ready in my mind. "We can start."

"This is it, then," Essa said. "Just as we discussed." The four adherents around me closed their eyes in concentration.

I could sense the Earth and Sea magic welling up around them. The Earth energy dove deep into the ground, which began rumbling ominously. The humans stopped, looking around to see what was happening. A few looked worriedly at the bare dirt beneath their feet.

The air suddenly smelled fresh and wet. Lanna was creating a light mist by pulling water from the nearby river. She'd inject water droplets into the magma once it had surfaced, which would apparently cause small explosions. I found myself anticipating the spectacle while idly tracking where the humans were. *I'll need to target them in groups, I think, especially if they scatter.* I called the Axis's awareness back to myself, wrapping it around me and preparing it to strike.

The three Earth adherents stood, locking their knees and clenching their hands into tight fists. Their jaw muscles bunched as they directed the power of their Axis.

The rumbling in the earth grew into a roar, and then the ground itself felt like it was rolling. My stomach flip-flopped a couple of times, and I forced my teeth together. They hadn't mentioned how unpleasant this would—

With a boom, a jet of blazingly hot orange-yellow magma burst from the ground, fountaining from in between the stacks of iron rails in a thick, searing column a hundred feet high. The humans screamed as droplets of blistering earth splattered down around them, and they began running toward their carts and carriages for cover.

For all the good it did them. The incandescent droplets struck the sturdy wood planks of the vehicles, instantly starting fires and sending small plumes of smoke into the sky. The horses were having none of it: they reared and shrieked, and one turned and galloped toward the river, heedless of the fact that it was still hitched to the carts. Most of the carts overturned, and the horses simply plowed ahead, dragging the carts on their sides and leaving thick rents in the earth.

I felt a moment of relief. I'd been worried about the horses getting hurt in all of this, but they'd had the sense to run.

The sensation of Earth magic bloomed in my chest, and the column of blazing magma quivered. Two sail-like wings stretched from a thin, sinuous body. A sleek, arrow-shaped head formed at one end of that body, while the other end stretched and tapered into a whipping, thrashing tail. A deafening roar echoed from the sky through Mali's mastery of Sky, lending credence to our display.

"Easy with that tail!" Essa snapped. "You'll splash magma on us!"

"Sorry," Arun strained to say, and the dragon's tail settled.

The dragon was incredibly lifelike. I wondered for a moment if they'd seen the same sketches and drawings that I'd enjoyed from the human storybooks I'd read. Although the creature was a uniform orange-yellow color, they'd managed to make the wings look delicate, almost silky. The long neck rippled as if scaled, and the shape of the head suggested curved horns, a wide mouth, and wickedly sharp teeth. The tail was even forked at the end. I was impressed.

"Lanna, now!" Mica yelled. On that cue, the dragon's head reared back, then jerked forward, its mouth opening into a wide maw, and a ball of flaming magma jetted forth. That incandescent sphere streaked toward the stacked rails, and just before it hit, I felt a surge of Sea magic dart toward it. Fresh water collided with molten rock, which promptly exploded in a spectacular blast of sound and fury. It had worked.

The dragon soared higher, and the humans couldn't take their eyes off it. Mali made it roar again, this time with booming, guttural words that rattled the storage yard. "I RECLAIM WHAT IS MINE! WHAT WAS STOLEN FROM ME!" Another fireball launched from the construct's head, shattering on a pile of iron rails, which immediately began to smoke from the heat.

It was extraordinary. I had no idea Earth adherents could be so . . . creative.

I jerked my attention back to the humans and realized some of them were running directly toward us, intent only on getting away from the destruction. We'd selected this location in the hopes it would seem an unsafe direction to run, but even amid the fiery barrage, the humans didn't seem to care. "Over here, Mica," I suggested.

The dragon complied, sending another sphere of flaming earth toward the ground, where it exploded between us and the humans. Through the resulting smoke, I saw the humans

skidding to a halt, then running in the opposite direction. There was no way they hadn't seen us, so I sent the Axis after them, holding the rune for Ending a memory in my mind:



The dragon was still spewing globes of destruction into the stacked rails, which were now glowing and beginning to sag in the middle as they melted. Mica sent more bursts ahead of the humans, forcing them to change directions again and again, almost as if she were herding them.

"I don't have much more in me," Essa panted.

Neither did the dragon: all of its projectiles drew from the initial column of magma that the Earth adherents had summoned, and with each blast, the dragon grew slightly smaller. I doubted the humans noticed, running around in abject terror as they were. But with just a few more shots, the dragon would cease to exist.

But I found it odd that Essa seemed so drained. I'd never felt tired using my Axis's power. Perhaps it was because they were sharing the power of an Axis rather than having it all to themselves. Or perhaps their power required much more concentration than my own.

"Four more," Mica growled.

"I'm with you," Lanna said.

"Okay," Essa agreed. Arun simply clenched his fists tighter, beads of sweat dripping down his face as four more bolts of

superheated magma shot into the stacked rails, demolishing the last of them.

“Ready, Daniel?” Essa asked.

“I am.” We’d debated on how to end the spectacle. It had to be suitably dramatic. With the finale close, the Earth adherents sent the significantly diminished dragon high into the sky. The air around us immediately turned dry as Lanna gathered the remaining airborne moisture and sent one last javelin of cool water toward the flaming construct. On impact, the dragon exploded, raining down huge chunks of still-blazing magma. I Ended the ones that threatened us, but two humans hadn’t avoided the falling rock. Pinned to the ground, they were screaming. I reached out and quickly Ended those bits of magma as well; the point of this was to send workers running back into town with a story to tell, not to kill them.

Just to be certain, I also reinforced the Ending of their memories of us as the undamaged humans staggered back to their feet and, all but dragging their injured colleagues, dashed toward the city as quickly as they could.

“Well,” Essa said, sinking to her knees. “I think that did it.”

The other Earth adherents joined her, their legs visibly shaking as they settled to their knees. “I can’t believe we have to do that again next week,” Mica sighed.

“Mesla will be angry,” Essa added with her own sigh, although she sounded almost happy at the prospect. I felt vindicated and decided that when the leading Earth adherent finally confronted me over this—and I knew she would eventually—I’d refrain from speaking to her like a child.

“Maybe she’ll throw us out of the Circle,” Arun said. His tone suggested he was only half-joking.

“She’ll see reason, eventually,” Essa said. She didn’t sound sure. “But it was worth it regardless.” That came out with far more conviction.

It was indeed worth it. The former rail storage yard was a disaster: still-glowing rails continued to sag, and most of the piles had completely collapsed. I imagined that the twisted morass of iron could be recast, but it would take substantial effort. The ground everywhere was blackened and blistered, and small piles of glowing lava continued to smoke and spit here and there.

“Last bit,” Essa said.

The three Earth adherents, still kneeling, closed their eyes. I once again felt their magic swell, heard and felt the earth groan and grind, and watched as a sinkhole opened up and partly swallowed the smoking pile that had once been iron rails. A final jet of glowing magma shot through it all, barely rising above the ground to partly fill the sinkhole and turn the entire railyard into an indistinguishable, smoking mess. The total destruction would be convincing evidence in support of the story the Sky adherents would spread.

“Your Sky friends are ready?” I asked as Essa swallowed heavily and opened her eyes.

Essa nodded. “They’re waiting for those humans to hit the city and begin telling their tale. The wind will carry those words across the city, along with tales of dragons and stories of the earth seeking to reclaim itself.”

“A couple of days of that should do it,” Lanna said with a satisfied grin.

“There’s no way they’ll remember us?” Mica asked. “One of them looked me right in the eye.”

“They won’t remember a thing. I Ended all their memories of us,” I assured them.

“And so the tale will spread: a fiery dragon burst forth from the earth to devour what had been taken from it,” Essa said.

“Or something like that. As long as they stop mining the stuff, we’re fine,” Arun said with a sigh.

I looked out over the wreckage we'd created, and the still-glowing, smoldering pit of metal that we'd left. *This* was what power was for! For protecting our people, for improving their lot. *This* is what the adherents—all adherents—should be doing. This is what the Axes' power was meant for. We'd planned, we'd been careful, and we'd achieved exactly the result I'd hoped for. "This was good work," I said. "And the Veil remains safe."

Of course, I didn't know what I didn't know.

CHAPTER 6

A Thinning Veil

I considered lazing about my Tower for the rest of the day, but my spirits were simply too high after the success in Twynsits. I decided to return to the city—to the side I knew—for a meal.

When I'd first decided I couldn't stand any more of the Tower's boring recipes, and had given up trying to invent some for myself, I'd finally ventured out for a meal. I had plenty of coin—the Tower had a cupboard that seemed to contain an infinite supply of the magically charged bronze disks that witchkind used as currency, along with stacks and stacks of the base-metal ingots that the humans used. Plus I had my family fortune, which Mr. Nash—the lawyer who'd brought me to the Tower after my Test—had delivered to me. Money was no object.

On that first culinary excursion, I had simply chosen a town at random, took myself there using the Axis's magic, and wandered into the first restaurant I came across. It had been a fish house, and I'd treated myself to the waiter's first suggestion: a lightly salted whitefish accompanied by something he'd called

sea beans, all dressed with a light, vinegary sauce. The dance of flavors triggered a memory of a prior adherent who'd enjoyed the same dish so much he'd considered investing in the restaurant. It had been one of the fonder recollections that the Axis had delivered to me from its trove of adherents' memories.

I took myself back to the Tower and immediately described it as best I could to the shadows, and the next evening they produced a passable imitation. From there I was hooked, taking myself out to eat at least thrice weekly and returning to expand the Tower's repertoire. I began taking a small notebook with me, quizzing restaurant staff on ingredients while scribbling notes and drawing sketches to take back to the Tower.

Twynsits had a constantly shifting landscape when it came to food, with humans opening tiny little cafés all the time. Many closed before long, unable to make a successful business of it, but there always seemed to be someone new willing to take over a space and try again. After the dragon display, I spent a delightful afternoon trying several of them, enjoying spiced fish, gently sautéed leafy greens, nutty pastries, and more.

Stuffed and satiated, I returned to the Tower and took to my bed just as the sun set below the horizon and the first moon was inching its way into the sky. I awoke the next morning to the reverberating gong that announced a visitor.

"Two in two days," I muttered as I pulled on clothes. "Almost a record." I took myself to the foyer and hauled the heavy front door open to see all four senior adherents—Zmogus, Debesi, Gilioj, and Mesla—standing there. Zmogus looked furious, which was normal for him, but even mild-mannered Mesla wore an irritated, angry expression. The sun was already high in the sky, meaning I'd slept in far longer than usual.

"We know everything," Zmogus snapped. His swarthy, redtinged face was twisted into a cruel sneer.

"That must be incredibly comforting," I replied instantly. I didn't know what it was about the man—probably his arrogance and seeming dislike for anything I did—but I couldn't help poking at him.

"We've spoken with Essa and the others," Mesla said, her voice sharp. She was the consummate Earth adherent: drab clothes, earthy skin, mottled brown hair. Her normally placid expression was drawn with disappointment. "We expect impetuosity from the juniors, but from you—"

"I expected nothing less," Zmogus growled.

"I thought it was effective," I said easily. "Would you all like to come in?"

"What, for tea?" Zmogus barked, his eyes flashing. "This isn't a social call, boy. As Mesla said, we expect this kind of behavior from the juniors. They'll mend their ways soon enough. We've punishments in mind."

Heat rose in my chest. "Punishment? Let me ask you something, mighty adherent. Who Chose Essa and Mica and Arun and the others? Not you. No, the Axes Chose them, just as yours Chose you, and just as mine Chose me. Who put you above them? Nobody but yourselves. Who judges how they use their Axis's power? Nobody. We're a law unto ourselves, with no responsibility to others, as you've told me again and again." My throat burned with anger, and my words came out rough and hard. My Axis's presence firmed around me, and I could tell the other adherents sensed it. Gilioj put a hand on Zmogus's shoulder to forestall a reply, and the man wisely bit back whatever retort he'd prepared.

"The juniors played out their parts in their plan," Gilioj said softly.

"They were wonderful," I interjected. "But what does that have to do with me?"

Zmogus sneered. "Because you failed, you child!"

“Zmogus, please,” Mesla said, visibly trying to keep her voice calm. “Most of us, Earth adherents in particular, have to work close to what we’re trying to affect. Working magics like you all did imperils the Veil. There’s no way the humans wouldn’t notice a half dozen people standing there in apparent calm and concentration while fire rained down from the sky.”

“I handled that,” I said easily. “I Ended their—”

“*You missed some*,” Zmogus hissed.

My mouth froze open in midsentence. “What?” I croaked after a moment.

Again, Mesla seemed to gather herself before speaking. “Debesi’s juniors played their role well. Tales of the fiery dragon consuming the iron rails spread throughout the city within minutes. But then a second tale began to circulate: a tale of five people garbed in black robes, surrounded by a halo of light, and standing like implacable judges, holding the high ground above the destruction. Controlling the dragon, this second tale said.”

“With magic,” Debesi added, her voice flat. Her face was cold and tight, her dark skin contrasting sharply with her pure-white hair. She was forcing herself to seem aloof and withdrawn, but her ice-blue eyes told me she was seething almost as much as Zmogus.

“I—” There certainly hadn’t been a “halo of light,” but this didn’t feel like the right time to quibble about details.

“You missed some, Daniel,” Gilioj said sadly, shaking his head. His weathered face seemed to sag, and the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth seemed carved far more deeply than when I’d last seen him. Of the four, he looked the least angry or disappointed, but the resignation in his eyes somehow cut me more deeply. “At least two, perhaps more. But it doesn’t matter now. The tale has spread, and the churches in Twynsits have taken it up.”

“Churches?” My heart froze, my pulse raced in spite of it, and my legs began to tremble.

“There was a gathering outside the mother church this morning, in the center of the town.” His deep voice was coarse and raw. “We’re told more than a thousand humans were there to hear the priest’s particularly impassioned sermon.”

The last of the blood in my face drained.

“They’ve pulled out their oldest texts, Daniel,” Debesi said, her jaw tight. “They were reading from them, quoting passages to the crowd. Several witchkind stood among the mob, and they’ve all said the same thing: the priest invoked one of their oldest commandments.

“A commandment that hasn’t been recited, to our knowledge, since the Veil was raised,” Mesla added softly. “*Nekęsk ragana gyventi.*”

Suffer not a witch to live. Long ago, humans and witchkind shared the True Language. For us, it was the language of magic, the names of our runes and our way of passing on our techniques and powers. For the humans, fragments of the True Language threaded throughout their religious texts, a testament to our shared origins.

“They’re calling for Hunts,” Zmogus spat. For a moment, I honestly thought he might reach out and try to throttle me, Axis or no.

I cleared my throat. “We can—”

“There’s more, Daniel,” Debesi said. “Already humans have been noticing us coming and going from our spaces. They look twice at even the simplest everyday magic. The Veil is thinning, no longer disguising us, no longer giving humans another explanation for what they see.”

That couldn’t be true, could it? Surely I could fix this. But Gilioj’s demeanor threatened to stamp out my hope. His eyes drooped and his shoulders slumped. He looked defeated.

"We've been told a story of a human fruit vendor blaming rotted produce on witchcraft."

Mesla spoke. "And Thornwaith's alumni in Twynsits have reported feeling . . . agitated."

My brow wrinkled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Thornwaith's is . . . special. Its students and alumni have a unique and primal connection to magic. Not to our Axes but to the deeper magic, the everyday magic that lies across the world. When magic feels threatened, it wakes them. If things become dire enough, they'll become puppets to it. Tools. The deep magic will lash out without regard for consequences, striking at whatever threatens it. It will simply . . . smash."

"If that happens, our situation becomes substantially worse," Debesí warned. "It is vital that we do not allow it to come to that."

Certainly not. Smashing the town with magic was no way to take humans' minds *off* magic. "What do you want me to do?"

"*Now* you ask us for guidance and direction?" Zmogus shouted. What little control he'd maintained suddenly evaporated. "What you should—"

"It is magic spent, Zmogus," Debesí snapped at him. "It's pointless to discuss it now. We need to stop the rumors. Stop the discussions. Stop the fear."

Zmogus fell silent, but his eyes were all but smoking as he glared at me.

"I can't End any of that." I found myself wishing I could. "Not on this scale. Not if thousands are speaking of it."

"It will spread to Twynsits's neighbors by nightfall," Gilioj said. "Tomorrow at the latest."

"Can't you reinforce the Veil?" Mesla asked, looking closely at me.

"I—" I stopped and thought about it. An adherent of the

Sixth had created the Veil, after all. If it was weakened, couldn't I fix it?

"Your predecessor created it," Debesi added.

"I know. But I don't know how. I don't even know how it works. Kirmin—my mentor—never mentioned anything about it. I mean, she told me of the Veil, but I don't think any of us knew how it was created." I'd never read anything in the *Book of Endings* either. More importantly, the Axis seemed to contain no memory of the Veil's creation. If it had, surely this discussion would have triggered a recollection. But how was that possible? How could Plaktukas have used the Axis's power without the Axis remembering?

Even memories can have an End, I remembered Kirmin musing.

"Plaktukas created the divide between humans and witchkind," Gilioj said. "He made it safe for us to live together."

"Yes, but I don't know how. I've never gotten the Axis to do anything so abstract. Not on that scale, and not permanently. The Veil has outlived Plaktukas by centuries. Longer. I've never read of anything else like it." My mind was racing. Endings happened, and then they were done. But the Veil wasn't truly an Ending, was it? Obviously it had Ended humans' memories of us, but did it just do that all day every day? Why couldn't I feel it happening? It didn't make sense. "What about their Church? Is there anything in their religion we could, I don't know, use?"

"Who knows what's in their stories?" Zmogus snapped. "Who cares?"

"I think we should focus on what's in our reach," Mesla said more calmly.

"I'm not sure the Veil is in my reach." I actually felt more certain that it wasn't, despite Plaktukas having created it.

"You have to try," Debesi said. Her tone carried the weight of an order, not a request, but I nodded in agreement. "My fellow adherents are spreading word in Twynsits. We'll move on to the neighboring cities today. Our message is simple: The Veil is thinning. Stay hidden. Practice no magic in a human's sight."

"That situation can't hold, Daniel," Mesla said. "Without renewed magic, fishing vessels will begin to fail. Buildings will falter. Wells will become contaminated. Streetlights will fail. Food will spoil. Humans depend on magic in a hundred thousand tiny and unseen ways."

Except for their iron roadway, a mad part of my brain chided. "I know all of that. I'm not stupid."

"Then you'll try?" Gilioj implored.

"None of you wanted to interfere when witchkind was killing humans," I reminded them bitterly. Mesla's face pinched at the memory. "I make no promises. This is ancient magic we're talking about. But yes. I'll try." The four of them gave me a hard look. "I'll begin now, in the Tower's library, to see what I can learn."

Gilioj nodded slowly. Mesla sank into the island itself. Debesi blurred and was gone like a tissue in the wind. Zmogus became a pillar of fire that jetted into the sky. Old Gilioj simply turned and began trudging down the path that led to my little beach, where he could join the Sea. "Gilioj," I called. "I can take you—" I stopped as he held up a hand and paused, still facing away from me.

"I'm old, Daniel," he said. His shoulders slumped even more, and his words sounded hollow and empty as they echoed off the island's tall, rocky spikes. "Older than you can probably imagine." He lowered his hand and slowly shook his bald head. "You can't fix me." He resumed his slow march to the sea. "I hope all of this teaches you, if nothing else, that you can't fix *anything*. None of us can. Consider, if you can," he added, his

voice growing softer but still echoing back, “that nothing is broken.”

My throat tightened, and I watched until he was almost out of sight.

“Just focus on the Veil.” His parting words rolled back to me like a distant growl of thunder.

And for once, the critical words of a senior adherent didn’t make me angry.

They made me ashamed.

I stepped back into the Tower. Closing the door behind me, I stared at the smooth stone floor. *Not smooth*, I corrected myself. Glance at any surface in the Tower, and you’d see smooth, glossy, gray-white stone. But look closer—and I’d had plenty of time during my apprenticeship to look very close indeed—and you’d see a web of fine cracks running everywhere. Perfectly natural, especially given how many feet had trod these floors over the centuries. But in that moment, the cracks demanded my attention. The Tower was *old*. Imperfect. It had never even fulfilled its original purpose of imprisoning its adherents.

I felt a sudden kinship with the ancient structure.

To shake off my dour mood, I walked into the library, another of the great, circular rooms on the ground level. Bookshelves lined the rounded walls, soaring high above me in a space that was magically larger than the physical structure would have allowed. “I need everything there is on the Veil. And Plaktukas.” My voice was harsh as I forced it through a tightened throat. The Tower’s shadow servants would fetch out whatever existed.

I took a moment to regret my actions—or at least regret that I hadn’t been more diligent in them. Twice now, I’d made things worse by Ending something. Perhaps some of my predecessors, the ones who’d become hermits and never left the

Tower, never engaged with the world. Perhaps they'd been in the right. Maybe nothing was broken. Maybe all I was good for was keeping the Axis chained. Maybe—

No. I needed to focus, as Gilioj had said. The Veil was thinning, and as far as I knew, that hadn't happened since it was first established. It was failing . . . and my own failure was to blame.

If I was going to heal the Veil, I needed to feel its failure for myself.

The Threat in Twynsits

Witchkind proved slow to change. When I'd ventured into the world in search of new delicacies, I'd quickly found that true in their adoption of foods and recipes. But in the human cafés, pubs, and inns, I'd found a bounty. Twynsits's location, straddling one of the continent's major rivers, gave it access to abundant freshwater fish and seafood brought up by trade ships. It was also adjacent to dense forests and open plains, each of which offered distinct varieties of wildlife, livestock, fruits, vegetables, and grains.

But food wasn't the reason I needed to visit today, and food was obviously not foremost in the humans' minds either. Ignoring what I'd just learned from the other adherents, I'd foolishly appeared in the middle of a square that I knew well, and a half dozen humans immediately stopped and began gaping at me, their eyes widening in alarm.

So this is what a faltering Veil felt like.

I quickly had the Axis End their memories of seeing me appear—a viable trick with a small enough group and a stark

reminder that I wouldn't be able to do the same to the entire town.

I did try, however, directing the Axis to End all memories of magic and witchkind in the town. As the Axis stretched itself, its awareness grew thinner, and its comprehension of what I wanted also seemed to draw and wane. There simply were too many minds and too many memories for it to affect everyone at once. And I couldn't run around town erasing the memories of small groups; once they spoke to each other again, they'd make new memories. I couldn't End *future* memories, and I couldn't fathom how Plaktukas had figured out how to do so. It seemed as though the Veil was constantly watching, Ending memories as soon as they formed so they couldn't spread. But that was impossible. Based on what I knew of the Axis, Endings were moments. Specific moments. They happened at a particular point in time, and they didn't persist over centuries. But the Veil did. How? Neither I nor any of my predecessors—save Plaktukas, of course—had directed the Axis to uphold the Veil. The world had even gone for decades without adherents. Who'd kept the Veil running, then?

It was a mystery that I desperately needed to solve.

I noticed a witchkind couple creep into an alley, carefully checking to see who was watching them. They touched an entry rune and vanished into the hidden space of their home. One human must have caught sight of them out of the corner of her eye: I saw her pause, stare into the alley, and open her mouth as if to speak or scream. I quickly Ended that memory, and she shook her head briefly in confusion before going about her day.

This was going to wind up being dangerous for the humans. I couldn't keep fragmenting their memories by Ending pieces here and there. I needed to figure this out.

I navigated to a small pub I knew, one run by witchkind and hidden in the rafters of a human inn. Fortunately, the entrance was inside the inn's public room, around a corner and in a small hallway that led to the kitchen. I waited until the hallway was clear, stepped inside, touched the entry rune, and was whisked away.

The pub was crowded, and everyone turned as soon as I appeared. Faces grew wary. Whispers flickered throughout the room.

"Adherent," one old woman called from her table. "Are you here to help us?"

All of witchkind knew who Plaktukas was and which Axis he'd held, and so I nodded. "I'm going to try." Those in the room relaxed a bit, and I realized how much tension had been in the air. "What can you tell me?"

Everyone had a story about themselves or a loved one being seen by a human, and they were eager to share their experiences. The public spaces of witchkind that were accessible via less-conspicuous entries—including this pub—had suddenly become popular, the patrons said, as everyone tried to figure out what to do. Neighbors had formed support groups and planned to pool their magic so they could summon basic food-stuffs and other necessities rather than go out. Service providers—lamplighters, water purifiers, and the like—had already begun to hunker down in their homes. A few people were making plans to leave town and visit distant relations, hoping to spend a couple of days Gathering sufficient magic to power fast-travel runes.

None of them seemed aware of my role in the disaster at least.

When I'd heard every tale they had to offer, I left, holding the Axis ready to End the memories of any humans who might

see me. None did, and I gave a brief sigh of relief as I made my way back into the street.

The humans were behaving differently. They moved in tight groups of no fewer than three, nervously glancing around as they raced to their destinations. Like frightened mice through the streets, they seemed skittish and intentionally quiet. Their silence made it easier to hear a loud stentorian voice coming from a few blocks away.

I followed the voice to another square, this one fronted by one of the town's larger churches. A crowd of a hundred or more humans stood before a makeshift platform, staring at the priest atop it. The priest railed against magic, repeating over and over their old commandment: *Suffer not a witch to live*. Magic, he claimed, was responsible for many of the town's recent ills: the outbreak of pests in the warehouse district, the sanitation problems near the docks, and the rotten produce in the shops.

I shook my head. Magic had likely been *preventing* problems of that kind, not causing them. Irritated and feeling petty, I Ended the wooden blocks holding up the platform, crumbling them to dust in an instant and causing the stage to collapse. The priest tumbled into the crowd, quickly righted himself, and began screaming that evil magic was all around them, pointing to the collapsed platform as proof. I ground my teeth and left the square.

I took a seat outside at a human café and ordered a glass of wine from the nervous server, who brought it to me rattling atop her tray. She quickly set it down before dashing back inside to what I presumed she thought was a safe harbor from "evil magic."

I sat for a long while, sipping my wine and simply *feeling*.

Over the past few years, I'd begun to understand two

aspects of my Axis. Always strong was its immediate presence and attention to me. I could feel it wrapping around me or sniffing around my immediate environs, inspecting whatever I directed it to.

But the Axis also had a more diffuse, less-local aspect. Through concentration, I could sink into it, letting myself go. This was the world-spanning cloak of the Axis, the part of its power that attended to the ordinary, everyday Endings that happened autonomously all the time.

As I settled into that broader awareness, I could tell that Twynsits and much of the area nearby felt different. Thicker, slightly. Muffled? Or was the sense of power actually clearer? I couldn't quite discern the feeling, but the Axis certainly felt less broadly present unless I directed my attention to a particular place.

Could that be sufficient to heal the Veil? Bringing the Axis's attention back to this place?

I concentrated carefully, threading a delicate balance between remaining in this worldwide awareness and trying to actively direct the Axis in a way I'd never done before. Could I have the Axis make this area, this entire town, feel the same as the rest of the world? Make it *present* here, without needing its direct attention?

No. After just a few minutes, I could tell it wasn't going to work. The active, aware part of the Axis simply didn't understand what I wanted, while the more diffuse, background aspect was entirely unresponsive to my wishes. But I found something new: a third aspect. Something in between the two that seemed to float with a hazy energy. I stretched to touch or influence it. Nothing. Was that the Veil? Could I—

“Looking for company?”

My eyes—which I hadn't even realized I'd closed—flew

open. My concentration shattered, and my awareness collapsed back to what I could see around me.

That included a young woman of witchkind with olive-brown skin, loosely curled black hair, and twinkling green eyes. She wore a simple but lovely deep-green dress, one dark enough to blend into the humans' customarily drab world, but with enough color to satisfy witchkind's instinctive need for bright hues. I blinked a few times as I came back to myself before asking, "Excuse me?"

"Well, you're sitting here enjoying a glass of wine, which is exactly why I've come here. You're clearly . . . you know." She leaned her head forward a bit, acknowledging our shared ancestry. "And it's a bit odd to see one of us frequenting an . . . establishment right now." Another quick nod to the human café behind me. "And so I wondered if you'd like some company."

My outings to human establishments for culinary explorations hadn't led to many social interactions. I found myself irritated at being interrupted.

"Please?" she added with a wide smile.

Her plea was so earnest that I chuckled. Perhaps some brief company would give me some fresh perspective. I gestured to the empty seat next to me. "By all means."

"I'm Gemma," she said brightly as she took her seat.

"Daniel." I caught a whiff of her: honeyed tea, lightly sweet and gently earthy all at once.

The server had darted back to the patio. Gemma pointed to my glass and held up two fingers, and the boy dashed back inside. "So what brings you to this café on a day like today?" she asked. "If it isn't terribly rude to ask, of course."

"Rude?"

"I can tell you're . . . more than just one of us," she said with a wink. "Not which Axis you serve, of course, but you definitely have a strong feeling about you. Not like most of us."

Serve. I found it odd that so many of witchkind thought we adherents were leashed to our Axis in some way, while in reality the opposite was true. Her comment was obviously a query, but I didn't feel like getting into Endings and death. I couldn't imagine anybody wanting to share a glass of wine with the adherent of the Sixth. I answered her first question instead. "I had business in town, and it's been my custom for some years to enjoy a glass and perhaps a meal afterward. I suppose I wasn't considering the current state of affairs. And you?"

She snorted delicately. "I haven't enough *ability* to so much as light a candle, let alone command the great forces of the world! I'm quite the embarrassment to my family but probably as safe as any, right? Ah, thank you." The server plunked two new glasses before us and scuttled away with my empty one. "It's quite tense in any of *our* places. This is more relaxing, despite, you know?"

"I had stopped in a pub before coming here, yes. And I caught a bit of a sermon, I suppose you would call it, in the square over. And yes, it was definitely tense. To say the least. What does your family do?" That was standard conversational politeness among witchkind: most of us were tightly bound to our families and clans and took up whatever trade they'd plied for centuries.

"The clan runs inns all across the continent. My family runs a handful here in Twynsits."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Me? Oh no," she said with a laugh. In spite of the situation that had brought me here, her laugh lightened my heart a bit. It was an honest laugh, bright and full throated. "Running inns doesn't suit my abilities either, I'm afraid. Quite the embarrassment, as I said. No, I'm only back for a visit. I moved to Evermore last season." She lowered her voice as she named the only

city of witchkind in all the world. "Living the dream away from all this. And what about your family? Your clan?"

