The Order of Some Omnibus Edition

STORIES OF WITCHKIND

DON JONES

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thank you for coming along for the ride


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a story of witchkind

THE ORDER OF SOME

CHAPTER 1

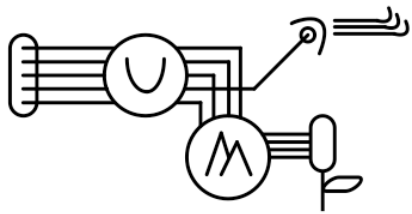
Disemstoke's

Everyone completed their reading last night? Good," Professor Whitlock said without waiting for anyone to answer.

Finley knew they hadn't: he'd heard Landon and Kannin roaming the halls of the dormitory all night, discussing their plans for the weekend. They never seemed to learn that when Whitlock assigned a quarter of a book for reading, there would *always* be a discussion the next day, if not a quiz.

And Whitlock's discussions were basically quizzes.

"Consider this," the professor said, moving his finger through the air in front of them. His finger left a trail of blue-white light behind, sketching a glowing rune in the air. When he finished, he made a flicking gesture, and the glowing sketch expanded, becoming large enough for the entire class to see:



"Anyone?" he asked. "Arcadia?"

Finley was confident that Arcadia would know. They'd been best friends for five years, almost from the moment they'd met in the first day of their first year here at Disemstoke's. She was just as dedicated to her studies as Finley himself was, and they'd often vied for top spot in their classes. Fortunately, it had never grown competitive between them.

"It's Old Runic," Arcadia said confidently from her place behind Finley. "It's a crop spell, meant to enhance crop growth."

"Define its parts, please," Whitlock asked.

"The input is to the left, as always," Arcadia said. "The first symbol in the flow indicates a female affinity, likely for nurturing and durability."

"Could a male empower this?" the professor prompted.

"Yes," she said after a moment's hesitation, "but not as well, unless they had a female affinity."

"Proceed."

"The earth affinity symbol is next, meaning the construct will be most effective when empowered by someone with that affinity," she continued, anticipating the teacher's question this time. "Flow then proceeds to the crop itself."

"Very good. Landon? Can you explain the purpose of the symbols in the upper right?"

Finley saw Landon, seated a desk ahead and one to the right, shifting in his seat. "Um, secondary input?"

"Incorrect. Old Runic always takes input from the left to right. Anyone else?" Finley raised his hand. "Finley?"

"Dispersion matrix," the boy answered. "Excess power will be diverted to a minor wind effect. To clear clouds from the sky, maybe?"

"Correct," Whitlock said with a smile. Landon turned his head and gave Finley a glare. Finley merely shrugged. "Now, consider this." Whitlock waved his hand, dismissing the glowing sketch, and began sketching a new rune construct:



"Middle Runic!" Landon called out, eager to redeem himself.

"Correct, and please wait to be called upon, Mr. Karcz. Can you identify the purpose of the construct?"

Finley could see the side of Landon's jaw clench. He couldn't.

"Anyone? Filomena?"

Finley looked to his side, where Filomena sat. She was a middling student who didn't speak much, but she was good at runes. "It's the same crop growth spell as the last one," she said, her voice firm with confidence. At the desk just beyond her, Finley could see Ramiro scribbling away in a notebook. The boy had barely seemed to grow at all in their five years here. Somehow sensing he would never have the answer, the professors never called on him. Finley was surprised he'd made it this far without dropping out.

"Exactly the same?" Whitlock asked Filomena.

"Middle Runic doesn't support dispersion matrices," she replied. "Some of the power will always be diverted to the wind effect, reducing the efficiency of the main crop support spell."

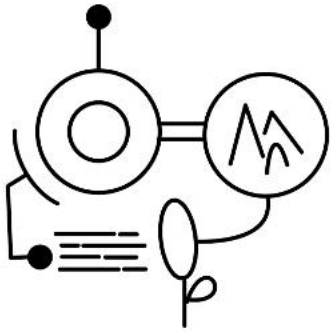
"Correct. And Clayton, what else do we know about Middle Runic?"

Clayton was slow on the uptake some of the time, but they'd discussed this multiple times before. "The wider strokes made it easier

to empower the runes, since there was less magic available at the time," he answered. "Witchkind had to gather magic into themselves overnight, and they could only use what they'd gathered for spells. So the spells had to be easier."

"Correct. Now, who would like to render this same spell in New Runic? Ah, Finley. Proceed."

Finley stood, quickly cast the spell that would let him duplicate the professor's light-sketching trick, and began drawing a precise rune construct in the air:



When he finished, Whitlock gestured and the sketch flew to the front of the room. He gestured again, enlarging it for the class. "Explain your thinking, please."

Finley remained standing, and cleared his throat. "Input at the top, as is traditional. Female affinity feeding earth affinity, and the same restrictions would apply as to Old Runic: anyone not having those affinities wouldn't be able to fully empower the spell. The crop connection remains at the end. The dispersion matrix can take excess power or, optionally, divert primary power, based on intent, and it feeds a more specific wind effect to reduce cloud cover only over the crop area."

"And the primary difference between this and the Old Runic version? Lydia?"

"More efficient use of power and a more precise description of the wind effect desired. Also, couldn't additional input be used instead of

drawing power from the main flow?" Lydia was also excellent at rune lore, and she often studied with Finley and Arcadia.

"Yes, Lydia, very observant. And very clever of you to build it that way, Finley. However, what are the risks of the additional input? Anyone may answer."

"You would have to monitor for unintended input," Arcadia said immediately. "A low-construct input like this could pick up ambient power, or even pick up feedback power from the main output." Finley blushed. He hadn't considered that.

"Correct. Finley, in the future, please try to stick with approved methodology until you've more thoroughly considered consequences. In a classroom environment, this would likely work as intended, but in practical application there represents a serious risk to overloading the dispersion matrix and harming the original caster. Be seated."

Finley took his seat with a small frown, which deepened when Layton turned and gave him a mocking grin.

"That brings us to our next topic, students," Whitlock continued, gesturing Finley's sketch into oblivion. "You were asked to review the chapter on power moderation in parallel constructs, and I have a few problems for you to work through. If you would turn your books to page one thousand, seven hundred and eight, we will begin."



Finley walked into the school's grand dining room. He'd told the others to go on without him, hoping to catch a few minutes with Professor Whitlock after class. Unfortunately, Whitlock had had other plans—namely, giving Landon and Kannin a sharp dressing-down for their lack of preparedness. After hovering near the classroom's entrance for a few minutes, Finley had given up and ducked quietly out.

Disemstoke's main building was laid out as a single long, relatively narrow structure. At the front of the building were the Great Hall, the dining room and kitchen, and a small auditorium. The second level featured offices for the staff and faculty, as well as the faculty's private apartments. The upper levels contained a series of smaller rooms housing the rest of the staff, along with their private dining room.

The back end of the building was given over to classrooms. The main classrooms for applied magic were on the first floor and featured tall ceilings; equally tall, ornate windows; and extensive magical wards to help protect the building from student magic gone awry. Less danger-prone topics were taught on the second- and third-floor classrooms, which were more moderately sized and less magically protected.

A single main corridor bisected the length of the building on the ground floor, running all the way from the large classrooms in the rear to the Great Hall in the front. Originally, Disemstoke's students had been housed in smaller, separate cottages scattered across the grounds. But several centuries ago, the administration of the time had decided to expand the main building. A rarely used ballroom, located on the left side of the main hallway and mirroring the auditorium on the right side, was demolished and turned into the entryway of a new set of wings.

Finley walked quickly through that space now, leaving the main hallway and striding past statues of former deans and paintings of former faculty, and beneath a portrait of the school's founder, Albert Disemstoke himself. The portrait hung over a huge archway at the opposite side of the former ballroom, the archway's thickness showcasing how stout the original building's outer walls really were.

The archway led to a second main hallway that paralleled the first, this one connecting the six dormitory halls that jutted out perpendicularly from the main building. Five of them were each given over to an entire class of students who would reside in that hall for their entire five-year stay at the school. The sixth wing housed post-graduate students who remained for a sixth and seventh year—with only a fraction of the school's graduates being offered that opportunity. The post-graduates lived to the right, in the last building.

Finley and his classmates had gotten what was largely considered the worst of the draw because it required the longest walk. It was the last building to the left, which, when they'd arrived as first-years, had just been vacated by the outgoing class of fifth-years. Aristaeus Hall was, in theory, identical to the others, but over the decades its students had managed to give it a bit of personality—and for Finley and his friends, it made it the best possible hall to live in. Presumably with the faculty's

permission, they'd magicked delicate glowing threads into the stone walls of all four floors, giving the hallways outside the dorm rooms a soft, ethereal ambiance. Some enterprising class had even used one of witchkind's space-expanding spells, enlarging the common study room into a cavernous library full of private study nooks, semi-private areas for small groups, and shelves upon shelves of books.

Turning left, Finley passed Canouah Hall first. Its students had taken a different approach to studying, carving out hidden-space study nooks throughout the building and devoting their single larger space over to a ball court. Weekend tournaments of tennis or handball were common, and for holidays, they decorated the space to the teeth and held dances, with each Canouah student inviting a lucky escort from the other classes.

Bronzewing Hall was next, and even from the corridor, Finley could see the glint of the dorm's warm magical lights reflecting off the metallic finish covering the stone walls. It was clever magic, transmuting the outer layer of the walls into actual bronze, but it had created a maintenance nightmare for every class since. Bronzewing students spent their five years magically polishing the bronze to a high luster, bugging out scratches and dents, and wishing they'd been housed elsewhere.

If Aristaeus Hall was considered poor luck due to its location at the end of the main corridor, Finley had at least balanced that by getting a private ground-floor room. Nearly all the dorm rooms were doubles, but Finley's abutted the wide staircase leading to the upper floors, so his room had been truncated and left with only a single bed. The thick stone walls blocked most of the noise made by other students clambering up and down the stairs, and even what noise made it through was more than worth it to have a room to himself.

He ducked in, his door unlocking itself automatically as he approached, and dropped off the heavy tome of rune lore that Whitlock had assigned them. Written *by* Whitlock, of course, with the running joke being that the man had only taken a teaching position to ensure the sales of his three thousand--page masterpiece. Finley grabbed his notebook, the only thing Professor Fulleron required for her afternoon class on applied magic, and began speed-walking back down the main corridor.

Many steps and three right-hand turns later, he was in the dining room.

Finley's parents had a dining room in the family home, of course, as so many families did. It featured a modest wooden dining table for six, more than large enough for their little three-person family. Finley often wondered if his parents even still used the table that often, given that he was only home on seasonal breaks. The room itself was scarcely bigger than the table, providing just enough room to manuever comfortably to your seat, with a bit of space left over for a hutch that contained Mother's prized dinnerware.

Dismenstoke's dining room was of a completely different order.

Even after most of five years, walking into the room still took Finley's breath away. It was the largest single space he'd ever been in that was *real.* The ceiling soared over thirty feet above, festooned with hanging banners that helped break up the noise of hundreds of hungry, chattering students. Long, sturdy wooden tables and benches ran the entire length of the room, filled almost to buckling with steaming bowls of food. Thousands of gently glowing globes floated to and fro, casting a constantly shifting warm light on the meal. This being lunchtime, the lights were bright and yellow; for breakfast, they'd be a more intense white, and for the evening meal they'd dim to an orangey-red that mimicked a flickering fireplace.

The nature of the Great Schools' enrollment patterns meant that classes of students tended to sit together. When Finley's class had arrived, the dining room had offered a single conspicuously empty table, where the just-departed fifth-years had sat. So the new first-years had dutifully filled it in. Each year, a new class graduated, leaving an empty block of tables in the dining room for the next class. Finley and his classmates had occupied the same tables for their entire time here, and they'd soon leave them empty for next year's incoming freshmen.

Finley's friends were seated on the edge of the fifth-years' "territory," already digging into their meal. He slid onto the bench next to Arcadia, who already had Lydia on her left side. Clayton sat across from Lydia, with Filomena next to him. As Finley reached for one of the last empty plates on the table, the last of their friends, Jamel, slid in on Lydia's left and grabbed the last plate.

"Fulleron had me helping prep for this afternoon," Jamel announced, his voice filled with glee.

"Oh great," Arcadia said with a light snort. "We all know what that means. Combat magic."

"It could be... Maybe holiday displays?" Finley offered with a grin.

"All your Flame affinities are all the same. You're only happy if you're blowing stuff up," she retorted.

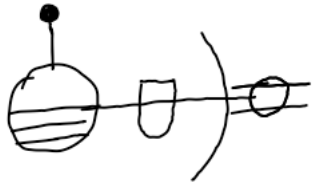
"I *hate* combat magic," Lydia said, her voice uncharacteristically sharp. "Who are we even combatting with?"

"Combat magic is an important and honorable tradition, dating back to the time of the Hunts before the formation of the Six Axes," Jamel recited. "It's important that we maintain this ancient discipline so that we never lose it."

"It was only Five Axes," Lydia said primly. "And combat magic is horrible when you have Sky affinity."

"It's because you overfeed the magic," Jamel said, his voice suddenly earnest. "Flame and Sky aren't opposites, they're complements. You just have to control the power input a lot more carefully, or you'll overfeed it."

Finley nodded. "He's right, you know. Look." He opened his notebook, extracted his stylus from the little pocket on the book's spine, and quickly sketched a rune construct.



"Your amplifier element is atrocious," Lydia pointed out.

"You knew what I meant," Finley said. "Look, the input goes directly to an amplifier matrix, right?"

"Sure," Lydia said, turning the notebook to look at it more closely.

"And then there's a hand movment to direct the output, followed by the fireball."

"Right, with a backlash shield," Jamel said. "That's the bit everyone forgets," he added ruefully, rubbing his eyebrows. They'd grown back now, but when they'd first learned this rune as fourth-years, he'd singed them off in his excitement to cast his first fireball.

"But the point is there's no filter," Finley persisted. "The actual amount of Flame affinity required here is minimal, which is why there's no affinity element. It's really just a spark, something any of us could do. Most of this is just feeding it raw power."

"Sure," Arcadia said. "I don't get your point."

"Your raw power is tinged with Sky magic," Filomena said, her voice barely above a whisper. "That's basically fuel for the fire."

"It *is* the fuel," Finley agreed. "So you're feeding it the raw power it needs, but it's more potent because it's also actual air. That's why you're always blasting great gouts of flame, and not shaped fireballs. You too, Lydia."

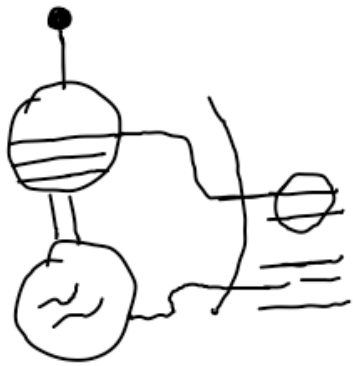
"But Filomena's Sky, too," Lydia objected. "She gets it better."

"No, I get it," Arcadia said, tapping the sketch. "Filomena's Sea affinity, too. So you're saying that cancels out, because Sea quenches Flame."

"Yes," Filomena said, her voice still soft. "Also, I concentrate harder."

Jamel snorted, and even Arcadia covered her mouth to suppress a giggle. Filomena had bragged about her school performance maybe twice in five years.

"But look," Finley said, doggedly pursuing his point. "What if you did it this way, instead?"



The six of them stared at the sketch for a moment. Lydia, their expert on rune lore, was the first to speak. "That's a power draw," she said. "It would—oh. Oh, I see."

"I don't see," Jamel said cheerfully. Rune lore had never been his strongest subject.

"It's a draw for Sky magic," Arcadia said slowly. "Any Sky magic coming out of the amplifier matrix will be drawn that direction, and used to power... a wind effect?"

"It's just top of my head," Finley admitted. "You'd need to do something with it, but could it help push the fireball?"

She nodded. "While other magic would go into the effect. You forgot the hand control," she pointed out.

"Oh, right," Finley said, quickly amending the sketch with his stylus. "But the point is that a *lot* of your magic wouldn't get drawn off. Magic isn't imbued with affinity, it's only... tinged by it. That's how Professor Whitlock explained it to me."

"You've been getting private lessons?" Clayton said, speaking up at last.

"I get him to answer questions after class, is all," Finley said defensively. "They're not private lessons."

"And that's why you're always late to lunch on Friday," Lydia said with a nod. "But yes, it's generally accepted that only a portion of your magic is colored with elemental affinity. So this might pull that off, helping keep the Sky magic from overpowering the effect." She looked

quietly at the sketch for a moment longer. "You came up with this yourself?"

Finley nodded. "I've been working on something for my parents. They're both Earth-affinity, and they like to work together, so the usual rune tends to ground out certain effects. I was trying to think of a way to draw some of that off."

"I've not seen anything like it," Arcadia mused. "I wonder if it would work?"

"It's not like we can try it," Jamel pointed out. "Although maybe Fulleron would let us?"

"No, let's not bring it up," Finley said, snapping the notebook closed. "It's just a doodle, for now. And look, we need to get going."

They looked around, realizing that most of the students had left the dining room for their afternoon classes. They quickly gathered their belongings and hustled out the door into the main corridor.



"Well," Arcadia said. "I guess that was a thing."

Fulleron's applied magic class—which had indeed been mainly about casting fireballs and not burning themselves to a crisp—had run long. The six of them had dashed directly to the dining room before the tables were cleared of food, wolfed down a lukewarm dinner of roast vegetables, and left just as the tables began magically clearing themselves. They'd gone directly to Aristaeus Hall's grand library, still smelling of soot and singed hair, and appropriated a large table in one of the more out-of-the-way group niches.

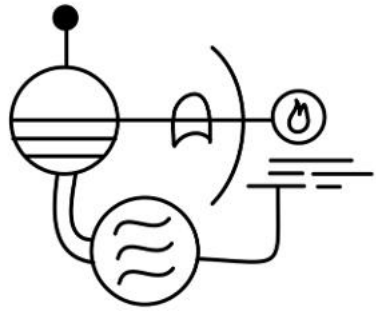
"I'm telling you, you just need to draw off the Sky affinity," Finley said.

"Easy for you to say," Lydia said crossly, pushing a burned lock of pure-white hair back over her ear. "You're dual-affinity with Earth. You've got protection built in."

Finley had, in fact, had an easy time of it. He and Jamel had received the professor's approval quickly and been told to sit down in the back of the room with the other three students who had strong Flame affinity. The rest of their group had struggled through the rest

of the three-hour class, which had stretched nearly to four hours before Fulleron called a halt to it. Even Kannin, an avowed follower of Landon, with a weak Flame affinity, had struggled to summon sufficient magic to power the fireball-casting construct they'd been given.

"Look, I worked on this a bit more," Finley said, withdrawing his notebook from his satchel and opening it to the rune he'd worked on through the rest of Fulleron's class.



"Hmm," Lydia said, turning the notebook so she could see the rune right side up.

"You modified the fireball effect," Jamel pointed out.

"Yeah," Finley said. "I, um... I actually did that in class."

"You *didn't*!" Arcadia said, delightfully scandalized. "Fulleron didn't notice?"

"It's actually the classical representation," Finley said defensively. "I'm not sure it would work as well for someone without Flame affinity, though."

"It wouldn't," Lydia agreed. "But if you had enough raw power, you'd get the right effect. You offset the Sky affinity component though," she pointed out. "Did you—"

"And what's the brain trust up to this evening?"

They all looked up at the mocking voice, Finley turning to see who'd walked up behind him.

"Landon," Jamel said in a flat voice. "Fulleron finally let you out?"

"You know Earth affinity can't cast fireballs," Landon whined. "But

what's this?" he said, leaning over Finley to look at the notebook. "You messing with Fulleron's runes?"

"It's nothing of the sort," Lydia snapped, closing the notebook. "That's an interpretation assignment from Professor Whitlock, thank you very much. And we'll thank you again to keep your nose out of our affairs and move along."

"You know, you all think you're so smart, I should—"

"Should what?" Jamel said in a low voice as he slid forward to the edge of his chair. Jamel was the only one of their group that Landon wouldn't try to bully around.

Finley felt Arcadia start funneling magic. He glanced back and shook his head quickly, and she let it go, although the menacing look on her face didn't subside. "Time to go, Landon," she said, her voice flat and cold.

When they'd come to Disemstoke's five years ago, Landon had quickly established himself as the class bully. A few other boys, all the traditional "follower" type, had quickly attached themselves to Landon, likely figuring that being on his side was easier than being in his sights. Of the half dozen or so followers he'd accumulated in those first weeks, only Kannin remained, the rest having flunked out after their second-year exams.

Landon had rapidly zeroed in on the academic high performers, assuming they were physically weaker and more easily cowed. Finley, who'd been raised in a highly non-confrontational family, had done his best to avoid the bigger boy and had managed to escape anything more serious than the occasional insult. Lydia and Filomena, though, been tormented by the boy, at least until Jamel and Clayton had joined their little group. Jamel, with his bigger build and strong Flame affinity, simply refused to be intimidated by anyone. Clayton, while slow on the uptake sometimes, had an uncanny grasp of any topic he spent enough time studying, and a heavy build that made him harder to push around. By their third year, he'd learned sufficient defensive Earth magic—quiet, reinforcing tricks that wouldn't attract the professors' attention—that Landon literally *couldn't* push him around.

Arcadia seemed able to repel Landon through sheer force of will.

"Now," she repeated, her voice cold as brass and hard as rock. Finley'd always thought her a very unusual girl to carry a Sky affinity.

"Like I'd want to be caught dead with you freaks," Landon said huffily, walking out of their niche.

Finley, closest to the niche's open side, tracked the bully until he left the library. "He's gone."

Lydia opened the notebook back to the page they'd all been studying.

"Did you do that offset on purpose?" she asked as if Landon had never interrupted them.

Finley nodded. "There was something in Whitlock's book about it. It indicates a stronger draw, but one that takes a certain amount of energy to initiate."

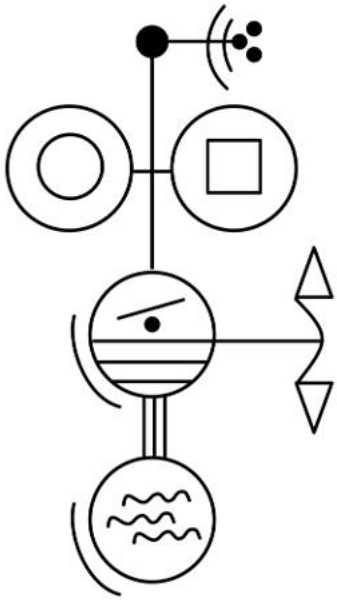
She nodded back. "It means someone with a very weak Sky affinity wouldn't activate the draw. It's clever. It means only someone at risk of ruining the spell and over-fueling the effect would activate the siphon and the secondary wind effect."

"Did you try it?" Jamel asked softly, a grin splitting his face.

"Of course not!" Finley said, aghast. "Fulleron would have noticed if I'd done anything unusual. Besides, I don't have any Sky affinity."

"You worked on any other interesting modifications?" Filomena all but whispered.

He nodded. "This is the one I was working on for my parents." He turned a few pages in the notebook and then pushed it to the center of the table so they could all see.