Ah, polite small talk turned against me. "Last of my line," I said, careful to keep my voice gentle. Her natural response would be pity, which I didn't need or want. "And my family was clanless. I've made my peace with it, and obviously . . ." Adherents didn't produce offspring. Everyone knew it.

She nodded slowly but said nothing.

"So you're comfortable being out?" I asked, eager to change the subject. "The situation doesn't bother you?"

"Really? No. I mean, I do find it a bit *odd*. Normally their eyes just slide off us, you know? It's strange to have them *look* at you. Are you here to do something about it?"

"I want to," I replied gravely. "But I'm not sure what *to* do."

"It's a shame," she said thoughtfully, "that someone felt so entitled that they could put on that show. To endanger us all this way." Her tone was cautious.

I struggled to keep my jaw from clenching. "I'm sure they felt they had their reasons."

"Did they? Centuries of peace behind the Veil?" She kept her voice low, and I scrutinized every word, looking for an accusation, but found none.

"At least the piles of iron rails are melted."

She gave a gentle snort. "As if the—*they*—won't make more."

I chuckled at that. Among witchkind, the primary truism about humans was, *they'll make more*. More humans. More iron rails. More, more, more.

"I'm told the show, as you put it, was convincing. Perhaps they won't make more this time."

"My family lost two inns when the iron roadway was first built." Her tone was effortless—careless, almost—but I sensed the anger and loss beneath her words.

“That must have been difficult.”

“The world changes. Nothing is forever.” She shrugged and took a sip of wine. It was unusual for any of witchkind to be so accepting of change. Of Endings. “We found other locations. Even saved enough magic to build a new one.”

“You were lucky.” It must have taken them years to hoard enough magic; the rune constructs used to create our hidden spaces were notoriously greedy for power.

“I suppose.” She took a larger sip. “But at least the . . . the ones who built the iron roadway didn’t have it specifically in mind to destroy us.”

My jaw clenched, and I quickly forced myself to relax. “I’m going to try and fix it. Many of us are.”

“But you said you don’t know how.”

I sipped my own wine, resisting the urge to bite the glass as I did so. “I don’t. Yet.”

“Well,” she said, gently laying a hand on my forearm. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

I forgot my anger and my stomach danced a bit, as if full of butterflies, at her touch. I’d never . . . touched. Not another person. Not so casually. Other than Mother, of course. Not even Great-Great-Grandmother or Kirmin had touched me. They couldn’t have, I suspect, although now I found myself wondering. Even Abbygail and her kin had steered clear of touching me, and when they couldn’t, it was always the most cursory and disinterested of brushes.

Being touched felt like . . . magic. As if there was some slight energy running between Gemma and me, coursing gently through our skin, connecting us.

That got the Axis’s attention, and it seemed to sniff gently around her before settling around us. Was it being . . . protective? Of the two of us? It surprised me sometimes how the Axis

would occasionally show a sense of intelligence, or at least more than mere awareness.

What was it I was feeling? It couldn't just be the physical contact—I'd *touched* other people before—handing them coin, accepting a plate, even giving a brief handshake in greeting. But it had never lingered like this.

And in fact, something, some feeling was . . . *missing*?

Gemma continued to speak, exclaiming her delight that the weather had held so nicely for so long, ordering another glass of wine for us each, and nodding toward an outlandishly dressed child that ran by. As she did, I realized what was missing inside of me: aloneness. I was feeling not-alone—a feeling so foreign to me that it took me a moment to name it.

Companionship. Gemma was with me because she wanted to be. Actually *with* me. This wasn't a conversation overheard by a boy who'd projected his spirit out of the Tower to salve his boredom. No, this was *real*, and I was in it. And she was *touching* me.

I wasn't alone.

I hadn't been not-alone since . . . ever. Since Mother was taken, at least.

I found that I very much enjoyed being not-alone with Gemma.

"Would you . . . like to eat something? Food, I mean? With me?" I asked, flushing at my own awkwardness. I directed the Axis to End my tipsiness and blinked hard as my head cleared.

"That would be wonderful!" Gemma said softly, giving my arm a soft squeeze. "What would you like?"

My heart sang at that squeeze, and sober or no, I found myself barely able to assemble a sentence. "Fish? Do you like fish?"

"I love fish! Have you had *ešerys*? Perch, I think they call it?"

I simply nodded and smiled, not trusting myself to speak.

Gemma turned back to the restaurant, signaling the server, who scurried out. “We’ll share a filet of perch,” she ordered with a smile, sending the server hustling back inside.

Share.

Gemma and I spoke for a while longer, watching the nervous groups of humans hurry past us and spotting the occasional wary witchkind likewise hustling along. Our fish came out, and we slowly picked it apart together. The flesh was smooth and succulent, and it had been grilled lightly with butter, giving it a soft, silky texture.

Gemma asked about my family—“They’ve all passed, I’m afraid”—and how I enjoyed being an adherent—“It’s usually quite boring”—and myriad other topics. She told me more about her family, her clan’s business, and her aspirations in Evermore. She intended to become a scholar at one of the many institutes for research that called Evermore home. “We’re even starting a school soon,” she added, “to compete with the three old ones. The school will welcome far more young people than the old guard prefers.” The back and forth soothed much of my tension, and I found myself relaxing back into my chair.

The fish was followed by a sweet, rich wine served in tiny glasses that Gemma insisted I try. It was delightful, and as the sun set past the city’s low buildings, we continued to chat. I still had no idea what I was going to do about the humans and the Veil, but at that very moment, it seemed somewhat less urgent. I’d never had a casual meal with another witchkind, let alone a woman. I’d have been happy for it to go on all evening.

Of course, that’s when the night had to end. A small group of humans hurried past us, carrying flaming torches and screaming about witches and magics, calling for others to join them on a Hunt that very night. Their faces were ruddy with anger, the postures both frightened and aggressive. “You!” one of them cried, pointing to another human who’d been hustling

by with her head down. "Would you join us to scour the town of foul magic?"

For a moment, the woman looked surprised, but her expression grew darker and tighter. "You have proof?" she asked. "My daughter said she saw a man appear out of thin air this morning, but—"

"Proof enough," the man growled. "People vanishing into thin air. Fire from a boy's fingertips. Priests are calling for trials. Want us to catch a witch and bring it to the church." His companions muttered their agreement, and the woman joined them as they began speaking in low, urgent tones.

"Excuse me." An elderly woman of witchkind tried to edge her way past the angry mob, and they whirled on her.

"Will you join our Hunt?" the man demanded.

The old woman stepped backward. "I'm far too old—" she started. Gemma's hand tensed on my arm, and I felt my stomach clench.

"None's too old to Hunt witches," one of the mob growled.

I felt it even as it was happening. Terrified, the old woman was reaching for her magic. It would be an illusion, I knew—something to distract the humans. And ordinarily it would have worked. They'd have seen something, and she'd have ducked away. The Veil would have covered her retreat, convincing the men that she'd simply moved on.

I slid forward in my seat, my legs tensing. Gemma's hand slid off my arm. "Daniel," she whispered.

The old woman's magic flared softly. She had a deft touch, and just a few days ago her trick would have worked.

"Look at her!" one of the men cried, pointing a stubby finger. "She's blurred!"

"No," Gemma whispered, stricken with horror. What the Veil would ordinarily have hidden, what it would have let the

humans simply explain away as a trick of the light or something innocent, was instead fully revealed. As I watched, the old woman's hair changed color and lengthened. Her clothes shifted subtly. And the humans *saw* it.

"WITCH!" they cried as they lunged forward.

My jaw muscles bunched as I sent the Axis toward them. I used a brute-force rune, Ending their memories of an entire day.



The *Book of Endings*, where I'd found all the runes regarding the Ending of memories and thoughts, cautioned that this one was imprecise at best, often removing memories from up to a week in the past.

I hardly cared. A life was at stake.

The group of formerly enraged humans stopped suddenly, blinking in confusion. The old woman of witchkind scurried away. The men looked at the torches they carried, looked at each other, and began slowly drifting apart, their shared purpose lost.

"What happened?" Gemma whispered, leaning close to me. The smell of honey and tea, now overlaid by a light note of lavender, tickled my nose.

"The Veil is too thin," I murmured, softly breathing in the scent of her. "We'll look different to them, especially if we use our power. But I suspect we'll be noticeable even if we don't." The situation was more dire than I'd imagined.

“What made them stop? Did you do something?”

I did, I thought bitterly. *I used the power of the most-feared Axis in the world to tear their memories from them. Would you like some more wine?* I found myself overcome with a desire to make this Gemma like me. Revealing myself as the man who was meant to be imprisoned in a distant tower felt unlikely to achieve that goal. I shrugged, my jaw still tight. “I need to. Do something, that is.” The pleasure of the evening was shattered, and my duty to somehow repair the Veil and protect all of witchkind had come smashing back down on my shoulders. “I need to go.” No companionship for the adherent of the Sixth, it seemed. At least not tonight.

I stood, and Gemma quickly followed suit. As I began fumbling in my pocket for coins, she placed a hand on my arm. “Please, let me,” she said softly, letting a few coins clink onto the table. I let my eyes meet hers. We held each others’ gaze for just a moment, and I could have stayed there for days. But the possibility—no, the surety—of more mobs, of more witchkind in danger had fouled the mood. “Please,” she repeated a bit more firmly. “I’ve very much enjoyed this.”

“Until the end,” I muttered. But I made no move to replace her coins with my own.

“Even so.”

“Can you get home safely?” She was dressed simply enough, but surely the humans would see the same etheric glow about her that I did.

She nodded. “It’s not far, and the entrance is concealed. I’ll be careful.” She paused, letting her hand slide off my arm. “When you’re done with all this, come visit me in Evermore?”

“I promise,” I said gravely. I added a smile that I didn’t feel, given the situation. But I very much did want to go visit her once this was all over.

Her return smile was far more genuine than mine, her lips soft and her eyes bright. “I’ll look forward to it.”

I quickly walked away, ducking into a dark, empty alley and taking myself back to my Tower.

I needed to learn what Plaktukas had contrived.

CHAPTER 8

Plaktukas's Plan

In theory, I should have known what Plaktukas had done to create the Veil. The Axis remembered everything its adherents experienced. Accessing that trove of memory wasn't as convenient as visiting a library, but anything I heard, saw, smelled, or felt could trigger memories, allowing me to briefly relive them.

The Veil thinning and humans running about shouting for Hunts should have triggered some of Plaktukas's memories of the Veil. But I got nothing. Adherents of the Sixth could End their own memories, and that seemed like the only sensible explanation. But why had Plaktukas done such a thing?

I'd have to rely on books to solve this mystery. The Tower contained a *massive* library filled with texts on magic and histories of adherents, witchkind, and more. Many histories. My shadow servants had found a sizable stack of books that mentioned the Veil, Plaktukas, or more frequently, both. But they were *all* histories, not firsthand accounts or practical guides written by adherents. These histories contained no details, no step-by-step instructions, and no advice for repairing

the Veil should it thin. I spent most of the night searching for even the slightest clue, the barest mention of a solution—and came up empty.

I slept briefly and fitfully, rolling out of my bed just as the sun peeked above the ocean to the east. No memories. No books. But I had one last resource.

As an apprentice in the Tower, my first lessons taught me about the Axis's Form of Communication: the Whisper Overheard. The magic relied on the Axis of Endings' omnipresence. Since it was literally everywhere in the world all at once, I could listen in on any conversation, provided I could identify someone in that conversation in a way that let the Axis single them out. It also let me speak to anyone, anywhere—and there was the key. Any time an adherent used the magic, anything they said or heard would be magically transcribed into a book on the Tower's first upper level. That level held an enormous store of these journals, chronicling everything that every adherent of the Sixth had ever communicated through the Axis. And so I had my shadow servants bring me all of Plaktukas's journals.

During my brief time as adherent, my use of the Axis had resulted in a half dozen journals; some of my predecessors had filled hundreds.

But after my shadow servants had searched for everything Plaktukas had said, they returned with one journal. *One*.

It was as if Plaktukas was reaching out from the past to deliberately thwart my efforts.

Apparently my predecessor had used the Axis for communication only rarely, and when he did it was for the most banal of conversations: an invitation to a councilor of the Taryba, a quick aside to a family member, an apology for missing an appointment.

A few passages in the lone journal did trigger some memo-

ries from the Axis. I experienced these as brief flashbacks, almost all of them lacking any meaningful context and all of them devoid of anything useful:

“Will keep us safe, Plaktukas?”

“It will keep us hidden, so long as we work to keep our magics concealed. Anything obvious, anything with no other possible explanation, will tear it.”

“And what if that happens?”

“See that it doesn’t.”

They were fragmentary—incomplete.

“How will this remain powered?”

“I’ve arranged for it.”

“You must have Gathered for an incredibly long time, Plaktukas, but surely the power will deplete at some point, no?”

“No. As I said, I’ve arranged for it.”

“Never heard of such magic. Where did you come across it?”

“It’s a very old technique, one that goes back to the founding of the world.”

“It’s certainly a marvel. Tell me, can you . . .”

That last flash was particularly vexing, promising so much yet revealing so little. So the Veil was based on an old technique that Plaktukas had adapted. Wonderful. Utterly useless.

I couldn't understand why all of the Axis's memories of Plaktukas were so fleeting. I'd experienced others that were entire days' worth of experiences, so immersive that I'd felt like I'd personally been there. It truly seemed as if Plaktukas had deliberately, surgically removed his memories from himself and the Axis. But again: why?

A name came through in one of those flashes: Garybion. That name triggered a recollection of my own—I'd seen it somewhere before. A book? I ordered my shadow servants to bring me any books written by someone with that name, and they brought me one of the ones I'd already pored over the previous evening. A history of some sort, one that mentioned Plaktukas.

I read the book more carefully and finally found a passage that caught my attention:

Plaktukas was thus the first adherent to successfully direct an Axis to an abstraction. His working didn't represent a moment in time or the outcomes of a single action. It was purposefully vague, apparently a request that the Sixth Axis examine conversations, memories, and sightings, and then instantly edit them, substituting in less-dangerous recollections.

That was the Veil all right. But how did he do it? Garybion was silent on the matter, and it's likely the writer had no idea whatsoever about the *how*.

Setting the book aside, I leaned back in my chair and made a profound effort to not grind my molars against each other. Dead end after dead end. I wanted to find a way to reach into the Axis itself—to whatever mind or awareness or sentience it

contained—and forcibly wrest from it the information I needed.

Actually, I thought after a moment. *That might work.*

I had a rune of communing. Kirmin had described it as a way to connect directly with one of my predecessors, with the Axis determining at my ascension which predecessor that would be. In reality, I'd learned that it was simply a way to speak to the Axis itself, presented through the appearance, voice, and experiences of a former adherent. A way of distilling the Axis's memories of that person into a credible simulacrum.

I hated using it.

To begin with, it felt false—*was* false. The Axis was hiding behind a mask, and it was so . . . unsettling. I felt exposed, vulnerable. The rune took the Axis's vague awareness and made it all too real. I became like a tiny mouse examined by a hawk that could, at any moment, dive down and snatch me up in its claws.

But I couldn't think of anything else to try. I sighed, closed my eyes, held the rune in my mind, and pushed the Axis's power into it.



As its avatar, the Axis had selected Galas End-Bringer, the archon who'd Forged the Axis. Galas appeared in my mind, and the two of us stood face-to-face in a vast, empty darkness.

"What do you know about Plaktukas? About the Veil?"

"After my time, obviously," Galas said, the Axis reinforcing

the illusion that this was *actually* Galas. “It was the first time the Axis had been given such a conceptual task, something so perpetual.”

“I know that.” The Axis was just parroting words from memory fragments I’d already seen. “How does it work?”

Galas stared for a moment. “They aren’t my memories,” he said slowly.

“Can I talk to Plaktukas?” I’d never tried asking the Axis to change avatars.

“No . . .” he said slowly, drawing out the word into a low, whispered moan. “There’s so little there. No place or time for what is.”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“I am anchored. I am anchored to the place and time when I *was*.” The Axis’s insistence on speaking as Galas seemed to make it stumble over its syntax. “But some are *not* anchored. Not to when they were. My memories of them”—as if the real Galas could have memories about people who lived centuries after he’d died—“are fractured. Floating. With no anchor.”

Anchor a memory. I’d read about the concept, hadn’t I? I waited for a moment to see if the comment triggered any of the Axis’s memories, but nothing came. Something of my own, then, some experience I’d had. It had to have been a book. But I’d read so many in my five lonely years as an apprentice.

I dismissed the magic and Galas faded. Opening my eyes, I said, “Books on anchoring memories.”

It took a while, but the shadow servants eventually delivered a slim volume entitled *Funerary Rites, Precautions, and Recommendations*.

I blinked. Hadn’t expected that.

The book was only about a hundred years old, so I assumed it was still meaningful. Flipping it open, I saw that it was the third edition: the first was apparently more than twelve

centuries old and had been written by an entirely different author. Apparently witchkind's aversion to change extended to our funeral traditions.

I began reading.

I skimmed detailed descriptions of how to prepare the deceased's body and of offerings to be made to the earth, in thanks for a life well-lived. There was an extensive list of attire considered appropriate for the funereal, the receiving of friends, and the thirty-day period of mourning. There were recipes for food and drink to be laid out for the aforementioned receiving of friends. There were even diagrams about how to arrange the furniture in a pub for celebratory gatherings during the thirty days of mourning.

Had the families of all the people to whom I'd offered merciful Endings been subjected to this?

It seemed like a lot, and I almost gave up, but I still hadn't found the bit about anchoring memories. If the shadows had brought this book to me, then it definitely contained what I was looking for, or at least something similar. I continued reading, careful not to skim too quickly for fear of missing some key piece of information. It wasn't until very near the end of the book that I ran across an elegant rune:



It was an odd rune, clearly old. I'd seen a few truly ancient runes here and there, and they were all more stylized than our modern ones. This looked to be something in between,

marrying the complexity of the oldest runes I'd seen with the bold, purposeful strokes of the runes I'd grown up with.

The book named it *atminties inkaras*, the Anchoring of Memory. It was intended to fix the deceased's memories to a particular place, such as a family home or some location that they'd loved in life. By holding their memories in place, friends and love ones could visit, and the magic would enhance any memories that they shared with the deceased: anniversaries, special occasions, and the like. The book urged readers to choose their loved one's *most* special place because the rune could only be cast once for a given person.

Perhaps Plaktukas hadn't erased his memories. Perhaps he'd *stored* them. Could this rune have preserved Plaktukas's memories for that long?

I read more closely. The book didn't mention a time limit. That said, the entire manuscript was written with the assumption that the casting was completed shortly after someone had passed, so the authors might not have felt it necessary to spell out something like a time limit.

But it was *something*. The only lead I had so far, in fact.

I needed to find a place that had been special to Plaktukas. That's where the rune's magic would be strongest—where the spell had likely been cast. The Tower was the obvious answer, but I hesitated: the man had seemingly gone to great lengths to avoid leaving much of an imprint on the Axis. Who was to say he'd even spent much time in the Tower? I didn't want to risk casting the rune here in case Plaktukas's secrecy was well founded. No, I needed to find where Plaktukas had lived *before* becoming an adherent. Surely a family home would have carried strong and fond memories. Excluding mine, of course.

Back to the books and Plaktukas's single communications journal.

It took the rest of the day, but I finally managed to piece it

together. Between the communications journal and an enormous, unwieldy tome—*Adherents of the Second Era: Heroes, Enigmas, Scapegoats, and Sacrifices; Their Stories, Their Failures, and Their Triumphs*—I learned that Plaktukas had grown up in one of the older parts of a then-small village called Twynsits.

Huh.

During my apprenticeship, I'd read a number of books on high philosophy. One introduced me to the term *synchronicity*. The author had theorized that there was no such thing as coincidence, that the layer of magic covering the world worked to bring things together as needed. I'd dismissed the idea, but it suddenly came back to me.

Twynsits. Plaktukas's childhood home was in one of my favorite towns, the one I'd just visited. The one where I'd further damaged the Veil that Plaktukas had created.

If magic was responsible for that, then magic had a dark sense of humor.

There was a decently detailed description of the neighborhood, one I hoped would be sufficient to pinpoint the building in the modern town.

It was time to meet my predecessor.

Summoning Memories

I took myself to a quiet alley in Twynsits, holding the Axis ready to End the memories of any humans who saw me arrive. None did, and as I stepped out, I found the streets largely deserted. The humans' fear of witchkind was keeping them in their homes, I guessed.

I'd not spent much time in the older section of the town where the original village had begun. I knew it was near the river, but I had no idea which *side* of the river on which to begin. There were more humans at the docks, working and closing up shops, and I dared not draw attention to myself with offbeat questions like, "Excuse me, can you tell me which of these buildings was part of the original village a few hundred years ago?"

I needed someone friendly who knew the—

Ah.

I wasn't used to having friends.

I swiftly took myself back to my Tower, appearing in the map room. "Gemma," I instructed the map table, holding in my mind both her image and her sweet, layered scent. The

image on the table—which looked like a hand-drawn paper map of the continent—slid and spun, centering on Twynsits. The town grew larger and larger, eventually covering the entire table. A mote of green light glowed over a building.

I noted the location carefully in my mind and then wrapped the Axis around myself, again invoking its Form of Travel. This time, a human saw me arrive, dropping a basket of vegetables in surprise. I quickly Ended her memory of my arrival before scanning the building before me. That was the trick bit with our hidden spaces: my map table would focus only on the real, physical human building, leaving me to figure out where the hidden space was. Fortunately, witchkind inns advertised themselves: a symbol for lodging was carved into a wooden lintel above a small window.

Beside the window was the entry rune. I stepped up to it, quickly scanned the street to ensure I wouldn't be observed, and touched it.

I was whisked into a cozy lobby lit by a handful of merrily blazing wall sconces. A cluster of comfortable-looking chairs sat in one corner, while—

“Oh! Daniel!” I turned to see Gemma standing behind a counter, several ledger books spread open before her. “I was hoping I'd see you again!” Her eyes were twinkling in the fire-light. “Any luck with the human situation?”

“I may have.” I stepped up to the counter and peered at the ledgers. “I thought you were no good at the family business?”

She blushed beneath her lovely skin. “Record keeping is my one saving grace. Scholars need a head for rows upon rows of numbers, and it turns out I do. So the family grabs me for a day whenever I visit to run over the accounts and make sure all's in order.” She flipped the books closed, stacking them neatly before stowing them beneath the counter. “So what brings you here?”

"I don't know the older parts of Twynsits," I admitted, "and I believe my next step is in a home in the older section—where the original village began."

"Do you have an address? The streets in those areas are a bit twisty."

"I don't. But I do have a description." I withdrew a small piece of paper with my notes.

Gemma read them with a small frown. "This'll definitely be on the other side, then," she mused. "You know, I actually think I know where this might be." Her frown deepened. "You might not be happy with this."

My brow creased. "Why not?"

"If it's the area I'm thinking of, it's perilously close to where the iron roadway crosses the river. There's a depot nearby. Any witchkind still living there . . . well. They might not be."

My mood soured instantly. Another dead end, and likely my last one.

Gemma must have caught something in my expression because she came around the counter and linked her arm with mine. "Don't look so cross. Perhaps we'll find it still standing and accessible. We won't know until we try."

I forced a smile. It honestly wasn't difficult: having her standing so close, our arms intertwined, made me feel loose—slightly distracted. Well, certainly more hopeful, although I couldn't say about what. "I can take us there directly," I offered.

"It might yet be safer to walk," she said. "Hmm." She withdrew her arm, reached up to her hair, and removed a bright-red ribbon. "Might as well try to blend in," she said as she tucked the ribbon into a pocket. Her dress was rust colored and would fit in well enough with the humans' drab clothing. I didn't own anything that wasn't gray or black, so I'd fit in just as well. "Come," she said, reclaiming my arm and leading me to the exit rune, which whisked us back outside.

Once I'd confirmed nobody had seen us return to the street, we set off, walking close together. Although not quite as huddled as the few panicked humans we passed, we could easily maintain a low conversation.

"So what's the significance of the place we're headed to?"

I hesitated. Gemma knew I was an adherent; it was all but impossible to hide, and she'd acknowledged it when we'd first met. But she also acknowledged that she didn't know which Axis I served. And I'd never met any witchkind who didn't get hesitant about my company once they knew exactly what I was. Would telling her what I'd found be a clue? Would she shy away from me, once she knew? Could I—

I shook my head. Time enough to worry about that later. "I believe it was the childhood home of Plaktukas."

Her hand tightened around my arm. "The one who created the Veil? Are you serious? It would have to be centuries old." She didn't seem to attach any special significance to my revelation.

"Aren't the older buildings from that era?"

She thought for a moment. "And before, I suppose. If they've space of wit—" She paused. If those buildings include *our* spaces," she corrected, quickly looking around to see if any humans were listening as we hurried along, "then they should still be in one piece."

"Except for the iron."

"Except for that, yes. Although I'm given to understand they mainly demolished their government buildings to make room for the roadway and its depot. Homes were left intact, but being so close to all that iron—"

"The physical structures would have fallen apart more quickly once our spaces' power was drained."

She nodded. "Sadly, yes. Few of their buildings are built well enough to last for decades, let alone centuries, without m

—” She caught herself again. “That is, without us holding them together.”

We fell quiet as four humans, clutching each other for support, rushed past us. One tight-faced man gave us a brief nod, his eyes scanning us as if to detect any signs of magic.

“It’s surprising that they’ve never figured out how to build better,” I said as we continued. Gemma guided me through a series of turns I’d never remember. Directions weren’t important when you could simply appear wherever you wanted, so I’d never picked up the habit of paying attention. The streets were now becoming more curved and organic, unlike the straight, regular blocks of the more recently built sections. The buildings had a different style as well—less stone and more wood.

“Their buildings are stronger in the smaller villages where there are fewer of us secretly adding spaces. But they’re more expensive to build. In the larger towns, they just do what they’ve always done, and we add spaces everywhere we can, which strengthens the physical structures. From their perspective, their building methods have always been sufficient and long lasting. Why build better when you don’t think you have to?”

“I suppose. Couldn’t we also just put more of our spaces everywhere?”

“Well, the runes to create new spaces are complex and hideously expensive in terms of . . . power. There’s a single clan that holds the rights to them, and they can only do so much. And so any buildings they don’t attach spaces to within the first decade or so tend to fall into disrepair after thirty or so years.” I felt her shrug. “They—the Scintias Clan, that is—involve themselves with the human builders’ guilds, and they discourage any building that they don’t plan to attach spaces to.”

“Fascinating,” I said. I hadn’t realized that witchkind

involved themselves so directly in human affairs. But it made sense: falling buildings were a danger to everyone.

"We're almost there," Gemma said, slowing our pace. "Now, where was that—ah, here."

We ducked through a close alley and entered a square with a landscaped park filled with lush green grass. Benches were scattered here and there.

There was also a distinct *taste* in my mouth. I sniffed the air, trying to pinpoint the source.

"Foul, bitter taste? It's the iron," Gemma whispered with a grimace, letting go of my arm. "I hate it."

Now that she mentioned it, I could feel the Axis restlessly prowling in circles around us.

"From your description," Gemma was saying, again consulting the paper I'd handed her, "Plaktukas's childhood home should be there." She looked up and nodded.

"There" was a quaint, sturdy, two-story building. The upper level was clearly residential, with laundry strung over an adjacent alley to the building next door. The lower level was an apothecary shop. The structure seemed better built than most of its neighbors, with stacked stones forming the first story and heavy wood timbers holding the upper level.

"The runes must be just holding on," Gemma muttered. "Can you feel it?"

I could. The magic in the area was sliding slowly *through* our target, drifting toward the iron roadway depot somewhere beyond. The Axis, by contrast, was repelled, slipping slowly backward. I could feel the iron pounding against my heart, and I found my breathing slowly falling into sync with it.

"I don't know if I can go in," Gemma said warily. "It must have the sturdiest runes ever to still be standing."

Her logic seemed sound, yet as I looked around, none of the buildings in this idyllic little square looked at all damaged. I

sent the Axis flitting through the building to sense something of its constitution. "It's well built," I told her. "They've used some kind of mortar in the stones, and the wood is held together with thick pegs, not nails. The wood is . . . impregnated with something. It doesn't have any sense of"—I stopped myself from saying *End* and searched for a more suitable phrase. "Of rot," I finally finished.

"You can tell all that? Is it something to do with your Axis?"

"Anyone with sufficient magic could tell," I temporized. "Look," I added, indicating the building on our other side. "There's a tea shop in this one. Why don't you wait there?"

"Oh, some *ramuneliu* would be welcome, if they have it. It'll mask the taste in the air." She patted my arm and walked into the shop.

I stepped forward and studied what I hoped was indeed Plaktukas's home. There were no entry runes anywhere on the front, but I found one—intricately carved into a flat-faced stone—in the alley, beneath the laundry that waved gently in the breeze. I touched the rune, fed it a bit of the Axis's magic, and was whisked inside.

A bell tinkled to announce my arrival, and before long, a middle-aged woman bustled into the tiny foyer in which I'd appeared. "Hello?" she asked cheerfully. "Wasn't expecting any visitors today, what with all the . . . you know." Her happy expression dimmed a bit.

"I apologize for the interruption. This may seem an odd question, but would you happen to know if this was the home of Adherent Plaktukas? It would have been long ago."

Her eyes grew wide, and her face broke into a broad smile. "It is indeed!" she said, nodding as she spoke. "Our family has given many to the Axes over the ages, but only he to the Sixth. Are you a historian?"

"I—" I began, intending to deny it, but quickly realized I needed a cover. "Yes. Of a sort."

But she'd already squinted and truly *looked* at me. A family accustomed to having children Chosen for the Axes should be able to tell what I was in an instant, and it was indeed just an instant before she nodded more slowly. "I see. Welcome, Adherent of the Tower." She bobbed a little bow. "How may we help you?" Her tone was serious now, layered with respect and perhaps just a bit of trepidation.

"Plaktukas's Veil is thinning here, as you know." She nodded again, her brow wrinkling in concern. "I'm hoping to anchor his memories here, where he grew up, and learn what can be done to save it."

Now her mouth formed a wide O. "I would have thought he'd been anchored at the Tower," she said softly. "Or is that not the custom of the Tower?"

It isn't our custom, because in a way he died when he ascended, not when he decided to stop being adherent. Also, the Tower would have been completely empty when he stepped down, so there'd have been nobody to cast the rune. Aloud, I simply said, "No, it isn't."

"It's been so long," she mused, looking around. "But the family histories cast him as a studious child. Perhaps his old bedroom?"

"If it isn't too much trouble." This was more than I'd hoped for.

"We've sent the children away to their relations in Evermore," she said, stepping through a narrow door and indicating that I should follow. She led me down a thin hallway to another door—had witchkind been notably thinner in Plaktukas's day?—which she opened. She then stepped aside and gestured for me to enter.

It was tiny, especially compared to the spacious rooms of

the family home in which I'd grown up. A thin sliver of a window magically brought in light from outside, while a slender bed took up half the floor space. A neat cupboard held drawers for clothes, and I could see storage boxes peeking out from beneath the bed.

"This may take some time," I said, settling myself on the bed. "If you don't mind."

"I'll just go make some tea for when you're done," she agreed from the doorway before threading her way back down the hallway.

Nothing for it but to begin. I held Plaktukas's name in my mind, overlaying it with the anchoring rune.



I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, caught by the shock of wind rushing out of me and my body locked in a never-ending spasm. I struggled to inhale, to stay standing, but to no avail. All warmth seemed to leave my body: I began to shudder with the chill. My face was numb, and the room began to spin around me. My heartbeat pounded in my ears so loudly that I thought my eardrums would burst. Unable to control my body any longer, I pitched backward, slamming my head against the wall. Stars exploded in my vision as the room continued to spin, and then everything went black.

“Adherent?”

I blinked a few times, my eyes adjusting to the wan light in the room. The homeowner was perched next to me on the bed, holding me up off the wall. “Ugh,” I managed.

“You cast the anchoring rune?”

I nodded slowly, testing myself to see if I was about to vomit. I thought not, although my stomach was still twisted around itself. It growled loudly as if to voice its displeasure.

“Surely you must have Gathered for days to power it?”

“Gathered?” I mumbled through a mouth that seemed full of rocks and cotton.

“Dear boy,” she tutted, pressing a warm mug of tea into my hands. I looked down and saw that my fingertips were blue. “Have you never used your personal magic before?”

“I—” I tried to answer, but my stomach heaved.

“I’ll take that as a no, then,” she said gently. “Stay here. Can you sit up?” She removed her hand from my back but held it ready to catch me.

“I think so,” I croaked.

“I’ll fetch some juice and some food. Focus on Gathering. Well, as much as you can with the cursed roadway so near.”

She scuttled from the room as my vision slowly stabilized. I’d had no idea that the rune would draw directly from my personal stores—I’d never, as she’s suspected, cast a single spell that I hadn’t powered using the Axis’s magic. I wasn’t even sure how to Gather magic for that purpose. But the Axis’s magic was already leaking back into me, and my awareness was slowly reasserting itself. The Axis sniffed around me with concern, dipping itself into and through me, apparently wondering what had happened.

By the time she returned, I’d downed half the warm tea and managed to pull myself into a more confident posture. “I’m doing better,” I told her. “I’m Daniel, by the way.”

"I know, dear. There's only one of you for us all to remember," she chided gently. "I'm Roze. Here, sip at the juice and eat these figs. The sugar will help." I did as she instructed and felt my energy quickly returning. "I assume you had enough to power the rune, as you're not dead."

"Dead?"

"A rune like that will take what it needs. Drain you completely, if it wants. I cast it for my parents when they passed, and even with a week of Gathering afore, I was knackered for just as long after. So if you're still with us, then you had enough power for it. Only just, I'd say, from the look of you."

"I'm always this pale," I said, meaning it as a joke.

"But not so blue, I'll wager. But that's fading, now."

So was the intense chill. "Can you feel his memories, then?"

She thought for a minute, and then shook her head. "Not that I would. That magic's meant for those who cast it, first and foremost. I tell my children stories of their grandparents, and then the magic will work for them. But of Plaktukas I've heard nothing but the legends, of course. We didn't have his memories when he finally passed, so we never handed them down."

Hopefully the Axis would be sufficient for me. "I have another part to do," I told Roze, "but it uses the Axis's power. Not my own. I'll probably seem like I'm in a trance for a bit."

She frowned with concern. "I'll keep an eye on you."

I shook my head. "No. Give me peace while I do this, but feel free to check in on me after a few minutes. If . . . should anything seem wrong, I've a friend, a young lady. She's in the tea shop across the square. Curly hair, rust-colored dress. Gemma."

"I'll fetch her," Roze said.

I started to stop her, to tell her that Gemma could stay there instead of coming closer to where the iron pulled the magic, but decided I'd rather have Gemma next to me if I blacked out

again. But then something occurred to me. “Roze,” I said as she stepped out of the room. She poked her head back in. “How is it that you can stand it? This close to the roadway?”

She shrugged. “You get used to it. Any closer and I don’t know that I could handle it, mind you. But here on the edge, magic can still be Gathered. You learn to resist the pull of it. And these buildings, they’re strong. They hold the magic as much as the magic holds them.”

“It does seem a special place.”

She stepped back in, suddenly animated. “It is! Tradition holds this was where the first anchors were driven into the world, to bring it out of chaos and make it real. The first school of magic was here, on this very site. That was ages and ages ago, but we’ve always believed that we’re close to magic’s source. Even all the iron in the world can’t drain it completely. My father believed that magic springs forth from the earth right near here and that all the iron can do is draw it back in so it can bubble up again, all in a big circle.”

I nodded slowly. I doubted it was true and hadn’t read anything to support it, but it was a nice story. “Thank you, Roze.”

She smiled. “I’ll just fetch your friend.”

I closed my eyes and invoked the rune for communing with the Axis.

“We’re doing this a lot these days,” Galas said as the darkness formed around us.

“Not you,” I told him. “I want Plaktukas. His memories are—should be—all around us.”

Galas fell quiet, regarding me carefully for many long moments. Then he looked around, as if he could see things in the darkness that I could not. And then his features twisted and blurred. A new man was standing before me.

“Plaktukas?”

He nodded uncertainly, his eyes casting around the darkness as Galas's had. In life, Plaktukas had been a striking man. A wavy mane of jet-black hair cascaded over his shoulders. He was tall, taller than me, with sharp, regal features. His eyes were a deep green and set into a face that was so black it seemed almost blue in places. His skin was smooth, and almost no age showed around his eyes or on his forehead.

"I never thought this to be." His voice was deep and resonant, but quiet, with an almost unreal, ethereal quality.

"You seem to have tried to ensure it."

He nodded slowly, still looking around before finally resting his gaze on me. "You have questions."

"The Veil. It's thinning."

His eyes widened and his jaw clenched. "How long has it been? Since . . . me."

"I don't even know. Not precisely. Centuries. Many of them. Millennia, even. I could check."

"Success, then," he sighed. "As much as I could have hoped for."

"Yes, but now it's thinning."

He snorted and drew himself up. "I told them," he scolded, "to keep their magic quiet and hidden. It's a delicate piece of magic." He took on a lecturing tone, managing to look down at me despite our similar heights. "The Veil wasn't meant to give us free license to flout our power. I told them all to be secretive. Careful. I was *very* clear."

It felt as though he was scolding me directly, and I responded with a slight heat. "They have. We have. There was . . . an accident. It was unavoidable." I absolutely didn't want to get into it.

"Mmm," he said, his eyes boring into me. I reminded myself that this was the Axis, channeling the man's memories,

and the Axis knew full well what had happened outside the town a few days ago.

My face flushed. "Can you tell me how to fix it?"

He shrugged. "Renew the magic. It's torn loose, is all. Repair it. Reattach it."

"How?"

Memories slammed into my brain. Everything *shifted*, and I was looking from Plaktukas's eyes.

"You're certain this will work?" The man's workshop was an absolute mess, piles of paper lying everywhere. I scanned them quickly and saw no sign of my commission. *Well enough*. "I realize you can't exactly test it, but you're as certain as you can be?" Origin, I hated depending on this fool. But my own skill with constructs was vague at best, and they were the one area where he excelled.

Ewen smiled and nodded happily. "Absolutely, Plaktukas. You see, when the—"

"NO!" My heart started pounding. "Fool! Don't even say it. Try not to think it. If I hear it, it'll be embedded in the Axis."

Ewen frowned. Irritating little man. "I thought you could erase your memories?"

"End them," I said. "It's different, and I'm unfamiliar with the technique. There's . . . risk. Just assure me that you'll never speak of it. Don't even write it down."

He chewed his lip slightly, but then nodded, his customary look of bemusement once again settling over his features. "I shan't. But why the concern?"

"Because I've never met my successors. They could be monsters. As long as the Axis's power remains temporally fixed, tied to a place and time, fine. But this? What we're proposing is

ongoing. If others discover how to make the Axis's power—any Axis's power—permanent, who knows what they'll do?" I willed my heart to slow. It hadn't been said, and I hadn't seen it; it would still be safe.

Ewen attempted to look as if he'd understood anything I'd just said. "I see. You're right, Plaktukas. I'll be careful."

"No, you're going to have to carve it. By hand. The old way." I frowned at the mason.

He frowned back. He was doubtless accustomed to shaping rock with his magic, but here, in this place, I couldn't allow it. It seemed sacrilegious enough to have ordinary witchkind here at the Tower's base. "The boys won't like it. I'll have to—"

"Charge what you like." I had plenty of coins in the Tower. "Take whatever time you need. This isn't about the money. I need precision."

He puffed himself up. "Precision? Don't you worry about that. When we're done, you'll be able to—"

"I'll never look at it. I'll never even come down here again."

His brow wrinkled in confusion. "How will we get out, then?"

"It's taken hold, Plaktukas." The councilor looked relieved.

"Of course it has. I wasn't worried about it taking hold. It's always done that. It's just prone to falling back to sleep when there's only one world."

"I still don't understand that part. One world?"

Politicians were so thick sometimes. "It's meant to separate *worlds*, not peoples. The trick is to keep it awake even when

there are no worlds to separate. To End its slumber, if you will.” That had been the trick of it, and I still worried about whether my little loophole would hold it down after I . . . retired.

“That’s pretty abstract.” Now the councilor was back to looking concerned.

“Is it?” I disliked this little man and all of his little friends on the Taryba. I especially disliked how *simple* he needed everything to be. “Endings are the other side of Beginnings.”

He frowned. “And you know that the—”

“*Don’t* say it,” I growled.

“I wasn’t.” I ignored his look of annoyance. “So you’re sure that the *target* will do so? Act in perpetuity?”

Perpetuity. I rolled my eyes, letting more of my disdain show on my face. I very much wanted this conversation to be over. “Do you know how long the world went without an adherent before I was Chosen? Not to mention the five years I was held in the Tower, mastering my role?”

“It was six years, wasn’t it?”

“Exactly my point.”

He looked more confused than ever. “What do you mean?”

“It was sixty, not six. And where was the Axis all that time? Here. That’s what the Tower was *made* for. To hold things in perpetuity.” Even if its method was a little unnerving. “My new working will hold for as long as the Axis does. For as long as the Sixth can remain chained without an active adherent. Is that long enough for you?”

The idiot nodded, but I knew he didn’t understand the subtle grandeur of what I’d accomplished.

“Plaktukas, I think there’s a problem with this plan.”

“Oh?” I was already tired of people scurrying up to my Tower, interrupting my peace. Couldn’t they just do their jobs?

“I’ve just been going over the runes one more—”

Fury erupted in my heart. “You haven’t brought them here, have you?” I’d given her far more credit for intelligence than that, but if she’d—

“No! No, of course not. And I won’t discuss the specifics or name names. But . . . it’s an elegant construct.”

“Thank you. I don’t see the problem, then.”

“It’s just that. In the end, the Axis’s power won’t be enough. To attach it, I mean. I was looking over the records . . . you know, from when it was made.”

She was being cautious with her words. I nodded approval. “And?”

“There’s . . . a requirement. More than just power.”

Ah. She *was* intelligent if she’d caught that. Nobody else had. “I’m aware,” I said, careful to keep my voice cool.

“No, I mean—”

“I’m *aware*, my friend.” Her eyes widened as I nodded calmly. “I’m aware. This time had to come regardless. I’m long past my own Ending. At least I can do this for us.”

“Plaktukas . . .”

“That’s enough.”

I swam back to myself. My memories, my senses, everything in my mind was still spinning, but as the real world reasserted itself, I began to feel more stable. Exhausted and hard-used, but stable. I found Gemma sitting next to me. “I thought this was too close,” I mumbled. “To the iron.”

“Roze said you’d need help. But yeah, you owe me. I’ll never

get this taste out of my mouth. What's with depleting yourself and still spending magic?"

"The Axis's magic," I muttered.

"I think we should get you back to the inn."

"I agree," Roze said, her voice full of concern. "You need rest."

"I can get back on my own." To prove it, I summoned the Axis, wrapping it—

Nothing happened.

"Can you?" Gemma asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I felt that, lad," Roze said, shaking her head. "You need rest. Food. Perhaps a fortifying beverage."

"All of which we have at the inn."

"And my Thom can take you there in our cart," Roze said.

I surprised myself by acquiescing, distractedly mumbling promises of docility. But I did feel worse than when I'd triggered the communing magic—a surprise, given I'd drawn from the Axis's power rather than my own. I was depleted and tired, sore and unsourced.

I let the two of them half carry me to the exit rune to be whisked back to the street. I let them load me into the back of a cart. Gemma sat with me, stroking my hair and saying something in gentle tones that I never quite caught. I was already passing out again when we arrived at her family's inn, and I scarcely remember being carried and laid into a bed.

During it all, a single thought was burning in my mind.

He messed up.

Whoever Plaktukas had been speaking with *had* possessed a sketch of the rune, and he'd left it lying on a stack of papers. Plaktukas hadn't noticed it, or he'd turned away quickly, but *he'd seen it*.

And so I'd seen it. I had no idea what it meant, but I'd *seen* it.



Good Morning

I pried my eyes open, blinking furiously against the light flooding the room. *Where am . . . wait.*

I was in the Tower. In my bedroom. On my bed. The light came from the Tower's magic, filling the windowless room to imitate midafternoon.

How had I gotten here?

A barrage of memories assaulted my mind—not the full memories I was used to, but rather a deluge of snippets and fragments. An adherent out for a night of carousing, passing out on the street. Another adherent celebrating a holiday with family and falling asleep from too much wine and food. Another hiking through the forest and falling asleep in the dappled shade of a tree.

The memories all ended the same: in the Tower.

Slowly, the knowledge assembled itself in my brain as the fog in my mind dissipated. The Tower was meant to hold us here; remaining outside required conscious effort. An adherent could easily accomplish this when awake, but fall asleep, and the magic would draw them back to their bed.

I hauled myself to my feet. I seemed to be fine: I was no longer exhausted, the room wasn't spinning, and I could feel all of my extremities—which weren't, upon close inspection, blue tinted anymore. I could sense the Axis slithering about the Tower, waiting for me to wake. Even now, I could feel its awareness focusing on me without concern.

Something rustled in my pocket as I stood.

I withdrew a crumpled scrap of paper. "Inn of the Dancing Horse" was neatly printed across the top, but the rest of the page was taken up by a carefully sketched rune:



I recognized the strokes as my own, and my beleaguered brain slowly remembered. I'd seen this rune in the memories of Plaktukas that the Axis had experienced. This rune was the key to whatever magic Plaktukas had constructed, the magic that he hadn't wanted any future adherent to know. Magic that apparently woke something ancient. It wasn't of the Sixth Axis, but it could separate humans and witchkind.

Plaktukas had thought to hide that rune to prevent any of his successors from knowing about it. But he'd failed. I found myself worried for a moment. Now the rune was in *my* memories. What had Plaktukas said? *I've never met my successors. They could be monsters.* Something about this rune construct had

worried him, and he'd painstakingly worked to keep it out of the Axis's memories of him. Why, I didn't know. That was a problem for later. For now, I needed this to fix the Veil.

The Veil.

Plaktukas didn't create the Veil, I realized as everything connected in my mind. *It already existed. He woke it.* But for some reason he'd known it would go back to sleep on its own, and so he'd tied his magic, this rune construct to . . . something. Something perpetual. Something carved into rock?

I shook my head. My memories were still fuzzy. I needed *kavos*. The hot, stimulating beverage would set me right.

To Twynsits, where I could grab a drink and let Gemma know I was okay. In Gemma's family inn, I found her behind the counter. "Oh!" she exclaimed lightly as she looked up from a ledger, a pen in her hand. Then her head swiveled to the hallway next to the counter, which I guessed led to the sleeping rooms. Then, looking back at me, her brow creased. "How did you sneak past me?"

Right. I was supposed to be sleeping in one of those rooms. "You seemed preoccupied?" I hazarded.

She chuckled and her expression relaxed. "I suppose I am. I'm supposed to head back to Evermore in a couple of days—we've saved up the magic already—but I really want to get through the last of these ledgers. But how are you feeling? You look much better."

"I feel better. Refreshed. Perfectly fine, in fact. Thank you for taking care of me."

She dimpled. "You're very welcome."

"I wondered if you'd like a mug of *kavos*. Perhaps a bite?"

Now she laughed. "It's a bit late for that. *Kavos* is a morning drink for me, and you've slept until"—she looked up at the timepiece hanging behind me—"well past noon! No wonder you feel refreshed," she teased. "But there's a shop

down the road, a witchkind one, that has an all-day breakfast as well as sandwiches and soups. We should both be able to find something there.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Indeed, my stomach was all but howling in anticipation. “If you can spare the time.” I nodded at the countertop.

She flipped the ledger closed and stashed it under the counter. “A girl’s got to eat!”

Once again, she came out from behind the counter, linked arms with mine, and led me back to the street. I lurched forward, but she held me back a moment. “A trick some of us are trying,” she whispered, leaning so close to my ear that her words tickled. “Rather than appearing and marching off, we simply stand here for a bit, as if we’ve been doing so for some time.” She drew her head back and laughed a bit, patting my arm as if I’d just told a tremendous joke. “See?”

A pair of humans had apparently caught sight of us appearing out of thin air and stopped to stare, but as we showed no reaction and acted as if we’d been standing there, they just shook their heads and moved on.

“They’ve assumed they didn’t see us to begin with, not that we appeared out of thin air,” Gemma said, echoing my thoughts. “We should be safe now.” She set off, our arms still linked.

At the shop, we waited until the street had cleared a bit, then Gemma touched the entry rune. We appeared in a magically lit shop full of neat white tables, each with two or four chairs. We took an empty two-top, and a young server hurried over with a smile to take our order.

The food—and the blessed mug of *kavos* I so desperately wanted—came out quickly. I’d ordered a hearty breakfast of eggs, a rasher of bacon, and toasted bread. Gemma had gone lighter, requesting a small bowl of clear soup.

“So did you ultimately discover anything useful?” she asked as I tucked into my food.

“Mmm. Yes, I believe so. Solid clues at least,” I said between bites.

“Can you share?”

I laid my utensils down and leaned toward her, keeping my voice low. “I believe the Veil is not of the Sixth Axis. Not of any Axis, in fact. Plaktukas’s memories suggest he’d discovered older magic, one long dormant. He used the Axis—his Axis, that is—to wake it.”

Her eyes had grown wide. “I hadn’t realized the Sixth Axis could . . . well, I guess I just think of it as . . . you know.”

I nodded. “Death. The Ending of things. I know. I did too. Everyone does, right? But something in one of Plaktukas’s memories . . .” I trailed off, trying to remember exactly what he’d said. The Axis, having now incorporated those memories into itself, supplied the quote: “Endings are the other side of Beginnings.”

Her eyes grew even wider and some emotion—surprise, perhaps?—flashed across her face. It was gone in less than an instant, and I decided I’d probably imagined it.

“Do you think you can . . . what is it you have to do? Can you even do it?” She laid her spoon down. “I don’t even know which Axis you serve!” she said with a smile.

“It will take more than one Axis, I suspect.” Though I had no idea if that was true or how the other four would contribute. I simply didn’t want to tell her who I really was. I don’t know why, but—

Yes I did. I enjoyed our time together, and I knew it would be over if she knew who I was. *What I was. I’d End our relationship*, I thought darkly. At first I simply wanted to avoid the usual awkwardness and reticence witchkind always felt around me. Now, not telling Gemma . . .

I wanted to feel her touch again, and I knew I wouldn't if she knew.

Especially if she knew what I'd done to endanger us all.

"But," I continued, "I don't know exactly. Not yet. I've some research to do, some things to try. With the others, of course. But this is more information than I've had . . . than we've had."

"And yet you're sitting here finishing breakfast with me." She smiled.

I blushed. "I needed food. And . . ." Too soon? Should I? Shouldn't I? I decided just to plow ahead. "I really enjoy your company." I looked deep into her eyes then, trying to project as much sincerity as I could.

Her expression seemed to soften. "As do I," she said softly. "But I'd feel terrible if I distracted you from this. Is there anything I can do to help?"

I cleaned the last of my plate and considered. "I don't think so." The Axis was eddying lazily around Gemma, not seeming to object to her presence or my interest in her. Maybe . . . well, perhaps this was hoping for too much. But maybe I didn't *need* to be alone, to solve this on my own. *Was* there anything she could help me with? "Has this ever happened before? To the Veil, I mean?"

She chewed her lip for a moment. "It has. There are stories. But it's always reasserted itself."

"So this isn't *entirely* urgent." That earned me a few dark stares from patrons at nearby tables. I lowered my voice a bit more and had the Axis End sound in the space around Gemma and me. "Perhaps it will just do that again?"

"I don't know." She definitely looked uncertain. "There are stories. Histories. Cautionary tales, really. I remember, when I was little, there was a rhyme my mother used to recite at night before bedtime:

Magic, magic, burning bright
 The Veil rewards a touch that's light
 And keeps us safe from human sight
 A small mistake the Veil will heal
 So no human knows that we are real
 Shine before a group so small
 Offend the Veil but lose not all
 Healing magic to the rescue call
 But burn too bright and you will learn
 Tear the Veil, the Hunts return

"She never explained what 'healing magic' meant, but I always assumed that you could get away with a little bit and that the Veil could be fixed. But . . . 'a group so small.'"

"No, an entire town." I sighed.

"I've never read or heard about an entire town being in an uproar. I think it depends on the problem being with a small group and convincing them that nothing happened."

Which could have simply meant one of my predecessors stepped in and Ended their memories—the exact thing I couldn't do on the scale we were now dealing with.

"And never with their Church involved," Gemma whispered.

"How does that make it different?"

"You saw those people with torches. The Church . . . do you know anything about it?"

I shrugged. "It's all stories and ceremonies."

"Well yes, but the humans believe the stories are real. And to be fair, some are. Stories of magic wreaking havoc, of witchkind—'witches'—withholding magic and using it selfishly. Those things happened. But no, what I meant was, Do you know the role the Church plays in their society?"

Zmogus hadn't put much stock in the humans' religious

stories. I'd taken that as a general feeling across all of witchkind, but maybe it wasn't. "Not really."

She sighed and took a spoonful of soup before continuing. I signaled our server for another mug of *kavos*. "In a way, their Church sets the tone of their society." Gemma's voice had taken on a lecturing tone, and I wondered for the first time exactly what she studied in Evermore. History? Human society? "The Church is their moral center. The priests hold enormous sway over what humans think is right—and what they think is wrong. The governments—they don't have a worldwide council like we do. All of their governments are strictly local, an individual village or town."

I shook my head. Humans were so disorganized.

"The Church is what binds them all together and creates consistency across local governments. If the Church issues an edict, all the governments move to basically turn the edict into law. It was the Church that originally declared an end to the Hunts. Most scholars think it was because they wanted the manpower put to other uses. But with the Church wound up about magic again . . ."

"They can turn that into law. Into action."

Gemma nodded sadly. "And the Veil *isn't* reasserting itself this time."

"Maybe we just need a distraction. A big one. Something that will take their minds of magic and let the Veil come back into force." I still had no idea how to piece together all the bits I'd learned from Plaktukas's memories.

She frowned. "I don't know. Maybe. Nobody really knows much about how the Veil actually works. I'd have thought the adherent of the Sixth . . . Hey," she said suddenly, her eyes widening. "Has anyone asked him?"

"Him who?"

"The adherent of the Sixth!"

Ugh. Of course she'd suggest that. It made the most sense, didn't it? But I'd have to explain that *I* was the adherent of the Sixth—that I'd been, if not lying to her, then certainly dancing around the truth. And it would come out that I'd *caused* all of this in the first place. No, now wasn't the time. I'd been enjoying her company so much and getting to know her—no. "The . . . senior adherents. That is, they're . . . the ones working on it. From that end. I was . . . I'm following this side of it." That sounded pathetic even to me.

"I know you don't want to tell me which Axis you work for," she said softly.

"It's—complicated being an adherent. I don't have any family, like most of them. It's . . . hard to . . . I wish the Axis wasn't the entirety of my life," I finished in a rush, feeling heat creeping into my neck.

She smiled softly and nodded. "But now you're telling me the Veil isn't even of the Sixth Axis."

I swallowed heavily and nodded, forcing my heart to slow. "I don't think it is. That's what I need—I mean, it's what I need to tell them. Plaktukas did something, but I think all he was doing was . . . reusing something else. His memories spoke of *waking* something."

Her expression dipped back into a frown. "I don't understand."

I hesitated, but I'd allowed enough deceit between us already. I knew I was risking driving her away, that she'd already been so patient. I decided to trust her. "I found this." I withdrew from my pocket the crumpled piece of paper with the sketched rune and slid it toward her. She spread it out and inhaled sharply. "You recognize it?"

"No, not exactly." She smoothed out the paper again and turned it a few times, as if trying to determine which side of the rune was the top. "It's old."

"I figured as much."

"No, *very* old, Daniel. It reminds me a bit of the runes they use to construct new spaces within human buildings. They're finer, like this. More complex. I think it's why they take so much magic. What does this one do?"

I hadn't realized her scholarly pursuits had included rune lore. "I don't know."

"Is this how the Veil was created? Or awakened, or whatever?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure what it does yet."

"Have you tried casting it?"

"Not yet. It needs an anchor, and I don't know what. There's just too much—"

"Daniel." It wasn't Gemma's voice, but a sharp, cutting one. Like a javelin made of—

"Ah. Debesi." I nodded to the senior adherent of Sky.

"You've been an annoying quarry, and now I see you're—" She frowned with disapproval, taking in my empty plate, Gemma, and the shop in general.

"Eating, Debesi. One does." I kept my voice even, trying to project some measure of authority. Gemma looked positively terrified.

Debesi's mouth quirked into something approaching a sneer. "Come with me at once. There's a problem."

The Hunt

Traveling by means of the Sky Axis's Form of Travel was odd. I'd felt strangely diaphanous, drawn into a mist, before reforming as myself in another square in Twynsits. I patted myself to discard any remaining mist, but I seemed to have arrived perfectly dry.

"This is their mother church," Debesi said in a low, hard voice. "I'm using the air around us to mask us from sight, just in case," she added.

"In case what?"

"In case they see us, you dolt." Zmogus stepped beside me. He seemed to ripple slightly as he stepped through Debesi's magic. His expression was even harder than usual, smoldering with anger. I found it more terrifying than if he'd been hurling his usual insults at me.

"Look to the church," Debesi murmured.

I turned. This church was much larger than the last I'd seen, with a grand staircase of white granite leading to a large open patio that spread out before the soaring entry doors. On that

patio, the humans had erected a pile of wood. A single tall post rose from the middle of that pile.

"What's happening?" I asked, panic coloring my voice. A middle-aged woman was tied to the post, and I could see that she was witchkind. Her magic swirled gently around her, and even at this distance, I could sense her fear.

My Axis's attention drifted slowly toward the church. An Ending was nigh, and its interest was piqued.

"She's been accused of being a witch," Debesi said frostily. "They're going to burn her."

"Burn—that's ludicrous," I protested. *Origin defend*, I thought in a panic. *I've killed her*.

"It's the Hunts," Zmogus growled.

Surely something could be done. Between us, we commanded an immense amount of magic. It couldn't come to this! "Your Axis is Flame. Can't you just stop it?"

"Child!" Zmogus spat. "Of course not!" Debesi held up a hand for quiet, likely concerned that whatever she was doing with her Axis wouldn't shelter us if we were yelling. I had my own Axis create a sound-dampening zone around us. Debesi arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Why not?"

"They know how fire works, you simpleton. I can't just stop dry wood from burning. They'd be even more convinced that magic was at work. That priest would further enrage the crowd, starting a riot."

But to just burn a woman on a whim! "Isn't there a trial or something?"

"Likely not, or if their religion demanded one," Debesi said, her full attention on the church. "They accomplished it quickly and only as a show. They're certainly not going to engage in true justice after riling up a mob."

She was right: the square was packed with angry, jeering,

and yelling humans—all of them clearly ready for blood. Their fervor could even be heard through my sound-Ending magic as a deep, guttural moan. I could smell their sweat, which was somehow amplified by having this many of them crowded together. I saw nothing but urgent tension. This crowd wanted a death, and if they didn't get it, they would explode.

"This," Zmogus said, his tone an intense and dangerous growl, "is what happens when children don't mind their elders."

My stomach knotted up, and I flushed with anger all at once. I opened my mouth for a retort but quickly thought the better of it. He wasn't wrong.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Fix the Veil, you layabout!" Debesi snapped, turning to glare at me with her gold, piercing eyes. "Not lounge around having leisurely lunches while our people are Hunted and burned!"

"He was doing what?" Zmogus asked, danger cutting an edge into his voice.

"I can End the flames," I offered.

"So can I, fool. We just discussed that." Zmogus was openly contemptuous now.

"I'm *working* on the Veil," I said, and even to my own ears, I sounded like a whining child. "I've recovered Plaktukas's memories. I've found a rune construct, one I believe he used to summon the Veil in the first place. Possibly to make it persistent."

"Then why haven't you fixed it?" Zmogus demanded.

"I only just found it, Zmogus! And I don't know exactly *where* to cast it. But," I said, pointing to the church, "we can't just let her burn." I'd offered mercy Endings before. It's what I'd offered Mother. But this death was perfectly avoidable. Letting her die would be like murder. I wasn't a murderer.

The priest at the top of the stairs was waving his arms and was joined by two more priests from inside the church. Both carried lit torches.

Debesi shrugged. "End her now, then. You can at least save her from suffering." As I had for Mother.

"Won't anything else stop them?" I asked softly, gathering the Axis around myself. Debesi was right: if this was inevitable, then I could at least offer a mercy Ending. Even if the poor woman couldn't directly ask for it.