They all stared at it for a long moment.

"Way out of my league," Jamel said, leaning back in his chair.

"Is this... This is a shield? Between two fixed points?" Lydia asked.

Finley nodded. "My parents live in a fishing village. When the storms come in, almost everyone of witchkind in the village comes together to reinforce the seawall. It's rammed earth, but they can help keep entire sections from collapsing."

"That's the top bit, then," Arcadia said, tapping the arrangement of three dots. "Input from everyone. But male and female affinity?"

"Mother and Father are the only Earth affinities in the village, so they drive it. There are aspects of defense and caretaking, so it'll work best with both of them."

"What is this?" Clayton asked, tapping the middle element. "I've never seen that before."

"Balance," Filomena said. "Balance and amplification." She frowned. "That's not... You made that up." It wasn't a question.

"But it seems to work, doesn't it?" Finley said quietly. "Mother is stronger than Father, but if they're not in balance, then the output

would be unbalanced and would overload the effect. This balances them and grounds any excess."

"And this?" Lydia asked. "You're filtering for Sea affinity? Grounding it?"

"Yes, it's—"

"It's wrong," Filomena said flatly, her voice still whisper-quiet.

"I know," Finley acknowledged. "But all the other witchkind in the village have Sea affinity. All that Sea magic would weaken the seawall. But this would filter it out, ground it. But.., it seems right. It feels more like Middle Runic, doesn't it? And it... it fits."

Filomena nodded. "It does feel right."

"Feels right? Finley, you haven't tested this, have you?" Lydia said, her voice low and full of concern.

Finley blushed a little, his dark skin glowing slightly red. "Not with the effect. And I can't test the Sea filter. But—"

"You can't power this on your own, though," Clayton pointed out. "I've seen this input construct before. *Two* people have to power it. Male and female. It won't work if it's one-sided."

Finley nodded quietly.

"Oh, you might as well tell them," Arcadia said with a sigh.

"Tell us what?" Jamel said, once again interested in the conversation.

"My little sister, Sessi, died when she was two. There was an accident. I was only four."

Everyone was very quiet.

"I'm so sorry," Lydia said quietly. "I'm so, so sorry."

Finley shrugged. "I don't even remember her. But it means I have dual affinity for gender, too."

"I can't even imagine," Arcadia said lightly. "I've known about you for a while, but I'm a weird child, too. Third."

"Third?" Lydia said, her eyebrows raising. "Your parents were overachievers?"

"Something like that. I've a younger brother, too."

"Good grief," Jamel said.

"Yeah, I—"

"Gentlemen, ladies," a new voice said behind them. Again, they all

looked up in surprise, and Finley turned to see who was accosting them now.

"Pr--Professor Fulleron," Finley stammered. "Professor Brys. What —that is—"

"What are we doing in your Hall at this hour?" Fulleron said with a smile. "What indeed." She edged herself between Finley and Clayton and peered at Finley's notebook. "And what have we here?"

"Just a doodle," Finley answered quickly. "Something I was going to ask Professor Whitlock about next week. He—"

"Seems a bit more than a doodle," Brys said, his violet eyes sparkling and his voice cheerful. "Whitlock showed you this?"

"N--no sir, it's my own design. But I—"

"Have you attempted to *empower* this construct, young man?" Fulleron said, her voice sharp.

"No ma'am," Finley said. "No, it's just something I was thinking of. I thought—"

"I see," Fulleron interrupted. She reached down, grabbed the notebook, and ripped the page out. That revealed the fireball rune Finley had showed the group earlier. "And this?" She slid the notebook closer to herself. "O-ho, I thought I felt you tweaking that one a bit. But you've no Sky—ah, you're trying to help your friends. I see." She ripped that page out as well. "Any others?"

"No," Finley said dejectedly.

"Don't sound so morose, Mr. Coughlan, you'll get them back. All of you, off to bed now. First bell's already rung." Fifth-years were given an extra hour before lights-out, so the library was still reasonably full of students. "We'll see you Monday."

With that, she and Professor Brys walked out of the library. Finley tracked them as he had Landon, and saw them passing the sheets of note paper between them as they left the room.

"I'm guessing Landon snitched," Jamel said.

"About all he's good for," Arcadia said. "Let us know how it turns out, Finley. But I'm off for the evening. Lydia?" She and Lydia were roommates.

"Agreed," Lydia said, pushing her chair back and standing. "Oh! We forgot to invite them!"

"Oh, right. Got distracted," Arcadia said, standing. "We're going into town tomorrow to go shopping. It's almost summer, and I need a couple of new outfits. Anyone want to join?"

"I'm still catching up on Whitlock's reading," Clayton said.

"I'll go," Jamel offered.

"You're further behind than I am," Clayton pointed out.

Jamel sighed, a long-suffering expression falling over his face. "I'll be here reading," he muttered.

"I've some catching up as well," Filomena whispered.

Finley shrugged. "I'll go. It'll be nice to get out. Meet you in the Great Hall after breakfast?"

"Something wrong with meeting us at breakfast?"

"It's Mother's birthday. I was going to go down earlier to eat and then 'cast with her. They're an hour earlier."

"Oh, right. Sure, Great Hall after breakfast. Be down by second bell though, or we'll leave without you."

"Deal."

With that, all six of them made their way out of the library and back to their rooms for the night.

CHAPTER 2

A Look at the Future

After a simple breakfast and a short chat with his mother, Finley made his way into the Great Hall.

It was said that neither Duocastella's nor Thornwaith's made much use of witchkind's space-expanding magic, the runes that let witchkind live mostly unseen in the human villages and towns. Finley imagined it was something of a statement: "In *your* towns, we might have to magic our homes and shops into the spaces between your walls, but in *our* places, we can live without such artifice." But at Disemstoke's, a school that celebrated the *use* of magic, those runes were put to wonderful and awe-inspiring purpose.

The walls of the Great Hall were made entirely of sharp, sequential arches marching from the front of the enormous room all the way to the back, where the main corridor began. Artistic stained-glass windows filled the space within each arch, magic ensuring that sunlight always streamed through those windows during the days, followed by softer, cooler moonlight during the nights. Atop those arches, their legs balanced on the peaks of the ones below, were more arches. Atop those were more, and so on and so on, stretching well out of sight hundreds of feet overhead. This being morning, bright, cheerful sunlight streamed down from above, catching on the motes of dust that swirled and eddied in response to the movement of people below. Finley

assumed that the light was produced magically, but it could just have easily been real sunlight, pouring in through an open roof, or perhaps a series of vast skylights, far above.

Whatever the source, the effect was breathtaking. New first-years entered the school for the first time through this Hall, and inevitably—just as Finley and his peers had done—tilted their heads back so far their jaws were pulled open in wonder.

Even after five years, the Hall evoked a sense of the stupendous in Finley. He walked in from the main corridor through the archway that formally delineated the Hall from the rest of the school and crossed over the elaborate parquet floor that was always polished to an almost impossible gleam. The Hall was mainly empty at this time of the day, with just a few fifth-years—the only ones permitted to leave the grounds unaccompanied on the weekends—strolling toward the front. A small table had been set up where students could collect brass weekend passes. These would not only let the school keep track of who'd gone out—and, Finley suspected, enable the staff to track them down if necessary—but they also provided access to the Standing Passage that magically connected Disemstoke's to the nearby lakefront town of Baythwaite. The Passage opened into a witchkind bookshop, which conveniently traded in the textbooks used by the school, ensuring anyone using the Passage would emerge into a safe space.

"Morning, Finley," Arcadia chirped, interrupting the boy's reverie.

"Hello!" Lydia added. Both had dressed similarly to Finley, in the drab, homespun clothes that the human denizens of Baythwaite wore. Arcadia wore a brightly colored hair ribbon to, as she put it, "take the edge off." Not that she'd be unremarkable in any event; her pale-white skin and pale-yellow hair were a rarity even in the Northern regions; this far south, she stood out from nearly any crowd she was in.

"Mr. Coughlan," a deeper voice said. "Miss Konowol, Miss Stempak. Off to town for the day?"

"Professor Whitlock!" Finley said, reflexively standing up straighter. "Yes, just to do a bit of shopping."

"Oh, well, I certainly don't want to interrupt important errands. I was just hoping to speak with Mr. Coughlan about a matter of some importance."

"I—" Finley started.

"Oh, no worries!" Arcadia interrupted brightly. "He was just keeping us company, but we'll head out and leave you two to chat!" With that, she grabbed Lydia's elbow and steered her toward the table near the main entrance.

"Oh," Finley said.

"Ahem. Yes," Whitlock said, his voice amused. "Given that your morning seems free, Mr. Coughlan, would you walk with me?" Without waiting for an answer, the professor turned and began walking quickly back toward the main corridor.

"What is it you wanted to discuss?" Finley asked, hurrying to keep up.

"All in time," Whitlock said.

They passed through the archway at the back of the Great Hall, and Whitlock made a sharp right, heading for the staircase that led to the upper levels. He stepped smartly up the stairs to the second level and continued walking briskly down the corridor.

Finley's heart started to race. There was really only one reason a professor would be escorting him up here.

His fears were confirmed when Whitlock stopped in front of a sturdy, brass-bound door, easily the largest and most impressive door on this floor of the building.

Dean Shardlow's office.

Finley'd been escorted here just half a dozen times in his five years at the school, and it had never been for anything good. Three times had earned him weekend detentions for a month; two more, an embarrassing 'cast with the dean and Finley's parents; and the sixth, kitchen duty for two months. All six had resulted in loss of privileges, earlier curfews, and other punishments.

This wasn't a good door to be standing in front of.

Whitlock knocked once and pushed the door open without waiting for an invitation.

When Finley had first been escorted to the dean's office, he'd expected the room to be... *interesting*. Filled with secret tomes of magical lore. Bookcases, cluttered with ancient artifacts. Maybe a bird on a perch. Basically, like the Tester's office he'd been sent to when he

turned thirteen, but without the horrific-looking lunch she'd eaten while he was there.

Shardlow's office had been the furthest possible thing from that expectation.

The room contained exactly five items other then Finley, Whitlock, and the dean himself: Two uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs, which sat in front of a positively huge desk, which sat in front of a more comfortable-looking chair that the dean occupied. All of that sat on a worn, rectangular red rug. It occurred to Finley that the rug had been different every time he'd come in this room, and he couldn't for the life of him imagine how anyone managed to change it without magic, given the size of that desk. The desk was *easily* larger than his bed.

Two sheets of paper, clearly torn from a notebook, sat side by side on the otherwise empty desk.

"Please, please, sit down, both of you," Shardlow said, his gruff voice friendlier than in Finley's past experiences. "You're not in trouble, boy," the dean assured him, an open smile under his bushy gray mustache.

Finley sat in the left-hand chair, Professor Whitlock easing into the one on the right.

"Now," Shardlow began, leaning forward on his desk a bit and tapping one of the sheets of paper. "I'm told that you... 'doodled' these up yourself?"

Finley nodded.

"Nobody helped?"

Finley shook his head.

"Hmm. Didn't get these out of one of the old, crumbling books at the back of the main library?"

Shake.

"Ever try to *use* one of these? Empower them?"

Shake.

"Show them to anyone but your little group of friends?"

Shake.

"Hmm. Tell me, what made you draw this *this* way? These aren't mere doodles. You took your time with these. The circles are perfect.

But this Sea element... it's a very old variation. Have you seen this before?"

Shake.

"Speak, boy, I'll not bite your head off," Shardlow said with a chuckle.

"I drew it myself. It... it *seemed* right. I mean, I know it's not right. I know it looks like Middle Runic, but I didn't know for sure it was older when I drew it. But the right one... seems wrong, somehow."

"Tell me more about that. What makes it seem 'wrong' to you?"

Finley frowned at the difficulty of trying to put a vague feeling, nothing more than a *sensation*, really, into words. "It just... it doesn't *fit.* The magic won't flow right. The correct Sea symbol—"

"You know its name in the True Language," Whitlock reminded him.

Finley nodded. "*Vandenynai.* It's... it feels *tight.* It's very precise. It doesn't... I guess it doesn't *mean* everything. Where the sea touches the shore is... it's different somehow."

"The older rune is named *vandens,"* Whitlock said. "More literally 'waters,' and more a direct descendent from Middle Runic. And Old Runic in turn, for that matter. *Vandenynai* is, specifically, the ocean. So yes, it loses its context on the borders."

"And so how did you arrive at *vandens* if you've never encountered it before?" Shardlow asked carefully, looking deep into Finley's eyes.

"I just... It came to me, I guess," the boy said nervously. "It's close to *vandenynai.* I just needed something... something simpler. Something less... I guess, specific," he finished, nodding at Whitlock.

"Hmm," Shardlow said, also nodding. "Finley, do you know what a runewright is?"

He shook his head.

"It's a fairly rare talent, actually. Professor Whitlock is one, which explains his abiding interest in rune lore, not to mention his prolific writings on the subject." He chuckled, and Finley caught Whitlock's smile in the corner of his vision. This seemed to be a shared joke between the two men. "It's estimated fewer than two dozen are born in any one decade. Runewrights have the ability to sense how magic will flow through a rune construct, or even a single rune, without actually

empowering the rune. They can often assemble new constructs from the pieces of other ones, ensuring everything fits together. For example, consider your modification of this fireball construct," he said, tapping the other sheet of paper. "You've rendered the wind effect differently, and this offset of the Sky rune is... let's say, nonstandard. Tell me about the wind effect."

"The right way pushed back too much," Finley said, trying to remember how he'd felt when drawing the construct. "Especially with the right fireball rune. It has its own vector, and they... they got in each other's way."

"It's a... *nonstandard* effect rune for the fireball, too," Whitlock pointed out. "Again, this one looks a lot more like a Middle Runic derivative."

"It needed to *fit,*" Finley said. "The 'right' runes, they just... I guess they just *blended* too much. The whole point was to keep them separate."

Shardlow nodded. "Professor Whitlock and I believe you may have the runewright talent, Finley. And we'd like to make you an offer."

Finley's eyes widened. "An offer?"

"You'll need to be tested, of course, but based on this evidence—and I believe you when you say you didn't pick these up from elsewhere—I have little doubt you'll pass. And if you do, we'd like to offer you a post-graduate position. An opportunity to refine that special talent, to learn how to use it." The dean leaned over his desk, his voice earnest. "You don't know how rare and valuable this is, especially outside Duocastella's." Finley didn't know much about the other Great School, apart from their reputation for magical research and their focus on more delicate magics, like healing. "A life as a runewright—I don't know what your plans were for after graduation, young man, but this opens a whole new world of opportunities for you."

"I... I don't know what to say," Finley admitted.

"'Cast your parents this afternoon. Discuss it with them. Runewrights are hardly a secret, they're just rare; I'm sure your parents will know the term. And you've got until graduation to decide, so that's a bit away yet."

"And I must point out that it isn't necessarily just a two-year program," Whitlock said, glancing at Shardlow.

"Oh!" the dean said. "Glory, no. Of course, there'll be the sixth and seventh years, but you'll be working directly with Professor Whitlock much of the time, I expect. No, the presumption is that, upon earning your advanced degree, you'd have a position here at the school if you wanted one. Tenured. Guaranteed for life."

Finley blinked. This was a *lot* to process. He'd planned little more than to return to his village and work alongside his parents, relying on his Earth affinity to let him help them with their tasks.

"There will be other opportunities, of course," Whitlock said. "There are some larger business concerns that would employ a runewright. But generally, their work is in the Great Schools, developing new runes and helping move all of witchkind forward."

"Indeed," Shardlow said. "Look, why don't you go off and have a 'cast with your parents? Get the conversation going, see what they think."

Finley nodded slowly. This was a *lot* of a lot to process. "Yes, sir. I'll go do that."

"Good lad," Shardlow said with a smile. "Off you go. Professor Whitlock and I have a few other matters to discuss."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Finley stood and left the office and made his way down the corridor and back to the stairs.



"You know perfectly well that 'runewright' isn't the whole of it, Michael," Whitlock said after the door closed behind Finley.

"With this balance-and-amplify rune? Of course not," the dean said. "We've never even *seen* a balancing rune that worked. Of course, we don't know this one will."

"It will. I can feel it."

"But you couldn't have drawn it."

"No," Whitlock admitted, shaking his head.

"So you admit there's something new in the world."

Whitlock grinned at his colleague. "That depends on whose side

you take. I still believe that the True Language already describes everything that can be described. We've just forgotten a lot of it. Or we never knew."

Shardlow chuckled. "Well, I suppose you can hang onto your beliefs, and I'll hang on to mine. What *I* see is a boy taking a completely novel approach to a problem. This sea wall of his, for example. You know every rune that's ever been written down. Do—"

"I *wrote* most of them down," Whitlock pointed out.

"Hah! You did. Thickest book I've ever seen. How would *you* have approached this? As a runewright and master of rune lore?"

"Hmm." Whitlock examined Finley's drawing more carefully. "You never see male and female affinity in a single power stream from a single input. Not ever. It's considered impossible, but I can tell this *would* work. He's not even trying to blend them, and I'd have had to include at least a trio of runes in an attempt to do that. I'd probably have had two parallel power inputs, one for each. That's safer, and it's what's always done. I'd have directed them toward either end of the sea wall effect, and probably had a ground in the middle to handle the mismatch."

"It would be ugly."

"It wouldn't work," Whitlock huffed. "You can't just ground power out of an effect, everyone knows that. But that's the point. The boy's... *discovered* something that we didn't previously know."

"Or the Create alignment *is* a thing, and we've found proof of it."

"Again with the philosophical debate," Whitlock said, shaking his head.

"Look, Amos, do you doubt that the boy may be a Rune Smith? The first since Vivance? The first in what, a thousand years or more?"

"Doubt?" The professor thought about it for a moment. "No. We can argue about creation versus discovery, but I've no doubt. I'll go you one further, in fact. There's no 'maybe' here. The boy *is* a Rune Smith."

"You know you're in the minority on the 'discovery' bit. It's a very old-fashioned notion."

"I acknowledge that it's no longer *fashionable,* yes, but I still believe the evolution of Old Runic to Middle and then to New demonstrates that we've likely lost more of rune lore than we still retain. Who's to say

what's creation and what's inspired discovery?" He chuckled. "But, more to the point, do we *tell* the boy?"

"Origin forfend, no," Shardlow said firmly. "Absolutely not. We'll bring him along as a runewright and speak as little as possible about the difference. The pressure it would put on the boy, not to mention the unwanted attention it might draw... No. But Amos, you're to do your level best to convince that boy to stay. Vivance was an Adherent in a time when magic was more constrained. To have an unfettered Rune Smith running around the world *now?*" He shuddered. "It's unthinkable."

"We agree on that much," Whitlock said with a firm nod. "He'll be the most famous of witchkind as it is. Might as well give the poor boy a safe place in which to be all of that. I'll speak with him again this evening."

Shardlow sighed and pushed the notebook pages across the great expanse of his desk. "Here, return these to him when you do. Impress upon him the importance of not empowering these without supervision?"

"Of course. I had actually thought to speak to Regina about it."

"You're thinking of letting him empower them under her supervision?"

Whitlock nodded. "She has experience with experimental magic in the hands of teenagers, after all. Maybe we could have his friends join him. It would encourage them to do this openly, where we can provide protection and guidance."

"Agreed. Have her speak with me if she has any concerns." He paused. "You'll handle the Test?"

The professor nodded. "Yes. Next weekend, perhaps. I'll have to take him into Baythwaite via the Passage, but Eugenia will need the full support of her Desk for this. In fact..." He paused for a moment, thinking. "With your permission, I'd like to take Miss Edon, as well."

"For the runewright test? You suspect she's one as well?"

Whitlock nodded. "There have been some signs. You know, she's as interested as I am in rune lore, and at a much younger age. She has an uncanny grasp of them and memory for them. That's the more common mark of a runewright."

"You'll tell her beforehand?"

"I think not," Whitlock said, tapping a finger on one knee. "No, I'll explain it to Finley, but I'll make an excuse for Filomena. She's a bit... hmm, *delicate,* is perhaps the right word. I've always been astounded she was Chosen for here and not Duocastella's. She's a researcher if there ever was one."

"Pot calling the kettle a bit, don't you think?"

"I thoroughly enjoyed my education at Duocastella's," Whitlock said in an injured tone. "I left because the school doesn't turn out anyone with close to the patience to actually teach rune lore. They're quite focused on research." He huffed. "The girl's destined to be a researcher, though."

"She *was* an odd Choice, I'll admit. It wouldn't surprise me if she joins the staff there, one day. Well, you've my blessing. See what Eugenia makes of her as well. We've ample space in Fidei Hall if she passes and can be convinced to stay. Provided you're willing to take on *two* apprentices."

"It would hardly be seemly to ship them to Duocastella's at this stage," Whitlock admitted. "So yes." He stood. "I'll keep you apprised."

"Good luck," the dean said in a firm, sincere voice.



"A runewright, Finley—that's just... it's just *remarkable.*"

Finley sat in his room, the wavering glowing images of his parents' faces floating in front of him. The *paprastas bendravimas*—literally "simple communication," although almost everyone called it a "face broadcast" or "face 'cast"—had a very small area of effect, and so his parents' faces were squeezed next to each other. The animated image flickered as they moved in their excitement as the magic tried to decide which person to focus on whenever they moved too far apart.

"I'm to be tested at some point, I gather," Finley said. "But if I pass... Well, that's what I wanted to talk about. They're asking me to consider a post-grad position. Two years."

"My boy, that's *wonderful!*" Father exclaimed. "I'm not sure about the tuition, but we'll do everything we can." Children of witchkind

Chosen to attend a Great School did so for free, but post-graduate positions generally carried a fee that the student, or their family, was expected to pay.

"That's the thing of it, Father," Finley said. "I think... I don't think there would be any tuition to pay."

His parents were quiet for a moment, their faces still registering his words. Then they erupted into exclamations of excitement and joy, to the point where the spell started breaking up again.

"Calm down, calm down, you're breaking up," Finley warned them.

"Sorry, sorry, we're just—this is so exciting!" his mother said, her voice full of joy.

"It means I wouldn't be coming home to work with you, though," Finley cautioned.

"Oh, Finley, that's not what we wanted for you. I mean, we love it here, and the people are wonderful, even the humans. But it's a little village. This is so much bigger! And it's not like we'll never see you. It's a school, not a prison! But it's about what *you* want, son." His father was clearly overjoyed but trying to control his enthusiasm. "We'll support you in whatever you want, but don't think for a moment that we'd be disappointed if you took this opportunity. This is a time when it's okay to be selfish, Finley. You think on what's right for *you,* and we'll have your back the whole way."

Finley nodded, his eyes starting to tear up a bit. "Thank you, Father," he said, his voice tight. "I'll think about it, and I'll tell you what happens."

"We can't wait, Finley!" his mother said, clapping her hands in excitement. "Tell us as soon as you know something!"

"I will. I love you both!"

"We love you too, son!"

Finley released the magic, and his parents' images faded.

CHAPTER 3

An Offer

Finley finished the call with his parents and stepped out of his room, his mind whirling. The Hall was quiet: most of the fifth-years would be in Baythwaite for the day, enjoying the spring air. Any who weren't would be in the athletic fields and gardens on the opposite side of the school, playing a pick-up game or just enjoying the sun.

He cast *laikas,* a simple spell whose rune dissolved in his mind to be replaced by the current time. It was one of the few small pieces of magic that students were permitted to cast on their own any time they wanted, and it told him that it was still too early for lunch. The dining room would have snacks, as they did all day on the weekends, but he'd eaten a hearty breakfast in anticipation of being in town all day, so he wasn't hungry.

He didn't feel much like a game, though; his mind was too distracted. He decided instead to visit the library. In addition to its extensive collection of books and papers on runes and magic, it contained a small section of fiction and adventure stories, which might be just the thing to help settle his thoughts. Or, if Mrs. Corminas, the librarian, was in, perhaps he could ask her if there were any books on runewrights. That might not settle his thoughts, but at least it would help him get a grip on what might lie in store.

He walked out of Arstaeus Hall and past the entrances to Bronzewing and Canouah. That last was a little busier, as the third-years spent their weekends cleaning the common areas of their Hall. Fourth-years were provided magical assistance for cleaning, and fifth-years had it taken care of entirely by magic, but thirds, seconds, and firsts put in plenty of "chore time" on the weekends. He honestly hadn't minded, since it had kept him occupied on what would otherwise have been a boring two days of studying and laying around. Without the option to leave the campus, Dismestoke's could get pretty dull. Fourth year had, if anything, been the worst, as the chores were cut back but going into town still wasn't permitted. Arcadia had taken up gardening just to give herself something to do.

As he passed through the arch into the main building, he saw Professor Brys walking toward him at a good clip.

"Good morning, Professor," Finley said politely. He fully intended to keep walking, but Brys stopped and smiled.

"Finley! Just who I was looking for!" Brys' voice was like that of a brass bell: loud, bright, and impossible to ignore.

"Sir?" Finley said, slowing to a stop in front of the man.

"I was wondering if you have a moment to chat?"

"Uh, sure."

"Excellent!" He paused for a moment, as if working through a complex problem. "It's a bit private, but my classroom is being cleaned at the moment. Oh, I know. The faculty dining room should be empty this time of the day. Care to join me for a late-morning cup of tea?"

The faculty dining room—all of the faculty spaces, for that matter—were *strictly* off-limits to students, but if a professor was inviting him, then surely it was okay?

"Okay."

"Excellent again! Right this way."

Finley expected Brys to turn around and hang a left into the main ground-floor corridor. There was a set of stairs there that, while narrower than the ones just off the Great Hall, were a lot closer.

Instead, Brys walked to the side of the passageway they were in and pushed an index finger into one wall. Finley felt a spark of magic, and

Brys' finger sank into the wall, right up to the last knuckle. He pulled, and part of the stone wall hinged open in front of him. When the secret door was fully open, his finger popped free, and he turned to grin at Finley. "It's how we get to the residence halls so quickly when there's a commotion," he said in a loud whisper. "Leads right to our common area, too, so it's convenient as all!" With that, he ducked into the doorway and quickly mounted the stairs. Finley rushed to follow him, as the door was already swinging shut.

As the door *thunked* closed, a warm light illuminated the narrow staircase, which wasn't wide enough for more than one person to ascend or descend at once.

They emerged into a comfortable-looking space that must have been the faculty dining room. It obviously served as something of a lounge, too: the outer wall featured a row of tall, arched windows that were currently letting in an immense amount of bright sunlight. Finley blinked for a moment and realized it must be magic: this wall of the building directly abutted Duskaton Hall, if he hadn't gotten turned around, meaning these windows should be showing nothing but gray stone.

A fireplace burned merrily at one end of the room, casting a friendly, flickering light over a half dozen chairs and pair of cozy-looking sofas. Mismatched end tables sat next to each piece of furniture, with the entire assortment taking up roughly half of the room. The other half was a more traditional dining area: two large, worn wooden tables sat six apiece, the wall opposite the fireplace anchored a long buffet. The buffet was mostly empty now, save for a large teapot that sat simmering over a magical heating disc. A stack of cups and saucers sat next to it, along with a small bowl of sugar and a small pitcher of milk. The milk was obviously cold, with beads of condensation running down the sides of the pitcher. More magic.

"Have a seat by the fire, why don't you, and I'll fetch us some tea. Milk and sugar?" Brys asked.

"Yes, please," Finley said. He chose a paisley-patterned chair that was obviously much-loved and had seen better days, and sank into its cushiony embrace. After a bit of clinking across the room, Brys joined

him, setting a cup and saucer on the little table next to Finley's chair. Brys hooked another chair with his ankle, drawing it closer, and then plopped into it, cradling his tea in his lap.

"That was quite a set of runes you drew up last night," Brys said, picking up his tea for a quick sip.

This again? Finley thought, confused. "Uh, yes, sir. I guess so."

"No need for the 'sir' in here." Brys chuckled. "Although..." He looked around at the door they'd entered through, and then at the main door leading out of the room. "We should be a bit more private, perhaps," he said thoughtfully. He set his tea back in his lap and, steadying it with one hand, waved the other hand at the doors. A shimmering sheen settled over them. "There. That'll keep conversation in and give us a bit of notice if someone comes to interrupt." He sipped his tea again. "Now, back to those runes. Thought of those yourself?"

"Um. Yes, sir. I mean, yes. I explained it to Dean Shardlow just now, actually."

"Ah, the dean, excellent, excellent," Brys said with a smile. "I'd hoped he would speak with you, hadn't realized he'd move so quick! Regina—that is, Professor Fulleron—and I shared your sketches with him last night. Quite impressive!"

"Thank you," Finley said. *Where is this going?* he thought.

"Runewright, is it, then?" Brys sipped his tea, but was staring quite carefully at the boy.

"He thinks so, yes. I'm to be tested."

"Of course, of course. My, that's exciting! Not a runewright myself, of course, but Whitlock is. Did you know that? Course he is; most lore masters are. Damn big book he wrote on the subject; might as well be a runewright after that!"

Finley nodded, blowing on his tea to cool it before sipping. He wished Brys would get to the point.

"So what next, then? After you're tested? Assuming you've got the talent, which I'm sure you have."

Finley sipped again before answering. "They said a post-graduate position. A permanent position here at the school, perhaps. Tenure."

"Tenure! My word, my word. It'll be years before I earn that, but, of course, for a runewright, it makes sense. Definitely sensible, yes." He

paused a bit. "Does it excite you?" His voice grew slightly more serious, and Finley sensed they were finally past the small talk.

"What?"

"Two more years here. *All* the years here, really, if you accept a tenured position."

"I... I honestly haven't thought about it much. I just told my parents."

"Any advice?"

"They said they'd support whatever I wanted."

"Smart, smart." Brys set his tea aside on another of the small tables, and leaned forward, looking intently at Finley. "And what *do* you want?"

Finley set his tea down as well and then shrugged. "I don't even know. It's all so new. I haven't even been tested yet. I don't even *really* know what a runewright does, or who even hires them, and—"

"I can answer that a bit," Brys interrupted, leaning back and folding his hands in his lap. "Runewrights do whatever they *want.* The ability to reassemble runes into new combinations, new constructs—it's a valuable skill. A *talent.* A couple of more years here will perhaps teach you more about rune lore, give you a broader base to build on." He shrugged. "But perhaps not. You've already got Whitlock's book; just about every damn rune ever made is in there already, is that not true?" He grinned, and Finley smiled uncertainly in return. "Point is, runewrights tend to set themselves up. Even here at the school, you're only going to teach classes like Whitlock does. Maybe do some business on the side, designing runes people pay for. Outside the school? More of that. Taking commissions for new constructs, building them, testing them a bit, selling them. It's pretty simple."

Finley imagined his life going that way and didn't find it all that simple. Or interesting, really. It sounded... dull.

"Sounds dull?" Brys asked, reading the boy's face.

Finley nodded.

"I expect so. School for five years, you've not even *lived,* and already it's all planned out. Dusty classroom, tea in this room every day, three meals a day, right here. Maybe working on some commissions, or maybe

you'll take up a second volume of Whitlock's book." He shook his head. "Tough to contemplate at your age."

Brys leaned forward again, his manner more intense.

"There's something more, I suspect, that they're not sharing with you."

"What?" Finley asked, confused.

"I don't think you're a runewright, Finley."

"You... you don't?" He wrinkled his forehead.

"I don't. That balancing rune? The one that amplifies and balances, and grounds the unbalanced power?"

Finley nodded.

"Doesn't exist," Brys said flatly. "Never has."

"I don't even know if it'll work," Finley said quietly.

"Oh, it'll work. Whitlock said so. Showed him as well, last night, same time as Shardlow. Said it was pure genius."

"But... wouldn't that make me..." Finley said, his voice trailing off in an unasked question.

"A runewright? No." Brys shook his head firmly. "Runewrights recombine. They take existing runes and put them to new use. Powerful talent, and very rare. Being able to see the flow of magic in a rune on paper, without the danger of empowering it? Dead useful. That's what you're doing, isn't it? *Feeling* the magic, even where there is none yet?"

Finley nodded. It was the best description he'd heard of the sensation he had when crafting a rune construct.

"The rest of us can't do that. We can't *feel* a construct until we picture it and empower it. And even then, if it's wrong, if it's unbalanced, all we can feel is that it's *wrong*. We can't tell why. I couldn't tell you to move a rune to the left and add another connector. I mean, I know enough lore that I could guess at the big pieces, but making it *work* is about the little things. If I tried to empower a new construct I made, I'd probably blow something up. Maybe even myself. It's dangerous, and that's why we leave it to runewrights. You can feel it, what will work and what won't. It's like an instinct, isn't it?"

Finley nodded. "But you said I'm not—"

"A runewright," Brys finished. "You're not. Because of that

balancing rune. That's *new*, Finley. Do you know the argument on new things? New runes?"

Finley shook his head.

"There are two theories. There's an older one, centuries old by now, that says the True Language came into the world fully formed, given to us by the Origin, the great intelligence that feeds magic into the world. Nothing new can be created, but we can always *discover* things that existed but that we didn't know about. An old-fashioned theory, one that's less popular today.

"Today, most folks believe that the True Language can be extended. New words can be invented, which means new runes can be invented. But not by ordinary witchkind. Not even by runewrights."

"Then who—" Finley started.

"Quick! Finley, answer quick!" Brys slid to the edge of his chair and began speaking urgently. "The balancing rune. What's it's name? What's it called, Finley? What's the name of the—"

"Dalijimasis kaip lygus," Finley blurted out. His eyes immediately widened.

Brys nodded, smiling broadly, and leaned back in his chair. "You invented something, Finley. Something new. Something *real.* That makes you a Rune Smith."

"A... a Rune *Smith*?"

"The rarest of talents. Said by some to be a gift directly from the Origin itself. The ability to create new magic and have it *work.* The last known Rune Smith was Vivance, Adherent of the Axis of Flame. Centuries ago, Finley." His smile grew even wider. "And I believe you're a Rune Smith, too."

"Will they... will they test for that?"

Brys snorted. "Of course not. I don't even know if they *can* test for that. Or Test, I should say. They'll take you into town, see the Tester, and she'll declare you a runewright, I've no doubt. Whether her Desk is smart enough to recognize you as a Rune Smith?" He shook his head. "Doubtful."

"What's her desk got to do with it?" Finley asked, puzzled.

"Never mind. The point is that you'd be *wasted* here, Finley. Cooped up in this school, a Rune Smith? Ridiculous. No, I have a

different offer for you. A different option. A path that will let you graduate form this school and put your special gift to use for all of witchkind." Brys' voice had grown gradually softer, until now it slipped through the room in a hush. "Finley," he said softly, "I work with a group of witchkind. A secret group. One that protects witchkind. A group that is open to only a very few of us. In the True Language, we're called *Kai kurių ordinas."*

Finley's mind buzzed, and his brain translated the phrase he'd never heard before. "The... the order of... some?" he said hesitantly.

Brys nodded. "Very good. I suspect only a Rune Smith could have done that. Yes, the Order of Some. Some of us, just some of witchkind, looking out for the rest."

"You said 'protect.'"

Another nod. "I did."

"From who?"

"*Whom,*" Brys corrected, and then caught himself. "Sorry," he chuckled. "Force of habit. From humans. From the few of witchkind who would do us all harm. But mostly from humans. I won't lie to you, Finley, it can be dangerous. The world often is. And I can't tell you much more about what we do. It's a secret, remember. We can't be effective if many people, know who we are or what we do. So I must ask that you keep this to yourself."

Finley nodded.

"Good. Even your parents aren't to know. If you decide you're interested, then we can speak more about it. But what I can tell you is this: you'll be out in the world. You'll be doing good for our people. You'll be putting your special talents to work in a way that won't be possible anywhere else. You won't be cooped up in this old school, writing another dusty old book." He paused and looked closely into Finley's eyes. "Think about it."

"Are you a member?"

Brys nodded slightly. "An associate, more like, but yes. We're in the other schools as well. I look for young people, like yourself, with special talents. Special aptitudes, special interests. Ones that can help us, all of witchkind, stay safe and even grow." His eyes glazed over for a moment before focusing back on Finley. "It's nearing lunchtime. Why don't I

walk you down to the dining hall? As I said, give it some thought. Let's speak again, before long. Agreed?"

Nod.

"Good. Well, then. Off we go. We should use the front stairs this time. Closer to the dining hall anyway, yes?"

Nod.

"Excellent." Brys stood and led the way out.

CHAPTER 4

Ruminations

Monday brought a return to Finley's comfortable routine. Mornings were split between Professor Daugirdas' Advanced Agricultural Magic class and Professor Watsham's Advanced Aquatic Magic workshop. After lunch, it was off to Professor Pulford's Magical Myths and Legends lecture, and the day wrapped with Mr. Louch's lessons on home economics. Finley navigated the day almost automatically, distracted by Saturday's discussions. So distracted, in fact, that he wasn't paying any attention to Arcadia as she chattered about finances and investing on the way from Mr. Louch's class to the dining room for dinner.

So distracted that he didn't hear Arcadia warning him to pay attention right before he ran into Landon in the hallway, almost bowling the larger boy over.

"What's your problem, Coughlan?" Landon demanded, recovering his balance and looming over Finley—who was now *very* much in the moment and paying attention.

"Let it go, Landon; he just wasn't paying attention," Arcadia told him.

"Need your girlfriend to stick up for you Coughlan?" Landon sniggered.

"She's not my—" Finley started, taking a step back.

"What's on your mind, O High and Mighty?" Landon pressed, stepping forward to again close the space between them.

"I'm sorry, Landon," Finley said, attempting to appease the other boy. "I just wasn't paying attention."

"Do better, Coughlan," Landon growled, putting a hand on Finley's chest and pushing hard.

Finley took an awkward step backward to catch his balance. A slow, uncharacteristic anger began to boil up. "Knock it off, Landon," he warned.

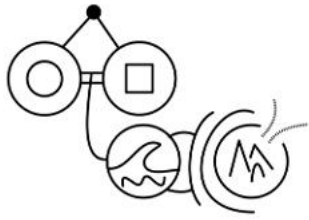
"Or what, wimp?" Landon laughed, stepping forward and extending an arm to push Finley again.

"Stop it!" Arcadia demanded. Other students were stopping in the hall, clearly hoping for a fight.

Finley's mind flew through calculations. Landon was more heavily built, with a strong Earth affinity. Even if he wasn't actively empowering a rune construct in his mind, a physical confrontation would be almost pointlessly one-sided in his favor. But Finley had a strong Earth affinity, too, and knew he could ground himself without rousing enough magic to alert the faculty or staff. He also had a strong Fire affinity, but using that in a sufficiently powerful construct to disrupt Earth would definitely attract attention.

But not having an affinity for an element didn't mean he couldn't use it anyway. Earth's natural counter was Sea, which could slowly but inexorably wear away at Earth, carving it away and claiming it.

In Finley's mind, a set of runes *snapped* together, including one that seemed to flow into place entirely of its own accord.



It was a construct few but Finley could empower properly,

requiring a dual gender affinity to make up for his lack of direct affinity with the Sea element. The construct roiled with Power alignment, something Finley hadn't had a lot of success with, but in the moment, with Landon's arm still stretching toward him as if in slow motion, Finley *poured* energy into the construct's input node.

Finley's left arm came up, tracing an arc from his chest outward, slapping Landon's outstretched hand aside. At the same time, Finley's right hand lashed out, his flat palm slapping hard into Landon's chest.

Landon's face instantly went gray under his jet-black skin. His eyes widened in shock and then glazed over as the full force of Finley's magic hit him. Raw power, coerced into a semblance of Sea magic, *shoved* through the foundation of Landon's being, dispersing his Earth affinity and scattering his magic.

Landon fell over backward, landing hard on his back.

Arcadia's mouth fell open.

The other students in the hallway fell eerily silent.

The entire moment felt frozen in time, Finley's right arm still stretched toward where Landon had been standing just a moment before. It could only have been a second, but it felt like minutes passed like that: everyone locked in place, even the motes of dust in the air seeming to hold themselves in place.

Time crashed back to full speed as an adult voice shouted, "Finley Coughlan!"

Arcadia didn't move, but the other students scattered, suddenly remembering they had other places to be and other things to worry about. The hall was empty in a blink as Professor Whitlock swept into the scene.

He immediately went to one knee next to Landon, placing a finger on the boy's neck to feel for a pulse. Landon's eyes were still glazed, but he began blinking them slowly. As he lay on the stone floor, his body began shaking in small, uncontrolled tremors, as if he'd suddenly become incredibly cold.

"Origin and Axis," Whitlock muttered under his breath, and Finley could feel magic starting to flow from the professor into Landon. "Finley, you've Flame affinity," Whitlock said urgently. "Lend me your

magic. Slowly, through a throttling rune, like I showed you in class last month."

Finley complied almost without thinking, forming a simple construct in his mind that filtered out all but his Flame magic, throttled it into a harmless warmth, and then linked that to Professor Whitlock's own magic.

It barely occurred to Finley that he'd never been *taught* how to feed magic to another of witchkind.

Whitlock caught up the thread of Finley's magic, weaving it into a construct of his own—a construct Finley could somehow dimly perceive, almost *see*, as Whitlock formed it in his mind. Flame threaded with Earth, apparently through Whitlock's own affinity, and flowed gently into Landon's... Landon's center? Finley could just make out the exact spot where Whitlock was now dripping the commingled power, and could barely sense that power flowing into Landon's limbs, curling up within his torso, and flowing gently into his skull.

Whitlock broke off after a moment when Landon coughed and then groaned. The professor helped the boy sit up and said, "Easy, there. Take it easy." He turned to Arcadia and Finley. "You two. Go to the dining hall. You're not to discuss this with anyone. In fact, sit by yourselves and eat. Remain there until the staff closes the kitchen. After that, Arcadia, you're to return to your room. Finley, you will meet me in my classroom. Are we clear?"

They nodded.

"Good. Now go."

They rushed off as Whitlock helped Landon to his feet, urging him to take it slow.



"What did you do?" Arcadia whispered as they sat at the far end of an almost-empty row of tables. Their friends had given them odd looks, but Arcadia had given them a small head shake, indicating they couldn't talk right now. She and Finley had only filled half their plates with food, both of them suddenly not as hungry as they'd been moments before.

"I... I'm not sure," Finley said, still running through what had

happened in his mind. "I don't know why he was being so pushy. Why he's *always* been so pushy." He shook his head in frustration.

"You don't know?" Arcadia asked, her voice still soft.

"You know everything about everyone," Finley pointed out. "I don't."

"The Karczes are a Thornwaith's family. For generations. But Landon doesn't have whatever extra thing it is that qualifies you for Thornwaith's. He was bitter about coming here as a first-year, and he's gotten more sullen about it every year since."

Finley was quiet for a moment, pushing his food around on his plate. "I didn't know."

Thornwaith's, the third of the Great Schools of witchkind, was extremely special. Its students were Chosen for the special relationship they had with magic itself, and its graduates were the defenders of witchkind. They all lived normal lives as fisherwitches, merchants, tradespeople, and so on, but all of witchkind knew that, at need, Thornwaith's graduates would put themselves in front of any danger. They were witchkind's proudest, and most invisible, defense against the return of the fabled Hunts.

Being Chosen for Thornwaith's had once been stigmatized, and the school and its alum had been secretive about what made them different. Since the fall of the Adherents, though, Thornwaith's had been somewhat more open about what the school stood for, and attendance at Thornwaith's had started to become a proud tradition for those families whose children were routinely Chosen.

"He doesn't talk about it," Arcadia said. "His little sister was Chosen, though, and I think that made it even harder for him. I overheard Pulford talking about it with Louch one time in our second year."

"I wish he didn't try to make up for it by being a bully."

"Yeah."

The two picked at their food in silence for several minutes, looking up for only a moment as little Ramiro started waking toward them, a tray in his slight hands. Reading their mood, he quickly diverted and sat at a spot that some other fifth-years had just cleared.

Finley and Arcadia returned their attention to each other and their half-finished meals. "Shardlow talked to me this weekend," Finley said.

"Was that what Whitlock was on about?" she asked. "We were wondering, but you didn't say anything."

"Yeah."

"What did the dean want?"

"He offered me a post-graduate spot."

Arcadia's eyes widened, and she stopped pushing food around her plate. "Really?"

Finley nodded. "Have you ever heard of a runewright?"

"A little. There's not much about them, but you run across them in books here and there. Whitlock has an appendix in that book of his, and he mentioned them."

"They think I might be one. I'm to get tested sometime. If I pass, they want me to stay on. Shardlow said they'd even give me a spot on the faculty, and even tenure, if I stay."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"You know..." Arcadia stopped and sighed, falling silent for a moment before continuing. "I never told you this, but they offered me a post-grad spot, too."

"They did? For... for the same thing?"

"No, not a faculty position. Certainly not tenure! No, just for advanced studies. Fulleron and Whitlock both brought it up, in fact."

"You're super smart," he acknowledged.

"Yeah, I know," she said. It was a matter-of-fact statement, issued almost absent-mindedly. She *was* super smart, and it made no sense to deny it. "But... I told them no."

"You did?"

She nodded. "They said I could change my mind until we graduate this summer, but I won't."

"Why?"

She shrugged and resumed picking at her dinner. "I don't want to be stuck here. I don't want to be stuck at home, either." Her family ran a small collection of taverns in Evermore. "What will more studying get me? Even more information I won't use

anywhere else?" She shook her head. "I want to... I want to go *out.* You know I've never even been to a human town other than Baythwaite? I want to see *more.* Not just... not just rot here. Or hide in Evermore."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. Sky affinity isn't much use on the trading caravans, but I could travel between the smaller farms, working weather magic. Farms tend to have people with Earth affinity, but a little weather-work is always welcome." She sighed. "I really don't know. I just know I don't want to be in one place all the time."

"Professor Brys talked to me, too," he ventured quietly.

That caught her full attention, for some reason. She looked up, meeting Finley's eyes with a sudden intensity. "He did?"

Finley nodded.

"What did he say?"

Finley suddenly wished he hadn't brought it up. "Not much, really. He just said that if I didn't want to stay here... I guess runewrights can do pretty well."