"Cover the sky in clouds," said a voice behind me. I turned to see a younger adherent who'd stepped inside the sound-deadening zone.

"Cyril, why are you here?" Debesi snapped.

"Just trying to assist," he said in a placating tone.

I ignored Debesi. "Why? The clouds I mean? Why that?"

Cyril gave me an intense look. "It's a sign that their god doesn't want to see what they're doing. A sign of disapproval." Debesi snorted at that. "But I'm an Earth adherent. I can't do it."

"It wouldn't work," Debesi said flatly. "There isn't near enough moisture in the air. And even if we had a brace of Sea adherents, there's not enough time to pull enough from the river. Besides, I've seen how human priests work. They'd find a way to twist its meaning into whatever they wanted. They're experts at manipulating signs and portents. It's practically all they do."

"But you know. . ." She sounded distracted, now, and she was again looking at the church, her eyes slitted in concentration. "You might have another option."

"The officiant," Zmogus said, nodding slowly.

"What about him?" I asked.

He pointed to the trio of priests. "The one in the middle is a senior priest. That's why he's wearing that tall cap and the

white robes. This whole ceremony is about calling down their god's wrath, and that's his job. Obviously, when that doesn't happen, when they don't get a pillar of fire blasting down from the sky, they'll save their god the trouble and light the fire themselves. But they can't do that if the officiant dies before actually calling for it."

"Dies?" My heart started beating faster.

"And fairly soon," Debesi said, still sounding distracted. "I think they're wrapping up. Listen."

I dropped the Axis's sound buffer and concentrated on the officiant's words. "We are commanded to seek out those among us who play with evil powers beyond nature's realm!" he shouted. "Our forefathers learned their lesson well! They attempted to control magic, to bring it under their heel, but it always fought back! Always slithered free and sought to subjugate us! Thus the commandment to suffer not a witch to live! Thus the commandment to Hunt them and burn them from this world! And so our forefathers did so, and how were they rewarded?" The crowd roared an incoherent response. "Our Lord saw our efforts and was pleased, and once we had burned out enough of the infection, he took the rest of the witches from this world! We were freed from their power!"

"Blithering idiot," Debesi muttered. "That was Plaktukas's Veil, not your fictional god."

"Evil magic has crept into our world again, and this is our proof!" The priest pointed at the poor woman of witchkind they'd tied to their stake. "She was seen appearing from nowhere, vile power glowing in her hands! Sent by the Beast to torture and enslave!" The crowd roared again, its fury building. "And so we must Hunt, and we must burn—until the Lord sees our efforts and removes the witches once again!"

The priest was truly worked up, spittle flying from his lips as he ranted. But the humans packed into the square didn't

think it was mere drama. This was serious to them. Deadly serious. This is what the Hunts must have been like—humans, terrified and worked into a frenzy by the Church, turning on us in a blind, righteous rage.

“We are being tested, my children! Will we prevail?”

The crowd’s response was affirmative and overwhelming. The masses began pushing toward the church’s stairs.

“If you can End him,” Zmogus said, “make it look natural.”

“I can handle getting her,” Debesi said confidently. “Zmogus, can you create some kind of distraction so they don’t see her vanish?”

“I can, but the boy must do his part. End the officiant, Daniel.”

“Or End that poor woman before they set her ablaze.” Debesi turned, fixing me with another hard, penetrating stare. “You’re the adherent of the Sixth. Endings are your domain. Choose.”

I turned back to the scene before us, my throat tightening and my heart slamming against the inside of my chest. The officiant had turned toward the pyre and was shouting something incoherent at it. I didn’t want this choice. I didn’t want to End *anyone* before their time.

But I’d taken that choice away from myself, hadn’t I?

My eyes blurred, and I reached up to rub them. My hand came away wet with tears.

“The priest,” I croaked.



I felt the Axis's disapproval. This was an unjust Ending; the man had done nothing in the Axis's eyes to deserve this. It had come for the woman's End, and it resisted conferring that on another. But I was its adherent, and it remained obedient to me, arrowing toward the officiant just as his companions were turning to walk toward the piled wood and their unfortunate, innocent victim. I'd sent the Axis after the man's heart, a complex modification of the basic rune of Ending. He clutched his chest, falling to his knees and gasping for breath.

The Tower's Foundation would have a new crack this day.

The crowd fell silent. Tension hung in a dense, invisible fog over the square, pressing down on us all, waiting for the smallest spark to trigger an explosion.

The other two priests quickly leaned down to help their still-gasping colleague, one of them laying a still-burning torch on the stone patio.

"Idiot," Zmogus said in a smug, satisfied tone.

That torch flared, all of its wood suddenly ablaze. The flames instantly caught the junior priest's robes, leaping from him to the other torchbearer and then to the officiant I'd just Ended, who'd finally collapsed and died. Fire spread out along the patio, searing toward the pile of wood.

"Pity," Zmogus mused. "Hadn't thought about burning them all instead."

"I have the woman," Debesi said, vanishing in a blue-white mist.

I barely saw her appear next to the bound woman in the middle of the pyre before both of them vanished in a puff of mist. The pile of wood caught fire instantly, the flames soaring hot and high into the air, obscuring the fact that there was no longer anyone bound to the upright post.

The crowd howled its approval, a sudden, bloodthirsty wall of sound that almost knocked me flat.

Zmogus continued to keep the flames roaring high for the crowd. The younger adherent behind me put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me back a step. "We need to do something about this," he whispered urgently.

"I know. I'm—"

"Not just the Veil," he said. "The humans. The Church. You're not alone," he added. I felt a quick wash of power as the man sank into the ground beneath us.

Zmogus turned to fix me with a hateful glare. "Fix the Veil, child."

I could do nothing but nod.

The Foundation

Gemma had left the workshop. I found her in her family's inn, a stack of ledgers in her arms.

"Daniel!"

"I'm sorry I had to leave so quickly."

"No, I understand." She set her burden on the counter. "Is everything all right? That woman seemed concerned."

"That was Debesi, senior adherent of Sky. And yes, it was urgent. The humans had a woman of witchkind tied to a stake . . . to burn her." All the color seemed to drain from Gemma's soft, lovely face. "We stopped them. The woman is fine. But I need to go."

"Daniel, is it that bad? Is it . . . the Hunts?"

I nodded gravely. "When were you planning to return to Evermore?"

"Tomorrow, actually, I just need to—"

"Go now. Tonight. As early as you can. You said you had the necessary magic?" She nodded. "Then go. Tell your family to stay inside. Don't risk appearing anywhere you might be

seen. Have them spread the word.” I gathered my Axis to myself.

“Will I see you again?” She seemed so frightened, so desperate. My heart almost broke.

“I’ll find you.”

“Promise.”

My stomach fluttered. “I promise.” I truly hoped I could keep it. But the consequences of my failings needed dealing with, even if it meant never seeing her again.

“I need to go.” I seized the Axis. When I appeared in the Tower library, I realized I’d used a powerful traveling magic that wouldn’t look anything like the methods used by the four elemental Axes. Unless I concocted some excuse—a lie—Gemma would know which Axis I served. Death. Endings. My chest tightened. *She’d know*. Perhaps I could later convince her it had been ordinary magic fueled by my Axis. If there was ordinary magic that did such a thing. Or—

I shook my head to clear it. I needed to focus.

I looked around at the books, encircling me and soaring high above me. None of them had given me an answer. I needed to . . .

What? What could possibly be next?

I shook my head again. Why couldn’t I concentrate?

I was kidding myself. Almighty adherent I might be, but I was also just twenty-one. I wasn’t clever. My failings at the river and the current debacle proved that, didn’t they? Plaktukas had been clever. He’d contrived to hide information from the Sixth Axis itself. All I could do was endanger innocent women of witchkind.

Is this how history would remember me? Daniel the Failure? The adherent who’d shredded the Veil and eventually retired completely alone? Who’d endangered all of witchkind

and couldn't even bring himself to be honest with the one person who'd been kind to him?

I wasn't clever. I wasn't subtle. I was brute force, flinging out Endings without regard.

But, yes, Plaktukas *had* been clever. And I had Plaktukas's rune, I could—

I'd killed someone today.

The truth of it finally settled on me like the heaviest cloak imaginable. My shoulders sagged, and my back bent under the weight of it. This is what Kirmin had warned me about. She'd cautioned me against acting rashly, using her own story, her own mistake, her own murders, to try and drive home the enormous weight of my responsibility.

I hadn't listened closely enough.

Urgent as the situation had become, I needed to accept accountability for what I'd done. I'd killed a man, and even if it had been to prevent him from killing another, the entire situation was my fault. I'd *caused* the entire situation by supporting those junior adherents, by failing to End the memories of just one or two humans—by not heeding the warnings of the high adherents.

I took myself to the Foundation.

My eyes were drawn directly to it. A crack so small and tight I couldn't have wedged a single hair into it. It ran crosswise for maybe the breadth of my hand and triple my height up the huge, solid column. I Ended the earth's pull beneath me and used one hand on the Foundation to pull myself gently up to the new fracture. As I ran my hand across the barely noticeable flaw, the memory came back to me.

Heart thumping. Voice raised. Terror. Exhorting the citizens to goodness. Reviling the evil before us. Joy in our victory. Pleasure in burning this demon in woman's form. Tightness in my chest—

too much. Pressure. Gasping. Lungs won't work, chest so tight. Heat—fire? Darkness.

I yanked my hand back. I hadn't expected to experience the Ending from the priest's point of view, but it felt all too appropriate. I'd *killed*. It was only right that I experience some of it. My own heart felt cold, my spirit sodden. It had been a no-win situation, and Debesí had given me the choice.

This was—whether by the builders' original intent or not—how the Tower made its adherents accountable. Each crack, whether thinner than a hair or wide enough to poke your thumb into, was a memory of our wrongdoings. Our mistakes. I had but to rest my hand on any one of them to see, feel, and hear exactly what had happened. Evidence. I wasn't sure if they came from the Axis itself, whether they were bound into the rock of the Foundation, or if it was some combination of the two.

I ran my hand more lightly across the adjacent fissures, each of them almost too small, too thin to see—stark reminders of every bad decision an adherent had ever made. Those memories swam past me quickly—I refused to let my hand linger too long on any one of them.

Memories.

Why had I never made this connection before? The Axis might hold all—or perhaps most—of the memories of prior adherents, but the Foundation held memories too. Memories of wrongs, of unjust Endings.

Carefully placing my hand on a smooth section of rock, I pulled myself a bit higher, sliding upward beside the Foundation, and let my other hand settle on another fissure. This one ran as long as my arm, cutting vertically through the black rock, deep enough that I could almost push a thumbnail into it.

My perspective shifted.

“So you agree?”

“That this needs to End?”

“Yes.”

I sighed. “I do.”

“You’ll do it?”

His look was intent—firm. He knew what he was asking. “The Axis will resist,” I pointed out.

His forehead wrinkled. “It can do that?”

I chuckled wryly. “It can. It resists anything that’s not a natural End. An early End, fine. Ending something that should never have been, fine. Temporarily Ending something abstract, sure. Even Ending an argument—both parties want the Ending, even if they want different outcomes, so the Ending is fine. But this . . . this dam should have lasted forever.”

“It’s blocking all the water from reaching the fields.”

“Oh, I know. As I said, I agree. It needs to go. You’re sure you couldn’t just tear it out yourselves?”

He looked uncertain. “It’s dangerous. The animals are . . . vicious. And protective.”

Nothing for it, then. “Agreed. And they’d just rebuild it, I suppose. My way, it will last longer.”

“Will the Axis obey?”

I steeled myself. It wouldn’t be straightforward, but he didn’t need to know that. “It will. There just will be . . . consequences.”

“Of what nature?”

He definitely didn’t need to know *that*. The responsibility here was mine and mine alone. “Nothing you need to worry about. Everyone’s well clear downstream? Once I End the dam, I can’t put it back. Even the creatures who built it will struggle to rebuild.”

“Everyone has signaled readiness. I’d feel more comfortable if we had a Sea adherent to help—”

“This isn’t the sea. You’ve seen Markus around freshwater.”

“Aye.”

“Let’s have at this, then.”

A structure, built by small, industrious animals over the course of years. Home to generations of them. Holding rushing waters at bay, giving small fish a place to swim and breed, the food of even more animals.

End it.

Resistance. Dismay.

Obedience.

I snatched my hand back. That had to have been a memory of Vandens. He’d become famous for reinvigorating the farmlands in the lower Southeast. I’d read of him in the histories—he’d restored a major river’s natural riverbed, bringing fresh water from the mountains to countless fields.

The Axis had resisted?

The emotions from the recollection were still fresh in my mind. The Axis had wanted to leave things alone—leave them as nature had changed them, rather than restoring them to what they’d been before. But the Axis still obeyed Vandens, an act that fractured the Foundation.

How in the world had that Ending been unjust? Tens of thousands had been fed as a result, preventing a near-famine that would have swept half the continent.

I thought of how I’d Ended the priest. The Axis would have preferred I’d Ended that poor woman instead. After all, her End—as precipitated by the humans—had already been near. It was a sure thing. I shook my head, my chest still tight and my

stomach hollow. I couldn't. Not to one of my own people. Not when she could be saved.

Placing just my fingertips on the Foundation now, I pulled myself around its circumference and a bit higher, looking to see if another crack would catch my attention.

There.

"No, Sylphis, I agree. She seems fine, apart from that injury. But it's gone gangrenous."

"The healerwitch will be here tomorrow. He needed specific herbs, ones he said could only come from the Wood. Can't you End the gangrene?"

Everyone thought the Sixth was some unconstrained miracle. "That flesh is already dead, Sylphis," I said with a sigh. "Past its End. Gangrene is a result of that, not the cause."

"She'll die, Gailest. If the toxins reach her heart. *When* they do."

"She'll lose the leg regardless."

"The healerwitch can handle that! There's no reason for her to die now!"

I considered it, feeling out the Axis's awareness. "The Axis expects her to pass this evening. It's . . . close."

"Dona, are you in pain?" The little girl shook her head, her expression brave and afraid. "Gailest, if it wasn't for the fever—"

"It's not the fever, Sylphis," I said for what must have been the twentieth time. "It's the poison from the dead flesh."

"There has to be something you can do. She's your niece!"

Something. There was. I resigned myself to it. "The Axis will insist. But . . . I can hold it."

Dona's mother looked confused. "Hold it?"

“Nothing dies without the Axis’s permission, without its involvement. Left alone, it would take Dona tonight. If you truly believe the healerwitch can counteract the damage—”

“He insists he can. He says he knows the magic. He just needed the ingredients.”

“Then I can hold the Axis. Withhold its permission, its involvement.”

The woman’s mouth widened in amazement. “You can do that?”

“I’m the adherent of the Sixth, Sylphis. But there will be consequences.”

“How so?”

My decision, my problem. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it.”

Leashed and now reined. Thrashing, bucking. An End meant to be—denied. All focus here now. That which is righteous—denied. Bitter betrayal.

Obedience.

I pulled my hand back more slowly as the emotionally charged memory ran its course. Gailest. I’d read of him. Nothing much—he’d been an unmemorable adherent by all accounts. Not, I suspect, like myself. No, I’d be remembered for certain.

But he’d *prevented* an Ending? Nowhere, ever, had I read about that being one of our powers, one of our prerogatives. I wondered how he’d done it, how he’d discovered it was even possible. Even the *Book of Endings* hadn’t mentioned it.

At least, in the pages that had opened themselves for me. There was still a stack of pages at the end, as thick as my finger, that remained stubbornly stuck together.

I found myself wondering if Dona had indeed survived and

what kind of relationship Gailest and the Axis had maintained afterward.

I slid higher up the Foundation now, pulling myself further around its wide girth. What else could I learn from my predecessors' alleged mistakes?

Here.

"And you just want me to End them for you? Remove the competition?" I plucked a peeled grape from the bowl on the table and popped it into my mouth. The soft flesh melted into sweet juice across my tongue. The obsequious little man before me sought to indulge as well. My frown stopped him.

"Yes, Skriaudikas," he said, ducking his head in apology. "If it's possible."

I laughed. "Of course it's possible, idiot. The question is whether or not it's . . . hmm, shall we say, *financially feasible*."

His face was a portrait of hope. "We've brought the chests, as you asked."

"Asked?" Irritating insect. "I never *ask*. I may have *suggested* a donation, as others have offered them in the past. That's far from a *request*, let alone a *demand*, as you seem to be implying."

His hope transformed into terror, and I took great amusement from it. "I was mistaken, Adherent. I meant—"

I stood quickly, fixing him with my most intense glare. "Don't call me that," I hissed. "Don't *ever* call me that. I'm not *adhered* to anything. Do you understand?"

The terror in his expression seemed to double. "Of course, Skriaudikas. I am . . . a poor speaker."

"Then let's hope your offering speaks for you," I said casually and settled back in my chair.

“Of . . . of course. It’s a bit more than what others have donated, as we feel we respect your work more than others.”

Perhaps he is not completely without intellect. “Hmm. Yes, I think that will do. Now, what was the man’s name?”

“It’s the clan, your honor.”

I smiled. “*Your honor.* I like the sound of that. Very well. What’s the clan name? I haven’t loosed the Horde in some time. Perhaps it will appreciate an afternoon out.”

I swallowed bile as I pulled my hand away from the Foundation, certain the glossy rock had grown ice cold. That would have been Skriaudikas the Abuser, one of the most infamous adherents. He’d lived not long after Galas and had openly accepted enormous bribes—most of which he funneled to his family—in exchange for “favours,” including the mass murder of the entire Statytojas clan of shipbuilders. Unsurprisingly, the modern fear of the Sixth Axis largely originated with Skriaudikas.

At least I wasn’t a monster like him.

I floated a bit higher, scanning for another prominent fracture. These moments of recollection, of reflection were proving useful. The Foundation wasn’t, as I’d been taught, damaged by unjust Endings. The cracks seemed to come from simply opposing the Axis—from ordering it to End something that it didn’t want to, like causing unnatural Endings or holding back an Ending it had anticipated. Justice had nothing to do with it. The Axis didn’t have a sense of right and wrong, only a role in the natural order of things, and it disliked being unable to fulfill that role.

Interesting.

I decided to try one more.

“You’re certain this will do it?” Damon asked.

“Yes, Galas. Without question.”

I sighed. “You know how much I hate the idea of consigning my successors to such a place. Myself, certainly—I understand the fear. But others? I—”

“It’s the only way to keep the peace, Galas. Sky, Flame, Earth, Sea, they’re all bad enough, but already those Axes have Chosen others. The Sixth seems stubbornly fixated on you. And without the balance of Beginning, it’s just too much for people. Too much power in one person.”

I chuckled. “It’s a power with surprising little utility, Damon.”

“If only you’d all succeeded in chaining the Fifth Axis as well.”

“We tried. She died trying, in fact. So here we are. People will just have to learn to live with me.”

“You could End anyone. Or everyone.”

“Little good that would do me, though. And after all the effort and sacrifice I’ve put into saving everyone.”

“You know what I mean.”

This isn’t how I’d hoped this would turn out. “I do. Show it to me again.”



“It’s less complex than I thought,” I mused.

Damon looked frustrated. “Well, it’s more complex than I’d hoped. Magic is thin now, with so much bound in the Axes. This is going to be horrifically expensive to empower.”

Ah, now we come to it. “You want me to do it, don’t you?”

Damon had the courtesy to look embarrassed, refusing to meet my eyes. “You’ll have to. It’s the only way to ensure it’s perpetual. Self-powering, as it were. This will be centered on a monolith, which should act as an anchor.”

I nodded. “I recognize the magic. Wait—did you say *should*?”

He hesitated before replying. “This is old magic. From before the Sundering. From before the Exodus, even, if you’re being technical.”

“I feel we should be technical,” I said. “You might even aim for *precise*.”

“Our best minds believe it will work as designed.”

I looked carefully at the construct. “This bit here,” I said slowly, tapping a part of the drawing. “You’re certain you mean for it to have this form?”

“Yes?” Damon looked confused. “It’s meant to keep you there all your life. Any adherent that ascends there will be caught in it as well. And since you’ve said—”

"I know, I know." *A loophole!* "It's just . . . all my life."

"That was the agreement."

"It was." I chuckled. "Go ahead. I'm fine with it."

His brow furrowed slightly. "You're going to have to—"

"Oh, I know. Once you leave this room, you won't remember any of this."

The rune in Galas's memory had been *the* rune—the one from Plaktukas's memories. But what did that mean? Galas's memory suggested the rune was part of the magic that trapped us in the Tower. But something was off. Galas had felt . . . amused? Victorious? He must have already conceived of the idea of moving past his own Ending. Or maybe he'd already done so. I had no way of placing that memory in a particular time, so there was no way to tell. He'd obviously Ended someone's memory—someone named Damon. I could look that up later. But this Damon had mentioned *perpetuity*. The magic meant to trap me, to trap all adherents of the Sixth, was perpetual. It wasn't tied to the Axis, but it was somehow connected to the Axis.

He'd mentioned a monolith. Was that the Foundation? Did this massive column of granite do more than just support the Tower? It obviously did, given that adherents' resistance to the Axis damaged it.

It was all very confusing. I stepped back from the Foundation and had the Axis gradually let the earth's pull reassert itself. As I drifted slowly back to the bedrock floor of the Foundation chamber, I looked down.

Stop, I ordered.

I hovered there in the air for a long, long time.

A giant rune construct was carved into the bedrock on

which the Foundation rested, centered beneath that giant pillar of obsidian rock. It was so large that I'd never even noticed I was walking on it. Close-up, its broad strokes had seemed like nothing more than uneven cuts in the granite.



Galas's memory had been of that rune. The rune that . . . what, controlled the magic of the Tower itself? Fed that magic? The same rune that Plaktukas had used to awaken the Veil, and to keep it active all these centuries?

I needed to find out what it meant. The rune was too complex for me to decipher as Galas had, and even now it triggered no memories from the Axis itself. My self-taught knowledge of runes and magic was deeply insufficient. I needed someone who could explain it to me and tell me what it did.

Evermore would know. Well, someone there. The scholars there knew the entire history of magic; surely one of them would know what this rune meant and how it worked. And Gemma had been heading to Evermore. I could find her, and she could help me find someone.

But . . . today was a rest day. All the halls of government and scholarship would be closed. Could I track down one of the scholars? Find them in their home?

I took myself up to the Tower's map room—and realized

that I didn't know any of their names. "Show me the scholars of Runehall in Evermore," I said hesitantly.

The map didn't move. So no, I couldn't find them that way.

I couldn't just lie idle while priests were trying to burn innocent people over a power they simply didn't understand. I needed—

Wait.

Zmogus had mocked my idea of looking into the humans' religion, to see if a solution could be found there. But Zmogus mocked nearly everything I proposed since I'd ascended. So why let that stop me? I could go to Evermore first thing in the morning, which left me much of the day to . . .

To what?

I squared my shoulders. To discover why the human religion hated us so much. To find a loophole, a story, a reason, anything that could end the attacks. Or at least abate them until I could heal the Veil. I was going to do something clever.

I pulled the Axis to me and ordered it to take me to Lastpointe.

Lastpointe

It was the smallest village I knew of that was far from Twynsits and still had a church. It was almost impossible that anyone here, on an island off the main continent's westernmost shore, would have heard of the re-emergence of magic.

Immediately I recalled why I loved Lastpointe. The people—even those of witchkind—were unfailingly laid back, taking life at a slower pace than “those busy folk on the mainland,” as they often put it. Like most small, seaside villages, fishing was a major occupation, but the few small cafés and pubs in the village served the most delectable species of fish I'd tasted anywhere in the world. After the whiplash of the day thus far, Lastpointe filled me with a much-needed sense of calm carried on a salty sea breeze.

I appeared directly in front of Lastpointe's church. It sat at the edge of the village, about as far inland as you could go before entering the island's sparse interior meadows, rolling hills, and rocky prominences.

I'd never paid much attention to the building, but I did now.

Humans built their churches according to a strict pattern, adapting when needed to accommodate the local climate, building materials, and terrain. Aside from the finer churches in the bigger towns, the buildings were usually compact, squat, and shaped like a crossroads. Whenever possible, they were oriented so that the entrance—almost invariable a tall, double wooden door—faced west. Human myths said they'd come into this world from the west, so they looked that way with wary and watchful eyes. If evil ever entered this world, it would also come from that direction. Accordingly, Lastpointe's church faced west, away from the town proper, so I circled the building on a well-worn dirt path.

The exterior was made of simple wood planks coated in thick white paint made from limestone and clay. The stuff was virtually impervious to weather, and I knew it could last for several years before needing even minor touch-ups. The corners of the building were stout wooden posts that could stand up to almost any kind of weather or wind. The eaves of the roof were decorated with carved pieces of wood, all painted in the dull, earthy shades that were the humans' sole concession to color: earthy reds, forest greens, grayish blues, and the humblest of brown oranges.

The church, like all the other human churches I'd seen, was entirely free of windows. I had no idea why, but I supposed their deity wanted them to avoid any possible distractions during worship.

Stepping inside, I was surprised to find two fireplaces contentedly burning to the left and right, their bright, flickering light supplemented by dozens of fat three-wick candles throughout the space. A series of wooden benches were lined up before me, and at the far end of the building was a lectern on

a small dais, where I imagined the priest would stand to deliver sermons and such. The interior otherwise lacked adornments. No paintings, no tile mosaics—nothing but more of the sturdy white paint, now blackened by soot.

“Well, hello,” a creaky old voice greeted me. I jumped slightly as a tall old man stepped through a hidden door behind the lectern. “How can I help you, son?”

He may have been taller in his youth, before age had stooped his shoulders. His deep-black skin shone in the firelight, reflecting sharply off his bald pate. A carefully groomed beard of coarse white hair stretched to his midchest, and his thin, lanky limbs moved with ease and confidence as he walked down a center aisle between the benches.

“I’m . . .” Why hadn’t I come up with some kind of story?

He paused halfway to me and cocked an eyebrow. “Looking for some advice?”

That would do. I nodded. “I think so.”

He smiled, and his bright teeth lit the room. He gestured to a bench. “Have a seat.” He settled into an adjacent bench and added, “I’m guessing you’re not from around here.”

Of course not. He’d know everyone in town, and this wasn’t the part of the continent where skin as pale as mine was even somewhat common. “No, just . . . visiting. On business.” I sat on the edge of the bench, facing him.

“So how can I help?”

“It’s about”—*might as well get right to it*—“magic.”

His eyebrows rose, the skin on his head wrinkling. “That’s probably the last thing I thought you’d say.” He chuckled. “Magic it is. What can I tell you?”

“I’ve gotten a letter from family . . . from my sister,” I said, stumbling a bit as I concocted a story. “It talked about magic—people using. Back east. There’s been an uproar, of course.”

He tilted his head a bit. “Of course?”

"Well, yes. Of course. You know the texts."

"*Suffer not a witch to live*, you mean?"

"That."

"Ah. And your sister, she's in one of the big towns?"

"Chiton." People with skin like mine weren't a once-in-a-lifetime sighting there.

He nodded slowly. "Well, that is what the texts say. Well, one of them." He peered at me closely. "Does she think the magic is real? Sometimes, you know, we think we see something strange, but it's easily explained—"

"Everyone seems pretty convinced, she said."

"I see." He sighed. "I suppose that's very frightening." I nodded. "Have they called for any . . . action?"

I could see he was avoiding the word. "Hunts? Yes. She says they have."

"Mm-hmm." He looked away for a moment before speaking again. "You know, I have to admit that I probably have a . . . let's call it an unorthodox view of the subject?"

"Oh?"

"Do you know much about the First Concordance?"

I hadn't heard of it. Was it a theory, a doctrine? Wait. "You mean the book you mentioned? No, not much."

He dismissed my ignorance with a wave. "Few do, I suppose, outside the seminaries. We don't refer to it much in modern times. Obviously it was our first text. It established the Church. But did you know it was written hundreds of years after we came to this world?"

"Came? You mean the Exodus?"

He nodded slowly. "There are older histories. I've read some. A few are considered apocryphal now, but there are grains of truth in them, I think."

Fascinating. I leaned forward. "What do they say?"

"They say that magic came into this world with us. That it

was a gift of the Creator, just as we are. The texts say we lived in harmony with magic, side by side, for centuries.”

This was eerily close to witchkind’s version of events. “Then what?”

He spread his hands. “It’s hard to say, actually. The stories change. The few texts written immediately before the First Concordance don’t all agree, but they all suggest that magic became uncooperative. Dangerous, some of them say. Magic was bottled up by a few who perverted it. Instead of using it for the betterment of all, they used it to rule.”

That was a new interpretation, but honestly, it wasn’t hard to imagine witchkind doing exactly that.

“And then?”

“The first high priest, Canonikus, prayed for magic to either be released or stricken from the world. That’s in the First Concordance.”

“And?”

He shrugged. “It was stricken, of course. Taken entirely from the world. Taken from those who had perverted it so that they could no longer do so. To ensure that we could all live freely and equally.”

If only you knew, I thought. “And if anyone uses magic again, if it comes back into the world?”

He nodded. “*Suffer not a witch to live*. The Hunts were an attempt to purge the last of the people who claimed to wield it.”

“So magic itself isn’t evil.”

Another sigh. “I choose to think not. If it ever actually existed, which I admit is difficult for my old mind to imagine, it would have been a tool—something that could have been used or misused, depending on whose hands it fell into.”

“Could it come back?”

He chuckled at that. “As a boy, I used to dream about it.

How wonderful, how fantastical, would that be? And I suppose, if we were found worthy, the Creator could release it back into the world."

"What if the Creator already had? What if what my sister says is true—that magic is out there right now? What if these Hunts are . . . wrong?" That might be the loophole I'd hoped for: a permissible return of magic.

The priest nodded solemnly. "You know, there's much in the First Concordance that I find . . . political."

My eyebrows went up. "Political?"

"Of their time. It provides a message that suited the priesthood of the day. Look," he said with another resigned sigh, "priests aren't gods. Maybe some people did try to bottle up magic and use it to control the rest of us. Or maybe some of us demanded things of magic that weren't within reason. Maybe magic itself posed a threat to the Church."

"A threat?"

"You've read the Second Concordance. And the Third, of course." My expression must have given me away because he let out a deep, hearty laugh. "I'm not about to quiz you on it, son, nor judge you. Just basic familiarity." I nodded once. "It's mostly rules. Ways to live, things to avoid, that kind of thing."

"Sure."