"Sure," she said. "Designing new constructs is actually a huge business. Especially if you get into the really complex ones used in construction or the ones we sneak onto human fishing fleets or something. They're always looking for ways to make constructs more efficient, too." She looked thoughtfully at him. "Is that what you did to Landon? Did you whip up a new construct or something to knock him down like that?"

He nodded. "Basically."

She nodded and looked back down at her plate. Finley's food was already cold, and Arcadia's must have been too, because she seemed ready to stop pretending she was still eating. She held the plate up until magic caught it and floated it over everyone's heads back to the kitchen. "What else did Brys say?"

"Not much, I guess. Just that there were options outside the school."

"Didn't tell you anything more about those options?"

Finley stopped himself from frowning. Where was Arcadia taking this? "Not really. Why?"

She shrugged. "I've spoken to most of the professors. Just to get ideas. He's kind of into the roaming-around idea like I am."

"Odd that he'd take a job here, then."

"I got the impression it's only temporary."

"What ideas did he have?"

"Just ideas," she said. Why did she suddenly seemed cagey?

She was one of his best friends, and he longed to tell her more of what Brys had told him. Had he mentioned the Order to her as well?

"He hasn't been here long," she continued. "I guess he just seemed more current than the other professors."

"Louch is new, too," he pointed out.

"Louch isn't even a professor," she said. "And he doesn't talk about anything other than balancing bank accounts or setting up a household budget." She snorted. "Not exactly useful if I'm going to spend my life on the road."

"Guess not."

"Everyone's gone," she said.

He had sat with his back to most of the room, but now he turned and saw that they were indeed the last two in the room. One of the kitchen staff was standing on the far side of the room, glaring at them.

"Right," he said with a sigh, holding his own plate overhead until the magic caught it up and whisked it away. "Guess I'm off to Whitlock's. See you for breakfast?"

"Yeah," she said, echoing his sigh as she stood. "See you tomorrow."



Finley made his way slowly down the main corridor of the school, taking the rearmost set of stairs to climb to Whitlock's dusty classroom.

The door was half-open. "Professor?" he said, sticking his head into the room.

"Come in, Finley," Whitlock said, looking up from his desk at the front of the room. "Close the door behind you, please."

Finley did so and walked to the front of the room. Whitlock came around to the front of his desk, leaned back on it, and crossed his arms. "Landon will be okay," he began. "He's with the school nurse, and he'll

spend the night under observation. Do you remember exactly what you did?"

Finley nodded.

"On the board, then, please," he instructed, pointing to the chalkboard on the side of the room. The professor almost never used the chalkboard, preferring to sketch runes in the air using magic, but Finley didn't argue. He walked over to the board and quickly drew the construct he'd created in his mind.

"This," the professor said, walking to the board and tapping the last rune, the one with the broken circle. "Where did you learn this?"

Finley shook his head. "I didn't."

"Hmm." Whitlock stared at the rune for a moment. "Which of the alignments have you learned at this point?"

Affinities were something each of witchkind was born with: a gender and an element, perhaps two. They were intrinsic to your makeup, and they colored your magic. *Alignments,* he'd been taught, were something anyone could learn. Few constructs relied on explicitly included alignments, but nearly all benefitted from the caster having an alignment that supported the construct's intended purpose.

"Power and Control," Finley recited. "Forge. Endurance. Reach. Preserve. Create. And... um." There was one more. "Speed."

Whitlock nodded. "If you stay on for a couple more years, you'll learn more. Destroy is one of them." He tapped the rune again. "This is an explicit use of the Destroy alignment. What were you trying to do?"

Finley blushed. "Landon kept shoving me. I just wanted to push him back, make him stop. But he's huge. And he's strong. And he has Earth affinity, so he's impossible to just knock over. I wanted to... I guess, just break his Earth affinity a little, for just a minute."

"Which of the alignments has Professor Bordoy passed you on?" Bordoy ran the Tuesday afternoon Alignments and Their Uses class and was responsible for certifying each student on the alignments they'd mastered.

"Power." That one was mandatory for all second-years. "Control." Mandatory for first-years, the basis of safe magic, she'd said. "I'm almost ready for Forge. Preserve, in third-year. Speed, last year. I can't quite get Endurance."

"It's a difficult alignment for someone with your affinities. Destroy isn't, though. It's intrinsic to Flame. But it's dangerous, and we don't teach it to undergraduates."

"What happened to Landon?" Finley asked quietly.

Whitlock sighed. "Your affinity for both genders gives you an unusually strong push in the Power alignment," he began. "I expect you know that. This transmutation, where you created a facsimile of Sea energy... this isn't even a standard rune, you know that?"

Finley nodded.

"You pushed almost every bit of magic out of Landon's body. Magic is *life* for us. It's what sets us apart from the humans. Just a bit stronger, or Origin help us, if you'd actually had true Sea affinity... you'd have killed him."

Finley's heart started beating faster. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice tight. "I didn't mean to. I—"

"No, I know," Whitlock said. "Landon's a bully, we've all seen it. He carries a chip on his shoulder about not being selected for Thornwaith's." He shrugged. "We all keep an eye on him, try to keep him from doing anything dangerous. Someone was bound to push back at some point. I'm frankly surprised you've all put up with him this long."

"Arcadia broke his nose in second year, and Jamel almost dislocated his shoulder in a fight during third year."

Whitlock snorted. "So he looked for less resistant prey. I doubt he expected anyone to be able to do what you did, though. That's... hmm. Runes like these aren't exactly secret, but few can empower them effectively. This Sea rune, though." He paused, looking at the rune before speaking again. "You made that up."

"Yeah."

"You did it on the spot, too, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Amazing," Whitlock said, shaking his head. "I think this is probably all the proof we need, though. There's little point in having you Tested after this."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard of a Rune Smith?" Whitlock turned and looked carefully at him.

"Um. Yeah," Finley said.

"You have?" The professor's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Vivance, right? The adherent?"

"Ah. Yes, that old tale. I didn't know anyone even... Where did you read that?"

Finley's mind raced to come up with answer, sensing he should keep Professor Brys out of this. "An old book," he finally said. "I'd just been looking for something to read."

"Hmm. And did the story say what a Rune Smith is?"

Finley shook his head.

"Well." Whitlock said. He returned to his desk, again leaning on it and crossing his arms. "Runewrights have the unique ability to sense the flow of magic in constructs, to sort of feel how runes can be assembled in new combinations. Safely, which is something the rest of witchkind can't do. All the trial and error in the world won't usually let ordinary witchkind invent new constructs, which is why runewrights are so valued. But they can't *invent* new runes, Finley. Only a Rune Smith can do that."

This was the same explanation Brys had given him. Hearing it from Whitlock made it seem more... more *real.* More final.

"So I'm a Rune Smith?"

"It would seem so," Whitlock said with another sigh. "Although that actually makes you far more dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Panic tinged Finley's voice.

Whitlock nodded. "Untaught, yes. Things like this," he added, gesturing to the board, a flick of magic erasing the construct Finley had drawn. "You'll begin involving other alignments without even realizing it. A post-graduate course of study is even more important now." He shook his head. "Honestly, I shouldn't have even brought it up. But I suspected, from the runes you drew in your notebook. We haven't had a known Rune Smith in the world since... well, since Vivance, really." His expression grew even more serious. "I have to caution you, Finley. Avoid making up new runes. *Definitely* do not empower them, especially in anger. Come to me first. Any time you want to. Roust me from my bed, if you must. You've no idea the damage you could do, the harm you could cause. Please."

Finley nodded, his stomach suddenly clenching too tightly to permit speech.

"Can I have your word?" Whitlock pressed.

Finley nodded, gulped a breath, and managed a tight, "Yes."

The professor nodded slowly. "Well enough. All right," he said, standing. "Off to your Hall. Speak of this to *nobody.* Dean Shardlow, if you must, but no other. *Absolutely* nobody. You're in... you're in a rather more unique and dangerous position than you may know. You're young. If it's widely known that you have the abilities of a Rune Smith... well. Suffice to say that *many* would seek to use you to their ends. You will go far and do much in this world, Finley Coughlan. Believe me when I tell you that.

"And believe me when I tell you that *many* will seek to control you."

CHAPTER 5

Thanks, but No Thanks

Tuesdays held two half-day classes, beginning with Mr. Strach's physical education class and ending with Professor Bordoy's Magical Alignments workshop. Finley was once again running on automatic all morning, failing miserably at Seize the Ball and earning a few hard stares from Jamel and Clayton, who were both extremely competitive and had chosen Finley based on his usual proficiency at the game. Lunch flashed by unremembered, a blur of some stewed meat and ignored conversations from his friends. Alignments was a near-disaster, Professor Bordoy throwing her hands up in disgust as Finley flunked his Forge exercise. It was as if he'd never even tried to use the alignment, even though he'd been working all year on it. His friends, sensing something was wrong, left him alone during dinner, although he couldn't miss their concerned glances. Only Arcadia seemed to have a notion of what he was thinking, stealing curious glances at him whenever she thought he wouldn't notice.

When everyone else trudged to the library, Finley made an excuse and instead sought out Professor Brys. He found the man in his second-floor classroom, bringing out a new set of books for his second-year General Studies students to tackle the next day.

"Finley!" Brys said cheerfully. "What brings you here at this hour?" His expression grew more serious as he said, "I heard about Mr. Karcz

yesterday. He's fine, so that you know, although I expect he'll be giving you a wide berth from now on. Whitlock was vague on what you'd done to the boy. Come to talk about it?" All of this came out in a rush, but Finley shook his head.

"I was... That is, it's about the offer you made."

"Oh! Well, of course there's no rush, but I'm glad you've made up your mind so quickly. Obviously we'll need to wait until you've graduated, but—"

"Actually, Professor," Finley interrupted, "I wanted to tell you that I don't think I can accept. I'm going to... I'm going to stay here. At Disemstoke's. For post-graduate, at least. Maybe... maybe longer. Longer, I think."

Brys nodded slowly, setting down the book he'd been holding and walking closer to Finley. "Well, of course I'm disappointed, but I understand." He tilted his head in curiosity. "May I ask, does this have something to do with Mr. Karcz? Did you... was it your... your *talent?*" He emphasized the last word, and Finley was clear on what he meant.

"Sort of. Yes. Not entirely, I guess. But a little, maybe."

"I see. Is it... I know I couldn't tell you much. But, is it the danger? I know I implied—"

He stopped when Finley shook his head. "No. No, it's... I don't know. This is all so much, so fast. The... the *talent,*" he said, echoing Brys' emphasis. "Whitlock—that is, it just seems—"

"Professor Whitlock spoke to you of it?" Brys said sharply. "When was this?"

"Last evening, after dinner. He was the one who—"

"Ah," Brys said, not waiting for Finley to finish. "He was the one who assisted Mr. Karcz. You used a... a novel construct, I assume?" Finley nodded. "And did you show it to Whitlock?" Another nod. "Ah. Yes, that explains it." He paused. "Hmm."

"So it just seems—"

"What else did he tell you, may I ask?"

Finley stopped, thinking of what he should say. He shrugged, deciding to just tell Brys everything. "That it's dangerous. That I need to learn to use it. That people will... people will want to use me. Control it. He said it's rare."

"Rare?" Brys chuckled. "Did he really say the word *rare*?"

Finley thought for a moment. "No, I guess not. But he—"

"*Rare* is the biggest understatement you could make about Rune Smiths. It's like saying one of the Adherents was a little powerful. In all of our history, there have been fewer known Rune Smiths than you have fingers on your hand, Vivance being the only other one most people have ever heard of." He sighed, pulled an empty chair out of its neat row, and sat. "Finley, may I tell you a little bit more about what our Order does? I'll caution you that this must remain very secret, or it will quite literally endanger people's lives."

Finley swallowed hard and nodded.

"All right. Have a seat." Brys gestured to one of the other nearby seats, and Finley sat.

"Have you ever seen one of the humans' iron roadways?" he began.

Finley nodded.

"Those were one of our—the Order's, that is—biggest failures. Our biggest regret.

"You've been taught about the Veil. It's part of my class, in fact, something we teach every first-year. It's a delicate magic that was cast centuries ago by one of the early Adherents of the Sixth Axis. He effectively Ended the relationship between humans and witchkind, making humans forget that magic had ever existed and that witchkind had ever wielded that magic. Even after the Fall of the Adherents and the reformation of the Origin, and the return of the full measure of magic to all of us, the Veil persisted. The Veil keeps us safe. It keeps humans from coveting our power, keeps them from relaunching the Hunts that killed so many of us.

"Humans reproduce far more readily, and in greater numbers, than our own kind. Most families of witchkind have but two children, some not even that. And so our population remains stable. Some families may have a third child, and incredibly rarely a fourth, causing our population to grow very, very slowly. But human families often have three or four children. Sometimes half a dozen, and not uncommonly even more. They outnumber us in the world by an enormous margin. Were they to remember us, and again embark on the Hunts, they could quickly overwhelm us, even with our magic.

"The Order of Some was formed shortly after the Veil fell across us all, to ensure that it—and all of us—remain safe.

"We work in two ways. First, whenever a human catches sight of magic—and it happens, no matter how careful everyone is—we modify their memories. It's a delicate task, and it's one area where a Rune Smith could help us. Our memory constructs have been cobbled together over the centuries by runewrights, but we've never been able to develop efficient, dedicated magic to do the job right and more quickly. But the work is crucial to maintaining the Veil.

"Second, we work to ensure that humanity would suffer without us. In the event the Veil does fall, humans would quickly realize that only magic holds their civilization together. Without magic, human construction techniques are flawed—their buildings would collapse, if not for the magic we cast to keep them together. Their ships would sink. In fact, nearly everything humans build or do would fall apart—with the notable exception of those iron roadways.

"You know how iron grounds magic, disspates it. Negates it. Again, we teach that to first-years, although it's a rare child who doesn't come here already fully aware of the damage iron does to magic. Worse, it sickens us just with its proximity, poisoning the magic within us, draining our very life from us. It's why witchkind uses human agents when they need to move goods by the iron roadways, and why none of witchkind would ever ride in those iron carriages.

"The humans' discovery of iron, their creation of the iron horses that pull those carriages, the spread of the iron roadways across the continent—all of that was the Order's failing. We're meant to keep humans from advancing their machines, from discovering things like iron. Now, we fight to keep the iron roadways from spreading: a stalemate. After all, with that knowledge loose in the world, we can do little to hold it back. But we help ensure the iron proceeds no further: we sabotage an experiment here and there, turn land to swamp too soft to support new roadways, anything we can to limit humans' use of iron and machines to what they've already got, and no more.

"Again, this is where a Rune Smith would be invaluable to our cause. Our dream is to create a rune construct that reacts to iron and alerts us when humans attempt to work with it. Constructs to help

identify humans' machines, even the ones not made from iron, so we can work to retard progress that might lead to them being more capable against us, should the Veil fall. Runewright after runewright—already rare talents and difficult to find—have tried and failed, and told us again and again that the True Language simply doesn't contain the words and runes we'd need.

"But a Rune Smith could *create* them."

Brys sighed. "I shouldn't be telling you this much," he admitted. "But this is an unusual case. You're an unusual young man. There's an opportunity to craft stronger protections for all of witchkind, to keep the humans safe from their own mistakes, to ensure we can all continue to live in harmony with each other." He leaned forward, speaking more earnestly. "*We* would teach you, Finley. We have more runewrights than just one professor. We have access to the ancient texts. We have our own private lands, where constructs can be safely tested. There, the powers of a Rune Smith would be little more than theory and imagination. Out there, with us, a Rune Smith would do *real* work. Make a *real* difference."

Finley nodded. "I know. But—"

"Do you know some of what Vivance created? The Rune Smith everyone reads about? That all of witchkind think is a myth?"

Finley shook his head.

"She created most of the runes we now routinely carve into ship's hulls, keeping them safer than ever. They're the runes that discourage bad weather and push the ship toward port when the weather insists on being foul. She created the runes for Speed and Forging, Finley! Runes that embody alignments witchkind had never even considered until she invented them! She created runes for casting light, for closing wounds, and for keeping food from spoiling. So many seemingly simple things, things we take for granted today, *didn't exist* until Vivance created them!"

Brys sighed and leaned back into his chair. "I'm not pushing you, Finley. I just want you to give careful consideration toward working with us. And there's no need to decide now. You can come back to me any time. Even after graduation, if you want. Stay here, do those post-graduate studies if you want. Build some confidence in yourself,

although I frankly think you have every reason to be plenty confident as you are. I'll be here regardless. Will you do that? Will you at least think about it?"

Finley nodded silently.

"Good. I appreciate it, Finley. I do." He stood, and Finley followed suit. "Let's talk again, anytime, whenever you want. I know how confusing... how scary it all seems. All this ability, what you can do. I'll help if I can."

Finley nodded again. "Good night, Professor," he said very softly.

"Good night, Finley."

Finley left the classroom, descended to the main floor, and made his way to his room. His friends would still be in the library, he knew, but just now he wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER 6

A Visit Home

One of the highlights of each of the last four years had been spring break. As the cold weather retreated to the most northern regions, where it was never truly warm, the rest of the continent breathed a sigh of gentle satisfaction, put away their heavy winter garments, and walked out into grassy fields, warm days, and pleasantly cool evenings.

It was the time when Disemstoke's and Duocastella's gave their undergraduate students a week off, and it couldn't have come at a better time for Finley. His mind still whirling with runewrights and Rune Smiths and secret orders and human Hunts, break time felt like a true reprieve this year.

His school uniforms were neatly packed into the drawers underneath his bed, where they'd be magically clean and fresh upon his return. He wore one of his three sets of weekend clothes as he made his way to the front of the Great Hall. There, several of the faculty—including Professor Whitlock, who gave him a smile and a knowing nod—stood by to wish the students well and oversee their travel magic home. Most first- and second-years were collected by family members or older friends, while the third-years used the safest of the travel magics they'd learned to that point: *Grįžti namo,* the Homecoming, which would take them almost instantly to the place their parents had defined for them. Finley remembered learning the construct, and his feeling of

excitement and accomplishment when it had worked for the first time. They'd learned that it was fairly recent magic, something not possible while the Adherents still roamed the continent and hoarded most of the world's magic for themselves. That a fifteen-year-old could wield magic that had formerly been impossible for even the most accomplished adult showed how far witchkind had come in the last two hundred years.

As a fifth-year, though, Finley had access to—and permission to use—a much wider array of travel magics. His favorite was *skrydis,* the Flight, but it required more magic than he was usually able to summon, thanks to its dependency on Sky magic. So instead, he'd chosen today to use *eidamas toliau,* a spell requiring strong Earth affinity that would magnify his steps, even at a run, enabling him to cover dozens of leagues in each single step. This too was newer magic for witchkind, rediscovered in ancient books and requiring more magic than any of witchkind could have Gathered in a single day back when magic was less plentiful. In class, they'd learned some of the similar magics that those centuries-old witchkind had used instead, and all of them had given Finley headaches and an upset stomach.

Pretending he hadn't seen Professor Whitlock, Finley followed the crowd out of the Great Hall and onto the school's carefully manicured front lawn. Nodding to a watchful Professor Fulleron, Finley held the travel construct in his mind and *stepped.* The scenery whizzed by, the magic carrying him across vast distances with every step. An entire day's journey was the work of a few such steps, the construct's only requirement being that he continue to move himself forward. The danger of this construct, especially heading toward a seaside village, was overshooting his mark and landing in the ocean—something the magic would not compensate for, meaning he'd likely drown. But he'd used this same spell to return to Disemstoke's last year: He knew exactly how many steps were required and how long each stride would need to be to carry him to the edge of the little village his family lived in.

He got it exactly right, taking one last step and then stopping. The magic dispelled, and the crisp smell of the sea washed over him. It was a tiny village indeed, situated on the edge of a shallow harbor just west of Sowsee. From where he stood, he could see the main road leading into

the village, its surface still rutted and broken from the winter thaw, all the way to the docks and piers that sat on the shore.

Fishing villages ran with the tides and the seasons, caring little for the day of the week. As such, the village was bustling even on this weekend morning, with the first of the day's ships—which had departed hours before in the dead of night—just returning to offload their catch. Crowds of humans, with more than a few of witchkind scattered amongst them, waited for the first ships to throw their lines to shore, ready to haul the catch to the sorting houses that lined the shore street.

His parents had taught him the drill from almost the time he could walk: witchkind of Flame affinity would have already cooled the sorting houses, an effect the humans attributed to the seawater they pumped through pipes that crisscrossed the low ceilings. A couple of Earth-affinity witchkind would monitor the spells on those bronze pipes, keeping the corrosive seawater from leaking out and making a mess of everything. Still other Earth-affinity witchkind, including his parents, would settle a gentle stasis magic across the sorting floor, further extending the amount of time everyone could work before the catch began to go bad.

All of this happened without the humans having a clue: they focused on hauling the catch in wheeled wooden carts, sorting it on the long wooden tables, and packaging it in smaller wooden crates at the back of the big, open space. Those crates carried more preservation runes, disguised as part of the fishmonger's stamp that was burned into every crate, helping the fish stay fresh while horse-drawn carriages hauled the fish to the inland towns and villages. Some of it would end up on one of the iron roadways, destined for further-flung towns and cities hungry for the exotic species caught by the southern fishing fleets; the crates' preservation magic would fail quickly amidst all that iron, but would be supplemented by blocks of ice carried down from the northern climes and stored in deep, cold caves—which were themselves enhanced by Flame-affinity witchkind.

His conversation with Professor Brys made Finley see all of it in a new light. The extremes to which witchkind went to preserve their anonymity, while supporting the trade that both humans and

witchkind relied on, was almost laughable. But at least the magic spent in these endeavors was easily Gathered as it was needed. Two hundred years prior, witchkind had struggled to Gather sufficient magic every night, able to spend only what was brought into their own bodies. Most lived in relative poverty, with little magic left over for their own affairs outside of their trades. Today, magic was plentiful, replenishing itself constantly from the life force of every being in the world and blanketing the continent like a thick energetic blanket.

Knowing his parents would be finished as soon as the actual sorting started, Finley made his way to the family home. It sat just two blocks back from the shore, down a twisting street lined with bustling markets, shops just now opening, and a tavern or two that were just clearing the remains of the breakfasts they'd fed to the carriage drivers who'd soon be hauling the morning catch inland.

Finley's family's space—hidden from humans, as were all spaces of witchkind aside from Evermore and the Great Schools—was contained within a modest human building that featured a tailor's shop on the ground level and the tailor's small apartment on the floor above. This was sandwiched between two similar shop-houses, a bookseller on the left and a dry goods store on the right. The buildings supported each other: having settled slightly over the many years since their construction, they seemed to lean on one another for companionship and support, happily hunkered down where they'd been for centuries already, prepared to weather a few centuries more.

As Finley stepped toward them, his eyes were drawn to the tiny, almost imperceptible runes carved into the wood lintels, eaves, and window frames of the building. All were New Runic, the older Middle Runic scratchings long since sanded down and replaced with more powerful, efficient constructs. It was these runes that kept the buildings upright, and that protected them from the fierce storms that often blew up in the Fall. Deep in the buildings' root cellars, he knew he'd find runes carved into the heavy blocks of granite that formed the buildings' foundations. He'd learned as much in Construction and Reinforcement class last year, and even knew how to translate Old and Middle Runic carvings into New Runic, should building-work have become his trade.

He walked smartly up to the tailor's window, an expensive plate-glass opening positioned to the left of the sturdy wooden door. The tailor wouldn't open for an hour or so yet, but the window—finely engraved with the proprietor's name and a rendering of a needle and spool of thread—was the key to Finley's family home. A New Runic entry-rune was carved into the lower left corner of the window frame, and Finley stroked it gently, feeding it just a bit of magic. With a *whoosh,* he found himself in his family's entry foyer.

The difference could not have been more stark.

Where the human buildings were made in a low, sturdy style, such that the towering Landon would have had to duck to enter the tailor's shop, witchkind's spaces were far grander. The ceiling in the entry foyer was easily three times Landon's height, readily accommodating the elaborate crystal-and-brass chandelier that shone with a thousand sparkling, magical lights. Rather than plain granite or slate, the floor here was a darkly feathered marble, conjured from far below the earth's surface, cut to exacting measurements, and polished to a high sheen that never dulled. Carved wooden chairs, delicate in style but all but indestructible in reality, lined the walls, offering visitors a place to sit while the family responded to their entry. A small table, its top made from a darker marble than the floor, supported a glass sphere imbued with magic that would enable instant communication with anyone else in the home.

Until he'd gone to Disemstoke's, Finley had never noticed how grand and fine his parents' home was. It featured an immense main bedroom that was theirs, complete with a private bathing room and toilet, with running water brought in through magical pipes from one of the many secret, central wells in town. Two small bedrooms—his, and, once, his sister's—shared a second bathing room and toilet. A fourth bedroom, again with a private bathing room and toilet, accommodated guests. A large kitchen with an attached dining room could serve ten during feasts or festival meals, the kitchen running almost autonomously through Earth and Flame magic. A small larder—which didn't need to be big, since it continually resupplied itself—hung off the kitchen, next to a washing-closet that would cleanse and renew whatever clothing or dishes were left in it for an hour or more. There were more rooms: a living room where the family could sit around a

roaring fire, a sitting room where guests could be received and entertained, a small library that satisfied his mother's devotion to books, and a small workshop where his father made small carvings to amuse himself.

Disemstoke's, on the other hand, felt more like a human building writ large: plain gray stone had been used for the walls, ceilings, and floors, and the ceilings were buttressed by massive stone arches. Threadbare carpets in the residential rooms took the chill out of the air, but simple, sturdy wooden furniture was the rule rather than the exception. When he'd first arrived at the school, Finley had felt like he was stepping back a thousand years in time. The school was like a living museum, completely out of touch with modern aesthetics, and completely uncaring about it.

Finley walked back to the kitchen, where he knew a pot of warm, spicy *prieskoniu* would be brewing, awaiting his parents' return. They had anticipated him: the smaller kitchen table where they took most of their meals was already set with a cup and saucer, a bowl of mild sweetener, and the salty, oily grains of *druska* that Finley and his mother preferred in their morning beverage.

Finley had just finished fixing his *prieskoniu* when a chime sounded, announcing his parents' return from the wharf.

"Finley!" his mother cried happily when she saw him, and he stood so that she could rush over and embrace him. "You've grown again!" He realized it was true: he'd been home last for Winterfest perhaps three months before, and the top of his head had barely cleared hers. Now he was easily three inches taller, and might even be just a shade taller than his father.

"My boy," Father said, his rich baritone sounding pleased. "Good to see you, son."

They busied themselves fixing their own beverages, telling him a bit about how the day's catch had gone—"those sea-claws are going to fall in price, you mark my word, as many as they're bringing in now. Might have to have a Sea Warden scatter them a bit, or the humans will overfish them, like as not"—and asking how Finley's brief journey had been. Mother retrieved a plate from the oven, and Finley was delighted to discover it contained thick slices of the simple brown bread he loved so

much for breakfast—and could never get at Disemstoke's, the staff there preferring the "more refined" white bread that was preferred by children whose families came from the larger towns and cities.

"So," Mother said as she settled into her seat. The three of them started slathering rich honey butter on the slices of bread. "How is school wrapping up for you?"

"Good," Finley said around a mouthful of delicious bread. He swallowed and wiped a bit of melted butter off his lips. "Agriculture is going well. Aquatic I just don't get, but I'll pass the final. Legends and myths is... legends and myths," he said with a shrug and a smile. "I think they're just keeping us busy. Mr. Louch has home economics this year, and it's interesting enough."

"Wish they'd put you through basic business accounting," Father said, tearing a slice of bread in half and shoving a piece into his mouth.

"It's not like he wouldn't have to apprentice anyway, so what's the point?" Mother argued.

"Alignments is going okay. I want to master Forge before we let out, but I'm having trouble getting the magic to knit properly." It occurred to him as he said it that the magic didn't seem to *flow* properly, and he wondered if his runewright talent might let him come up with a more effective construct. "Oh," he said. "There's a... something happened. Nothing bad!" he amended quickly, seeing concern in both his parents' faces. "Something good, in fact. Maybe. I learned more about the post-graduate position."

"Oh?" Mother asked.

"Is it the tuition?" Father asked, getting right to the point.

Finley knew his parents weren't wealthy; nobody with wealth would choose to live in a small fishing village that didn't even have a recognized name. Witchkind's economy had collapsed two hundred years prior, when the practice of charging coins with magical power had grown pointless when magic itself had become almost infinitely available. Today, witchkind had moved to a shared economy with the humans, using the same copper, silver, and gold coins they did. Finley knew a two-year post-graduate position at Disemstoke's was expensive, likely far more than his parents could afford, even with a loan.

"It's nothing," he said, finishing his slice of bread and looking long-

ingly at the slices still on the plate. "It'll be free. And I think I've decided to accept."

"Free? You're certain? I know you said you thought, but..." his mother said, following his gaze and pushing the plate toward him.

Finley shrugged. "It's Dean Shardlow and Professor Whitlock. They think... well, I guess at this point they *know.* That is, the position would actually become a tenured one, and I'd—"

"Did you say *tenured?*" Father interrupted, his voice sharp. "As in a professorship? At *Dismestoke's?* At your age?"

"Finley, what's going on, dear?" Mother asked.

Finley took a deep breath, and let it out. "I told you. I'm a runewright," he said.

The air itself seemed to gather a magical charge as his parents stared at him.

"I know it's amazing," Mother said carefully. "But I'm worried I don't know the full of it."

"Yes, you do, Erin," Father said, his voice level. This was how he spoke when he was trying to contain himself, Finley knew. "A *runewright,* Finley." He shook his head, and his mouth split into a wide grin. "Origin abounds, that's amazing, son."

"But how can you be a *professor?*" Mother asked. "At your age? You're only just graduating now!"

"Erin, they won't have him teaching right out of the gate. Post-graduate is two years. And even then, he'll probably not teach until he wants to. Whitlock—that's your lore professor?" Finley nodded. "Isn't he the one that wrote that great heavy textbook?" Nod. "Well there you go, Erin. Until he's Whitlock's age, I doubt they'll have him teaching."

"What would I do, then?" Finley asked.

"Duocastella's always has a runewright or two on the faculty when I was there. 'Half the 'wrights in the world,' they used to tell us. They *worked.* The school gets a big chunk of its funding from customizing rune constructs for the bigger concerns, especially in Evermore. Probably drives Disemstoke's dean mad with envy. Of course, now they'll have one of their own, eh?"

Finley nodded and smiled around his last bite of bread. "There was another option, too," he said quietly.

"Oh?" Mother said, arching an eyebrow. "What's that?"

Finley shook his head. "It wasn't as... I guess, not as straightforward as just staying at Disemstoke's. But the same thing. Making—that is, customizing," he amended, seizing on Father's words, "rune constructs, but for private concerns."

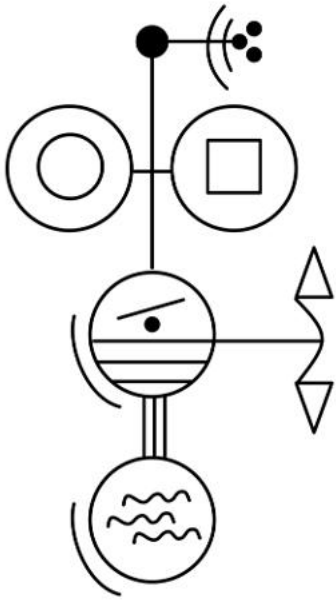
Father tilted his head a bit, thinking. "I know some of the Evermore guilds keep a runewright on staff when they can get one. Might pay better, but the Great Schools contribute an awful lot of good to the general populace. At least Duocastella's does. You know that new construct we started using in the sorting houses, oh, six or seven years back? You know, the one that's got just the one input, but the two Earth affinity branches?"

Finley nodded. They'd studied that one in Watsham's class.

"That was from Duocastella's runewright. Ayano Rautjärvi is her name. Revolutionized preservation magic. Heck, I think that was the first dual-branch construct I ever empowered."

"We see more of it now, though," Mother pointed out.

"Oh!" Finley exclaimed. "That reminds me!" In his mind, he held the rune-sketching construct that Whitlock had taught them, then drew his seawall spell in the air:



His parents studied it carefully for several long moments.

"That's our sea wall construct for the storms, isn't it?" Mother asked. She'd always had a better eye for the details in a construct. "But this, in the middle... and this," she said, carefully pointing at the runes. "Is that... What is that?"

"The middle one will balance you and Father, and ground out the excess so you don't overpower the construct," Finley explained. "That last one draws off the Sea affinity, since you have so many people feeding you power tinged with that. The middle one also amplifies, but this forces the Sea affinity out before it empowers the effect. It should make it easier and faster for you to put up a sea wall."

"This is fascinating, Finley. This is what I mean about the schools helping ordinary witchkind, not just the big concerns that can pay for a runewright." Father paused, still looking at the construct hanging in midair. "Where did you get this Sea rune?"

"It's not the standard one," Mother agreed.

"Oh... I, ah, you know, that book of Whitlock's. Professor Whitlock's, I mean. He said this one is a more direct translation from the

Middle Runic than we use today, but it's broader, so it'll pull out more of the Sea affinity that would weaken the wall." His mind raced as he offered the explanation, not yet ready to discuss the Rune Smith topic with his parents. He didn't even know how *he* felt about it, let alone how they'd take it. He half-imagined Father pulling him out of Disemstoke's completely and *insisting* Duocastella's take him immediately.

"Well," Father said, nodding as Finley let the glowing rune fade away. "I'll have you sketch that out before you go, but I think we can try that this summer before the storms come, don't you, Erin?"

"Absolutely," Mother said, beaming with pride. "Won't everyone else in the village be surprised?"

"And I guess this means we don't have to sit here and quiz you about your apprenticeship," Father pointed out.

"Yeah," Finley said weakly. He'd forgotten about that, but this *was* the time of year when apprenticeships were contracted. He'd intended to look into the shipwright's shop, which had just a single elderly man of witchkind secretly forging runes into the ship's keels and timbers. That seemed to be off the table, now.

Mother, always more sensitive to her son's moods, looked more closely at him, and her smiled dimmed with concern. "Finley, is this what you want? This runewright thing, the post-graduate position, the tenure, all of that?"

An immense tension Finley hadn't even known he was feeling flooded out of him. "I don't know," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "It's all... it's all so fast. I thought maybe the shipwright's, you know, or I'm good at Reach, I could do field magic, or—"

"Finley, son, it's okay. It's fine." Father took one of Finley's hands and held it in a firm grip. "You can join us, if nothing else. You've a strong Earth affinity, along with Flame. You could probably cool those sorting houses better than any five of us, especially if you can tweak the runes to your own style. But you don't need to decide now."

"But the apprenticeships—"

"I know, I know," Father said easily, nodding. "I know now's when everyone starts signing their contracts for after graduation. But it's fine. You don't need to. Your mother and I are doing well enough, and even

if you decide not to accept Shardlow's offer, you've a place here. You don't need to rush this."

Finley's face felt slightly moist, and he rubbed his eyes. "Thanks," he said softly.

"Finley, I know this feels like a lot," Mother said, taking his other hand. "But we're here to help. We want you to be happy. Even with this new thing, this runewright business, you still deserve to be happy. Okay?"

Finley nodded.

"Now look, you've got a week away from school. We've signed up for half-shifts on the wharf all week, so we've plenty of time. Let's just not talk about it, and spend some time relaxing together. We'd thought to take a picnic tomorrow. How's that sound?"

Finley sniffed, the relief at his parents' reaction overwhelming him. "That sounds great," he said with the first genuine smile he'd offered anyone in over a week.

CHAPTER 7

Disaster

Finley woke up late the following Sunday, the day he was due back at school.

"It takes less than half an hour to get there, son," his father said, chuckling at Finley's sudden rush to get going. "You're not even taking anything with you. Have some breakfast before you go."

Finley managed to wolf down a small breakfast, his parents trying to hide their mirth at his urgency.

"You don't have to be there until after noon, Finley," his mother reminded him.

"But Arcadia and everyone else will be back early," he said. "She always uses *akivaizdu*; it's instantaneous."

"You know that one as well, don't you?" Finley's mother hadn't gone to one of the Great Schools, and she usually relied on her husband for travel magics. But Duocastella's only taught a fraction of the constructs Disemstoke's did; Finley had spent Monday mornings for his entire third year in a dedicated Travel Magics class.

"I do, but it makes me nauseous," he said. "It's one of the old ones."

It had been exactly the kind of relaxing week his parents had promised him: they'd gone on strolls, visited friends and neighbors, and gone on two picnics. They'd discussed redecorating his room now that

he wouldn't be using it, although Mother had promised to move his dearest possessions—books, mostly—into the her little library.

They didn't discuss Sessi's old room. They never did.

"What's the fastest one you know?" his father quizzed him. "I know you've been using *eidamas toliau,* which is fast enough for me, but what are your other options?"

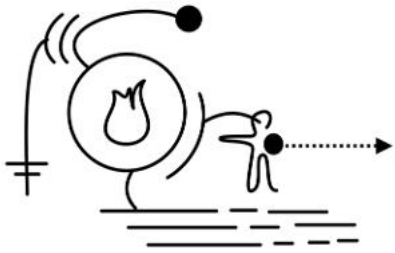
Finley took his plate and mug to the washing-closet as he thought. "Most of the Earth-affinity ones are slow. *Tunelis* isn't bad, but you end up filthy. And we're not supposed to use it on the grounds. On the Flame side, I can do *plūduriuojanti kibirkštis.* It's not much faster, though, but it uses... hmm." He stopped for a moment, the washing-closet door hanging open.

"Finley?" Mother asked after a long silence.

"Thinking," he said distractedly.

"Is this the runewright thing?" she whispered to her husband. He merely shrugged and kept watching Finley.

"This would work," Finley said at last, closing the closet and turning to them. He sketched a construct in the air:



"That's... complicated," his mother said after he'd finished.

"But it'll work," Finley said confidently.

"This bit," his father said, getting up and walking over to stand in front of the glowing sketch. He waved a finger over the right side. "What's this?"

"The whole thing is using Flame's connection to Sky to basically duplicate flight magic. But too much Flame magic will overpower it.

This filters off the excess. I have to explicitly control that, which is what that does. It forces the Control alignment."

"This is beyond me, son," his father said ruefully. "I was never the best at rune lore, if I'm being honest. But if you think it'll work, why not?"

"Are you sure, Jamison?" Mother asked. "I mean, I get that he's a runewright and all, but an untested—"

"He'll be fine, Erin," Father said, his voice calm. "That's the point of the runewright talent. His constructs *will* work. You know what? Let's head outside and give it a go. Right now."

His mother bolted out of her chair. "I'm coming with you," she said. "And you're to 'cast us the moment you arrive at the school, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mother," Finley said with a smile. "I will."

As Father led them out of the kitchen and into the entryway, he asked, "What do you call this one? Does it have a name?"

"All constructs have names," Finley said absently, his mind still running through the power flows. "This one is called *įkaitęs oras veža mane namo.*"

Father blinked, clearly marveling that his son hadn't even stumbled over the complex syllables of the True Language. They all gathered in the foyer, and Father touched the exit-rune to take them back to the street.



The construct was a success, as Finley had felt it would be, taking him to the school in an eye blink and a rush of warm air. He hurriedly 'cast his parents to assure them he'd arrived safely and then walked quickly into the school. Students were milling about everyplace, their arrivals monitored closely by staff and faculty members posted just outside the Great Hall's entrance. It was still breakfast time here, so Finley ducked into the dining hall to see if any of his friends were there. Their usual spot was empty, and so he made his way quickly to the private library in their Hall. Only a few students were in there, though, and none of them were his friends.

Odd, he thought. They'd always met in either the dining room or the library whenever they'd returned from breaks. Perhaps everyone was running late today? He quickly empowered a simple locator construct and discovered that Arcadia and Lydia were back and sitting in one of the smaller gardens on the side of the school.

Forbidden from using travel magic except to leave for, or return from, approved breaks, Finley was forced to walk half the length of the main building until he came to one of the stout wooden doors that led into the gardens and athletic fields. The girls were in one of the furthest gardens, a small copse of citrus trees surrounding a little stone fountain. He found them perched on the edge of the fountain. Lydia was leaning against Arcadia, her expression numb. Tears ran down Arcadia's face, and she held Lydia tightly, running her pale fingers through the other girl's striking white hair.

"Arcadia... Lydia," Finley said, slowing his gait and lowering his voice as he approached. "What's the matter?"

Arcadia sniffed and looked at him. "It's her family, Finley. They were killed."

"Kill—what? How? What happened?" He closed the remaining distance between them and knelt down on the ground in front of them, ignoring the moisture slowly wicking into his trouser knees from the damp earth.

"They were home," Lydia said quietly, her voice flat and mechanical. "My brother is... was two years older than me. He'd come back for break, to see me. They live on the edge of the village, you know. Always have; our family has always lived there. It's in an exporter's warehouse, but it's beautiful. So beautiful. Mother always loved flowers, and she—" The girl's voice tightened, and she took a deep breath before continuing. "The iron roadway runs right behind it. That's why the exporter has that building, you see; it's closer to the iron carriages. It never bothered us, growing up. It was far enough away, a whole street and a set of loading platforms away. Never bothered us." Her voice trailed off, and she seemed to lose herself in thought.

"Come back to us, lovely," Arcadia said softly, once again running her fingers gently through Lydia's hair.

Lydia gave a short hiccup and then continued, her voice somehow

flatter than before. "The iron horse, the one that drags all the carriages behind it. It came off the roadway. Those thick iron rails? It just came off. It wasn't meant to stop, they said. There are different rails for the ones that stop in our village. This one was just passing through. Moving so fast." A crack in her voice at the end betrayed her emotion. Tears started running unimpeded down her face. "It crashed through the loading platforms. Across the street. Into the exporter's building. All the way through it. The whole building fell." She sniffed. "They didn't—"

"Shush, enough," Arcadia said. She looked up at Finley. "It happened the day she got home," she said, her own voice soft, raw, and full of heartache. "She's been with friends because she didn't want to come back here and be alone."

"Lydia, I'm so sorry," Finley said, taking one of her hands in his. "If I'd known, I'm—I'm so sorry."

Lydia nodded, but said nothing, her gaze still directed inward.

"Do you have—is there anyone I can—" He stopped as Lydia shook her head slightly.

"I wanted to be here," she said softly, her voice finally containing some feeling. "I wanted to be with all of you." She sniffed and sat up, giving Arcadia a small smile of thanks. "I've cried so much, I think I'm almost cried out. But I want to finish. The dean knows. I've—there's money. From insurance. Father worked on the buildings, keeping them strong. The council paid him." She sniffed, and wiped her sleeve across her face to dry her eyes. "I was going to apprentice with a councilwoman, you know. I know my grades are nowhere near yours, but she said it was enough. There's money," she repeated. "Enough for the contract. She said she'd sponsor me to the Great Library in Evermore when I was done." She shook her head. "It all seems so pointless now. Even this," she added, making a vague gesture that encompassed the entire school. "But if I quit, I'll have wasted everything." She sighed. "I've a year to apprentice, at least. The dean said I don't need to decide right this instant." She sighed again. "I think I'm hungry," she said carefully.

"Let's take you inside, then," Arcadia said, her voice strong again.

The three of them stood, and Finley fell in behind them as they made their way back into the building.

As they exited the little grove, they found Professor Brys standing there.

"Lydia," he said. "Dean Shardlow asked me to check in on you. I'm so sorry, my love. I'm glad you're with your friends, though. Do let me know how I can help."

Lydia simply nodded, and the three of them continued on their way. Or rather, the girls did: Brys grabbed Finley's arm and pulled him aside.

"This is what I was talking about," he said urgently. "This kind of needless pain. This is what we'd stand against, Finley. We'd end the iron roadways. End humans' careless negligence with these forces they can't control."

"You said the iron roadways were the Order's fault," Finley hissed back.

"Not our fault, Finley. Our oversight. Our mistake. We've plans to correct it, but we need *you*, Finley. We need your special talent. *Please."*

Finley pulled away. "I need to help my friends," he said curtly and hurried to catch up with the girls.



"I've gotten her to bed. I'm hoping she can sleep a bit. I don't think she's slept much since... well. Since."

They'd taken Lydia to the dining room and managed to get a bit of food into her, along with a hot, calming mug of *taikosuoga.* Arcadia had taken her to her room and tucked her into bed, and now she and Finley were sitting in one of the smaller, out-of-the-way niches in the Hall's library.

"Is it the humans' fault?" Finley asked quietly. He'd gotten them both mugs of plain tea from the kettle that was always simmering in the library, and they both took a quiet sip.

"The iron roadways are, of course," Arcadia said.

"But they have accidents all the time. The iron horses coming off and crashing. I thought they were supposed to move slowly through villages, just in case."

She shrugged and took another sip. "They're in a hurry. They don't follow the rules. So yeah, I'd say it's their fault."

"But it's not like we can do anything about it now."

She shrugged again. "Can't we? We never should have allowed them to plant all that iron across the continent, all those years ago. They haven't been expanding the lines as much, but they still have to maintain the old ones. You know those rails have to be replaced every so often? They wear out." She shook her head. "But nobody stops them. Maybe it's our fault, too, for not stopping them."

"How could we?" he objected. "They outnumber us a hundred to one. Maybe more. And magic won't work around the iron."

"We still have hands. We have tools. You've Earth affinity. You're telling me you couldn't create a sinkhole beneath an iron roadway? That the iron would stop you?"

He thought about it. "I don't know, actually."

"I'm going to stop them," she said quietly. "Even before... before Lydia's family. It's what I'm going to do. It's why I didn't take Shardlow's offer."

Finley sat up slightly straighter. Was this... had she spoken to Brys? Arcadia wasn't a runewright, Finley was sure of it, let alone a Rune Smith. Did she have some other talent? Something Brys was watching out for?

"We can't just attack the humans," Finley pointed out, sipping carefully from his mug and keeping an even more careful eye on Arcadia's expression.