"Some of those things, if we're being honest, are really just about putting the Church in control. The old books tell you to do things just so you're following orders. None of those orders are really *bad*, but . . . I mean, how angry is the Creator actually going to be if you cook fish on the holy day?"

You mean you can't? "Okay?"

"But it's a way to keep people following the Church's rules. A minor thing, easily adopted. You get people to accept enough minor things, and they'll accept the big ones. Like the rules on tithing."

I don't even know what that word means. "Sure," I repeated.

"You see, magic would make many of those rules seem quite foolish, right?"

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know. Say, maybe . . . oh, the prohibition on more lights in a room than people. 'We shine as lights unto the Creator's eyes, and ill betide those who would blind the Creator with false lights; therefore, never shall more false lights burn than true lights be in that room.'"

That's a thing? Good grief, their Church is weird. "Of course."

"The prohibition, as many religious scholars have discussed, originated from a safety concern. But it was couched in religious terms: you were upsetting the Creator if you didn't obey."

"What safety concern?"

"That if your home is filled with too many lit candles, you might start a fire."

I turned to look at the dozens of lit candles about the church. "Seems you have an excess of false lights, then."

He chuckled heartily. "Well, this is a church, not a home. Our lights represent all those who aren't with us. We put them out during services, right?"

"Oh . . . right," I stammered, flustered.

"But what if we had magic lights? Lights that illuminated without burning?" His look became more serious. "That would be a pretty silly restriction, at least the way it's worded now."

"I see," I said with a slow nod. I could see the implications.

"And there are a hundred more examples. Probably hundreds of little instances where the Church would look silly or ineffective if magic existed in the world. And so the prohibition on magic, the Hunts for anyone accused of practicing it, and so on. It all comes about."

Lies built on lies, you mean, I thought. "I guess that makes me feel a little better. Safer, maybe." The man's concept of his faith was . . . different. Certainly not what I'd expected.

"I'm sure your sister is fine. If you write back, I'd just encourage her to stay out of it. No good comes from the kind of thinking that leads to a Hunt. After all, is our first commandment not to protect life in all forms we find it?"

Is it? Good to know. "It is. Although . . ."

"Yes?"

"It seems a bit of a contradiction, doesn't it? Protect life but kill the witches?"

He chuckled. "Yes, well. Priests are men as any other. We needn't take everything they say as . . . law, I suppose."

"The people in Chiton seem to."

He nodded slowly. "And it will take a good man or woman to point out another path." I said nothing, and he held my gaze for a few moments before asking, "Anything else?"

"No! No, sorry. I didn't mean to take up so much of your time." We both stood. I found myself surprised. He'd been gracious and wise. He seemed as far removed from the spittle-spraying madman in Twynsists as possible, and not at all what I'd expected. "Thank you, really."

"Not at all. It's what I'm here for when it's not a holy day." He smiled. "I've enjoyed revisiting these topics. I haven't thought about these ideas . . . oh, since shortly after seminary." He gave me a wink. "You know, it's why they stuck me out here. 'Insidious ideas. Too many questions.' Little did they know how much I'd come to love this place."

"I do too," I said, wishing I could stay and leave the Veil mess behind me.

"Please, come in again the next time you're here on business."

"I will." As I said it, I found that I meant my words.

“Then I shall bid you good day.”

“Good day.” I turned to go. “Oh.” I turned back and offered my hand. “My name is Daniel.”

The priest smiled and shook my hand—a gesture witchkind and humans had kept in common for millennia. “Dedicant Ormond.”

“Thank you, Dedicant Ormond.”

He nodded a farewell, and I made my way out of the church. As the door shut behind me, I realized that I didn’t have anything close to a solution, at least inasmuch as the humans’ religion went. Perhaps we could have some Sky adherents spread whispers that magic had returned at the hand of the Creator? But Ormond’s words about magic taking away power from the Church—that seemed like a powerful incentive for the priests in Twynsits to shout down any suggestions of magic’s legitimacy.

Ormond would see me again, but for now it seemed as if getting the Veil back in place remained my best bet.

Our discussion had put a different light on things. I found myself feeling less hostile—toward the humans, that is. They’d been manipulated by religious leaders to hate witchkind. Before then, we’d lived peacefully. Perhaps we could again.

The sun was nearing the western horizon, and already I could see the first moon slipping into the sky. This time of year, the second moon would follow shortly after, tired of being alone. They’d part ways again soon enough, I knew.

As I wrapped the Axis about me for my return to the Tower, I wondered if the humans had their own stories about the sun and the moons.

The capital of witchkind, the only city in the world that was ours and ours alone.

There were none of the squat, sturdy buildings that the humans had erected. Instead, the builders of Evermore had created soaring, graceful structures that reached five, six, even ten stories into the sky. The sun glistened off flawless glass windows and gilt ornamentation, putting witchkind's love of color on display. Bright flags of emerald and crimson rippled in the breeze, flashes of turquoise and violet outlined door frames, and mosaics in every color imaginable depicted scenes of family, revelry, and myths.

In human towns, the streets were rough cobblestones at best. More often they were dirt or mud or gravel. Evermore's streets, even in the lowliest of service alleys, were paved with smooth, sturdy bricks formed from a combination of local limestone and clever magic. Each piece was carved with additional runes for durability and traction, and those runes were renewed regularly by the city's hardworking maintenance teams.

Here, witchkind could not only live in the open, but live openly: bright fabrics, glistening metals, and sparkling gems adorned each and every person, down to the smallest child. And yet Evermore and its riot of color and texture somehow blended into a harmonious, iridescent whole.

When I'd first come here, I'd wondered how such a bright, brilliant city could possibly have remained hidden from humans for so many centuries. As I inquired and investigated, I realized that it hadn't. Any human could stumble across Evermore and see it plain as day. The trick was simply making sure they didn't.

Magic, a lack of any incoming roads, and a subtle discouragement of human development too close to the city all worked together to ensure Evermore remain undiscovered. And so it became the center of witchkind life, culture, and history. The tall government buildings held our records of births and deaths, genealogies, real estate, and more. That was why I'd come: if anyone could help me understand this mysterious rune, they would be here in Evermore.

In the heart of the city was a wide-open square full of trees, fountains, grassy hills, and other areas to relax and enjoy. A profli-gate amount of magic—much of it derived from various taxes and the labors of adherents of Sky—was spent to ensure continually pleasant weather over this portion of the city. From that central park, I made my way to Runehall, Plaktukas's rune construct hoarding my mind's attention. It felt so tantalizingly familiar yet so foreign at the same time. It was clearly old, but I'd—

“Daniel?”

I snapped out of my reverie and refocused on my surroundings. The man who'd spoken was a young adherent, Earth if I was to—wait. “Cyril?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “What chance, running across

you here this morning! We were hoping to speak to you about—”

“I’m actually on fairly urgent business,” I said, moving to continue on my way.

“This is urgent as well,” he said in a low voice, grabbing my arm. I stopped and begrudgingly looked down into his eyes, then at his hand on my arm. I didn’t have time for this. He audibly swallowed and released me. “Apologies. But this *is* urgent, and it has to do with”—his voice lowered to a whisper—“the Hunts.”

That was very specific. And timely. I met his gaze again. “Go on.”

He quickly looked around at the many witchkind hurrying past us on their morning errands. “Not here,” he muttered. “There—may I buy you a cup of *kavos*?” He nodded toward a small café.

“Quickly.” I followed him into the café, which had just begun emptying of its morning customers. We took a small table in the back corner. “What is this about?”

“I know you feel responsible for this . . . situation,” he said quickly, keeping his voice low as he signaled the server for two mugs. I frowned. “But this isn’t the first time.”

My frown deepened. “The first time for what?”

“That the Veil has been threatened. Not even the first time it’s been threatened in an attempt to keep the iron roadway work at bay.”

He’d piqued my curiosity, and I leaned forward as two mugs of steaming black liquid were placed between us. “What do you mean?”

“Not just the iron roadway. Did you know the human ship-builders in Chiton launched a whole new ship design not long ago? They promised it would be sturdier, safer, and able to

move at nearly twice the speed of the designs everyone has been using for centuries.”

“And?”

“They were right. But they got there by using iron strapping to reinforce the hull beams and planks.”

My eyes widened. That would have made the fisherwitches’ runes useless and prevented them from even being *on* those ships.

“We—a couple of Sea adherents, that is—were able to capsize it. We floated the story that the iron made it too top heavy over the high seas, despite what their designers had predicted.”

“They accepted it?”

“We think so. We’re watching them more closely now.”

“You keep saying *we*.”

“That’s why I wanted to speak to you. There needs to be a more concerted effort to monitor the humans’ advances. Their use of iron, in particular. We let the iron roadway happen without resistance—we have to stop further advances before they get far. If we’d have been watching, paying attention, we could have stopped that ship from ever being built. Come up with . . . something.”

“Why are you coming to me?” Was he proposing another outlandish display to deter humans? Was he looking for me to End something—or someone?

“We’re putting together a group. A small one. The senior adherents—” He stopped with a frown.

“I understand completely,” I said bitterly.

“Yes. So it’s a few of us juniors. But not just adherents. We’ve found a few ordinary witchkind, ones who are better positioned to learn about human advances and experiments.”

“Which leads to me how?”

“We want to know we can call on you if a quiet Ending,

early enough on, can prevent something from progressing too far. From becoming another iron roadway.”

“Sounds perfectly reasonable.”

“So you’re in?”

“I suppose. I don’t interact much with humans, but—”

“We’ll handle the watching. We’re building a network. We just need to know that at least one major power is with us.”

I nodded firmly. “I’m with you.”

“Thank you.” His expression was a portrait of relief. Had he feared I would turn him into Mesla or something? “We will—”

“I do need to go,” I reminded him, then drained my mug. “When this is all over, let’s speak again.”

He nodded quickly. “May I ask where you’re going?”

“Runehall. I’m researching. Well, I may have found a clue about re-establishing the Veil.”

His eyes grew wide. “That would be amazing. I know a shortcut from here, out of the morning traffic.”

“I’ll follow you, then.”

Runehall was the repository of all known magic in the world: every rune, every technique, every word of the True Language, and anything else related to our magical heritage was stored here. Many of the books in my own library were copies of volumes kept in Runehall.

As I entered the building through tall, arched doors, a young man seated at a neat wooden desk raised his head and gave me a bright smile. “How can I help you today, Adherent?”

“I’ve got a rune I need some help with. History on it, even deciphering it if possible.”

He raised an eyebrow. “May I see it?”

Plaktukas had worked hard to keep the rune a secret, but there was no way the scholars here could help me without seeing it. Plus, at this point, the diagram was firmly in the memories I would leave behind one day. Inevitably, the Axis would know this rune despite Plaktukas's efforts. Feeling the slight weight of a failure I didn't understand, I slid my sketch across his desk. The young man turned the paper over a few times, as Gemma had, and then frowned. "This is . . . old. I suggest you take it to the Research section." He pointed down one of several hallways behind him. "Second door on the right, straight back to the end. There's a speed rune just inside the doorway, if you like. Take a left at the end and ask for Andreas. He's in charge of the section."

"Thank you." I reclaimed my sketch and stepped through the door he'd indicated. As promised, a speed rune was carved into the doorpost, and I touched it. In an eye blink, I found myself at the far end of the hallway. Efficient magic. I turned left and stepped through an arch that had "RESEARCH" carved overhead. I found myself in a long, wide, vaulted hall. Magic lights dotted the walls, lending a dim but unflickering glow to the place. It exuded a deep sense of age and reminded me of some of the wine cellars I'd been in—except vastly larger, of course. My nose tickled as motes of dust slid and eddied around me.

"Good morning, good morning." An incredibly old man stood behind a tall counter, a sheaf of papers spread out before him. He was tall and almost skeletally thin, his dark skin heavily lined and worn with age.

"Andreas?"

He nodded with great energy, his expression splitting into a wide grin full of bright white teeth. "I am indeed. Not often an adherent pays a visit to us back here, dusty and old as we are! How can I help you today?"

Once again, I slid my sketch over. "I need to understand what this does and how it works, if possible."

He turned the sketch over a few times. "Hmm. Quite old. Interesting." He stared for a bit longer. "Gel!" he shouted suddenly, making me start. The Axis poked forward, echoing my alarm.

"What is it, Andre—oh. Well, hello. I said to come visit sometime, but I didn't think you'd come so quickly!"

It was Gemma. "I . . . uh, I didn't realize you worked here," I stammered.

Her smile seemed to strip away a century of age from the place. "This is where I'm starting my scholarly work!" She glanced down at the counter and saw the slip of paper still in Andreas's hand. "Oh, your rune. How clever to bring it here! Have you learned anything more about it?"

"A bit," I said, hesitant to tell her about the Tower. "But I was hoping someone here would be able to tell me more."

"Here, Gel," Andreas said, pushing the paper in front of her. "What time frame would you place this in?" He looked at her sharply, as if testing her.

Gemma chewed her lip for a moment before replying. "It's not modern, obviously. But it's not Old Runic either, is it?"

"Why do you say so?"

"They're more . . . organized. Parallel lines, sharp angles, very meticulous symbology. This seems . . . almost like a mix of old and new."

Andreas nodded. "We call it Transitional Runic. Actually quite rare. Nearly every example I've seen came from just after the Forging, no more than ten to twenty years after. Past that, everything shifted over to the modern style we still use today."

"Can you tell me anything about it?" I asked.

"It's difficult," the old man mused. "Grab us the Tokenen, would you?" he asked Gemma. "The one in the green binding,

not the blue.” We waited for a moment as Gemma ducked through a side door, emerging a few moments later with a thick, heavy-looking book. She laid it on the counter in front of Andreas, who flipped it about halfway open and began slowly turning pages. “Ah, yes. Hmm.” His head swiveled between my sketch and the book a few times before he spoke. “You see here,” he said to Gemma, tapping the page, “where this curves to this side, and this the other?”

“Mm-hmm.” She seemed engrossed in whatever he was showing her, and I leaned over the counter to see.

“In Old Runic, that would have been a feedback mechanism, looping unused power back into the rune. There’s no modern equivalent, not really. No need, thin as magic is.”

“But what about this bit?” Gemma asked, touching my sketch.

“Ah, I suspect . . .” Andreas trailed off as he flipped a few more pages. “Yes, yes. See here?”

None of it made any sense to me, especially upside down. Gemma frowned. “A parasite tap?”

Andreas nodded vigorously. “Quite rare. A means of fueling a rune from a storage system of some kind. Not anything like we have now, though. The ancients could store power in huge crystals. But this . . . hmm. Not intended for one of those. See how the symmetry here is different?”

“Mm-hmm,” Gemma murmured. *Storage crystals?* I thought. I’d never encountered a mention of such a thing. Modern witchkind stored excess magic in their coins, making commerce more about the exchange of power than the base metal that contained it. But giant crystals?

“Meant to draw from something else,” Andres said, followed by something low that I couldn’t hear, and then his head snapped up and his eyes bore into mine. “Where’d you find this?”

"It's . . . associated with my Axis."

He frowned. "In the Tower?"

Well, that was out of the bag. Gemma gave me an odd, confused look as I simply nodded.

Andreas nodded slowly, his eyes returning to his book as he flipped a few more pages. "Yes, yes, I suppose that makes sense. Probably what powers half the place. Expect it draws from your Axis itself."

"Wait," Gemma said, apparently putting it all together. "You're *that* Daniel?"

"Hush, Gel," Andreas said. But something he'd said had caught my attention. *Draws from the Axis*. It made sense, taken with the memories I'd experienced at the Foundation.

Wait, the Foundation wasn't a giant *crystal*, but—

"See here? This is an anchoring device," Andreas was saying, tapping another bit of my sketch. "Always wondered how it was the Sixth stayed chained between adherents. Expect this does it. Must tie it to the island itself or something else. Maybe those great spikes you've got."

Not the spikes. The Foundation. This rune was at the heart of the Tower's function. Between adherents, it somehow chained the Axis to the Foundation itself— or at least the prominent part of the Axis whose awareness I could feel even now.

"Odd anchor, though," the old man mused as Gemma continued to give me an inscrutable stare. "It'd require intelligence of some kind. Sentience. Not sure it's just the rock."

Would the Foundation's memories be sufficient? No . . . that couldn't have been it. When it was built, the Foundation had been flawless and empty. Its creators must have intended it for something else. "You mentioned a loop?"

Andreas nodded, flipping back several pages in his book and tapping it again. I leaned closer but still couldn't decipher the

tiny, crabbed writing or any of the elegantly drawn runes. “Perpetual magic. Rare, but not unheard of. Most commonly used to make these expanded spaces. Half of Evermore runs on these. Not this exact one, mind—this is elegant work. Would have taken a wagonload of magic to get it started, but from there it’d run forever. Never need a top-up, if it’s indeed drawing from the Axis for replenishment.”

So that would keep the Veil going. But how had Plaktukas awoken it in the first place? The Veil itself wasn’t of the Axis, even if the Axis was keeping it awake. Or was supposed to be doing so? “Is there more?”

Andreas sighed. “You know, it might be easiest to have it simplified. I never had the knack for that, though.”

“Simplified?”

“Most Old Runic constructs can be redrawn in modern runes,” Gemma explained. I still couldn’t make sense of her expression: it was flatter but still polite. Doubtless she was terrified that she’d been spending time with the adherent of Death and likely upset that I’d deceived her. But she didn’t show anger. Why? My guts clenched. *Because she was afraid to.*

“I could take you down to Stevas,” she offered, looking at Andreas for permission. Maybe she wasn’t afraid, then? “He’s a fair hand at simplifying, didn’t you say?”

Andreas nodded. “The best we’ve got, and he’ll have the reference books to help. That’s what I’d suggest,” he said, looking back up at me.

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” I said, still looking at Gemma. She hid her emotions well.

“This is about . . . Twynsits?” she asked quietly, once again making eye contact. In this dim hall, her eyes had lost their sparkle and warmth. I nodded. “Then there’s no time to waste,” she said firmly. She stepped around the counter and put a hand on my elbow, turning me toward the exit. “Off we go.”

We didn't link arms as we had at her family's inn. That would be too close, too personal. I was the lying embodiment of Endings, I thought miserably. My stomach felt like a sack of rocks, sitting heavy in my body. This is exactly what I'd known would happen once she found out. Any chance I'd had of—

"I knew," she said quietly as she led me back into the main hallway and down a set of steps that the speed rune had carried me past. "When you vanished yesterday, I knew you weren't one of the first four. We've an adherent of Sky in my family, and he always just seems to . . . dissipate. You simply vanished."

"You're not upset?" I asked, keeping my voice low as well.

"Surprised, I suppose," she mused.

But not angry? Even if she'd known, I'd still lied to her.

"I can't blame you, now that I think about it. Your kind lead lonely lives, don't they?"

My kind. As if there was more the one of me. "I do," I admitted even more quietly.

"You were afraid I'd . . . I guess people don't want to spend much time with you, do they?"

"I was meant to be imprisoned in the Tower of Endings," I said bitterly. "I'm not supposed to be around people. People aren't supposed to be around me. The adherent of the Sixth is meant to be alone."

"You don't have to be," she said, matching my tone as we came to the bottom of the steps. "I don't think I'm afraid of you, at least." Warmth spread through my limbs as we stepped into a small office, furnished with a battered old table and three rickety chairs. "Stevas?" she called out.

"Eh?" A middle-aged man appeared through a narrow doorway.

"Andreas suggested we see you. This is . . . Daniel. He's the adherent of the Sixth." Stevas's eyes widened. "He's come to ask us about simplifying a rune."

Stevas nodded, his eyes still bulging, and gestured to the table. Gemma had taken my sketch, and she laid it in the center of the table. “I can pay you,” I blurted. I didn’t expect these people to do everything for free just because I was . . . me.

“Pay?” He seemed to consider the concept. “Guess it’s normal enough. Usually charge twenty, maybe thirty for one this complex,” he added, eyeing the sketch.

“You can’t possibly—” Gemma began, heat rising in her voice. “Do you know who—”

“I’m happy to,” I interrupted. I withdrew a handful of coins—my family’s rather than any of the ones hoarded throughout the Tower—and gently set the stack on the table.

Stevas looked at them for a moment before scooping them into his own pocket and sliding into one of the chairs. “Sit,” he said as he pulled the sketch closer to him. “Hmm.” He held a hand out to one side, palm up. “Brevas,” he ordered in a sharp tone. “The old one. And Tommis, third edition. And pen and paper.”

The requested books and supplies soared through the same narrow doorway and thumped in his outstretched hand, his arm dipping under the weight. He quickly slid the pile onto the table, opened one of the books, and arranged the blank sheets of paper in front of him.

He muttered and turned pages for several minutes, finally picking up the pen and sketching a single rune:



My eyes widened. Stevas laid his pen down and examined his work before looking up at me. “*Teisėjas*, in the True Language,” he said carefully, perhaps with a note of suspicion in his voice.

Judge, the word meant. It was also my family’s true surname, one we rarely shared with anyone. For generations, they’d used pseudonyms like Scratch.

“Not sure I care to finish this,” Stevas said in a low voice, his eyes drilling into mine. “Not an auspicious start.”

I cleared my throat. “I think you’ll find,” I said carefully, “that accepting my family’s coin imposes a burden.” I licked my lips nervously.

Stevas cocked his head and me and attempted to push his chair back from the table. It didn’t budge. He struggled with it for several moments, wiggling it hard enough that I worried it might actually shatter. With a resigned sigh, he said, “I see.”

Gemma gave me another odd look that I didn’t quite know how to interpret. *She’s probably decided I’m too weird to trouble with*, I thought sadly. I pushed it aside—I was naïve to think I could have a life outside the Tower, to have anything as absurd as a friend, despite her well-meaning words.

My mood continued to darken as we watched Stevas translate the rune I’d sketched. He summoned book after book, eventually accumulating a stack that stood higher than his head. When he finished, he pushed the completed page toward me.

“Thank you.”

He slid his chair back with a grunt, stood, and with a parting glare, hurried out of the room.

The page contained two additional runes.



“I know the first one,” Gemma said, peering at the page. “*Ikalinimas*. To be imprisoned.”

“Imprisonment,” I corrected her absentmindedly. I’d built up a solid knowledge of the True Language while alone in my tower. “The connotation is describing the actual condition, not the future eventuality.”

We stared at the other rune for a long moment. “But I don’t know this one,” I said at last.

“Is it a compound?” she asked. She’d moved very close to me so that we were standing shoulder to shoulder as we leaned over the sketches. I breathed in gently, savoring the light, sweet scent of her. Would she have stood so close if she’d given up on me?

She was still speaking. “Something like *nepaliaujama*?”

“Never-ending?” I mused, forcing my attention back to the sketch. “So this bit,” I said, tapping the drawing. “In the . . . presence?”

She shook her head. “It’s more like *kol gyvybė egzistuoja*.

‘Never-ending in the presence of life.’” She shuddered. “That’s a little ghoulish.”

“But it squares with what Andreas said, doesn’t it? Never-ending—something perpetual? Still, I don’t see how these would all connect.”

“They wouldn’t in modern runic. That’s as much of a compound rune as I’ve ever seen, in fact—at least one used for magic. It would take a good bit of energy to empower it. Old Runic . . . there was a way about it, how they linked concepts. There was a word for it.” She chewed her lip as she thought. “*Sinergija*.”

“The whole is more than the sum of its parts,” I translated with a nod. “That tracks.”

“So does it tell you what you need to know?”

I sighed. “It seems close. Almost tantalizing. But I’m still . . .” I shook my head in frustration. “I don’t know. I think I’m still missing a piece.” I found myself incredibly distracted by my family’s true name being part of this. “You know,” I said carefully, folding the paper and looking into Gemma’s eyes. “I’m wondering if my family might be part of this somehow.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Your family? How so?”

I dropped the paper into my pocket. “It’s a hunch.”

“Andreas said this was part of the Tower. He meant the Tower of Endings? Your home?”

I snorted. “My prison. Or intended to be.” So we’d been told, but I was having doubts. “But yes, the rune is part of its construction apparently.”

“Do you think your family may have been part of that as well?”

I blinked as I considered it. “Actually . . . that’s a thought. But . . .”

“But what?”

I sighed in exasperation. “My family is difficult. Elusive. I’ve

struggled to learn anything about them. My parents were the last generation. My mother, that is. She married out-clan, sort of. Out-family, really. I'm the last, and now there won't be any more. But I've only ever found hints about them. Mentions in a social paper, real estate transactions, little things. I've always run out of leads, hit dead ends."

Her expression brightened with a wide smile. "Well, you happen to be in the perfect place to learn more."

Daniel, came a voice. It seemed to drift through the air itself, tickling my ear. My Axis reared up.

"Debesi," I said aloud.

Carvendam, the voice replied.

"Gemma," I said, keeping my voice casual. "Would you like to come with me for a moment?"

“What’s she doing here?” Debesi’s voice was cold and accusing. I’d found her in Carvendam’s large, central square, where a crowd of humans was standing before the village’s church, roaring and shouting.

“*She* is named Gemma,” I replied evenly, “and she is helping me research the Veil, both its creation and its maintenance. She works at Runehall in Evermore.”

The older adherent blinked a few times before regarding Gemma with more respect. At least, the tightness around Debesi’s mouth eased a bit, which I took as an improvement—no matter the reason.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Word of magic has spread,” Debesi said, waving a hand toward the angry mob.

“I gathered,” I muttered, struggling to contain my irritation. “What is it you want from me?”

“I had hoped this village would be small enough for you to take all of their memories at once.”

“You can do that?” Gemma whispered.

“Oh, the Sixth can do anything. *Everything*, in fact. Just ask him,” Debesi mocked.

I wouldn’t satisfy her with a reply, instead directing the Axis to spread its awareness across as much of the village as possible. In truth, Carvendam—named for the enormous, carved wooden dam that straddled the river, far downstream from Twynsits—was large enough to be called a town.

I shook my head. “No. It’s still too big. I could do this group—”

“Don’t bother.” Debesi sighed. Disappointment chilled her voice. “There’s another group preparing to burn down a home a few streets over.”

“You’re kidding.”

“That way. Two streets.” She waved her hand again to indicate the direction, then vanished in a cool mist.

I wrapped my Axis around myself, expanded it to include Gemma, and invoked the Axis’s travel magic to follow Debesi.

Zmogus was already there, standing as far back as he could while still keeping an eye on the structure that the humans were, without a doubt, trying to burn down. Easily a dozen men carried flaming torches. “They saw someone appear out of thin air and ran for the torches. Apparently word had already spread from upriver, but *seeing* it tipped them over.”

A mad part of my brain suddenly wondered where all the torches had come from. Was there a stockpile someplace?

“Do they know it’s a *human* building?”

“I don’t think they care,” Debesi observed. “Look, they’re trying again.”

I watched as three humans dashed up to the building, holding their torches against one wooden wall until it caught flame. As they retreated, the fire died. “I’ve been doing that for a while now,” Zmogus said with a grin. “But I expect they’re

about to decide that's magic as well, not just a wall that won't burn."

"Is anyone inside?"

"I retrieved the family, so no." Debesi shrugged. "There might be some humans in the main building."

"I can End their memories," I offered.

Zmogus snorted. "There's already another group on the other side of town, trying to burn down a café that's also home to the local witchkind council hall. Another adherent of Flame is dealing with it. They'll light the whole city aflame if we don't stop them, but I don't know how long we can keep it up without being caught."

A strategy formed in my mind. "Get caught."

"What?" Debesi's voice turned sharper than the glare she gave upon my arrival.

"We can't let them destroy us. Evacuate who you can. Keep the flames down. Adherents can get away easily; it's not like the humans can do anything to us. Don't worry about whether or not they think there's magic."

"The Veil—" Gemma started, earning a pointed stare from Zmogus that silenced her at once.

"The Veil is already torn," I said. "We're close to fixing it, and once we do, everything goes back to normal. In the meantime, just keep everyone safe." I hoped I was right about being close to fixing it. And that doing so would return everything to normal.

"There aren't enough of us to protect the witchkind in every town and village across the world," Zmogus growled.

Always fighting. I forced my voice to remain calm and confident. "Then keep it contained. Don't let anyone leave. Send more people to Twynsits with the same orders. If there are other cities nearby that've been told of magic, send people there too. If we just use our magic, we can keep the humans bottled

up. For a while, at least. They don't have any means of communicating over any kind of distance. Earth adherents can raise barriers if needed. You just need to hold them."

"For how long?" Zmogus asked, flicking a hand and dousing the humans' torches.

"A day. Two, at most. We're close, I'm telling you. I've found the magic. I've found its anchor. I just need to understand where to put the power." An oversimplification, true, but I felt my confidence grow as I said it.

Debesi nodded slowly. "We're betting everything on you repairing the Veil, then."

"You already were."

"I'll send word," she said, once again vanishing in a short-lived cloud of mist.

"Best get on it, boy," Zmogus growled, his Axis snuffing another flame against the building. The small crowd was already grumbling and looking around as they relit their torches. Zmogus gave them a wide, fierce grin.

"I am," I said. I told my Axis to take Gemma and me back to Evermore.

Family History

“**D**o you even know where to start?” Gemma asked as we arrived just outside Runchall.
“I was hoping you might,” I admitted.
“Family Hall, then. Follow me.”

She hurried off, leading me through Evermore’s gently curved streets until we came to another government building, although one that seemed almost human made. Its architectural style was rare for Evermore: solid walls and pillars stretched a half dozen stories overhead, everything squared off and solemn. “One of the oldest repositories in all of Evermore,” she said as she pushed her way through the stout granite doors and into the dim, somber foyer.

“May I help—oh! Hullo, Gemma.”

“Hello, Danske. Bit of an emergency.” She tilted her head toward me, and Danske’s eyes widened.

“Hello . . . Adherent,” she stammered while bobbing her head and attempting what may have been a curtsy. “How may we—”

"I've got it," Gemma said, grabbing my forearm and hauling me forward. "We'll need to use the Great Tree," she called back over one shoulder.

"It's available!" Danske called back as we marched quickly out of earshot down a long hallway.

"We like our hallways, don't we?" I mused as Gemma led me along at a brisk pace.

"Leaves more room to attach expanded spaces," she explained. "Here. This is us."

She pushed through another door, this one made of finely carved, glossy wood, and we stepped into . . .

A forest?

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees all around us. The floor was still stone, but trees seemed to grow directly from it. As Gemma wound her way through them, aiming for some destination only she knew, I realized that the trees had been planted—grown? Magicked into existence? Placed?—in a complex pattern.