"No? Perhaps not. Maybe we should move witchkind away from the iron roadways. Let the humans do whatever they want. We can keep to ourselves. Is that what you mean?"

"I—no, that's not it. They can't live without us. Our magic cools the sorting houses on the wharfs, it holds the ships together, it holds the buildings together, it—"

"Yes, but *they* don't know that," she pointed out. "And we could do that without living next to their monstrosities. We could just move. Move everyone."

"Out of their homes?"

"Fat lot of good their homes do them when an iron horse comes

charging through," she said bitterly. She was eyeing him just as carefully now.

Finley sat back in his chair, thinking. She wasn't wrong.

"You know, my parents know all of the fisherwitches in our village."

"So?" Her expression was curious, but her voice was flat.

"Old Mr. Goebel was one. He lived a few doors down from us, and he went out on the ships every day. He used to tell me all the stories. Tall tales," he said with a chuckle, "but he was nice."

"I thought we just reinforced the ships, renewed their runes?"

He shook his head. "Mr. Goebel had Sea affinity. He'd help steer the weather. Call to the fish. If a line snapped, he'd weave it back together long enough to get them home."

"Why am I thinking this story doesn't end well?"

"It doesn't. He died. Seven, maybe eight years ago. I was still really little. At the time, they told me he'd gotten tangled in the lines and fallen over. But later, my father—Mr. Goebel *never* got tangled in the lines, he said. He said the ship had pitched hard, and he'd gone over. But he had Sea affinity, right? He should have been fine. That's what I told Father.

"But Father said no. The ship had been testing a new technique, dragging chains across the sea bed in the open areas, away from the reefs. The chains stirred up the bottom feeders—the flat fish everyone likes so much. They string a net above the chains, and it catches them all.

"But the chains are made of iron.

"Father says the chains drained Mr. Goebel's power enough that he couldn't save himself. Nobody even noticed he was gone until they got back to the docks. An old man who'd been with them, on their ship, his whole life. He kept their weather fair, kept their ships sound, and they didn't even notice. But they killed him with their iron chains."

He shook his head. "The chains destroyed the sea bed. The Sea Wardens managed to convince the human Fisher's Guild to ban them. So it was all for nothing. All because they do a thing, and they just don't care. The consequences don't matter."

"They don't live as long as us, you know," Arcadia said softly, her

eyes moist as she looked at him. "I don't think they think the future is as big of a deal."

"It's not just the humans," a voice whispered next to them.

They both jumped, looking up to see little Ramiro, who'd crept almost silently up to the nook they were occupying.

"Ramiro," Arcadia said gently. She'd always been a little protective of the smaller boy. "What do you mean, 'it's not just the humans'?"

"Witchkind abuse iron too," he said, sinking nervously into the nook's third chair.

Finley cocked his head in curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"You both know how weak I am at magic," Ramiro said.

"You're just not as—" Arcadia started, but the smaller boy stopped her with with an uncharacteristically fierce shake of his head.

"I know I am," he said, his normally tissue-like voice gaining some strength. "I wasn't always. I was an only child."

Finley's eyes widened. "You mean you were—"

"Dual-gendered. Yes."

The little hairs on Finley's neck began to stand on end.

"But my family—they're a very old clan. And they have some... strong ideas about magic. Our clan head... it's always a woman. Great-Grandmother, to me; I'm in the direct line. But my mother disappointed her by having only one child. And men... men aren't supposed to be powerful in our clan."

"But you were," Arcadia said, her voice growing cold.

Ramiro nodded. "But only because of being dual-gendered. I didn't have any other affinities, even." He sighed. "The tradition is to tattoo male babies. The tattoo is Old Runic, and it bleeds off power."

Arcadia and Finley stared at him in growing horror. "That's... barbaric," Arcadia said.

Ramiro nodded.

"They did that to you?" Finley said, aghast.

"No," Ramiro said, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling his collar down. "Not me."

The thin boy's chest was a mass of old scars, pale white against his dark-brown skin. As Finley stared, his brain began tracing the scars,

assembling them into a... "That's a construct," he said, almost without thinking.

"Origin protect," Arcadia whispered, her eyes now tracking the scars. "This is... this is a *throttling* construct."

"Those are forbidden," Finley gasped.

"They wanted to make sure it worked," Ramiro said, the misery in his voice surfacing for a painful moment. "I was twelve. It was obvious Mama wasn't going to have a baby in time, and so I'd get both gender affinities. Great-Grandmother wouldn't stand for it." He began buttoning his shirt back up, hiding the mass of intricately branded scars. "They hired a human to do it," he continued, his eyes beginning to brim with tears. "They had the rune construct made from thin strands of iron, all connected to a long rod. They heated it up in a fire, right in front of me. It was glowing, glowing yellow-hot."

His eyes took on a glazed, faraway stare. "Mama was crying and pumping Sea magic into me. It made me cold, numb. But when they pressed the iron into my chest..." He stopped, unable to continue for several long moments.

Arcadia now had tears running freely down her cheeks, and Finley's throat was so tight he knew he wouldn't be able to speak.

Finally, Ramiro took a deep breath, and his eyes focused. "The explosion inside of me almost made the pain easy to ignore," he said. "I passed out and woke up a week later. I was Tested about a month after that, and the Tester Chose me for this school. But she said it would be a struggle. My magic was taken. Twisted, she said. They made sure she never saw the scars, but I always felt she knew something was wrong."

"Ramiro, that's horrible," Arcadia said, wiping her eyes.

"I know. I overheard you two talking. Witchkind abuses iron, too. They make humans do it for them, but they're just as guilty. If you're going to stop the humans from using iron, stop our people, too."

"We will," Arcadia said, her voice firm in its promise.

"We will," Finley said somewhat more loudly, his voice resolving into determination. "I'll see you both at dinner. I have some things... I have someone to talk to," he finished in a rush. He stood and walked out of the library, a new purpose in his stride.

Finley found Professor Brys in his classroom, preparing for the next morning's lesson.

"Finley," the professor said, his voice surprised.

"I accept," Finley blurted out, then lowered his voice. "I accept. You're right, I see that. It's dangerous, but... but I want to do it."

Brys laid down the pile of books he'd been carrying and walked slowly to Finley, holding his gaze the entire time. When he got near, he put a hand on each of Finley's shoulders.

"This is a significant commitment, even at this stage," he said quietly. "You will need to graduate, of course. That goes without saying, perhaps, but it's only a few weeks away now. If you don't... we'll have to wipe your memory of me. Of everything I've told you. You'll also need to pass some... some *tests* of ours. Again, if you fail them, we'll remove your memories of us." He paused. "I won't be vague here, Finley. Tampering with the memories of witchkind isn't as easy as amending a human's memories. It could affect your abilities. Could damage your talent. Could damage your *magic.* It could make other options, even make your *life,* difficult. Or impossible.

"This is very much a one-way street. If you proceed, you will need to begin as if you mean to succeed."

Finley swallowed heavily and then nodded. "I understand. I accept," he repeated.

"Very well," Brys said with a tight, satisfied smile. "I will be in touch before the week is out, and we will begin."

Finley nodded as Brys released him.

"Accept what?" a familiar voice said as Finley walked out into the corridor.

Finley turned and saw Landon standing there. Panic gripped Finley's guts as he realized he hadn't closed the classroom door. Landon must have heard... might have heard *everything.*

"None of your business," Finley said, trying to sound disinterested and curt.

"Brys doesn't even teach fifth-years," Landon pointed out, keeping pace beside Finley as the smaller boy walked quickly down the corridor

toward the staircase. "So what're you accepting? Is this about your apprenticeship? Everyone knows Brys has contacts in Evermore. Is that it?"

"It's none of your *business,"* Finley spat, stopping and turning toward Landon so fiercely that the bigger boy took an involuntary step backward. "And why would you care, anyway? All you've ever wanted with me is to bully me. To insult me and my friends. To push us around." Finley felt heat rising on the back of his neck, and he took a menacing step toward Landon. The other boy retreated again, his back bumping against the stone wall of the corridor. "So why *now?* Why are you following me around? Why are you eavesdropping? Why do you even *care?*"

Landon flushed, his jet-black skin flushing to complement his fiery red hair. "You and your friends. Like you've ever understood," he said enigmatically. He stepped toward Finley, who backed up a step in response, but then whirled and all but ran down the hallway, taking the stairs down two at a time and disappearing into the throng of students still returning from break.

CHAPTER 8

Initiation

Finley jogged back into the main building of the school, still sweating lightly from Mr. Strach's physical education class. The teacher had decided to have them play Run the Rings, a difficult challenge that involved using magic to direct a small golden ball through a series of every-smaller rings suspended in the air. The rings were spread across the entire athletic field, requiring each student to run to keep pace with the ball lest they lose track of it. It was fun, a great magical exercise, and pretty exhausting. This afternoon's Alignments class would be even harder, given all the energy he'd spent, but at least Strach had released them a bit early so they could change in time for lunch.

As Finley slowed to a trot and entered the building, he felt a cool wash of magic cleaning the sweat from his skin and drying his phys ed uniform. The spell was maintained continuously, often renewed by the dean himself, and was especially appreciated when Strach's class ran long and they had to head straight to the dining hall for lunch.

"Mr. Coughlan!"

Finley looked up and saw Professor Brys on the opposite side of the main corridor. He'd clearly been waiting, and he waved Finley over.

"Tonight, immediately after dinner, make an excuse and return to your room. Keep this on your person until then," Brys said, pressing a wooden disc into Finley's hand. Finley pocketed the disc without

looking at it. "In your room, lay that on the floor, stand over it, and feed a trickle of power into it."

"What should I wear?" Finley asked.

"Your uniform is fine. It won't matter."

"Do I need to—"

"There's no preparation. Just do as I've said before the kitchen closes for the night. Understand?"

Finley nodded.

"See you then." With that, Brys turned and walked quickly down the corridor.

Finley rushed to his room to change, remembering to transfer the disc into the pocket of his regular school trousers. He glanced at it has he did and realized that the complex, tiny runes carved into the disc were Old Runic. They'd be difficult to empower, so hopefully the disc indeed just needed that trickle of magic as Brys had said.

He headed toward the dining hall, less rushed but still moving quickly in his excitement and anticipation.



Lunch went quickly, but Alignments seemed to drag on. Professor Bordoy had brought in a teaching assistant, one of the rarely seen post-graduate students, to work with Finley specifically. The older boy watched Finley attempt to bind three different pieces of wood together into a single magical entity and then nodded when the magic fell apart.

"No, I see what you're doing. Look at the rune construct," he said, tapping the sheet that Finley had been working from. "This bit needs less power, far less. And... do you mind if I ask a personal question? It's relevant, I promise." Finley nodded. "Are you dual-gender affinity, maybe?" Another nod. "That's why. You're going to have to work to keep one or the other affinity out of this particular one. You don't have to do that with all Forging, of course, but this one's going to make it more difficult. Can you do that?"

Finley tried again and discovered that he could, the three pieces of wood snapping together as if they'd been milled from the same tree and

remembered how close they'd once been. Finley's eyes lit up, the older student congratulated him, and Professor Bordoy smiled her approval.

Then she made him do it ten more times.

Finley barely paid attention to the conversation at dinner, which was unusually subdued anyway. Lydia was still understandably sad and quiet, and Arcadia was uncharacteristically quiet herself. Filomena never spoke much during meals, but the combined silence of those four left Jamel and Clayton without much to say, either. Bits of small talk wedged themselves in between bites of food, and everyone was clearly relieved when they finally cleared their plates and stood to go.

"Library?" Jamel asked, looking at the rest of them as if he expected them to say no.

Filomena and Clayton nodded, but Lydia shook her head. "I'm going for a walk," she said quietly.

"Arcadia?" Jamel implored.

"Sorry, I've—I need to 'cast my family. I'm just going to go to my room," she said in a distracted voice.

Jamel turned to Finley.

"I haven't been feeling well," Finley said. "I'm going to go lie down. I'll see you all tomorrow."

The six of them trooped back toward their residential hall, Arcadia and Finley slightly in the lead. Finley waved a good night over his shoulder as he let himself into his room and carefully locked the door behind him.

He withdrew the disc from his pocket, placed it carefully on the floor, and stood over it. Taking a deep breath, he trickled just a bit of magic into it as Brys had—



It was unlike any travel magic he'd ever encountered. A blast of cold wind came from nowhere, threatening to knock him down. It seemed to carry him right through the stone floor, through the earth, through yet more layers of stone, and finally into a dark room. A fluttering, almost enfolding feeling accompanied the wind, and when it all faded,

Finley found himself clad in a heavy cloak, an equally heavy hood drooping over his forehead and weighing down his shoulders.

"Finley Coughlan," a deep voice said. Finley turned around just as a dim light seeped into the room, and saw another person, clad in a similar cloak and hood, their face in full shadow. "Follow me," they said, and now Finley could hear the slightly grainy, tremulous effect of a magically modified voice. The robed figure in front of him turned and walked away.

Finley realized he was being led through a narrow stone hallway, tight enough to make him feel anxious. His heart was starting to pound in earnest when they emerged into a large round room, its walls, floor, and high, domed ceiling made entirely from plain gray stone. A circle of five robed figures stood before him.

His guide turned over their shoulder and said, "Stand here. Do not move. Do not speak. Do not make noises. You will be summoned." Without waiting to see if Finley would obey, his guide stepped forward, completing the circle of six evenly spaced figures.

Finley looked down. They were standing on a circle that had been carved into the floor. Each of the six figures faced inward, although Finley couldn't see past his guide to see what they were all looking at. The room's soft lighting seemed to emanate from the center of their circle, illuminating the concave, unmarked surface of the ceiling.

A deep thrumming noise pulsed through the room, shivering Finley's bones and vibrating the insides of his ears. It wasn't regular, though. Instead, it seemed—Finley cocked his head slightly to one side, wishing he could pull the heavy hood off his head to hear better. It seemed like a pattern of some kind. He listened for a minute longer and realized it sounded like a group of men speaking from behind a sturdy wooden door, at the end of a long stone hallway, with the hallway's entrance covered by a thick curtain. The voices had been robbed of intelligibility, reduced to a distant, bass rumbling.

Finley looked over the heads of the six and realized the reason their voices sounded so muffled: they'd raised a magical barrier. Whatever they were discussing, they wished it kept private from him, and so they'd created a shield that dulled and blurred their words.

He stood for five minutes, then five more, and then ten after that,

shifting his weight uneasily from foot to foot, trying to minimize his movement and even his breathing. Finally, after what must have been half an hour, his guide turned toward him and extended an arm, inviting him into the circle.

As he stepped through the sound ward, his ears tingled for a moment. It was as if they had been stuffed with thick cotton all this while, and with it now removed, they were reaching out, hungry for noises they could make sense of.

His guide placed a hand on his back, urging him into the center of the circle. Looking down, Finley saw runes—more of the tight, rigid strokes of Old Runic—carved into the floor, filling almost the entire space. Small pieces stood out as different, but before he could examine them further, someone spoke.

"Finley Coughlan, you come before us tonight a supplicant to the Order of Some. Our ancient Order accepts only the best, the brightest, and the most discreet into our ranks. You have been sponsored to us by one known to us and trusted by us, and so we will hear your plea. You are to be Tested this night, and if found unworthy will be cast out of our circle. If you are found worthy, then you will be accepted into our Order, a companionship that has been open to only a few across these many, many centuries. Do you understand?"

Finley nodded.

"Speak your understanding aloud, Finley Coughlan."

"I understand."

"Then let the Test begin."

The room went black.



Finley's head filled with memories from his brief life.

Moments he was ashamed of: the time he'd wet his bed when he was three because he was too afraid of the dark to climb out of bed and use the toilet; the time he'd stolen a sweet from the human dry goods store on their street; the exciting and fearful dreams he'd had of Arcadia smiling at him as she gently took his hand in hers.

Moments he was proud of: the day he'd been Chosen to attend

Disemstoke's; the time he'd helped an older woman of witchkind pick up a basket of shopping that had slipped from her hands; the night he'd first learned to cast light when his parents had been working a before-dawn shift at the sorting house.

Moments that brought joy: picnics with his parents; a half-remembered Sessi held tightly in his arms while Mother hovered over them, beaming her delight; watching Father expertly cast soothing magic of some sort over a nervous dog they'd run across in the village.

Moments that brought fear: the storm that had blown in unexpectedly while Father had been out on one of the fishing boats, something nobody of Earth affinity should have volunteered for; Mother's face when Sessi had finally slipped away, overwhelmed by her injuries; his own face in the looking glass when he'd realized he'd inherited his sister's affinities.

He tried to shake his head to clear the unpleasant memories, but something was forcing him to remember even more. It zeroed in on his foggy, imperfect memories of Sessi, making them sharper, clearer. More real.

He remembered her toddling along the hallway in his parents' home, shrieking with delight that she hadn't yet fallen. Remembered laughing as he chased after her, anxious to catch her before she finally overbalanced and fell. Remembered holding her after she did, still laughing, while she both cried and laughed at once.

Remembered her falling on the cobbled street, tripping over an inexpertly installed storm grate and falling in front of a street vendor's pushcart. Remembered the human vendor pushing the cart, his head held high and his sight focused on his destination down the lane. Remembered Father leaping for Sessi, reaching for her.

Remembered Mother's cries.

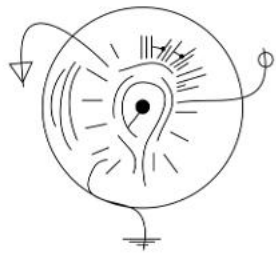
Remembered the street vendor's face, an annoyed twist to his lips as he leaned into the pushcart, not realizing that Finley's little sister had fallen directly in front of his wheels.

Or had he known?

Whatever power was driving this memory clenched at Finley's heart, his guts, and his spine, even as he tried to shake it off. He didn't *want* to remember, couldn't even understand *how* he was remembering

this. Whatever had seized him, he wanted it to stop. He couldn't bear the moment he knew was coming, a moment he was *sure* he'd never seen.

Power—his own power, now, roused by his grief and anger—coiled up around his spine, an orange, almost solid glow. It shrugged off whatever magic had gripped him, freeing his body, and pushed itself up into his head. Into his skull. Into his *mind.* A rune formed there, glowing hot and bright in his mind's eye, created by his own power and shaped like nothing he'd ever seen before:



It bore no resemblance to any Runic language Finley had ever seen, and a mad part of his brain briefly offered a negative comment about the lack of form and symmetry. He recognized the glyphs for the alignments of Control and Power, but little else in the scattered, almost childlike strokes. Though he'd never seen the rune before, or even anything like it, he knew its name, and his mind roared it into the void around him: *Aš.*

This is Me.

This is Mine.

Lik Lauke. Keep Out.

The painful memories of Sessi shattered, and the world returned not to a blank, black void, but to a shining, golden glow.



Finley had a brief sensation of falling to a stone floor, and of rough hands picking him up and carrying him away.



Finley came to in a worn, comfortable chair. As he opened his eyes, he saw that he was in a different room. All stone again, but a more familiar rectangle shape this time. His hood had been removed, although he was still covered in the heavy cloak that wrapped around his body. Other people were in the room with him, he realized, speaking slowly. All happened to be facing away from him, but they'd also removed their hoods, revealing at least the backs of their heads.

He cleared his throat, and everyone turned to him, their conversations stopping immediately.

"Mr. Coughlan," someone said as they pushed through the small crowd. It was Professor Brys. "Welcome back."

"How long?" Finley muttered, his mouth dry and puffy-feeling.

"Thirty minutes or so. You gave us all quite a... well. Let's just say—"

"Let's say it was impressive and be done with it," an older man interrupted in a gruff voice. Finley didn't recognize him, although he'd never forget him now: a thick shock of gray hair, standing out at all angles, topped a set of eyes that rested atop an equally busy gray beard. "Never seen anything like it, boy. If that's what a—"

"Let's leave that for a moment," Brys broke in. "How are you feeling? Can you stand?"

"I'm okay," Finley said, his voice clearing. He stood. "That test was..." He stopped, at a loss for words about how violated he still felt.

"I know," Brys said, nodding slowly. "It's meant to be. We need to *know* you, understand your motivations. We've all been through it. I'm sorry."

"You really put a stop to it, though," someone from the back of the room said.

"I wish I could have seen it," another voice said.

A female voice.

She pushed her way through to stand right in front of Finley, her rare, pale white skin gently reflecting the soft light in the room, her pale-yellow hair seeming deeper and more lustrous, her black eyes sparking.

Arcadia.

"It was horrible," she added. "But... I understand it. But what did you do?"

"I—" Finley started, but another voice interrupted.

"If you saw anything half as horrible as what I saw," it said, "I don't blame you for stopping it, whatever you did." The speaker stepped up right behind Arcadia.

"Landon?" Finley said incredulously.

"Just Landon," Arcadia said quickly. "Kannin wasn't invited."

Landon shook his head. "Now that I know, I'm glad. He... Kannin isn't a strong guy. He only hung out with me for protection."

"Protection?" Finley said, his voice still full of disbelief. "From you? You—"

"Brethren, perhaps we'll leave our new initiates to discuss the evening," the gruff older man said. "When the three of you are ready, there's an exit-rune over there," he added, indicating the direction. "We've already briefed the other two, Mr. Coughlan, but I would hope it goes without saying that you're not to discuss any of this."

"Is this it?" Finley asked, looking past Arcadia and Landon to the older man. "Just... this?"

"I'll be in touch over the next few days," Brys answered. He stepped close to Finley, leaning down to speak softly in one ear. "Give Landon a chance. There's more to him than you may know." He straightened, nodded, and followed the other five adults to the other side of the room. One by one, they touched the exit-rune carved into the wall, vanishing in a soft *whoosh* and a blur of light.

Arcadia and Landon turned back to Finley. "What did you do?" Arcadia asked.

"I..." Finley paused. Brys' earlier interruption had made it seem like he didn't want the Rune Smith thing being discussed, so he decided to hedge. "Professor Brys—well, and Shardlow and Whitlock—said that I'm a runewright."

"You are not," she said in disbelief.

He nodded. "I am."

Landon: "What's that?"

"Ugh, Landon," Arcadia said, but there was no malice in her tone, which surprised Finley. Maybe Brys had already said something to her?

"A runewright can reassemble existing runes into new constructs with a high degree of confidence in their stability and effect. It's basically where new constructs come from. But," she said to Finley, "how does that have anything to do with tonight?"

He swallowed heavily and sat back down in the chair he'd woken up in. "They were... they were forcing me to remember things. Things I didn't even know I knew. About... about my sister. Her... about her accident." His voice was tight as the emotions welled up inside him.

"They did something similar to me," she whispered. Landon nodded agreement.

"It was too much. So I... I don't know. Something in me just pushed back. I held a... a construct in my mind. It shoved everything out. I passed out and woke up here."

"Wow," Landon whispered.

"Mine were..." She stopped. "I can't talk about it. I'm sorry. Maybe someday, but I can't now."

"I can," Landon said his voice still soft. The other two looked at him.

"Look," he began, "I know I'm a bully. It's because nobody likes me. But I know that's my fault, not theirs. I just—"

"Have you tried not being a bully? People would like you," Arcadia put in, a touch of her usual snark creeping into her voice.

He shook his head. "My own family doesn't. My sister, she's a year younger than me, she went to Thornwaith's. I've an older brother who did, too. My parents both did. All four grandparents. We're a Thornwaith's *family."* He sighed. "Except me."

"I mean, it's just a school," Finley said.

Landon shook his head furiously. "It isn't. Do you know they have no competitions there? No sports. No contests. Not even a Šachmatai club. Do you know why?"

"They're... all..." Finley started, but shook his head, unable to come up with a retort. "No."

"When you're Chosen for Thornwaith's, it's because you have a special relationship with magic. It's why they're the guards, the ones between danger and all of witchkind." His voice was tinged with a sad pride as he recited a phrase he'd doubtless heard a million times as a

child. A phrase that couldn't apply to him. "When Thornwaith's stands up to defend, *magic* takes over. We—they're more powerful. Colder. Devoted to witchkind. They don't matter as individuals, they don't even think as individuals. They become... part of it. Of all the magic." He shook his head. "It's the one thing you always carry with you, as a graduate. And you always have the others with you." His face managed to fall even more than it already had. "But not me."

They sat quietly for a moment. "Is that what they made you remember?" Arcadia asked quietly.

Landon nodded. "And being Chosen for here. And my parents' disappointment." He paused a moment before continuing. "Do you remember, we would have been ten or so, the time a group of humans, hunters from the woods, somehow stumbled across Evermore?"

Arcadia nodded. "It was a huge scandal. The entire Taryba was blamed; most of them got voted out."

"My family lives in Evermore. I watched it... I watched the magic come over my parents. Even my little sister got cold and quiet, although she stayed home. The others all marched out like they were puppets. Outside the city walls.

"It was a big hunting party. Half a dozen wealthy men on horses, two or three dozen people with them. Evermore's magic had pushed against them, but they were carrying iron. Spears, swords, knives, I don't know what. It diminished the magic, instead of pushing them away, just made them more curious. So they pushed their way through, right to the city's walls, almost.

"I remember my parents coming back, exhausted. They couldn't even Gather magic for two nights, had to have our neighbors make our meals.

"By the time they were better, we were allowed outside the city walls again, so my sister and I went out to see what we could see." He stopped, lost in the memory.

"And?" Finley prompted him.

He shrugged. "There was a giant sunken area, not far from the eastern gate. It was like... I dunno, like a giant hand had just pressed into the ground. There was a whole circle, maybe fifty paces across, just

smashed down as deep as my arm is long. All the grass was dead. There were furrows.

"We asked a guard, and he said the furrows were from where they'd had to drag the bodies away to burn them."

He blinked and came back to them, his eyes clearing. "That's what Thornwaith's is. It's what I was supposed to be. The Order is the closest I'll come to that, but I'm *meant* to protect witchkind from the humans. So I'll do it here.

"But I wanted Kannin to come with me. I wanted a friend."

We were quiet for a while longer before Arcadia spoke up again. "We can be your friends," she said firmly. Finley found himself nodding. "We're in this, now. What did they call it? Brethren? We're that."

"Thank you," the bigger boy whispered, a tear rolling down one cheek.

"I've known about this for a while," Arcadia said, changing the subject.

"How?" Finley asked.

"There are clues. I've known since last year. My family is in Twyncits, you know that?" Finley and Landon nodded. "There were... just clues. Things would go wrong with some humans, and we'd find out they were experimenting with iron machinery. It happened more than once. At some point, it's not coincidence anymore, right? So I started researching, poking around. I knew there was some group responsible. I didn't realize how long they'd been at it, is all. But they have runes associated with them. You know that throw rug Brys has behind his desk, in his classroom?" The boys nodded again. "It's worn, but it has one of their runes. And so I started talking with Brys. About how... well, I have reason to be afraid of what humans can do to us. Let's just leave it there," she said, her voice brooking no argument. "And they tend to look out for high-achieving students, so he started to kind of lead me into it."

"I'm not high-achieving," Landon pointed out. It was true: everyone knew the boy had barely passed his fourth-year exams.

"I suspect you may offer different value to them," Arcadia

suggested. "But look, we need to get out of here. There's something that feels... wonky with time here. I'm afraid half the night's already passed."

"Where are we, exactly?" Landon asked, looking around the almost-empty room.

"I think this is below the school's basements, actually," Arcadia said.

"So, what do we do? Just... just leave? And wait for Brys?"

"We need to keep it looking the same for our friends," Arcadia warned. "But yes. We still have to graduate."

"Three more weeks," Finley said.

"After that, I have a feeling we'll find out more," Arcadia said. "But right now, honestly, I'm exhausted. Let's just go."

Finley stood again, and they all walked over to the exit-rune together.

Tomorrow will be a very different day indeed, Finley thought.

CHAPTER 9

Apprentice

The week following the initiation, Arcadia, Finley, and Landon were informed that they'd been selected for an internship that would last their final few weeks of school. Henceforth, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday afternoons would be given over to the internship, which would be led by Caitlin Novell, a junior partner of a firm that had been partnering with Disemstoke's for decades.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to learn about how real businesses work, and to see what kind of career you might enjoy after school. You might even change your mind about the apprenticeships you may have had planned!" Dean Shardlow told them. He was still holding out hope for Finley taking a post-graduate position, and some small amount of hope for Arcadia changing her mind about one. The fact that Landon —the last person the school would extend a post-graduate invitation to —was part of the internship didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

Finley wondered if they'd done something to Shardlow to make him so accepting, but decided not to pursue the thought.

They met Novell—"Please, call me Cat"—after lunch on Monday. After a round of introductions, she led them to a small, unused staff office on the second floor. Once inside, with the door closed firmly behind them, she grimly advised them to brace themselves before empowering a construct that swept them down, down, down again—

seemingly below the school's basement levels, as Arcadia had surmised after their initiation.

"Okay," she said after they found themselves in another anonymous, rectangular stone room and recovered their equilibrium. "Here's how this is going to go. While you're down here, your personal magic will be locked down to a large degree."

Alarmed, Finley reached for his power and found it tantalizingly out of reach, as if his mental hands were covered in thick woolen mittens and unable to grasp his magic.

"Over the next few weeks, I'll be running you through some very specific training programs. Your magic will be unlocked only as needed to complete the tasks I give you. Understand?"

They all nodded.

"Good. Some of this is going to be difficult, and some of it... well, 'uncomfortable' is a mild way of putting it. You'll need to succeed in every task, though. If you don't, your acceptance into the Order will be rescinded, your memories wiped, and you'll be sent on your way. Got it?"

They nodded, more slowly this time.

"I know. But trust me, you can get through it. We all do. We actually have very few failures." She offered them a sincere-looking smile. "Let's get started."

She walked to one side of the room and tapped the wall. A portion of the wall obligingly swung open, a door that hadn't been discernible until that moment. "In you go," she said.

"What's in there?" Landon asked.

"In you go," Cat repeated.

Filled with trepidation, the three initiates walked into the next room. They jumped when the stone door slammed shut behind them. This room glowed with the same soft light as the other one, and it seemed just as featureless and empty—except for a thick, dark railing bolted to one of the longer walls.

"That's an iron rail," Cat's disembodied voice floated into the room. "It's going to start grounding your magic. Don't let it. I'll let you out in three hours. Good luck."

Finley's heart began beating harder in panic, and he *felt* his magic

slowly pulling toward the long iron rail. All three of them backed against the opposite long wall, putting as much distance between themselves and the iron as the room allowed, staring at it in terror.

The distance wasn't enough.

"I've got nothing," Arcadia whispered, her voice filled with the same panic that Finley felt. "I just tried a shield, two travel magics, and a summons. Nothing works."

"Me either," Landon said miserably. "I can feel it sucking my magic, though."

"She said our personal magic would be locked down," Finley said through gritted teeth. "She implied we could stop it. Or at least resist it." His mind raced, trying to think of what to do.

He focused on holding his magic inside himself, and felt its egress diminish slightly. In a flash of inspiration, he tried holding the simple rune for Gathering in his mind, a rune that had changed little in the move from Middle Runic to New:



It helped. He could feel his body pulling at his magic, actively resisting the grasping void of the iron rail. "Gather," he told the others through clenched teeth. "Use the Gather rune." He didn't take his eyes off the iron bar, didn't let down his grip on the rune in his mind, but he could somehow sense the other two doing the same.

"It's working a little," Landon said, his voice still tight.

"It's hard," Arcadia added.

"Keep in mind our ancestors had to hold the Gather rune subconsciously as they slept," Finley reminded them. "We can do this."

"This sucks," Arcadia said. "Literally," she added with a small chuckle.

They all settled back against the wall, staring at the malevolent iron rail, focusing on holding their magic within them.

It felt like a... a violation. Finley found himself tiring faster than he thought possible, but even the *sense* of fatigue was being slowly, inexorably drawn out of him. It was like the iron was drawing out not only his magic, but his emotions. His sense of self. His *life.* But with his personal magic locked down, what could he do about it?

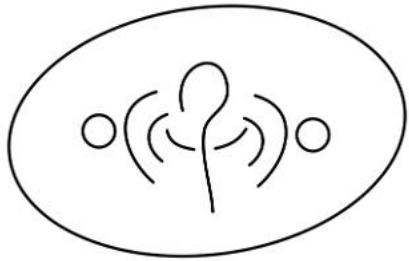
Then he blinked.

The Gather rune was working, wasn't it? Wasn't that part of his "personal magic?" Or was it just because that rune operated entirely within himself that it could still function?

Could something else personal, totally internal, also work?

He closed his eyes and, while focusing to maintain the Gather rune, slowly reconstructed the rune he'd cast the night of the initiation. The rune that defined his own *self,* that established the boundaries between him and the world around him. As he reassembled it in his minds eye, he realized that it wouldn't work. The flow was wrong. That rune had stopped a power from impinging on his self, but this iron rail wasn't trying to do that: it was trying to suck his self *out.*

And so he started moving pieces of that rune around, reconstructing it until it defined not a shell around his self, but a definition of his self. A second skin, a point past which *Finley* did not, *could* not, exist. The result was much cleaner, much more structured and defined, and much more effective:



The flow of magic leaving his body stopped abruptly.

Finley slowly let the Gather rune fade from his mind, waiting tensely to see what happened. His magic remained in his body. He could still feel it *thrumming* against his skin, clamoring to be let out, to flow into the iron railing that would ground it, but he kept it in.

"Guys, this," he panted, kneeling down and sketching his rune on the dusty stone floor.

"What's that?" Landon asked.

"Just hold it instead of the Gather rune," Finley instructed.

"Oh," Arcadia said, surprised. "Oh, that's much better. What is it?"

"It's still trying," Landon said.

"Yeah, but it's not working anymore," Arcadia said. "I could keep this up for hours, I think. What is it?" she asked again.

"Runewright at work," Finley said. He sensed this was actually his Rune Smith talent, but still wasn't sure if that was a topic he could discuss with his peers. "Just keep holding it."

"Hey," Cat's voice floated into the room. "What're you three doing in there?"

"She noticed?" Arcadia muttered.

"Of course I noticed. I can monitor the amount of power that thing is grounding. It stopped. How'd you make it stop?"

"Heh," Finley said under his breath.

"I'm coming in there," Cat said.

The stone door opened again, and Cat stepped gingerly in the room. "Crap," she grumbled. "I hate that." Finley presumed the iron

rail had latched onto her magic. She stepped back but left the door open. Were the walls shielded somehow, he wondered, or did stone provide a natural protection against the effects of iron? "Okay, come on out," she called.

After the door was firmly closed behind them, they all let the new rune vanish from their minds, their postures visibly relaxing.

"Who did that? And how?" Cat demanded.

Finley slowly raised one hand.

"How?" Cat repeated.

In response, Finley lifted a finger into the air, summoning the magic that let him draw runes in glowing—*ah, right,* he thought when nothing happened.

Cat immediately realized what he was trying to do and scrunched her nose a bit. Finley felt the hold on his magic change, and he began sketching the rune.

Cat walked closer as he finished, her eyes devouring the construct. "I've never seen this before," she said slowly.

"Did they tell you?" Finley asked. "That I'm a—"

"A runewright, yes," Cat said distractedly. "I just didn't realize it meant... well. You realize this is impossible."

"It worked," Landon said with a shrug.

"Obviously, but it's still impossible. You can't just... *shield* against iron."

"It's not a shield," Finley and Arcadia said in the same breath.

"It tells your magic to stay in you. It makes your own skin the extent of your magical influence," Finley continued.

"It feels a lot like the Gather rune," Arcadia added, "but... *more.*"

"Interesting," Cat said slowly. "I think I see. Give me a moment."

She walked back to the door, opened it, and stepped in the room. After about a minute, she stepped back out. "Yeah it works."

"Still impossible?" Landon asked sarcastically.

"Absolutely," Cat said with a smile. "I love it. What if you did that when you weren't around iron?" she asked Finley.

He shrugged. "It would keep your magic inside you. It redefines the limits of your world to your own skin."

"Fascinating." She stood for a long moment, tapping one finger on

her thigh. "Well. I'd intended to take you to get Tested for that runewright talent, but it feels a little pointless now." She paused again, considering. "I think that's enough for today. Take the rest of the afternoon off, and I'll see you back in the same office tomorrow morning. Exit-rune's over there," she added, pointing to the far wall. "Don't be late."



Tuesday was combat magic, held in another hidden room opposite the one with the iron rail. Cat unlocked most of their magic, encouraging them to fling attack spells at the rune-protected walls and each other, testing for their strength and precision. Landon bested them all in these tests, the sheer strength of his magic often overwhelming their defenses and proving all but impervious to their attacks. Finley found himself being more competitive than he'd ever been before, actively growing angry and frustrated when he couldn't land a hit on Landon, and when Landon blasted down all but his most powerful shields.

Arcadia didn't fare any better against the bigger boy, but simply shrugged it off. "I try not to get into slug-fests," she said with a shrug as the afternoon wound down.

Cat had repeatedly reminded Finley to stick with known rune constructs, and so by the time she dismissed them, he was both tired and worn, and had a headache from bottling up his runewright ability.

On Wednesday, Cat took them into yet another practice room. This one had an earthen floor rather than one of stone, and they spent the afternoon learning to shape and manipulate that earth—a task that finally brought out frustration in both Arcadia and Landon, their affinities entirely unsuited to the job. Finley did well, although the raw power behind his Earth affinity was insufficient to perform some of the more impressive tasks Cat set, such as creating a giant sinkhole in a matter of moments. "It's your Flame affinity holding you back," she said with conviction after Finley's last attempt. "Most Earth kids can't *stop* themselves from making sinkholes; we have to teach them to hold back a bit. It feels to me like your power wants to *melt* the earth, not move it. We'll work on it."

After discovering that fifth-years had a free period Thursday afternoons, Cat co-opted it and took them to the final practice room off the "hub" that they'd been traveling to all week. This one was filled with brass cauldrons, bronze pillars, freestanding stone walls, and more. She had them use subtle magics—"so sneaky, I don't want to be able to sense them"—to slowly compromise the structural integrity of each. As a demonstration, she stared at a copper pot for twenty minutes, walked over to it, and tapped it—causing it to crumble into bent, broken shards.

This was where Arcadia shone: her patience and the subtlety of her magic served her well in these exercises. Finley struggled: technically, this was all Forge magic, but he'd barely mastered that alignment, and it fought against him as he tried to use its reverse aspect. Landon's brute-force approach to magic left him the worst performer of the three: he *shattered* plenty of items, but with nowhere near the subtlety that Cat was looking for.

By Friday, they were all more than ready for Professor Fulleron's often-dreaded Applied Magic class in the afternoon. It would seem easy by comparison.



"Ugh, what a week," Jamel said, leaning back in his chair. Aristaeus Hall's private library had become their evening reunion spot, as all six of them were by now engaged in internships with various visiting taskmasters. "Even last night." Jamel had missed their evening commiseration session, his entire night having been commandeered for some "special" task.

"What exactly are you doing?" Clayton asked. His own post-school apprenticeship was with a construction firm in Evermore, and so his last few weeks of school included an internship in Forging. "Every afternoon, it's stone blocks," he'd complained.

"It's basically a security guard company," Jamel said, the most he'd revealed about his internship to date. "They accompany trading caravans and provide protection against bandits. Officially. Unofficially,

they also nudge the weather when they can, which is harder than it sounds."

"No harder than using a Sky affinity offensively," Arcadia muttered. "Turns out lightning bolts are a thing, but they're bastards to actually control."

"What are you three up to, actually?" Jamel said, leaning forward in interest. "Who picked up you two *and* Landon?"

"Who said anything about Landon?" Finley said quickly.

Jamel shrugged. "Didn't have to *say* anything. You three all head off together, you return together; not hard to figure it out."

"Finley and I still haven't decided on a post-grad position," Arcadia explained, much to Finley's relief. "So the internship is more about 'well-rounding,' they said. Landon's in for the same thing, but for him it's to get through the graduation." Finley made a mental note to make sure she told Landon the cover story when they next met. "Lydia, how's yours going?" she said, changing the subject.

"Good," Lydia said with a small, tight smile. "Mrs. Corminas is nice, and she worked in the Evermore Library for a few years herself. She's been filling in some gaps for me. She knows the Councilor I'm apprenticing to and has been giving me tips." She sighed. "I can't believe we're going to be done so soon," she added, her voice full of sadness.

"And you, Filomena? Still happy you didn't take an internship?" The quiet girl was the only one in the group who hadn't.

She nodded. "Especially after listening to you all every night," she said softly, a friendly grin on her face. "Mama convinced me to stay with the family firm, so I'm heading home as soon as we graduate."

"I have trouble picturing you as an accountant," Jamel teased.

"It's just to start. I couldn't pass the runewright Test, you know, but I've always been good with the books. I used to help Papa with them before I came here. Besides," she added with an uncharacteristically sly grin, "there's a boy back home."

"A boy!" Arcadia said, feigning shock. "You've got a boyfriend already?"

Filomena nodded happily. "We've known each other since we were

kids, but on the last few trips home he... we got a little closer." Her smile widened. "We're going to get engaged after the solstice."

"Engaged! Sparks, Filomena, that's wonderful! How have you been holding out on us?" Jamel asked, reaching out and patting her shoulder.

"We just decided a couple of nights ago, and you guys have been all, 'dinner, chat for twenty minutes, and then go to bed and pass out' all week."

Jamel snorted. "Yeah, it's been a week for sure. I am happy to announce to you all that my romantic life is unchanged."

"I'm actually getting on with the girl who's interning with me," Clayton said. "It's not an engagement yet, but we'll see."

"There's an older boy in the Library," Lydia said softly, her face losing some of the tension it had displayed since they'd returned from break. "He's doing a post-grad program on Library Sciences." She dimpled, and Finley's heart leaped to see her happy again after all she'd been through. "We had dinner together last night; that's why I didn't show up."

"Nothing for me," Finley said, holding up a hand in a signal of defeat. "It's all I can do to keep up with classes these last few weeks."

"I've my eye on someone," Arcadia said, causing Finley to start. She'd been on the same schedule as him, so when had she had time to have her "eye on someone?" Still, his heart fluttered slightly, and his neck grew hot. He'd always considered Arcadia a close friend. Could she... could she see it as something more?

"And no," Arcadia said before any of them could ask, "I will *not* be telling you who. In fact, I'm off to bed. *My* internship has an early call tomorrow morning." She gave Finley an arch look.

"Yeah," he sighed, pushing his chair back and standing. "*Very* early."

"On a weekend?" Clayton said.

"Every free moment," Jamel said. "Turns out I do, too."

They said their goodbyes and headed for their rooms.

Finley's step was a little lighter than usual this evening, as he wondered who Arcadia might have her eye on.



"All right. You three sit tight, and I'll be back in a moment. We've a fourth joining us this morning," Cat told them. She'd had them meet in the same tiny office, but this time, her magic had spirited them into the forest surrounding the school.

"A fourth?" Finley asked.

"Late addition to the Order," Cat said with a nod. "Apparently his sponsor was a bit unsure of him at first, but they worked it out. Flame affinity like you," she said, looking at Landon, "and just as strong. A bit more nuanced, so I'm hoping you'll be able to pick up some pointers from him." Landon blushed, as Cat's main complaint of him was his brute-force, no-subtlety approach to everything. "Be right back."

She winked out of sight and reappeared moments later.

With Jamel.

"I believe you've all met already?" Cat said with a grin.

"Jamel! But... but you said—oh, I see. Guard company. Combat magic." Arcadia nodded. "I get it."

"Sorry I couldn't tell you guys. They said not to discuss it until we joined up," Jamel said, offering an apologetic grin.

"And even now, no discussing inside the school unless you're with me," Cat cautioned them. "The secrecy of the Order is a huge part of what makes us effective. And, in fact, today we're going to talk about a recent success, which was possible *only* because of our secrecy. And you're going to learn some tricks for helping maintain that success over time. Sound good?"

They all nodded.

"Good. So, you're all aware of the threat iron poses to witchkind. This one," Cat said, looking at Jamel but gesturing to Finley, "is the one who created that construct I showed you. He's a full runewright, and he'll be our secret weapon, if I'm any judge.

"But back to iron. Humans mine iron from deep-dug mines, much deeper than tin and copper, which are far more common. Even zinc is easier to pull out of the earth, which is why brass and bronze have been in use for so long. As difficult as iron is to mine, most of their mines' production have gone toward the iron roadways, the iron horses, and the iron carriages.

"Over the past decade or so, the Order has devoted itself largely to

correcting the oversight that led to the iron roadways existing in the first place. I've explained before how we've discouraged extensions to the line." They all nodded; her exercises in creating sinkholes were largely aimed at supporting that discouragement. One of the Order's favorite tricks was to build sinkholes in previously stable ground, swallowing new tracks as they were laid.

"Well, we've managed to go a step further. About eleven years ago, a small team—two Flame affinities, an Earth affinity, and a Sky affinity—managed to infiltrate one of the smaller mines in the west. They spent a year building up their resistance to iron, which, it turns out, is less problematic when it's buried in the earth in ore form. Once they were in the mine, they used a complex set of runes to create a fire beast of sorts. It ravaged the mine, killing about half the miners and collapsing almost all of the tunnels they'd built. The miners that were allowed to escape had a final vision of this 'fire beast' collapsing the entrance of the mine while roaring at them to never again invade its territory."

"Wow," Finley said under his breath.

"Wow indeed," Cat agreed "At the same time, another set of teams began feeding rumors to the humans' priests, suggesting that the violation of the 'Deep Earth' was contrary to their religious doctrine. A member of the Order—a runewright, one you'll meet eventually, I'm sure—helped craft a construct that made changes to the humans' religious texts, supporting this new 'Deep Earth' restriction.

"That brought their own churches down on the mines, along with subsequent 'fire beast' attacks created by Order teams. The humans had eight iron mines, and I'm proud to say that this week saw the last of them finally get shut down and abandoned."

"That took a decade?" Arcadia asked skeptically.

Cat nodded. "For one, we wanted it to be a slow change. If we'd taken their iron from them all at once, they'd have fought harder to get it back. As it is, the gradually increasing scarcity of iron has, for the most part, given them a chance to find substitute materials. And it's given time for the 'Deep Earth' mythos to filter throughout their society. Deep miners are now seen as enemies of the church, which has made it harder and harder to justify reopening mines or building new ones."