Gemma stopped abruptly. "We're here."

A tree stretched so high into the sky-ceiling that I couldn't make out its top, and its trunk was so wide even eight people holding hands with their arms outstretched couldn't encircle it. Its bark was a deep reddish brown, and between it and us was a podium. As Gemma took a step closer to it, I realized that the podium itself was a tall stump of the same kind of tree; it had been far smaller when it had been cut off at waist level, but it had the same bark.

"This is *the* Tree, I take it?" I asked. Something about the room—forest? Space?—made me keep my voice low.

"It is," Gemma replied quietly. "This is an organic repository of all knowledge of the families of witchkind, going all the way back to the Exodus."

According to the legends, that was when all of witchkind

came into the world. I'd read about it several times and always wondered where the humans—who weren't mentioned in the tale—fit into it. "How do we use it?"

"You said you weren't in a clan?"

"No."

"Then your family rune. Scratch, right?" She took one final step forward and sketched a rune.



The wood glowed as she moved her finger, and the final sparkling rune seemed to sink downward. A breeze blew around us, rustling the leaves. I realized then that one reason this space seemed so odd was the lack of sound: a real forest of this size would have had birds chirping, small animals creeping through the underbrush, and so forth. Until the breeze stirred, it was eerily, impossibly silent.

Symbols, glowing in every color of the rainbow, began appearing above the podium. The glyphs spun and swam for a moment before coalescing into something legible.

"Odd," Gemma remarked with a frown. "It's . . . a land deed." She pulled a pad of paper and a carbon stylus from somewhere—did her dress have hidden pockets?—and copied down the reference. When she finished, she tapped the stump, and the shining letters and numbers dissolved into motes of light that quickly faded away.

She turned to me. "That was a lot less than I expected."

I flushed. "Yeah. The world knows me as Daniel Scratch,

but Scratch isn't actually my family name." She raised one delicate black eyebrow, inviting me to continue. "My family changed the name they used in public. Our real name . . . I always understood it to be something of a secret."

"It's one of the runes Stevas drew, isn't it?"

I sighed and nodded. "I don't even know why it was such a secret." I stepped up to the stump and drew a new rune:



"*Teisējas*," Gemma said, and then the breeze blew more strongly as the glowing symbol sank into the wood. Once again the air above the stump was filled with twisting, twirling symbols.

"Some families were always protective of their name," Gemma mused as we waited for the symbols to stabilize. "It was one of the reasons they formed clans originally. To hide the family names. But the Tree always knows. We may even—ah. Yes, see?"

I did. Shining letters of crimson and plum spelled out additional names, ones I supposed my family had used in the past. Lines of peach and azure connected them in a complex web. Circles and squares, rendered in illuminated amber and cobalt, formed a proper family tree. Tiny words written in lustrous viridian noted names, dates of birth, and relationships.

My family, written in radiant hues.

I found my throat tight and my eyes a bit wet. Why hadn't I known of this Tree sooner?

“Laikytojas,” I recited. “Statybininkas.” The two main branches of the oldest part of my family. I peered at the dates. “They did go back to the Exodus. Or at least to those dates.”

“Laikytojas,” Gemma said. “That’s an old name. It means . . . Keepers?”

I believe so. “And Statybininkas would be Builders. Hopefully that’s a good sign.”

“You know, there’s that evidence the Exodus was a real event,” she said, almost absentmindedly. She had a finger in the air and was tracing the delicate connections between the most ancient members of my lineage. “Oh!” she exclaimed, pulling back as if she’d been stung. “Too close.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Tree can share . . . not exactly memories, but recollections.” She shook her head. “That didn’t make sense, did it? It doesn’t know private memories, but anything public, anything that was in broad awareness, it stores. Try it. Just touch one of them.”

I reached out and poked the glowing diagram. It was a bit like experiencing shards of memory from the Axis. Flashes came quickly and left even faster, although the process felt gentler than I was used to.

Stepping through a glowing portal, holding tight to the children.

Coaching a new Earth adherent as they raised a new island from the ocean floor.

Empowering the family home for defense and secrecy.

Clearing land for a new homestead.

Arguing with human neighbors: “You’ve no right to demand we use our magic to help you!”

Then one grabbed my attention.

Drawing up detailed plans. This will work. Here, this will hold the power. Spikes, all around it, to catch at the spirit. On

an island—isolated. But the plan will take generations to play out.

We'll need someone to guide it over the decades. A volunteer. We'll make them a space.

In the house?

Of course. Everything will play out there. They'll need the shelter.

Document everything. Write it all down.

There were a dozen—a hundred, maybe a thousand—more that zipped through my brain faster than I could count, making me dizzy. But a few key impressions stuck, the first being that the Statybininkas branch of my family had built the home I'd grown up in—it was far older than I'd ever realized.

I snapped back to reality, my stomach protesting the rapid shifts in perspective. “Ouch,” I said softly, rubbing my temples. “How does that even work?” The last images were already fading from my consciousness, and my innards were managing to settle themselves.

“The Tree?” Gemma tapped her chin with one long, delicate finger. “I’ve heard different theories. My favorite is that we’re all part of magic and that magic preserves us. It’s difficult to access, and you only get those flashes, but we’re all in it, forever, to some extent.”

Not unlike how the Axis seemed to preserve its adherents’ memories, it seemed.

“Did you get anything useful?”

“Hmm? Oh. I think so. Maybe. There was a flash. I think my family may have helped build the Tower. Somehow they’re connected to its magic, which is what Plaktukas apparently connected to, or duplicated, to power the Veil. Whatever the Veil is, he awakened it, and now it’s . . . nodding off, I guess. The humans have seen through it. That’s my theory.”

“So . . . where do we go from here?”

"We've a name, now. Laikytojas. From the family tree. You said Scratch came up with a real estate transaction?"

"The Tree has connections to the main archives a few blocks from here."

"Let's try Laikytojas, then." I tapped the stump, and my family tree vanished. I wrote the Laikytojas rune onto the stump, watching as it settled into the wood.

This time, the result was . . . impressive.

"Oh, my."

"My thoughts exactly," I said wryly. "I hope you can make sense of all that."

The glowing symbols had snapped into place much more quickly, forming a dense, almost unreadable web of connections, symbols, and tiny, crabbed text.

Gemma waved her hands in a practiced motion, and the symbols shifted, some shrinking away, while others grew large enough to read.

"You're good at this," I observed.

She blushed. "I used to beg the staff to let me in here when I was a teenager. It's part of what got me interested in becoming a scholar." She peered at the now-legible text. "Well. It's interesting, at least."

"How so?"

"Laikytojas goes back to the Exodus. From what this says, they were one of the leading Twelve."

I thought back to one of the memories. *Stepping through a glowing portal, holding tight to the children.* "The families that allegedly brought witchkind to our New Haven?"

"Exactly. And they were involved with Erškētis, the family that later drove the Sundering."

"The Sundering? I definitely thought *that* was a myth."

"The Exodus and the Sundering are connected. Did you

not get all of this in—oh, right. You never got to attend a proper school.”

“I had an island all to myself and a ghost to mentor me,” I countered. “And I read a lot.”

Gemma gave me a long look. “You’re actually serious about the ghost part.”

“I am.”

“Well, we should discuss that whole business sometime.” She turned back to the glowing display. “Myth or no, the Exodus and the Sundering were the first two major events for witchkind in this world.”

“There are more?”

“The Forging.”

“Of course.”

“The Exodus represents the time that witchkind arrived in this world. Some contend that it’s when we got our powers, our connection to magic, and that the Sundering was when we severed our ties to humans. Others insist that we literally came to this world from another, and the Sundering was the time when the last way home closed.”

“That was the version I read. Which do you believe?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never bothered deciding. It doesn’t matter much either way, does it? The Forging is far more interesting because we *know* that happened.”

“So my family goes a ways back.”

“All the way. You’re practically royalty, being of the Twelve.”

She turned to smile at me, and I realized how very close we were standing. Her honeyed scent filled my nostrils, tickling the back of my throat. She leaned forward ever so slightly, and I reciprocated. *She’s almost exactly my height*, a distant part of my brain observed. I heard her feet shuffle on the stone floor, and suddenly she was no longer just *close*.

Our lips brushed.

I felt . . . everything. Fire, racing along my veins. Or was it ice, sharp and cool and tingling? My stomach flipped round and round, and my heartbeat seemed to triple in speed and intensity. I realized I'd closed my eyes but could still see brightly glowing points of light, flashing and exploding on the insides of my eyelids.

"Sorry," she whispered as she drew back, breaking contact.

"Don't be," I said softly, slowly opening my eyes.

"Is it allowed? Permitted?"

Good question. I reached out to the Axis, but it was off nosing around in a far corner of the room, seemingly unconcerned. "I believe it is."

"Then we shall have to try again."

"Later. The Veil . . ."

"Yes." She stepped back, clearing her throat and nodding. "Business. So." She turned back to the stump, gathering her thoughts. "Your family, part of it at least, goes back pretty far. Here," she added, lifting a finger to the diagram, careful not to touch it. "Eril Laikytojas married Stonna Statybininkas about a dozen years before the Forging."

"Can you look at the Statybininkas side? Before then?"

She nodded, making a complex twisting motion with her fingers. The shining diagram shimmered and shifted, showing the other side of my family's original line. "Oh. Look at that."

I couldn't make sense of any of it.

"It's just . . . here," she said, pointing to a long row of letters and numbers. "Statybininkas registered a family archive. Just after the Forging, in fact."

"A family archive?" *Document everything. Write it all down.*

"They were common back then. Now everyone relies on the Evermore archives, but this was before Evermore was even a hamlet. Bigger families would keep their own records, and

they'd register their archives." She put a gentle hand on my forearm as she spoke.

"Does it still exist?" My heart quickened again, and not entirely because of this new information.

She took her pad and stylus back out and copied down the letters and numbers. "These are coordinates. We'll need someone look up where this is, and then we can go see. Should be simple since you're able to travel so easily." I detected a note of amused jealousy in her tone.

"Where would we do that?"

"A land agent, of course. Can you whisk us back outside? I believe there's one just down the road." No sooner said than done, we appeared back on the street. "That takes your breath away a bit" She rubbed her arms as if to warm them. "But I could get used to it. Look, it's just there."

I followed her to a small office. The door clanked against a bell as we entered, setting off a tinny clanging noise.

"Help you?" a worn-looking woman asked without standing from her desk.

Gemma handed her the slip of paper with the coordinates. "Can you tell us where this is? Exactly?"

The woman sighed as she looked at it. "Old system. This a listing?"

"Not that we know of."

"I see." She peered at the paper for several moments. "Seventy-four . . . that'll be Farreach. The one in the north. Hmm." She opened a drawer in her desk and rummaged around a bit. "The map, I'll have to charge you for it." I slid one of my family's coins across the desk. She eyed it before nodding. "That'll do. So it's just here." She picked up a carbon stylus and carefully marked a small X on the map. "Nasty location, if it's a listing."

"It's not. But why?" Gemma asked.

“All cliffs along that bleak, freezing excuse for a lake they have up there. Good ways out of the village proper.”

“Can you take us there?” Gemma asked me. “Although perhaps we should stop for a coat.”

“No need.” I picked up the map, stared at it for a long moment, and willed the Axis to carry us away.

Farreach (in the North)

As we appeared, a biting, almost crushing wind assaulted us, whipping Gemma's hair around and stinging our eyes with wet, icy air. I Ended the cold around us—one of the more abstract uses of the Axis's power—and Gemma gasped with relief. "Sorry," I offered, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

"No, it's fine," she said, rubbing her hands together. "That was just so sudden."

"I guess I'm used to it." I paused, swiveling my head to take in the gray sodden landscape. "Not the most hospitable place, is it?"

"You've come here before?"

"To the town, yes. Never out here on the shore."

"Is it always so . . . grim?"

I chuckled. "I think so. You know, this is where I always imagined my family originated."

"Because of your skin?"

"Being so pale, yes. This part of the world is the only place I don't feel so obvious."

She looked at me for a moment. “It does sort of suit you, you know. Your eyes, your skin, your hair—you fit in here. Visually, at least. But you never lived here?”

“No, the family—”

“Daniel.” A gust of wind formed into a short, broadly built man with piercing blue eyes and light-brown hair.

“Yes?” Who would have known to look for me here?

He gave a slight bow from the waist. “I’m Vėjas, adherent—”

“—of Sky, no doubt.” I grinned, but it twisted into a frown. “How did you know I was here?”

“Nuvilnijo and I—she’s a fellow Sky adherent—were sent to help maintain order here. We’ve cast a net of sorts that detects magic, so we can respond quickly.”

Interesting. Yet another application of their Axis that was new to me. “So word of the Hunts has reached Farreach?”

He nodded. “There isn’t a full-on riot like the one in Twynsits, but we have an adherent of Flame here as well in case witchkind are discovered. The humans are rumbling about magic and Hunts, but we don’t think any of them have actually seen anything. And with all this wind available to us,” he added, gesturing around himself, “we’ve got plenty to work with in terms of creating illusions.” They used similar illusions to mask Evermore, I recalled, but the specifics eluded me. I made a note to spend more time studying the capabilities of the other Axes. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“This is Gemma,” I said, my arm still around her shoulder. “She’s been helping me research this. We’re close to a solution for the Veil, and there’s supposed to be a family archive near here with information we believe may help.”

He nodded again. “Not surprising. Earth magic has always run strong here, and it excels at preservation. The cliffs in

particular are probably riddled with old family archives, to say nothing of all the ones in the town itself.”

“I believe we’re looking for one of the ones in the cliffs.”

“Any idea where?”

I still had the land agent’s map in my hand, so I offered it to him.

Vējas stepped forward and took it. “Yes, easy enough.” He pointed toward the lake. “Do you see that tall pillar of stone? The one that juts up about twice your height, very close to the shore?”

I scanned the horizon, but it seemed far away and shrouded in mist. “Not quite.”

“Ah, right. Try this.” He held his hand up and the air in front of me *solidified*. A large circle of air seemed to clear and hold still, somehow magnifying what was beyond it.

Absolutely fascinating. “I see it now.”

“Then I will leave you to it.” He gave another quick bow and vanished in a gust of wind.

I had the Axis take us to the shoreline just in front of that tall pillar. “Any idea how we—”

“There,” Gemma said at once, pointing to the cliffside.

I peered more closely, taking a few steps forward, careful to pull her along with me, as the Axis’s zone of no-cold didn’t extend very far. “Ah,” I said as I spotted it: a series of runes had been carved into the rock, just above my head. The carvings, probably once crisp and precise, appeared worn from centuries of wind and rain.

We stepped closer, and I began pushing on the rough rock face below the runes. There were no seams, no grooves, nothing that indicated an entrance. “How do these things usually open?”

“I’ve never actually been in one.”

I couldn’t have the Axis just jump us inside—there was too

much risk of appearing within solid rock. Although I was already past my own End, Gemma wasn't past hers, and I didn't relish the thought of somehow being trapped in granite. So instead, I fed just a bit of power into the rock face, probing gently to see if I could detect anything. *Ah*, I thought as a tiny void seemed to draw at my power. *Maybe if I push that a—*

The world blinked, and we found ourselves inside a small cavern. Magic lights began glowing to life around us, providing a dim, even illumination.

We were standing in some sort of entry foyer. It was bare of any furniture, without even any carpeting on the smooth-hewn rock beneath our feet. But the walls were inlaid with elegant, precisely cut crystals and tiles, all formed into hexagons that interlinked with one another, alternating between a creamy, alabaster white and a dark, shiny onyx.

Four portraits hung in the room, each one depicting a stern-looking, matriarchal older woman. I released Gemma and stepped forward to examine them.

A small brass plate affixed to the bottom of each frame provided the women's names: Sprendimas, Montuotojas, Cherise, Phoebe. Older names, graduating to ones that were more common in modern times. I wondered what they'd done to earn a place on these walls and examined them again. Cherise stood out this time. She bore a stunning resemblance to Mother.

"Daniel," Gemma said softly, pointing. I followed her finger and realized there was a door carefully fitted into the rock wall of the cavern. It was inlaid entirely with a matte-black material that seemed to absorb light, which is why I'd missed it at first. We stepped toward it, and it swung inward at a light touch.

We stepped into a library.

It didn't have the soaring grandeur of the one in my Tower, but elements of the room reminded me of my island home. The

cavern was perfectly round, with the walls carved and polished into a smooth, glossy dome that reached perhaps thrice my height at the center. The walls were lined with head-height shelves, each one filled with books in ordered rows. In the middle of the room, a large, round, waist-high table offered a place to lay books out for study.

"They're all in the True Language," Gemma muttered.

"What is?"

"The labels," she said, pointing.

Indeed, there were signs carved into the smooth rock above each bookcase. "*Šeima*," I read aloud. "Family. *Statyba*. Building. *Grimuaras*." That was an odd one. "Grimoire?" I guessed. "Books of magic? *Finansai*. That's finances." The list went on around the room: Legal. Land. Politics. Everything the family had ever done or engaged in, apparently, was documented here.

"Even Evermore doesn't use the True Language for shelf labels," Gemma grumbled.

"My family comes from an older time," I agreed. "As a scholar, are you not already conversant in the True Language?"

"Not as much as my mentors would have me be, no," she admitted. "I'm surprised you are."

"Five years alone on an island with almost nothing to do but read," I said with a shrug. "Even before then, I was always bookish, I guess. And Great-Great-Grandmother encouraged an interest in the old tongue." She'd ordered me to memorize a vocabulary book when I was twelve, I remembered. "These all seem promising."

We separated, Gemma heading for one set of shelves and I for another. I aimed for the Building section and began pulling books from the shelves, examining them and putting them back. These weren't like the books in my library in the Tower: these were all hand-penned, with hand-drawn illustrations and

diagrams. *Document everything*. This was indeed an archive of everything the family had done.

"Here!" I exclaimed as I opened a book to its title page. *Pabaigų bokšto pastatas*, it read. "This is how they built the Tower."

"Daniel, have you seen this?"

I turned, expecting to see Gemma holding a book as I was. Instead, she was walking slowly around the room's central table, staring at the floor. I dropped my eyes and inhaled sharply.

Carved into the floor was the rune. *The* rune. The one in Palktukas's memories. The one carved below the Foundation of the Tower.

"There are words," she added, hunching down to trace them with a finger.

"*Šviesk, šviesk*," I muttered, causing the magic lights in the room to grow brighter. Still holding my book, I followed Gemma around the table, picking up where a phrase seemed to begin and tracing it around the outside of the circular rune. "It says, '*Visi dalykai, laikomi kartu valios ir proto, patvarūs ir nesi- baigiantys*.'"

"That's a mouthful," she muttered. "All things?"

"All things held together by . . ." I paused, dredging up the meaning of the obscure words. 'Through?' No, 'by means of.' Same thing. 'By means of . . . will and reason.'"

"Enduring."

"And unending."

"All things held together by means of will and reason, enduring and unending," Gemma recited, putting it all together. "Quite the motto." She stepped back, casting her eyes around the room. "Oh!"

I followed her gaze. "It can't be," I breathed.

I laid my book on the central table and stepped over to the

shelf. The brightened lights had revealed something I couldn't believe I'd missed: a tiny, intricately detailed model of a tall, stately home.

"It's so beautiful," Gemma said next to me, leaning over to examine the model, her nose almost touching it.

My Axis nosed around the house to confirm my suspicion. "It's my family home. The one I grew up in."

"Oh, it's so precious. You said they built it? This must have been the model."

"Actually," I said slowly, noting the Axis's discovery: a deep and powerful magic permeated the home. "I think this *is* my family home."

Gemma pulled back. "What?"

"It vanished when I left. There was nobody else in the family for it to serve, I thought, and so it just . . . went." I nodded toward the shelf. "I think this is it. I bet there's even a book here that explains how they did it. But I think it must have come here until it was needed again."

We stared at it for a moment longer, wonder still filling my mind. But then I recalled my purpose here. "Come on. We've come here for answers. There'll be time enough for all that later."

I returned to my book and began flipping through it. Gemma went back to the family shelves and began poking through the books there.

I read for what felt like hours, laboriously translating the long passages of True Language. "It's true," I said at last, my gaze still riveted into the book's pages. "The memories from the Tree were real. They built the Tower of Endings, using a rune they'd invented, one designed to cycle power indefinitely. The book details all the runes they used to raise the island and the Tower itself." I shook my head. "They're incomprehensible, at least to me. Incredibly old." Gemma stepped up quietly beside

me, startling me. “The Foundation *is* the key. Somehow it’s part of what anchors the Axis, not just the current adherent. Something about . . . I don’t understand this bit. *Visy, kurie laikė vadeles, esmė*. Any of that make sense to you?”

She reached out with one long delicate finger, tracing the words. “Essential?” she asked, stopping on one.

“Essence.”

“‘The essence of all’ and . . . something about holding?”

“Past tense. ‘Who have held.’” If nothing else, the two of us made an excellent rune-lore team.

“‘Leash?’” she guessed.

“Close enough, I think. I’d have said ‘reins,’ maybe.” I frowned, not understanding the context.

“And what does this have to do with it all?”

“It’s part of the anchor. I don’t understand it, though. This implies that an Axis can only be anchored, chained, to a person. Which we knew—that’s why we’re Chosen. But it’s also saying that the Sixth is partly anchored to the Foundation of the Tower, which is just a huge rock pillar, not a person at all.”

“Andreas said something about crystals storing power?”

“The Foundation isn’t a crystal. And this isn’t about power, it’s about anchoring it. Keeping it in one place.” I shook my head. “This must be how the Axis stays anchored even when there’s no adherent, but I don’t understand the context. What was the other rune? You said it was ghoulish.”

“‘In the presence of life,’” Gemma said.

“Which doesn’t make sense. There’s no life *in* the Tower.”

“You’re alive,” she pointed out.

“Not technically,” I muttered offhandedly. “We have to End ourselves to actually accept the mantle of adherent.” I ignored the fact that her eyes grew very wide. “Maybe I don’t need to understand this. Look here—this is how they empowered the

rune. And the Veil—I may just need to feed more of the Axis’s power into the rune.”

“Surely it’s not that easy. Just giving it more magic?”

“I don’t think it’s going to be. From what they’re saying here, they actually worried raising the Tower and empowering this rune might kill Galas.”

“But you just said you’re already—”

“Past my Ending,” I interrupted. “It’s different. Maybe a paradox. I don’t know.” I studied the book for a while longer. “Have you found anything?”

“This,” she said softly, sliding a book onto the table.

Priešpaskutinė was stamped into the leather cover. “Penultimate?” I asked.

I felt her nod as she flipped the book open, turning to the last page. “See here?”

My eyes scanned the page. “That’s me.” And it was: neatly lettered inside a box near the bottom of the page was “Daniel.” Above that, two boxes with my parents’ names. Above Mother’s was my grandmother and her husband. Above her, Great-Grandmother. Above her, Great-Great-Grandmother. “Great-Great-Grandmother’s name has a star next to it,” I noted.

“Daniel, *yours* has *Sekėjas* next to it. ‘Adherent.’”

I shrugged. “I am an adherent.”

“So someone’s been in here *since you were Chosen* to update this?”

I blinked. That seemed unlikely. But . . . “Maybe?”

“No, wait. Look at the inks. Start with your Great-Great-Grandmother. See how the ink has faded? It’s almost a light brown at this point. But the ink gets darker as you go. Even Earth magic can’t fully preserve a book in pristine condition.”

“My name’s dark black,” I said with another shrug. “I was the last born.”

"Yes, but *Sekéjas* is faded worse than your Great-Great-Grandmother's."

I frowned. Meaning . . . they'd known that the child in my generation would be an adherent? Before Great-Great-Grandmother had even been born? "How could they have known?"

I flipped back a few pages but found nothing more than a matrilineal family tree, stretching back centuries. Every fourth or fifth generation, sixth at most, a name would be starred. But none had any other notations written next to them. "I don't understand."

"Daniel," Gemma said slowly, carefully, "what if they *meant* for you to become an adherent."

My mind balked. "That's impossible. Nobody can predict who an Axis will Choose."

"What if *they* could?"

"I—" I began, before snapping my mouth shut. There had been a prophecy, a smattering of badly rhymed words that Great-Great-Grandmother had whispered to me. It was one of the last things she'd said, in fact. Clearly, my family thought they could predict who would become an adherent. "It doesn't matter. That's not helping with the Veil. I need to go back to the Tower, try to re-empower the rune there. Pushing more power into the Veil should fix everything."

"You're certain?" Gemma didn't seem to be.

"I need to try. I—Gemma, I need to take you back to Evermore, for now."

"You said Galas almost died doing this," she protested. "What—"

"I said they worried about it. He didn't. He lived well beyond the Tower's construction. I'll be fine. Also"—*I'm not sure about having personal guests in the Tower*, I started to say—"it might be dangerous. I have an Axis, and you said yourself you barely have enough power to light a candle."

“Okay.” She sounded dubious.

“If it works, I’ll tell you immediately. And if you don’t hear from me, contact an adherent. Any of them. Tell them to check on me.” Of course, I was assuming the Tower would let them in if I was injured. Or dead.

“Okay,” she agreed, sounding reluctant. “Will you have time for a meal, at least?”

Oh, how I wanted to say yes. How I wanted to do nothing more than remain in her company, to see her smile. To try another kiss, perhaps. My heart cracked as I said, “No. I’m so sorry. Not now. I need to fix the Veil. You saw what was happening, and we couldn’t even contain it to Twynsits and Carvendam. But afterward. Once this is all fixed, we’ll go to the nicest restaurant in Evermore. I promise.”

She smiled, and the room seemed to grow exponentially brighter. “I will hold you to that, Daniel Scratch. I—”

I cried out as a blinding, burning pain crushed my mind. I fell to my knees, clutching my head, feeling the Axis hurtle about the room in alarm.

“Daniel, what is it?” Gemma knelt next to me, concern filling her features.

I massaged my temples. “It’s a Summons.”

“For you?” she seemed confused.

“For the adherent of the Sixth. The strongest I’ve ever felt. I need to go.”

“I’ll—”

“Now.”

Eldritch Fire

I took Gemma to Evermore, leaving her without a word on the steps of Runehall, the Summons still ringing in my head. I followed the Summons blindly, directing the Axis to *just go!* and found myself in a meadow, facing a dense, ancient forest.

And a fire.

The smell of burning wood assaulted my nose, and within moments I was all but engulfed in hot, stinking smoke.

“Daniel!”

I turned to see Zmogus running toward me. “I thought you were in Carvendam,” I said. “Where are we?”

“The Great Northern Wood,” he panted as he thudded to a stop next to me. He hadn’t hurled an insult at me along with his answer—this was urgent. “It’s burning.”

Anyone could see that much: A fire had started in the meadow, judging from a blackened ring of grass whose center was still aflame, but the conflagration had spread to the forest itself. Whole trees were engulfed, throwing sparks on their neighbors as the fire threatened to run out of control.

My heart beat faster. I had been here on my birthday, answering a Summons to offer a merciful death. But this Summons was dire. The Great Northern Wood was where all of witchkind came into the world. Seeing it burn felt like sacrilege.

"We can't control it," Zmogus said, still breathing heavily. His face was more flushed than usual, his dark skin taking bright-red undertones. "Something is fueling it. Something magic."

There must have been a half dozen Flame adherents scattered along the fire's front, manically waving their arms to little effect. They'd get one tree to stop burning, then another would catch, and the moment they turned their attention to that one, the first would burst back into flames.

As I watched, a troupe of people—all witchkind, from the magic floating around them—poured out of the forest and began waving their arms, bringing to bear what magic they could to stop the blaze. "Are those Woodwitches?"

Zmogus looked. "Yes. Very secretive. And I don't know that they'll be able to do anything a group of Flame adherents couldn't."

I knew of them. "Secretive" was something of an understatement: as far as I knew, the Woodwitches *never* left the Great Northern Wood. The Wood sheltered them, and they protected it, in some kind of mysterious, almost mythical symbiosis.

But Zmogus was right: their magic was having little effect. They'd quickly deployed to the edges of the fire and were trying to convince the still-intact trees to *not* catch on fire. I felt the cyclical bursts of banishment magic, which were accompanied by an oddly organic and loamy intent. With each casting, brief gusts of wind attempted to blow glowing embers back into the main body of the fire.

That magic wouldn't last. No matter how much the Wood-

witches had Gathered the night before, they were spending magic at a rate that was simply unsustainable.

“End it, Daniel.” Zmogus’s order snapped me back. “That’s why we Summoned you.”

“Right.” I pushed the Axis toward the flames. This was the best and easiest use of its power: this fire would eventually end itself, so we were just hurrying the natural order of things. There were no abstractions here: I simply wanted the fire to *stop being*.



My power sped into the fire, which immediately flickered and died. Smoke and steam still roiled off the trees, but even the embers floating in the sky sputtered and went dark. Everyone who’d been frantically—and futilely—fighting the blaze look surprised, and then began cheering, jumping up and down and shaking each other’s—

The flames roared back to life, taller and hotter than before. Zmogus and I took an involuntary step backward as the furnace before us nearly melted our faces.

“What?” I was stunned. Even the Axis was confused, pulling back as if considering the leaping flames and wondering why they were still there. I pushed it forward, ordering it to End the fire, investing it with every ounce of my authority as the adherent of the Sixth Axis, and once again the inferno died down.

And once again, it reignited.

“What are you doing?” Zmogus demanded. “This is no time—”

“It’s what you said,” I shot back, confused and irritated. “I’m Ending it, but . . . a new fire starts. It’s not the same one,” I said as the realization struck me. “That’s why your adherents can’t put it out either. You *are* putting it out, but then a *new* one blazes up. Something’s powering it. Something . . . perpetual.” The rune from the Tower flashed through my mind.

“Where?”

“I’m about to find out,” I said grimly. One more time, I sent the Axis in to End the blaze, but this time I held onto the power tightly, keeping my senses firmly focused on what the Axis felt. It had a sense for magical power, and I used that sense now, casting it about.

The forest fire roared back to life, but I’d caught its center. “It’s there, in the meadow. Just on the edge of the Wood. That’s where it started.” I pointed to the blackened, burning ring of grass, where a huge pillar of fire whirled at its center. It’s existence seemed impossible. All natural fuel had long since been consumed.

“Can you stop it?”

“We’ll find out.” This time, I directed the Axis to the center of the burning pillar, seeking out the magic rather than the flames themselves, directing it to End whatever was there. It arrowed into the maelstrom of heat and light, striking into a dense, singular source of magic that kept bringing the fire back to life.

With a *snap* that must have been audible to everyone in the area, the magic broke. The fire sputtered and died under the Flame adherents’ power. The column of fire in the meadow gave one final surge, leaping higher into the sky before it ran out of magical fuel and flickered into nothingness.

“Dust and destruction,” Zmogus cursed softly. He began

trudging toward whatever had started all this, and I fell in behind him. Steam and smoke still rose from the burned and blackened earth, and I quickly had the Axis End much of the residual heat before my own clothes burst into flame.

“That’s it?” Zmogus asked as we stopped in front of a hip-high granite plinth that someone had settled into the soft dirt of the meadow. It had been carved into a rough cylinder, its top a blunt cone. Despite having been in the center of immense heat, it looked unaffected by the ravages of heat: the stone wasn’t blackened, cracked, or even slightly sooty.

An old woman, one of the ones who’d come out of the Wood, stepped up next to us. “This was the cause?” she asked.

I nodded tiredly. The Axis may have done the work, but I suddenly felt as if I’d put the fire out with my own force of will. “I believe so. Look, there are runes carved into it.”

The old woman leaned down to look and then shook her head and made a *tsk* noise. “Nasty work, that. You recognize it?”

I looked closely and, with some alarm, realized that I did. The runes were of the same complex style as the one I’d been working with for days. The same—what had Gemma called it—Transitional Runic. But these runes were cruder, as if carved by a careless child. Far less precise than what was in the Tower. Some of the runes bore a strong resemblance to the rune my family had apparently contrived—the circular components, what Andreas had called an anchoring element, and more.

“I know some of this,” I said.

But the runes on the plinth were also slightly different, more like modern runes than the Transitional one I’d been looking at for days. There, for example, were modern runes to light fire. Interesting. While the main construct seemed to draw power and loop it, that bit would act to—

“You are Daniel? Adherent of the Sixth?” the old woman

asked. I focused on her for the first time. Her eyes were a tired brown, her deeply wrinkled skin a dark mahogany, and her short-cropped hair as pure a white as I'd ever seen. She moved briskly enough, but with a slight stoop. Even now, she stood with her feet slightly apart, as if struggling to balance herself.

"I am. And you are?"

"Call me Ikwity."

"You're a Woodwitch?"

She merely shrugged.

"What are all these?" Zmogus asked. He stepped away from the plinth, surveying the area around it. He leaned down and picked up something from the ground, holding it up for us to see.

It was still smoking in his hand.

"Looks like . . . metal?" I guessed.

"Copper," he agreed. "Badly melted, of course. They're scattered all over."

I looked around and found another lump of molten metal nearby. I Ended its heat and picked it up. "Heavy. This one feels like brass. But what's it for?"

"You ever see anything like that?" Zmogus asked, ignoring me and pointing at the plinth.

"There's something . . . well, not like it, I guess. But similar. In the Tower. Its Foundation. The runes—"

"Such constructs were once used to hold the world in place," Ikwity broke in quietly.

Zmogus snorted, disinterested as always in stories and histories, focused entirely on the present. "Someone was seeking to burn the Wood, not hold the world in place," he growled. "I mean to find them." He stalked off to confer with his colleagues, carrying the lump of metal with him.

"What do you know of them?" I asked her. "Those constructs?"

"No need for them anymore. Well, aside from your obvious exception." She gave me a piercing look. "They're mostly gone now. Broken down as the relationship between humans and witchkind."

"My Foundation, you mean? The obvious exception?"

She nodded. "Dangerous precedent, that one. I suppose it serves its purpose. Inasmuch as the Forging was destined to occur, no matter what anyone with sense advised."

"I thought the Forging was done out of necessity."

Ikwity frowned. "Necessary for whom? Magic hates being leashed. Always has."

"Magic was running amok. Causing untold damage. It was chaos." We had leashed magic for the good of all.

"There to see it, were you?"

"Of course—I mean, no, but . . . I've sort of seen it since then." Via the Axis.

She nodded as if she knew what I meant. "But colored by the eyes that did see it. Ikwity says that's when the relationship cracked. When humans and witchkind grew apart."

"What do you mean, *cracked*? We live alongside humans now. That's what the Veil is for, isn't it?"

Now she snorted and wagged a finger at me. "Live *apart*. Separated. That's the whole point of the thing. The Veil. To separate us. Thinly so, but apart nonetheless." She let her finger drop.

"I broke it."

She shook her head at me and sighed. "You didn't. It was always a broken thing. Unnatural. Raised by fools with more fear than sense."

"You're saying it can't be fixed?"

"Saying we should let it go. There's no fixing it, whether you want to or not. It just needs reminding." She looked over

her shoulder, and I noticed the Woodwitches nodding good-byes to the Flame adherents, and moving back into the Wood.

"How do you know? That it just need reminding?"

She turned back to me. "I know much, child. Been around a while, Ikwity has. Long enough to know what goes on in that Foundation of yours. Long enough to know about the Veil. Noxious, misguided business, the both of them."

"Aunt!" One of the Woodwitches was calling to Ikwity, waving for her to rejoin them. She waved back.

"Still, I need to fix it," I said. She turned back, regarding me with a curious stare. "Or remind it."

"Sure, sure. Work to do, important work. No time for Ikwity and her stories." She turned to go.

"It's not that—"

"Nobody ever has time for stories," she said over her shoulder as she began ambling away. "Not with the Keepers and Builders thinned to just a man." She turned and gave me another knowing, appraising look.

Keepers and Builders. The two branches that had come together to form my family. "What do—"

"Daniel!"

I turned to see Zmogus striding back toward me. I turned back to the old woman—but she was gone, vanished into the Wood with her people. "What?" I asked distractedly.

"Thank you for your help." My head whipped around at the first compliment he'd ever paid me. His expression was sincere. "I—"

"Look out!" I shouted, stepping backward as a lick of flame burst into life in front of us. I grabbed at my Axis, preparing to End whatever new attack this was, when the flame flickered and resolved into a young woman.

"Zmogus!" she said, panting. "It's Carvendam. You're needed. It's getting worse."

Zmogus's expression drew back into the angry scowl I was accustomed to. "How goes the Veil, Daniel?"

"I think I have it," I said, still somewhat distracted by what Ikwity had said. "It needs reminding, she said." Not to mention that interesting little addition I'd seen on the plinth.

"What?"

"Reminding. The Veil. I think I know how. I just need one more piece."

"Which is?"

"I don't quite know. But I know where to get it."

"Hurry."

Secrets from the Past

I quickly took myself back to the family archive. Now that I was familiar with it, I had the Axis deposit me directly in the main cavern, next to the central table. I knew the light outside would already be fading, that the sun would yet again have given up on bringing any light to this sullen corner of the world. But inside the archive, it was warm, well lit, and . . . cozy, actually.

The books Gemma and I had taken out were no longer lying open on that table. They'd been reshelfed, most likely, by some magic in the place—not unlike the library in the Tower. But even odder was the fact that the table looked pristine.

No—not *pristine*. It had been covered in a fine layer of dust, which Gemma and I had thoroughly disturbed, at least on this section of the table. Now that dust was back in place.

It reminded me of my workshop table. Drawing runes in the dust is how Kirmin had taught me much of the Axis's workings. Something about the table kept the runes from activating, making it a perfect tool for teaching—and for experimenting.

I quickly used one finger to sketch a common rune, one for summoning light, in the dust.



The drawing stayed for several moments before the little granules of dust visibly rearranged themselves, erasing the image. Fine, but was it just accepting the drawing, or was it checking it as well? I sketched the rune again, this time deliberately getting it wrong. Just like my worktable in the Tower, the dust seemed to pool and eddy around my finger, not letting me finish the flawed rune. I'd marveled at that behavior when I'd first seen it on my own table; Kirmin had explained that the table fed a small trickle of energy into whatever you drew, enough energy to know when the magic wouldn't flow freely as it should but not enough to actually empower the rune. I waved my hand over my attempt, and the dust redistributed itself.

Now I sketched out the rune. *The Rune*, as I'd increasingly found myself thinking of it. I'd seen it enough to draw it from memory, although this time I added a small hook to one side—the extra bit I'd seen on the plinth. The bit that had reignited the flames. Or, as Ikwity might have phrased it, that had *reminded* the flames to burn.



The image held, and I almost cheered. This would make my task much easier.

I looked around the room for pen and paper, something on which I could copy down this new version, but didn't see anything. Irritated, I decided to just try it—on a small scale. If this worked, then I would know how to heal the Veil.

I took myself outside, the wet, chilled wind hitting me like a slap in the face. I quickly Ended the cold and looked about for a suitable rock. There was no shortage of them on this inhospitable, gray, desolate shoreline, and I found a fist-sized specimen with a single, almost perfectly flat face.

I knew a rune that would let me carve an image into the rock, but I'd never mastered its use. Usually the rock would crumble to pieces. But perhaps I could focus the Axis on a task this delicate and precise. All rocks crumbled to dust in the end, but perhaps I could hurry that along for just a fingernail's thickness of the rock's face?

Concentrating and holding the Axis with a delicacy I'd never before attempted, I began tracing my finger over the flat surface. The Axis followed my lead, dipping in every so slightly, and crumbs of rock began flaking off in my finger's wake. My neck and arm ached at the sustained, measured effort, even with the addition of a basic light rune to the rock. But I was pleased

with the result. With the rune, I'd ensured myself a simple, safe test.

Now for the tricky part.

I began dripping power into the rune construct. At first, I realized that I was inadvertently feeding it my own personal magic, unaccustomed as I was to using the Axis this way. I redoubled my concentration, wrapping the Axis around my personal power, gradually reducing what I sent from myself and replacing that with the Axis's energy. The Axis seemed . . . curious. It held very still, as a cat might when eyeing prey that was just out of reach but moving closer. I'd never tried to send pure magic out of the Axis before, but the sensation felt oddly familiar, like a song I'd heard a long time ago but forgotten about until someone whistled a piece of it nearby.

Although I hadn't done this before, the Axis obviously had, and it remembered the sensation.

The flow of energy picked up, and I focused on keeping it smooth and steady, afraid I'd shatter the rock if I gave it too much too quickly. Then, with a sudden flush of warmth in my skin, the air around me began glowing with light. It was as if a hole had broken open in the dismal gray clouds above, letting a single shaft of pure sunlight play upon me. I even looked up to check. But this wasn't sunlight: it was pure magic.

A tear crept from my eye. I'd learned this light-bringing rune from Mother—the only bit of real magic she'd ever taught me.

I pulled back the Axis, cutting off the flow of magic into the rock—but the light continued unabated, now glowing without the Axis's active input. The Axis didn't feel depleted in any way, although of course only the tiniest portion of its power had been captured by the energy loop I'd created. I let the magical light glow for several minutes, then Ended the light. All light

ends, after all, so this was merely speeding up that natural process.

The light winked out, returning the area around me to its dour grays.

But then the magic rekindled.

The light bloomed back into existence. I felt a slight draw on the Axis, for just a moment—so fast I may have even imagined it. The rune upon the rock—it made the light *perpetual*.

I'd done it. I knew how to repair the Veil. To remind it, as Ikwity had said.

One more test: I Ended the rock that bore the rune construct.

It crumbled to powder in my hand, a hundred thousand years of environmental wear reduced to an instant. As it crumbled, the light around me also faded, the rune that had kept it running now gone. This time I felt a quick surge of power as the magic trapped in the construct returned to the Axis.

I'd done it.

There was clearly a limit to this trick, as at some point the Axis would become strained, but given how long the Tower and the Veil had remained intact, the Axis seemed able to support a tremendous draw over a long period of time. Likely forever.

I needed to write it down. *Document everything*. Capture it while it was fresh.

I took myself back inside, searching frantically for a blank sheet of paper and a stylus, but I found nothing. Frustrated, I found myself at a break in the shelves where a door exited the foyer. I'd been in there, and—

Wait.

I turned toward the center of the room. There, exactly opposite where I was standing, was a door. I looked up at the labels over the shelves. *That* was the door through which

Gemma and I had first entered this chamber. I turned back to the wall closest to me.

So where did *this* door lead?

A small finger-hole at about waist height provided a way to pull the door inward on perfectly silent, exquisitely balanced hinges.

I stepped through.

This small chamber was exactly like the one we'd first entered from the shoreline—but opposite. Instead of alabaster and onyx, the walls here were tiled with hexagons of amethyst and topaz. Even the floor had been buffed to an off-white, unlike the natural dark gray of the other side. The magic lights here glowed a comforting yellow rather than the harsher white of the first foyer.

There were also four more portraits, each of elegant, severe-looking women. I walked from one to the other, reading the nameplates.

Laikytas. Stanislava. Agnes. Sorsia.

I stopped. Sorsia looked familiar. Incredibly, impossibly familiar. I looked again at the nameplate.

Sorsia Viešpatie.

Sorsia looked exactly like Gemma, with perhaps forty years added.

Exactly like her. The same nose. The same eyes. The same hair. The same cheekbones. Had the painter included them, I knew Sorsia's fingers would be long, delicate, and strong.

The same lips.

But the family name was unfamiliar. Viešpatie meant . . . “Lady?” No, it was a male connotation. “Lord,” then. Or “king?” No, my beleaguered brain informed me, “king” was—

I swallowed hard. In the True Language, “king” was *karal*.

My mind stopped working, broken as it spun in circles.

Gemma was Viešpatie. Viešpatie was Karal.

Gemma was Karal.

My enemies. The clan who'd killed Mother and then vanished. The ones who'd drained power from humans—

I fell to my knees.

They'd drained power from humans and stored it in metal ingots, as witchkind had always stored excess magic in copper and brass coins.

The image of Zmogus, holding a smoking lump of copper in his hand, shot through my mind.

Dust and destruction, he'd said.

I couldn't focus enough to call the Axis. I tried, but it slipped out of my mental grasp. I stumbled forward—I needed fresh air. Was there an exit on this side? I felt blindly against the wall, my vision suddenly gray and shaking. There—push.

I stepped out into bright sunlight, warm air gently swirling around me. The fresh smell of seawater tickled my nose. The sun was hours higher in a clear blue sky.

What the—

I was standing on a beach—but not the cold, dour shoreline of Farreach in the north. This beach was covered with soft, white sand. The scent here wasn't the dense, dull smell of freezing lake water but the fresh, salty smell of a warm sea.

A dirt path, almost grown over by lush, soft green grass, led up a gentle slope to the top of the cliff from which I'd just emerged. I clambered up, twice falling to my knees and pulling myself forward with my hands. At the top, I stood. There, stretched out before me, not so very far away, was a beautiful village, with buildings all of creamy white sandstone.

Farreach.

In the south.

I sat down suddenly, almost cracking my tailbone in the process.

It was impossible. Yet here I was.

And Gemma and I were related.

She has to know.

My guts clenched, and my vision started to grow black around the edges. My fingers and toes started to sting with pins-and-needles sensations, and I suddenly realized I was hyperventilating. My stomach heaved, and I clamped my jaw shut. The Axis swam around me, exuding concern, but I could only bat at it with mental hands that seemed to be wrapped in cloth.

Stop, I told myself. I forced myself to breathe slowly: in . . . out . . . in . . . out. My vision steadied, but I was sure standing would make me vomit. So I sat, my sense of the Axis sharpening slightly as it nuzzled close.

She can't have known.

I hauled the Axis around me, clumsy as if I'd been Chosen but yesterday, and bid it take me to Evermore.

I appeared—still sitting—in Runehall, in front of Andreas’s counter.

“Adherent?” The old man was standing there, leaning over his counter to peer at me, his expression and voice full of concern.

“Gemma,” I croaked.

He frowned. “I believe she’s left for the—”

“*Gemma!*” I roared, pulling myself into a squatting position, hoping my stomach wouldn’t betray me—when had I last eaten? I couldn’t remember—I lurched to my feet. “GEMMA!”

I am tall for witchkind. Not unusually so, but few heads reach even my eye level. My skin is pale, almost white and somewhat translucent—rare among my people. Rare even among humans, except in the deep north. I habitually dress in blacks and grays, clothes that the Tower provides to me in colors—or lack thereof—traditionally favored by adherents of the Sixth. But I was angry. My form must have seemed larger, the Axis billowing behind me. My face must have flushed red, the blood

boiling within me. My voice boomed with rage found only in betrayal.

The old man skittered backward, his mouth opening and closing like that of a fish. "G . . . G . . ." he stammered.

"What's all the commotion?" Gemma came hurrying out from a side door, running to Andreas before she caught sight of me. "Daniel?" She frowned. "What are you—why are your trousers covered in sand?"

"Did you know?" I asked hoarsely.

She straightened, the hand that she'd had on Andreas's shoulder dropping to her side. She looked at me for a long moment, calculating.

Then she shrugged. "Of course."

Something about her appearance *melted*. It was as if she'd been covered in a gauze so fine that you couldn't even see it until it fell away. And fall it did, slipping down across her features.

The resemblance to Sorsia's portrait was even stronger now, as Gemma aged twenty years in a moment.

"We're kin, you and I," she said easily as I gaped and struggled to make sense of what I was seeing. "Different sides of the same family, really. Split and re-split over the centuries, obviously. Although your half seems to have forgotten all that, as you dwindled."

"But—"

The sweet smell of her. The softness of her lips. The easy familiarity of her hand on my arm.

"I was meant to distract you, silly."

I tried to say something, but no words would come.

"Although I have to say, I felt a bit redundant after your debacle with the Veil."

"Who?" I managed to get out. Even Andreas was blinking

furiously at her, clearly not understanding why his young assistant had become a mature woman.

“Our families only ever had one goal, Daniel: to leash both of the Axes. Fifth and Sixth. Beginnings and Endings. Life and Death.” She shrugged. “Yours took a different path than mine, and I have to tell you—well, I didn’t actually know about the archive. That would have been useful.”

“What are you talking about?” I felt I might retch.

She looked thoughtful as she said, “We probably could have prevented that little mishap in the Wood.”

“The . . . Wood? The fires?”

She shrugged. “You know how it is with rune constructs. What was it you were telling me, Andreas?” She looked at the older man, whose mouth was opening and closing like a landed fish. “You miss one little element, and the whole thing blows up in your face?”

“I don’t—” I began, but I was cut off as a Summons, urgent as any I’d ever felt, pierced my bewildered, spinning brain. I was needed in Twynsits.

She read my expression. “Another mess to clean up? Tsk, tsk. Go, Daniel. Go and fix your Veil.” She smiled, and it was nothing like the soft, glowing, gentle smile I remembered. This one was cunning. Vicious.

And triumphant.

“We’ll handle everything on our end,” she said as my Axis spirited me to Twynsits.

“Daniel!” Debesi again, her voice uncharacteristically hot with panic.

“What’s happening?” My voice still felt rough, my focus was shattered, and my limbs were shaking so badly I wondered how I remained upright.

“It’s gotten worse,” she said hurriedly. “We’ve begun carrying witchkind out as quickly as we can. We’ve advised everyone to burn whatever magic they have to get out of the city, even if it’s just into the fields. The schools have sent—

“Debesi,” I growled. “*What is happening?*”

She blinked. “They’re going to burn the city. The Flame adherents—it’s all they can do, they’re dampening every fire in the city, even the street lights. But they can’t hold for much longer. We’ve been at this continuously for two days. We’re all tired. And when their torches quit holding a flame, they just began pulling up cobblestones and throwing them. People have been killed. Their priests have gone mad, they’ve been ordering—”

“Debesi, stop!” I cried. I needed a moment. Just *one moment* where everything wasn’t blowing up around me.

“The Veil, Daniel.”

I took a deep breath. “I know how to fix it,” I said. “I’ll go and—”

“Daniel, wait,” she interrupted as she sensed me pulling my Axis close. “Thornwaith’s is here as well.”

My heart started beating faster, but I couldn’t tell if I was picking up Debesi’s obvious fears or if it was curiosity about the mysterious school and its alumni. “Where?”

“Outside the town. Due west.”

I took myself there, and Debesi appeared next to me. I spotted them at once: at least two dozen men and women of witchkind, slowly walking toward the city. Through the smoke, a short, stocky man of perhaps middle age moved toward us. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

He said nothing.

“They’re under its control,” Debesi whispered. She was all but in a panic. “We have to stop them before it’s too late!”

The man had stopped rather than walking into me. I leaned down a bit, putting our faces at the same level. “Sir? What are you doing?”

Nothing, and I started to feel Debesi’s panic. The centers of the man’s eyes were open wide—wider even than they’d be on the darkest evening. And they glowed, but softly, a deep, midnight blue. Almost black to be sure, but there was a murky, swirling intelligence tinting them with the darkest indigo.

I could sense a raw, primal fear paired with cold, unyielding anger.

The man began to slowly step around me, and I shuffled to one side to block him. Around me, in a ragged line, the other Thornwaith’s alumni were continuing their advance.

"It's the magic, Daniel," Debesi said, louder this time. "It's afraid."

I Ended the man's possession. Or tried. My Axis surged forward and . . . bounced. It pulled back, confused.

"I don't know what you just tried," Debesi said in a low, urgent tone, "but I wouldn't do it again."

I looked around and saw the other Thornwaith alumni had stopped. They'd all turned their heads and were staring at me with cold, unblinking eyes.

I stepped out from in front of the man I'd been blocking.

The others' heads slowly swiveled back, and they resumed their slow, plodding pace.

"Can you delay them?" I asked Debesi. "Push them back?"

"I daren't." Her tone was as much horror as fear, now. "These people have *flattened* their enemies. They'll level the entire town."

"They'll kill plenty of our people at the same time."

"In the stories, witchkind are always spirited away somehow. This is the magic of the world itself, Daniel. It's protecting its own, but it doesn't care what other damage it causes."

I could feel the power gathered around the alumni. I looked at the man who'd just stepped past me as he continued his inexorable, patient march forward. Raw magic roiled around him, more than I'd ever felt in one place at once. It was filling the alumni, I realized, pushing itself into them faster than simple Gathering. Magic might lie thin upon the world in general, but here it was thick and heavy, drawing itself into the former Thornwaith's students. With this much magic available to them, they could accomplish near miracles on a scale only adherents could normally contemplate.

Flattening a town would be well within their abilities. "Debesi, how long do we have?"

She hesitated. "If Zmogus and his people can keep the

flames out, the magic might restrain itself. It feeds on panic—ours, the humans, and talk of magic and Hunts. But if there's no actual violence, Thornwraith's may hold."

"Will the magic release them?"

"Now? Not until the threat's ended. One way or another."

"Then let's End it." I seized the Axis, and it whipped me back to the Tower, directly to the Foundation. The rune carved into the bedrock was clear to me, now that I knew it was here. I quickly walked its circumference, finding the exact spot where the "reminding" addition would go. Repeating the trick I'd done with the rock in Farreach, I carved the new element into the bedrock.

When it was done, I centered myself as best I could in the cavern, standing just next to the Foundation. I laid one palm flat against the tall, cool, solid rock—careful to avoid any of the fractures. Then I centered my *soul* as best I could, reaching out to the Axis with gentle, steady mental hands. It came to me at once, coiling around me more tightly than ever. It knew why we were here, and it was ready.

I felt a thrumming from the Foundation, vibrating through my hand and into my torso. With the Axis attuned, I could feel, clearly and for the first time, what the Foundation was.

Nasty business, Ikwity had said.

The magic of the Forging, that last great work of free magic in the world, had chained the Axes to living people—the Archons, the first adherents. After the Archons, the Axes—aware in some sense, if not fully sentient—Chose those they would be bound to, creating an uninterrupted chain of living souls, each one holding a portion of their Axis's power under control.

Except for the Fifth.

The Fifth had snaked away from the Forging, refusing to be captured. It had distributed itself, the story said, in all of

witchkind and all of humanity, dispersing its own magic to avoid being chained. Spread out like that, its Forging failed.

A similar anomaly occurred with the Sixth.

The Archon Galas successfully leashed the Axis of Endings, but it never Chose another—not while Galas lived, and not for a long time after he'd stepped down. And so it had been ever after: the Sixth Chose only one adherent for itself and went long periods without one. The gap between Kirmin and me had been *decades*.

So what kept the Axis chained when there was no adherent?
Souls.

That was the “nasty business” Ikwity had mentioned.

The Foundation was a prison, home to the soul of every adherent of the Sixth that had ever walked this world. *They* were the once-living energy that kept the Axis bound when no live adherent served. *They* maintained order in the world until the Axis Chose another.

Resisting the Axis damaged the Foundation, and eventually those souls would break free—and whoever was adherent at the time would be the last. When they stepped down, the world would return to chaos as the Sixth Axis roamed freely once again.

The sudden realization stabbed at my soul.

The Axis's own energy, via the rune construct beneath my feet, maintained the Foundation and all the little magics of the Tower itself. Plaktukas had tapped into that perpetual loop of magic, using it not to *awaken* the Veil—I still had no idea how he'd accomplished that—but to *remind* the Veil to remain awake.

But in creating our dragon, those junior adherents had overburdened the Veil. From the human perspective, there was no explanation for our actions other than the will of a god—or magic. To think I could confidently End their memories after

our display! They'd *seen* magic, they'd seen witchkind, and I hadn't upheld my role as adherent of the Sixth Axis—as steward of the Veil.

That resistance to the Veil, that *blindingly obvious* display of magic, had strained the Sixth Axis itself—so tightly interconnected were Axis and Veil. That resistance had fractured the Foundation and severed the link that kept the Veil awake. And so it had started to return to the slumber from which Plaktukas had roused it.

Hopefully, it was not yet fully asleep. Hopefully, something of it remained, and all I would need to do is once again *remind* it of its duty.

I poured the Axis's power into the rune construct at my feet.

The Axis seemed to howl with pleasure, the feeling of being *nearly* unleashed, even if only for this moment, rippling through its awareness. Even the Axis's more diffuse, world-spanning aspect seemed to pull inward and concentrate here in the Tower, pushing a flood of power, a rushing river of energy, a veritable *sea* of magic, into the sturdy bedrock upon which the Foundation sat.

The Foundation and Veil were linked—and had been since Plaktukas's little trick. The rush of power shot up into the Foundation, and I sensed some of the fractures—the past transgressions on the Axis's desires and instincts—healing, as if those arguments and wrongdoings had finally been forgiven.

Plaktukas hadn't wanted other adherents to know his trick. I imagined he had feared—rightfully, in my opinion—that an abuser would arise and use the Tower's perpetual loop of magic to enact some kind of horror on the world.

From within the Foundation, the souls of the past adherents howled in anguish. My heart ached for them. Whether the Forging had been a good idea or, as Ikwity had suggested, a bad

one, no adherent had expected this treatment when they'd been Chosen. To be all but forced to End themselves simply to ascend, then to have their souls snatched up and imprisoned when they finally grew weary enough to step down . . . it was cruel, at best.

And it would happen to me one day.

I pushed all of that down, focusing on maintaining a smooth torrent of power into the rune construct, until suddenly the world seemed to snap.

I stumbled and caught myself against the Foundation, sliding down its side and coming to rest in a tangle of my own limbs on the cold bedrock. The cavern was eerily quiet, my mind suddenly an empty chamber. My ears strained to hear something, *anything*.

A moment later, I felt the comforting *thud thud* of my heart. The sound of rushing blood filled my ears. My vision swam back to clarity—I'd blacked out. My legs felt weak and unreliable, but with a hand on the Foundation, I steadied myself and stood upright again.

The Axis drifted lazily about the room, and I could feel its diffuse aspect spreading across the world, eager to catch up on whatever small Endings it had neglected over the past few moments. The aware part of the Axis, the part that was always with me, seemed satiated. I called to it in my mind, and it slid toward me, sniffing curiously. I felt its power swirl around my chest, and my legs stopped shaking quite so badly.

"We need to go to Twynsits and check our work," I told it, my voice weak and rough.

It gathered me up and took me there.

"Daniel." Debesi found me at once, and her voice was calmer. Cool, almost soothing in a way. Her expression was less tense, her posture relieved. "You did it. We all felt it the moment you did it."

"It worked?"

She nodded and smiled. "You look terrible. But it worked. Look."

I scanned the square in which I'd arrived. Several humans were standing around, confused looks on their faces. I spotted a priest who looked flustered and out of sorts.

"They literally stopped screaming midsentence," Debesi murmured.

"And Thornwaith's?"

She vanished in a gust of cold air, reappearing just moments later. "They're themselves again. They'll start making their way back to their homes."

"They'll be disoriented."

"This is what they learn to cope with at Thornwaith's."

I stepped over to a human. "Sir, are you all right?"

He nodded slowly, looking about as steady as I felt. "I think so."

I held up a finger and summoned a few motes of light to it, holding the rune briefly in my mind. He blinked and leaned toward me. Then he shook his head and smiled. "You've got something sparkly on your fingers," he said with a chuckle. "Caught the moonlight a bit. My wife would love that. What is it?"

I smiled. "I believe it's some sand, is all."

"I'll have to try that. I'm a glazier. Seems ripe for making an expensive piece."

"I'll leave you to it, then."

He nodded and walked away, growing more sure of his steps as he went.

"Satisfied?" Debesi asked in a low voice as she stepped up behind me.

I nodded. "He found an explanation other than what it was. So yes."

“And see how they look at us.”

The humans wandering through the square glanced at each other, exchanging nods and smiles. But when their gazes landed on Debesí and me, they just slid off. We weren’t interesting to them, not worth noticing unless we put ourselves in front of them.

“So much damage,” said a voice behind me. I turned to see a human in priestly vestments, shaking his head as he surveyed the square. Cobblestones had indeed been pulled up, and cold torches were scattered everywhere.

“Bad food, I believe,” Debesí offered. The priest looked at her, his eyes widening as if just now noticing her presence. “You know how it is. You get fevered, and people get angry. Could even have been fouled water.”

I nodded. “Water would make sense. Why so many were affected so quickly.”

The priest bobbed his head in agreement. “Yes, I recall delivering . . . that is, we’ve been telling people the laws on keeping the wells pure.” He frowned. “Seemed very worked up about it, as I recall.” Then he nodded again, squaring his shoulders. “Clearly a subject to revisit come holy day.”

“Clearly,” I agreed.

Debesí and I stepped back as the priest marched away with renewed purpose. “That story should hold,” she said quietly. “Thank you,” she added, her tone sincere.

“It was my fault.”

“And you fixed it.”

“People died.”

Debesí was silent for a moment. “Yes. And there may be others we don’t know about. Our actions have consequences. More so than most.”

“I know.”

She regarded me carefully. “I believe you do now.”

"I'm sorry."

She accepted my apology with silence.

"Debesi—there's something happening."

"What now?"

"Gemma—the woman I was with. We're related, it turns out. My family—" My head spun. Where could I even begin? "It's a long story. You know the fire in the Great Northern Wood?"

"Zmogus told me."

"She started it. Well, not her. Her family. Her clan. She was Clan Karal."

Debesi's eyes widened. "The stolen power."

"I think I know what they're trying to do."

"Oh?"

Even now, I could sense my Axis's interest being drawn away. "I need to go."

"Call us if you need us. I'll be listening."

I nodded and let the Axis follow its nose.

W e—I should say *I*, but at that moment, the Axis felt very much like a companion to me—appeared outside the Great Northern Wood. We were nowhere near where the forest had burned, but as the shadows of night threatened the Wood, the Axis sensed a stirring. It drew toward the magic, and I saw it: another granite plinth had been erected. It stood in the center of a loose circle of witchkind. There must have been fifty, maybe sixty people there. Piled at the base of the plinth were bars of copper and brass, each one of them charged with an immense amount of magic. The sheer amount of power hanging over that circle was indescribable. Nearly *lethal*, in my eyes. The magic around that plinth was so thick it would have been visible to humans. I couldn't imagine any beneficent use of that much raw power. It hummed and vibrated as if it might explode at any moment.

Next to the plinth stood a single young man of witchkind. His appearance was unremarkable: middling-brown skin, plain clothing, close-cut black hair. Even-enough features, average height, absolutely the definition of “normal” for our people.

The Axis strained to pull forward. It was eager—no, that's not sufficient. *Desperate*. Like a child who hadn't eaten in days and had been commanded to wait until the table had been fully set to gorge on a feast. It pulled, and for once, rather than letting its awareness wander free, some instinct deep inside me held it back.

Something was happening here, and I—no, the world—*convulsed*.

That's the only way I could think to describe it. Everything seemed to draw inward, to roll into a fetal position, centered on that granite plinth. Magic compressed into the space, and the air grew hot. I tried to say Debes's name, to summon her, and Zmogus, and the others, for surely there would be another blaze that threatened the Wood. But my words were ripped from my mouth and packed into the air that seemed to be careening inexorably toward that stone pillar.

I fell to my knees, ignoring my body as my mind fought to keep the Axis in check. It struggled, trying to tear itself free of my grip, to join the inexorable *pull* that seemed to be drawing everything inward and—

Then the world exploded.

I was blasted backward, lifted into the air, and impelled away from the circle. The Axis was blown back as well, and for a brief, terrifying, existential moment, I felt the Axis *detach* from me. In that one eternal eyeblink, I hung prone in the air, my arms stretched over my head, my legs akimbo, my soul *empty*. My personal magic was fountaining out of me, shattering in the sudden onslaught. *This is what it would have felt like*, my mind managed to assemble, *if I'd never been Chosen*.

Time resumed, and I slammed into the grassy earth, the Axis snapping back into place. It was cowed. Afraid. Frustrated. Depleted. Denied. It was a dog, beaten with impunity, its tail

tucked between its legs and its head lowered in shame, its body quivering in fear.

A column of pure energy—not fire but pure, unadulterated magic, the likes of which I’d never felt in one place before—rose into the sky. Face-down on the ground as I was, I didn’t see it, but I could sense it, feel it, as the unspeakable pressure of it threatened to lift me back into the air.

Then it winked out.

My ears were pounding, my heart racing. I tasted dirt in my mouth, paired with the unmistakable metallic bite of blood. I pushed myself up and spat out a few bloodied blades of grass. All plant life, even trees, had been blown flat in a perfect circle around the plinth, as had every single person who’d been standing around it. An old woman was creeping slowly forward out of the Wood, taking in the scene. Ikwyty? I blinked, willing my eyes to focus. But when I looked again, she’d gone.

Of the young man who’d stood next to the plinth, I could see no sign.

The people on the ground began to stir, pushing themselves upright as I had.

“That’s done, then.”

I turned to see Gemma—the new, older Gemma—standing behind me, her face bearing a broad, happy smile.

“What have you done?”

She laughed. It was the rich, hearty laugh I knew, made denser and more layered by the decades she’d acquired. “We’ve completed the Forging, Daniel. After all these centuries, the work is done.”

I knew what each of those words meant, but they didn’t make sense strung together that way. “What?”

She crouched in front of me, putting us eye to eye. “We did the impossible. We gathered power for years, Daniel. Until you

stopped us. But by then we had nearly enough. The rest, we've Gathered the old-fashioned way over the past three years.

"And we hid from you, didn't we? I can't imagine you didn't look for us. Do you know how we did it?"

I swallowed. "Your runes."

She nodded, a clever smile stealing across her features. "We burned out our identity, yes. Every one of us. Some died of it, you know."

Was I supposed to feel bad about that?

"We hoarded that power, beggaring ourselves in the process. Because we knew it would all come to this. And you helped! Your family history, those clever runes from that archive—that gave us the last bit we needed. The bit that let us correct the mistake from our trial run."

She leaned closer. "We've completed the Forging, Daniel. We've made the Fifth Axis."

My own Axis howled a lament, anguish and desperation filling my mind and spirit.

She stood, brushing grass off her long dress. "We figured you'd be more alert after what happened three years ago, but you were so caught up with the damage you'd done to the Veil that we almost needn't have bothered. Giving up on the little people, concentrating your efforts on all of your big projects—it kept you nicely out of the way."

"The Fifth Axis." My voice was all but spent, now weak and raspy even in my own ears.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, speaking slowly, as if to a child. "The Fifth Axis. The Axis of Beginnings, the Axis of Life. The foil to your own. Our family's dream, finally realized. Although I suspect they planned for us to be more cooperative than you've been."

"How?"

She waved a hand. "I don't really know the magical details. I

really *am* as weak as I told you. A cousin brought me here, in fact. I know it took an unprecedented amount of power, as well as runes that haven't been seen since the Archons first devised them."

That left only the obvious, pressing, and most meaningful question. "Why?"

She laughed again, this time with a mocking undertone. "You're not that much a fool. You know full well the liberties—the *opportunities*—provided to an adherent, especially one who controls Death. Imagine your opposite: an adherent of Life."

I wondered if they knew that their new adherent would be able to *withhold* life, as I'd learned I could withhold death.

Inside me, my Axis sobbed.

"Where's your new adherent, then?" I asked. I presumed that was the young man who'd stood next to the plinth.

"Aron?" She waved one hand vaguely in the air. "Off somewhere recovering, I expect. That was the plan."

He'd learned to use his Axis in record time, then, unless another cousin had somehow spirited him away.

"But, Daniel, there's no reason for this to be acrimonious, you know." Gemma held out a hand to help me up. I declined, pushing myself back to my trembling, unsteady feet. "We can work together."

I just looked at her, blinking as the last rays of the sun dipped below the far-off horizon.

"After all, we're family."

Epilogue

Abrupt? I suppose. But that's the end of this story.
Oh, of course. You'll find that there's almost always
another story, and another after that. It's no different
with my stories.

I can tell you. It's just . . . a bit long. And sadder than this
one, in ways. Happier in others, maybe.

Perhaps another time? It's growing light out, and you've not
slept at all.

Agreed, then. What's that?

Hmm. No, I rather think that will be the last of my stories
for you.

It'll make sense when you hear it.

Yes, best saved for when you don't have to be up and about so
early.

I'll see you then.

Characters and Pronunciations

ADHERENTS OF THE SIXTH

These are presented in order of their ascension.

- Galas (GAY-lass) End-Bringer
- Skriaudikas (skree-OWD-ih-cuss) the Abuser
- Plaktukas (PLACK-tuck-us)
- Vandens (VAN-dens)
- Gailest (GAYLE-est)
- Kirmin (CUR-min)
- Daniel (DAN-yell) Scratch

OTHER ADHERENTS

- Arun (air-OON) (Earth)
- Cyril (SEER-ill)
- Debesi (deh-BEZ-ee) (Sky)
- Essa (ESS-ah) (Earth)

CHARACTERS AND PRONUNCIATIONS

- Gilioj (GILL-ee-oh) (Sea)
- Lanna (LAH-na) (Sea)
- Mali (MAH-lee) (Sky)
- Mesla (MEZ-lah) (Earth)
- Mica (MY-kah) (Earth)
- Nuvilnijo (noo-VILN-ee-yo)
- Tomas (TOW-mahs) (Sky)
- Vėjas (VAY-jahz) (Sky)
- Zmogus (ZMO-gus) (Flame)

OTHERS OF NOTE

- Andreas (AHN-dray-us)
- Erškėtis (AIRS-kit-iz)
- Gemma (JEM-ah)
- Garybion (gare-EE-bee-on)
- Ikwity (ICK-witty)
- Laikytojas (Lie-KEET-oh-ess)
- Roze (RAH-zay)
- Statybininkas (stat-ee-bin-IN-kuss)
- Stevas (STAY-vahs)
- Sylphis (SILL-fiss)

THE TRUE LANGUAGE

My real-world inspiration for the True Language is Lithuanian, mainly because, to American eyes, it's an exotic-looking language. Any language with that many diacriticals simply *has* to be magical. But I've taken some liberties with translations and even spellings in order to better fit my needs, so not every word of the True Language translates perfectly in real-world languages. Now, within the story itself, the characters have no

concept of Lithuanian—to them, it’s just their True Language. The story isn’t set on Earth (there are two moons!), and it isn’t in any time period we’ve ever known. As such, the True Language doesn’t necessarily have the same pronunciation as Lithuanian. But if you’d like to sound out the words (mentally or aloud), find yourself a Lithuanian pronunciation guide on the internet and give it a whirl.

Below I’ve provided a few of the more common or notable words I’ve used, along with my heavily Americanized pronunciation of them. You’ll note that I largely ignore any diacriticals, as English lacks them, and I’m using English phonemes for the letters—even though in some cases, actual Lithuanians assign different phonemes to these same letterforms (there’s a good list at http://mylanguages.org/lithuanian_alphabet.php/). Regard the following pronunciations as only an approximate guide—from the lips of the characters, they’d be much more nuanced and lovely, I expect.

And hey—if you’ve already come up with pronunciations in your own mind, please keep using them!

- *driežai* — dree-ESS-aye
- *kavos* — KAH-voze
- *teisėjas* — tee-ISS-ee-us
- *ramunėlių* — ram-OON-el-you

If you’re *truly* wondering, “Don, why Lithuanian when there are plenty of other languages with exciting diacritical marks?” then you simply must read *Clara Thorn*, *The Witch That Was Found*, and its three sequels.

About the Author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed novels now span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters. He lives in Las Vegas (and sometimes in Southern Utah).

Connect, get five (!) free novels and a collection of short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by joining the author newsletter at DonJones.com.



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Transfer to Thornwaith's

This is a short story that shares a brief look at Thornwaith's, the odd school whose alumni are the final line of defense for the world's magic. You'll find more tales like this in the free e-book, Short Stories of Witchkind. It's available from most e-book retailers, and you can get it—along with five full-length novels—by joining my newsletter at <https://DonJones.com/>.

“Class, we have a transfer student joining us today. This is Ryzan, formerly of Disemstoke’s.”

The other teenagers looked intently at Ryzan, and a few offered knowing nods. “Transfer student” only meant one thing at Thornwaith’s, and they all knew it. Most of the hard, flat looks he was receiving were probably from children who’d been assigned to Thornwaith’s from the outset. The couple of cold, calculating glares were likely from students who’d also been transferred and who were wondering what he’d done to get sent here.

Ryzan had arrived early that same morning, shepherded by Disemstoke's head disciplinarian. They'd left directly from her office after Ryzan's parents had signed the transfer forms. They'd had little choice; Ryzan had been Tested and found worthy of schooling, which in effect meant he was required to be educated at one of witchkind's schools until he reached his majority. Ryzan could still see the bitter disappointment on his parents' faces. His father had been educated at Disemstoke's, the first in his family to be so honored. His mother, like the rest of her family, had only modest magic, and none of them had ever been admitted to one of the Great Schools. His parents had been thrilled when he'd been Tested and found worthy—and obviously crushed when they'd been told he'd be transferred to Thornwaith's.

Not that Thornwaith's was a bad school.

The disciplinarian had taken Ryzan's hand, led him out of Disemstoke's grand front entrance, and begun stepping southward. Ryzan had only traveled that way once before, when his father had brought him to Disemstoke's at the beginning of the semester. The sensation had been exhilarating and chaotic at the same time, the scenery whizzing by as each step covered a league or more. The disciplinarian hadn't paused when they reached the coast, her steps carrying them across the deep blue sea to the lonely island where Thornwaith's awaited. She'd paused for a moment on the shore, and Ryzan caught a glimpse of the strange trees growing along the sandy beach. Their slim, tall trunks were bare of leaves until the very top, where they practically exploded with huge flat leaves unlike anything Ryzan had seen in the north. Then the disciplinarian had stepped onward, moving quickly into the thick, more traditional wood at the island's heart, until they came to Thornwaith's itself.

The ancient school consisted of a single stone tower perched upon a rocky hill, looming over the surrounding land-

scape. Looking up, Ryzan had made out only a few window slits along its otherwise featureless walls. The broad square tower was topped with crenelated battlements, and Ryzan had wondered if it had originally been built as a fortress of some kind. A metal staircase, formed from deeply pitted and stained brass and incongruous in any building made by witchkind, clung to the side of the tower and provided access from a single dark opening to the upper battlements.

On the whole, the tower looked far too small to contain an entire school of magic. It had not been until the disciplinarian led him into a small opening at the foot of the rocky hill that Ryzan realized almost the entire school was underground.

The transfer of custody had occurred quickly, smoothly, and almost silently as a Thornwaith's administrator met them. The disciplinarian had left as quickly as she could, leaving Ryzan feeling even more alone and depressed. The administrator had him sit on a cold, stone bench, next to a flickering torch that provided the only illumination in a dim hallway. Before long, the sounds of the school coming to life had begun to echo down the hall as students made their way up from wherever they'd spent the night. Ryzan's stomach had grumbled just as the administrator returned with a plate of hot buttered rolls, bidding him to eat quickly. He had done so and was once again taken by the hand and led to the classroom.

Ryzan bowed his head quickly to his new classmates and took the seat the teacher indicated. It was directly in the front row, and Ryzan imagined he could feel the hot stares of the entire class on the back of his neck.

The teacher began his lecture.

Life at Thornwaith's was not unlike that at Disemstoke's. Despite full knowledge of where they were and why they were there, Thornwaith's students were still teenagers, more likely to focus on whatever mischief the administrators and teachers would permit them than their day-to-day studies, and little cliques that formed, ebbed, and flowed throughout the student body's ever-changing social structure.

Each morning began with a modest breakfast and proceeded with lectures from a variety of teachers. Ryzan was a first-year student, an *entrant* in the formal language of a school and a *baby* in the crueller language of the upperclassmen. He'd be in Thornwaith's for six years, progressing to supplicant, then to freshman to sophomore to junior, and finally to the exalted title of senior. Upon his graduation—and his teachers had quickly made it clear that failing to graduate was not an option—he'd at least be permitted to leave and travel to whatever town or village he wished, where he could partake in the ordinary life of witchkind. Like the other Great Schools, Thornwaith's offered placement programs, and at the beginning of his senior year, he'd begin finalizing his plans for life outside the school.

But that was years away. For now, his mornings were filled with lectures on magical theory, flash cards of basic runes to be memorized, and long, quiet sessions where everyone practiced Gathering magic into their bodies. After lunch, which was always far heartier than breakfast, the students would begin using the magic they'd Gathered to empower the simple runes they'd learned. A handful of teachers supervised these sessions, which were always held in a heavily protected room deep within the school's lower levels. Scarcely a day passed without one or another student feeding too much or too little power to a rune, or someone improperly holding the image of the rune in their mind. The results were often disastrous, with all the teachers quickly slamming a shield around the offending child

until the uncontrolled magic channeled itself to the ground by means of the iron spikes spaced liberally throughout the stone floor.

Mandatory physical exercise followed. As fall arrived and the island's thick forest began turning shades of gold and orange, the students were led on hikes, runs, and other group activities in the cool, bracing air. It was the only time that the students were ever permitted outside, Ryzan learned. He had hoped that the school would have sports and other team activities. Before leaving Disemstoke's, he'd admired the teams of older boys and girls playing Filwrith, the sport for which Dismestoke's was most famous. But Thornwaith's, he quickly learned, forbade any kind of competitive activities. Students were not even permitted to form houses to vie for honors and prizes, unlike students at other schools. "Focus on yourself," the teachers would continually remind them, "and focus on helping your fellows, rather than competing against them." Ryzan suspected it was a wise policy, given the type of student who typically arrived at Thornwaith's.

A type of student, Ryzan sadly reminded himself, that was now him.

Always a friendly boy, Ryzan quickly made a few friends among his classmates. None of them were hostile or even cold to him once the novelty of his arrival had passed, but almost all were simply ambivalent. Amber, Jacks, and Dorsey had opened up a bit more to him. They sat together during meals, worked out homework problems together in the evenings, and chatted between classes. All three had been assigned to Thornwaith's by their Tester, with—as was tradition—no explanation as to why. They were all immensely curious about whatever Ryzan had done to earn a transfer here but politely refrained from pressing him on the issue. But as he came to know them, and they him, the unasked question loomed larger and larger over their

conversations. Finally, one day at dinner—a lighter and less hurried meal than lunch—Amber broached the subject.

“So,” she said quietly, using her fork to push the remains of her meal around her plate. “You were at Disemstoke’s?”

Ryzan could feel the other students within earshot grow quieter at the mention of the other school. He nodded, slowly placing the last forkful of dinner into his mouth. He chewed slowly, knowing the moment had finally come. Jacks and Dorsey looked expectantly at him, and the sound of other students scraping their forks across their plates suddenly seemed louder than possible.

“So,” Amber repeated, almost in a whisper. “Did you like it there?”

Ryzan swallowed and sighed. “I was only there a month,” he reminded her. All the schools began their terms at the same time. Only Thornwaith’s held a summer session, retaining all students at the school until graduation. If he’d remained at Disemstoke’s, Ryzan would likely have returned home to his parents for the summers. “It was in Runic Arts,” he added. Runic Arts was the class they all shared every afternoon, where they practiced activating runes and empowering them with Gathered magic. Jacks and Dorsey nodded sympathetically.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” Amber began, but Ryzan shook his head.

“We’d learned *lengvas* that morning,” Ryzan said. The others’ looks of curiosity intensified. It was a simple rune, doing nothing more than bringing a soft illumination to a small area around the caster. They’d all learned it in their first month too, and they’d all seen Ryzan cast it a hundred times since he’d arrived. “Almost everyone else got it right away that afternoon,” Ryzan continued. “One girl put a bit too much magic into it, but all it did was make her skin light up. The teacher handled it. But I . . .” He stopped and swallowed. “I got the rune right,” he

said emphatically. The others nodded again: it was a simple enough rune, almost impossible to get wrong. And even if you held its curves slightly awry in your mind, it would simply fail to function. They thought it an odd rune to get transferred over. "I fed it my magic," Ryan whispered, his throat clenching a bit at the memory. "But it felt . . . cold. Not like it's supposed to. Not like it has since. It felt . . . it felt like the rune looked at me, in my mind." He shrugged. "The teacher cast *izoliacija* on me," he said sadly, referring to the containment spell they'd all seen the teachers use. "My magic drained away, and they called for the disciplinarian."

Amber blinked. "Wait, that's it? Nothing even happened?" Ryzan shook his head sadly. "Did they even tell you what you'd done wrong?"

Again, he shook his head. "I sat outside her office until my parents arrived. Father was terribly angry and kept yelling. Mother was crying—I could hear her. But then the disciplinarian said something. Father got very quiet, and Mother cried even louder."

"What did she say?" Jacks whispered.

Ryzan shrugged. "All I could make out was *stiprios tamsios sienos*," he said. "I looked it up in the library after I got here," he added. "It's True Language. It means something like 'hard black walls,'" he finished. "I assume it meant here."

Dorsey shook her head. She had a keen interest in the True Language and was usually the one to correct their homework on the subject when they studied together in the evenings. "That's not right," she said. "Literally, it means 'strong dark walls,' but *sienos* has a connotation of guarding and protection. Walls to keep things out, not to keep things in." She tapped her fork against her now-empty plate. "But I've seen that exact phrase before," she mused. Then her face brightened. "Anyone fancy a trip to the library?" she asked.

After the dinner hour is when the school's vast library was busiest. Their little group of four moved past similarly sized groups of students huddled around the dozens of study tables just inside the library's entrance, each group discussing their homework in hushed tones. Another group of first-years was quizzing each other on runes. Next to them, a group of fifth-years was intently discussing a complex multirune structure they'd been assigned. A soft, purposeful buzz wound through the library, which was closely supervised by the ancient librarian who presided over it from her desk near the back of the study area. The wizened old woman followed their group as they threaded past the study tables, and she nodded once at them as they passed her desk and entered the long ranks of shelves behind her. Her piercing gaze tracked them, and they had a firm sense that she continued looking at them even as they passed out of her physical sight.

Amber led them deep past the seemingly endless rows of shelves, finally stepping into a row that was labeled for fifth-year students. They'd already been told that they were permitted to reach any book in these open rows; the designations were simply to help students of different years find the books that were most likely to be assigned to them by their teachers. The library's lower level, accessible only via a broad spiral staircase that was protected by a locked gate, held all of the restricted volumes. Only the librarian or her assistants were permitted there, and students had to fill out a pull slip to request books from those sections.

Amber ran her finger gently along the spines of the books just above her eye level, obviously scanning for the volume she wanted. "Ah," she said softly, stopping and withdrawing an inch-thick leather-bound book from the shelf. She carried it

back to the end of the row, where an empty bookrest waited to receive the tome she'd selected. She laid the book down carefully and then tapped the cover.

Stiprios Tamsios Sienos. The title was embossed deeply into the dark leather and picked out with gold-leaf highlights.

"That's it," Ryzan said, his voice barely loud enough to be considered a whisper. The librarian was known for her prompt and harsh attention on anyone who broke the quiet sanctity of her realm.

"No," Amber replied just as softly, tapping the cover again. Ryzan looked more closely and saw the author's name embossed less deeply but still accented with worn gold leaf. Genten Thornwaith. Three sets of eyes widened: the book had been written by the founder of this very school.

Ryzan slipped his fingertip under the edge of the book's cover, intending to flip it open. But the cover wouldn't budge: it was as if it and the entire body of the book were frozen together.

"It's a fifth-year book," Amber whispered softly. "But I overheard one of them struggling with the rune's name a week ago." She put her fingertip under the cover's edge and whispered, "*Ramiai atsidaryk ir atsiskleisk.*" Ryzan had yet to learn any runes that had a companion verbal component. Such runes were somewhat rare, and he was surprised that even Amber, skilled as she was with runes, had managed to cast it so easily.

Just as the cover flipped open to reveal a sparsely illustrated title page, a stern voice from behind them said, "That will do, children. Come with me, please. Bring the book."

The four of them whirled around to find the school's head disciplinarian behind them. Her countenance was calm, her gray eyes steady. When Amber picked the book up from the bookrest, the disciplinarian turned and walked swiftly to the librarian's desk. The librarian tracked them, saying nothing, as the disciplinarian led them to a nondescript door at the side of

the library. She opened the door, revealing a small room furnished with a study table and six chairs. "Sit," she said, although she remained standing at the head of the table. Dorsey was the last one in. "Close the door, please," the disciplinarian instructed her.

"I am Professor Page," the woman said after Dorsey had closed the door and claimed a seat. "I am delighted to have not made your acquaintance until now. That book," she said, nodding to the volume Amber had placed on the table, "is usually reserved for juniors, you know."

"I thought anything in the open section—" Amber began.

"It's not restricted," Professor Page said, tilting her head slightly to one side. "It's just something we prefer students to read when a teacher can discuss it with them. There's a trigger spell on the book that notifies senior staff when it's opened. When that happens outside of a classroom setting, someone is dispatched. Myself, in this case. You're welcome to read the book, but you're to do so while I can help you understand it." She fell silent and looked at them expectantly. After a moment of silence, she pointed at the book and said, "*Atidarykite taikiai ir atsiskleiskite dabar*," causing the book's cover to flip open of its own accord. "If it would be easier," she added, making eye contact with each of them, "I can simply tell you the gist of it. I assume you sought out the book because of Ryzan's history?"

"Yes," Ryzan said quietly. "And yes, please, if you would be so kind."

Professor Page offered a small smile. "Delighted," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting. "That book is, as you might have guessed, something of a history of this school. Or rather, it was a missive that Genten Thornwaith wrote as an argument for founding this school in the first place.

"Disemstoke and Duocastella had already formed their Great Schools at the time, and witchkind was only just

returning to live alongside humans in their towns and villages, protected by the great Veil that the Sixth Axis had cast to conceal us from them. As our people moved out of Evermore in small groups, the Taryba, our great council, realized there would be a need to deploy Testers in any settlement with a significant population of witchkind. It simply wouldn't be feasible to have people traveling back to Evermore all the time to have their youngsters Tested. And so as witchkind began to resettle across the continent, new Desks were constructed, and new Testers sent out to join them.

"But something strange started to happen. When witchkind had been mostly centralized in Evermore, the Testers there had only ever sent children to Disemstoke's or Duocastella's. The former tended to focus on the applied magical arts, and the latter on the pure study of our magic. But with the Diaspora, the Testers began finding children who were deserving of a higher education but who couldn't be assigned to either of the existing schools.

"There was much confusion and many hearings and discussions before the Taryba. Where should these children be sent? And what focus would they have, if not on the applied or theoretical aspects of magic? Was a different school needed, and if so, what form would it take? The interim decision was to simply dispatch the children to one of the two existing schools and see what happened.

"What happened was a disaster." Professor Page paused for a moment before resuming. "What I have told you to this point is public knowledge; most any adult of witchkind knows this much. What I tell you next is something I would very much prefer you keep to yourselves until we introduce this to your peers in your fifth year. Most witchkind are not aware of exactly why Thornwaith's was founded or what our specific magical focus is. I realize we have something of a reputation for being a

school for children who simply could not 'fit' at the other Great Schools, but the truth is somewhat more nuanced." She paused again, and said, "Can I have that agreement from you?"

All four children nodded.

"Very well," she said, giving them a quick nod of acceptance. "It was at about that time when Duocastella's was discovered by a group of human adventurers from Farreach along the Great Northern Range. They'd struck a course south, hoping to find a new place to settle, when they happened across the school quite by accident. Unfortunately, being northerners and somewhat given to conquest and violence back then, they attacked the school.

"Despite their focus on the theoretical aspects of magic, Duocastella's staff was far from helpless. They made an excellent accounting of themselves in defending the school, but they were spread thin, and the school had not been built as a fortress. One professor was killed as a small party of humans broke the defensive line and infiltrated the campus. The other professors moved to counter them, when . . . something happened.

"Two of the students—ones who had been sent to Duocastella's despite having been Tested for some other fate—marched into the open area just in front of the invading humans. Genton Thornwaith was a professor at Duocastella's at the time and writes that the entire staff felt a wave of firm, cold magic wash across the campus. The humans inside the campus boundary died instantly, their bodies crushed into pulp by some unseen force. Thornwaith questioned the students in question afterward, who said they'd felt a compulsion to cast *balastas*, a spell ordinarily used to add a stabilizing weight to seagoing vessels. But the spell had taken a *turn*, so to speak, in these students' minds, adding a crushing weight atop the humans.

"But before Thornwaith was able to have that discussion,

the two students' magic reached out and crushed the remaining humans at their camp outside the campus perimeter. The staff checked immediately and found every one of them had been crushed to a pulp. There were no signs that any had escaped.

"Thornwaith removed the two students to his home in Wising, on the southern coast. Some weeks later, he wrote this missive, and within the year, the Taryba authorized the creation of a new Great School. Thornwaith drew his first staff from both Duocastella's and Disemstoke's, supplementing them with personal acquaintances he selected himself. After two decades of operation, every staff member at Thornwaith's had been a student at the school, and so it has been ever since. We are all, including myself, Thornwaith's alumni. After graduating, we spend about ten years traveling and studying, and then we may return here to take a position, if we wish.

"You see, children, once the Diaspora of witchkind began, Thornwaith believed that magic itself knew we would require protection. Magic knew that forces both magical and mundane would move against witchkind, and among us were those with the potential to counter those forces. Those of us sent to Thornwaith's have the ability to access a different kind of magic. We Gather the same power as any of witchkind do, and we can cast all the same runes that they do. But we also have the ability to . . . to transform our magic. To change the nature and effect of the runes we cast. We are the strong dark wall that rises to protect our families and fellows.

"That is why we have no competitions at Thornwaith's. It is why we spend our six years of education here and nowhere else. When you graduate and leave this island, you will find your fellow alumni always at your side and ready to support you, whatever your need and wherever you may go. Our magic sets us apart from the rest of witchkind, and it binds us as brothers and sisters for life. Our peers from Duocastella's and Disem-

stoke's will never know the nature of our difference, for it would frighten both them and the rest of ordinary witchkind. We harness a dark kind of power, one that they fear would be used against them. But it never will be: we exist to serve and to protect. Thornwaith's will always be somewhat looked down upon by the rest of witchkind, and that is as we would have it. Our power comes from our silence and our dedication to protect."

She paused and looked at Ryzan. "Sometimes the Tests get it wrong," she said softly, kindness filtering into her voice. "It isn't until our darker nature manifests that the situation can be corrected. But I assure you, young man, you belong here. You have a role to play in the world, one that is more firm and hallowed than most of witchkind will ever realize or aspire to." She sighed heavily and then continued. "I must ask that you not try to deliberately invoke the darker side of your magic. It will happen on its own, naturally, in time. That is why we are so much more disciplined about the proper use of your magic than even Disemstoke's: you must have full and absolute control of your intent and power so that it does not move you as it did those two students from so long ago. Do you understand?"

The four of them nodded.

"Well enough," the professor said. "Amber, please return the book to where you found it. And, children?" They paused, their chairs slid half-back in preparation for their departure. "You have a great purpose ahead of you. I, for one, am glad to have you here for it." She smiled and gestured that they could go.

Ryzan lay awake long into the night, any chance of a quiet sleep dashed by what he'd learned. But at least now he understood why he'd been sent to Thornwaith's, and despite his parents' disappointment, he was eager to begin what he now understood to be his purpose among witchkind.