"What's that mean for the iron roadways?" Landon asked.

"It means they're eventually going to be abandoned," Cat said with conviction. "They're sturdy, but they do need maintenance. Right now, the humans are able to use brass and bronze to keep everything running, but it's already getting difficult. They lost an iron boiler a month ago and had to build a brass replacement. But that can't run at the same pressures, so it's not as powerful, which means that iron horse can't haul as many carriages." She smiled. "It'll take time, but it's the beginning of the end. *That's* what the Order does. We're subtle, we're unseen, and we steer the humans toward behaviors that are safer for witchkind."

She smiled. "Which brings us to our exercise for the day. We need to ensure we've got plenty of ability to launch new 'fire beasts' whenever and wherever need arises, and so you're going to learn the constructs and build one for me."



It took much of the day for them to get it right, because the rune *was* complex. It took nothing less than two Flame-affinity workers capable of tremendous, sustained bursts of power. Finley's Earth affinity was called to perform by creating a rock structure for the beast that the Flame magic could ride, turning its outer shell to glowing, molten rock. Arcadia's Sky affinity helped prop the thing up and gave it its roaring, angry voice. Manipulating it took practice, with their first few attempts resulting in the creature collapsing to the ground. But after a few hours of practice, mainly learning to read each others' body language to see what they were about to do, they managed to get the beast upright, walking, and yelling. Cat even had them make it bash down a few trees, which she quickly extinguished with her own magic.

"All right," Cat said, finally calling a stop to it. "I'm sending you back," she added, nodding to Arcadia, Jamel, and Landon. "I've a bit more business with our runewright friend here." After a quick round of goodbyes, the other three interns were whisked back to the school, leaving Cat and Finley alone in the forest.

"I shared your iron-shield construct with the Order," she said without preamble once the others were gone.

"It's really more of a—" Finley began, but Cat interrupted.

"I know it's not really a shield. It's just a name, and I needed to call it something. What I'm more interested in is that some of the runes in that construct don't exist."

Finley swallowed hard.

"I'm no master of rune lore, mind you, but we've plenty in the Order who are. Even our other runewright says the construct is sound, and innovative, but he's never seen some of those runes. So," she said, taking a step closer and looking directly into his eyes. "You want to tell me what's up?"

Finley nodded slowly. "They—Professor Brys, that is, and Professor Whitlock, so probably the dean, too—they think I'm a Rune Smith."

Cat nodded, taking a deep breath before speaking again. "I'd wondered as much. *Hoped* as much, to be honest, because the alternative would be you having access to some lost library of rune lore that even the *Order* didn't know about. Origin provide,"she sighed, shaking her head. "A Rune Smith. In my time." She paused, looking at him in a new light. "That puts a new twist on things. I want you to try and avoid doing that again. If you're in a situation where you feel you *have* to, tell me, and I'll end the exercise. The fewer people who get a look at novel runes, the fewer who'll know what you are. At least until we can get you trained, and figure out what that even means. Sound good?"

Finley nodded.

"Graduation will be here before you know it," Cat told him. "Just three weeks, now." Finley quickly counted in his head, and realized she was right. "Let's keep it under our hats until then, when we can get you in front of the rest of the Order."

"Okay."

"Okay." She grinned. "Well, let's get you back to school."

CHAPTER 10

A Vision

The handful of weeks remaining in the school year flew by, a flurry of classes, afternoon internship sessions, cramming for finals, and then the finals themselves. Finley passed with flying colors, as did most of his friends, Jamel's colors perhaps flying a bit lower than his peers'. Landon scraped by, as he had for five years.

Finley finally told Whitlock and Shardlow that he wasn't accepting a post-graduate position and had instead decided to find his own way outside the school. Both were disappointed. However, Finley—having become more sensitive to the flow of magic, and the effect emotions had on those flows—sensed that the two were less disappointed in not having him than they were in the "loss" for the school itself. That struck him as a little selfish, and it made it easier to tell them no.

At last, the final evening arrived. The school's auditorium was magically decorated for the graduation ceremony, with alternating banners, featuring the school's blue and white and Aristaeus Hall's gold and black, hanging from the walls and fluttering from the high ceiling. The next day, their parents would all arrive after breakfast, the hours-long ceremony would be held, and they'd be declared graduates of Disemstoke's Great School, *amžinai tvirtas, amžinai išmintingas,* as the school's motto said. Forever firm, forever wise.

Their final dinner in the school was a raucous affair, the faculty

putting in a rare appearance in the main dining room, smiling indulgently at the noise from the fifth-years' tables. With their exams behind them and no classes the next day, Finley and his friends stayed up far too late in their hall's library, the staff choosing to ignore their final curfew, provided they didn't get too noisy.

They chatted about everything and nothing: memories of their first year in the school, notable accidents from Applied Magic classes, and what they planned for the future. They all took an oath to remain in touch, something that Finley, Arcadia, and Jamel knew would be all too easy to keep.

Finally, yawning with fatigue and out of remembrances of their five years in school, they all trudged quietly to their rooms for one final evening. Finley fell asleep almost the instant his head touched his pillow, after casting one last careful look over the cases he'd already packed his clothes and books in, ready for his parents to help him magic home the next afternoon.



Finley woke in the woods, the smell of perfectly clean air and the glisten of perfectly golden light betraying this as a dream. He stood, brushing pine needles from his clothes as he walked in the peculiar, in-charge-yet-not-in-charge way in which dreams lead us along the path they've planned.

He walked through the woods for what seemed like hours, brushing his fingers along branches and tree trunks, stepping easily over gnarled roots, and listening to the soft chirps of unseen birds and the gentle rustles of unseen animals in the underbrush. He had a sense that he was going to a particular place but allowed the dream to carry him along in its roundabout, seemingly unhurried way.

He came to a clearing, a place where the trees hadn't grown quite so closely together. A flood of sunlight filled an open, grass-covered space, a tiny field dotted by bright wildflowers. In the middle, atop a small rise, stood a man. He had the brown skin and black hair that could have come from almost anywhere on the continent, and was dressed in plain, dark clothing. Finley knew him at once as a human: although visually

indistinguishable from witchkind, something in his dream's eye saw the man as being apart from magic.

The man looked up as Finley entered the little glade. Finley inhaled sharply as he saw that one of the man's hands was full of long, ebony hair, which was connected to the head of a little girl, who was lying in the glade, struggling to free herself from the man's grip. She was witchkind, Finley saw at once, gentle threads of glowing magic looping around her as she fought.

Save her, a voice whispered in Finley's mind.

His heart thudded, and he raised his hands, sketching an accompaniment to a rune construct he knew wouldn't work. Humans were, for the most part, immune to magic cast directly on them: magic tended to smash into them and dissipate almost immediately, drawn to the ground through the peculiar, passive connection humans had with the elements of the world. He flung his hands toward the man, pushing Earth magic that should have bound the man's feet, drawn him down to into the ground, and perhaps startled him enough to release the girl.

As one part of Finley's mind had guessed, the magic simply flowed into the man and down into the ground, its effect completely nullified. Finley tried again, his hands twitching as he summoned a new construct into his mind. Perhaps he could spirit the little girl away, cast a construct like *traukti* to draw the girl to himself and away from the human. But the man's grip remained firm even as the girl's little body lifted off the ground and tugged toward Finley. She screamed, torn between the two opposing forces, until Finley finally dropped the spell, his heart rent in two.

As he raised his hands for another try, he felt a gentle energy seep into his arms. *Like this,* the voice said again, guiding his hands as he drew a new construct in the air. He felt his own power, the force he identified as his Rune Smith talent, uncoil from its home in the base of his spine, flow down into his arms, and help the mysterious voice craft a new rune.

A rune began to form in the air before him, but, although he could grasp the general shape of it, the details were fuzzy, flicking in and out of focus in that frustrating way dreams have of hiding details that might help us. *It starts here,* the voice said softly, teaching his power how to

carve the new rune in midair. *The Earth axis* here, it said, as the rune construct extended tendrils of light straight down into the ground at Finley's feet. *And then back to the start,* it said, as the energy looped through the earth and back again.

Finley tried to speak, tried to ask a question, but found that he could only mumble incoherently. He looked past the rune he'd been drawing in the air, its details still lost to flickering and shifting, and saw the man trudging out of the glade, dragging the poor little girl of witchkind behind him. Her screams were cutting, but also strangely muffled, as if Finley's ears were filled with cotton.

And then cast, the voice said in his mind. *You'll get it eventually,* it added. Finley sensed its withdrawal, saw the glowing rune before him gutter and die, and watched the man enter the shadows of the trees, still dragging the girl behind him, until both were out of sight.

Finley lunged forward to follow them, but found he could not give chase. His feet kept stumbling, tripping over themselves, until he threw himself face-first onto the ground.



Finley sat up with a start, covered in sweat and back in his little room at the school. He took several deep breaths and cast the simple rune to tell him what time it was. No more than an hour or so until sunrise, he realized. An hour past that would be breakfast, and then the ceremony.

He pushed the sweat-soaked bedclothes off of himself, desperate for a bit of cool air on his overheated skin. The dream—vision?—had been stunningly real and terrifyingly immediate. He could still see the fear on the girl's face, the fierce fight in her eyes, the tiny cords of her muscles resisting her captor. He could see the slow disdain on the man's face, the strength in his rough hands, the coarseness of his black hair.

And he could still see the vague, sparking outlines of the rune he'd been trying to draw. A rune that he *knew* could have affected the man, could have affected a *human.* A rune that was still tantalizingly *just* out of his reach, even its broad strokes fading as the dream receded in his mind.

He took one last deep breath and decided to get dressed.

CHAPTER 11

Field Training

Welcome to the Farm," Cat said cheerfully.

The last week had been a whirlwind. Finley, Arcadia, Landon, and Jamel had—along with the other fifth-years—sat through the happy but interminable graduation ceremony, received their diplomas as Disemstoke's graduates, and received their final dismissal from the dean.

Arcadia and Finley looked for Ramiro in the proceedings but couldn't find him. "He must not have made it," Arcadia said sadly. That would mean he'd likely left late last night rather than face the successful graduates in the morning.

"Hopefully his family didn't expect anything more after what they did to him," Finley said, a snarl in his voice.

"I hope he gets away from them," Arcadia added.

Their parents had helped them gather up their belongings, and, in most cases, let the new graduates magically send their luggage home ahead of them. They'd seen the faculty helping Lydia get her belongings off to Evermore, where her new apprenticeship sponsor had arranged for housing. Then, using whatever travel magic their families preferred, they'd all headed home.

It was traditional to take about a week off after school before heading to their contracted apprenticeships, and for Finley, the time had been enjoyable enough, if a little dull. His parents hadn't been able

to take more time off work or arrange advantageous shifts, so he'd spent much of his time wandering around alone, greeting old friends and shopping for new clothing. Officially, his apprenticeship would be with a small-kitchenwares producer who wanted to completely retool its production using new, more efficient runes that only a runewright could assemble. Unofficially, it was all a cover for the Order of Some, and Finley had a short list of clothing suggestions and personal supplies that he was to gather.

By the end of the week, he was anxious to leave home and get started. He and Arcadia had 'cast at least once a day, with Landon and Jamel joining them once or twice, and he knew his friends were just as eager to start their new lives as he was.

When the week ended and it came time to depart, he endured another emotional farewell from his parents, Mother struggling to hold back tears and Father making no effort to conceal the pride on his face. Their goodbyes exchanged, Finley cast a travel magic and headed back to Disemstoke's, where Cat had instructed them to meet her.

He arrived in front of the Great Hall to find Arcadia and Cat chatting amiably, and barely had time to wave hello before Jamel and Landon burst into existence behind him, their Flame-based travel magic offering a more dramatic entrance than his milder Earth-powered construct.

Cat gathered them all together, and her magic whisked them away. They arrived in front of a sprawling ranch house, a wood-rail fence surrounding it, with a spacious, grassy yard. Gently rolling fields surrounded them on all sides, and they could see a tall wooden barn not too far in the distance.

"I know it doesn't look like much," Cat said with a grin, "but this is the Order's headquarters and primary training facility. Trust me, you're going to be in good hands."

"I'm still curious about the 'small-kitchenwares' apprenticeship," Arcadia said.

"Hah! You'll learn plenty about that, trust me. I know you all think it's just a cover, but it's actually a real-deal business, and you're going to be part of it."

"Like… teakettles?" Landon asked.

Cat nodded. "Kettles, pots, pans, hand mixers, mortars, slicers, you name it. The Order owns shares in its own copper and zinc mines, in fact. You're going to get to know more about brass than you ever imagined possible."

"Oh joy," Jamel said, feigning a disappointment that wasn't supported by the grin on his face.

"You've all got private rooms here in the main house," Cat said, starting toward the building's main door. "Let's get you settled."



The Order wasted no time in putting the four through a series of rigorous tests and into a demanding regimen of training exercises. Cat remained their primary instructor, but she was joined by a variety of specialists who came and went. "We're mainly about subtlety and precision," she said again and again. "We leave brute-force defense to the Thornwaith's alums; if the humans become an active threat, they're the ones best equipped to deal with it."

"In a kind of no-holds-barred, everyone-dies kind of way," Arcadia pointed out.

Cat had merely shrugged. "Given the unmistakably magic nature of what they do, that's probably for the best as far as witchkind is concerned. Fortunately, they're called on quite rarely. If we do our jobs right, we can usually steer humans clear of witchkind. That's the ideal outcome."

The tests the four endured were focused on the alignments the Order found most useful: Control, Destroy, and Conceal. Finley, Arcadia, and Jamel had long since mastered Control, although Landon continued to struggle and was paired with an instructor who specialized in it, in an attempt to make him more proficient. The Destroy alignment was something taught only to certain students at Disemstoke's: Jamel had learned the basics, and Finley had gotten an introduction to it, but both Arcadia and Landon were starting from scratch. Unsurprisingly, Landon embraced the fundamentals of the alignment quickly but again struggled to use it in anything but the most brute-force scenarios.

The Conceal alignment was entirely new to all of them, and some-

thing Cat acknowledged wasn't really taught in any of the Great Schools. "The general idea is to not put magic in front of humans at all, so most of witchkind doesn't need Conceal. But you're going to be using magic right in their view, and so Conceal is a must-have. The idea is to weave magic into what's already around you, and already in front of you, so whatever effects you create are more easily attributed to something other than magic."

Combined, she explained how the three alignments could support each other. "For example, until the last of the iron mines closed, humans were constantly trying to make better, more powerful iron boilers. That's bad for us, so we'd try to sabotage them whenever possible. Using Control, Destroy, and Conceal all together, we could create small imperfections in the iron they cast, which would cause their boilers to blow when fully pressurized. The resulting damage looked like bad casting, or an impure ore, or some other perfectly plausible cause. That made them doubt everything about their craft, sending them back to the drawing board.

"In contrast, when they work on brass and bronze fixtures, we sneak in and strengthen them. That has two positive outcomes for us: one, the humans focus on materials that aren't dangerous to us, and two, they get lazy with their own production techniques, meaning they rely on magic without realizing it. It's one reason the Order's public business is so profitable: kettles made entirely by human hands don't last as long, and aren't as efficient, because we've never let humans actually get very good at working brass."

She smiled. "We've kept this up for well over a thousand years. Holding them back just a bit, steering them away from iron or dangerous behaviors, and making sure that, without magic, almost everything they do would start to fall apart. They've developed entire sciences, entire industries, based on faulty assumptions, tampered evidence, and substandard practices. At this point, if magic were taken away entirely, they'd be setting themselves back a millennium, which would hopefully give witchkind time to protect ourselves."

Arcadia shook her head, clearly impressed. "You're saying that human industry has basically been at a standstill for over a thousand years?"

"Well over," Cat said with a smile. "Look at witchkind: Disemstoke's is a good example of leading-edge witchkind architecture and construction from, oh, maybe two thousand years ago. The school hasn't changed much because it hasn't needed to. But for much of that time, during the age of the Adherents, the places of ordinary witchkind didn't look much different. Our hidden spaces were small because we simply couldn't Gather sufficient power to make them bigger. Witchkind itself was at a standstill for much of that age, limited by the magic left in the world. But look at the last two centuries! I bet your families all live in spaces that would have been considered palatial less than a dozen generations before. The poorest of us live in homes a hundred times the size of the humans' and have access to amenities the humans may never have. Indoor toilets, for a start."

"All because of the Order?" Jamel said.

"Mostly," Cat said, nodding. "Humans aren't stupid. Many of them *know* that there must be better ways to do things, to do *more.* But they don't have magic. All they can do is try new approaches, and when something succeeds, they can build off that success. We just make sure they rarely succeed, and so they keep trying new things, often in completely the wrong directions, because of how we've steered them."

"Amazing," Landon said quietly.

"So that's what your training is all about. It's why those three alignments are so important to our work." She paused. "Now, we've got about two hours until dinner. Let's get back in the shop and try again."

The "shop" was the enormous barn, located a good five-minute walk from the house. It was filled with items large and small for them to test their skills against: brass boilers, bronze castings, wooden doors, stone walls, and more.

"Right now I want to focus on your really fine detail work," Cat said as they walked into the barn, drawing a groan from Landon. "It's where most of our work actually lies," she reminded them. "The idea is to make the humans think their failures are *their* fault, somehow, which means we have to be pretty sneaky. Look," she continued, walking to the far back of the barn, into an area that was set up like a small sitting area. It contained a couple of worn sofas, a beat-up wooden chair, and a small table in between them all. Against the wall was a bookcase,

stacked with tattered-looking books. A dirty, threadbare rug lay underneath everything, tying the pieces of furniture together into an obvious "room."

"This is a really good example of an actual mission that we send people on," Cat said, gesturing broadly to include the entire arrangement. "Any idea what we might be doing in a setup like this?"

They all stared at the room for several minutes, trying to see what she was talking about. Their work so far had focused mostly on introducing weaknesses in metal castings: creating hairline fractures, thinning the walls of pressure vessels, and the like. There was nothing like that here.

"Oh!" Arcadia said as something struck her. "It's the books!"

Cat nodded. "You're right. Explain why."

"Books are how everyone transmits information. If the humans have discovered something that might be dangerous, they'll write it down. If we can destroy that, they'd lose the information."

Cat nodded again. "That's one approach," she said, making it clear she was after a bit more.

"*Modify* the books?" Finley ventured. "Throw them off track with false information?"

"That's it exactly," Cat said, smiling in approval. "We could certainly use a targeted Flame construct to burn out a single page of a book, but a smart human would notice that it was missing. Then they'd go looking for another copy, and we'd be right where we started. But if we *modify* the book, we actually have a far greater impact. Who can tell me why?"

Again, it required several moments of quiet thinking, during which Cat stood patiently.

Arcadia spoke up first. "Because they won't go looking for another copy. They'll think the one they have is correct."

"And," Finley added, "we've now created a contradiction."

"Right," Arcadia said, nodding as she warmed to the line of thinking. "Now even *other* books will be suspect, because they say something different."

"And the more of *those* we can change to say something *different*..." Finley added, picking up her excitement.

"The more we can control what they know and don't know!" Arcadia finished, her eyes wide and bright.

"Now you're getting it," Cat grinned. "And so that's our exercise for this afternoon. One of those books," she said, gesturing to the bookcase, "contains a description of how to create something called a *lost-investment casting*. It's how the humans learned to create some of their larger iron castings. One step calls for a particular type of sand to be used. You're to change the description of the sand in some significant way. The bookcase has its own rune construct: you can't touch the books, but you'll hear a chime when you make the change successfully, and the book will change back shortly afterwards so the next person can try. Good luck!" she finished, giving them a cheerful wave and walking toward the exit. "Dinner will be ready in two hours, so see how far you can get by then."

"This isn't what I expected," Landon said after Cat had left.

"You were thinking more fireballs and smashing?" Arcadia teased.

"I was," Landon nodded seriously. "More like... more like Thornwaith's."

"You heard Cat," Jamel said, although his voice was dubious. Delicate work wasn't his forte either. "We're the ones who keep Thornwaith's from having to become involved."

The three continued chatting, but Finley took a couple of small steps toward the bookcase. The more he let his Rune Smith talent work, the more he started to feel magic flowing through others and through the constructs they created. This bookcase had been Forged, he could tell, its magic imbued in it almost permanently. He couldn't see any runes on it, but they could easily be on the shelves, obscured by the books, or even on the back. Changing its construct would be difficult: Forged items didn't like to be changed, often destroying themselves if you tried, as the magic had become part of their structure.

He probed deeper, the others' conversations fading from his consciousness. He could feel the bookcase's magic slipping through the books themselves, and he felt it pooling and swirling around one book in particular.

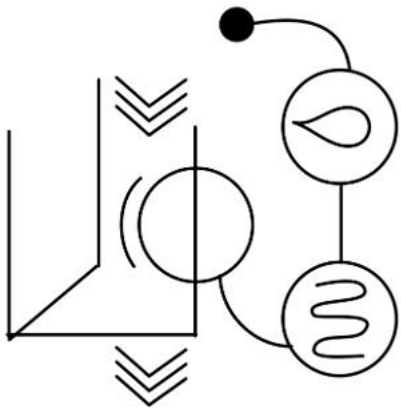
Is this cheating? he thought for a minute, but then shook his head.

The Order felt like one of those organizations where "whatever gets the job done is fine."

Summoning the Rune Smith power that was always coiled around the base of his spine, he roused it upward and outward, extending it toward the book in question. He held *description of sand* in his mind, along with the phrase *investment casting* and a general desire for *change.*

His power stretched out lazily, seeming to sniff at the book before dipping into it for a moment. It reared back, not in alarm but in apparent interest, before nosing in more purposefully.

An image began to form in his mind:



Finley held the construct in his mind, marveling at its complexity. It had a beautiful... not *symmetry,* but it made *sense* to him. It... it *fit.* And Cat wouldn't know. Or, if she did, maybe she wouldn't mind. He let his Rune Smith power draw itself back into his body and then flicked a bit of magic into the construct. It firmed up in his mind, growing sharper and clearer, before—

Bong.

His eyes flew open. Nothing about the room had changed, although there was a slight acrid smell that—

"You're kidding me," Jamel said flatly.

"Of course he did," Landon said mournfully.

"Our special Finley," Arcadia sighed. "I guess I'll give it a shot next. Any chance you'll share whatever wonderful little trick you pulled?"

Finley turned and grinned. "What do I get in exchange?"



It actually took the other three more than a week to crack the book puzzle, something Cat put them on every afternoon before dinner until they all got it. She quizzed Finley separately, marveled at the construct he'd created, and then showed him the "official" solution that the Order had been using for years. "Granted, you were asked not to use that power... but. I get it."

"It's difficult not to," Finley admitted.

"Oh? Hmm. Interesting. I'll have to keep that in mind. Anyway, your construct is a bit more elegant, but a bit less power-efficient," she said.

Arcadia was the next one to crack it, discovering some of the necessary runes one evening as she pored through the Order's extensive library of rune lore. Once she found the key runes, Finley helped her put the rest together, although her solution was closer to the Order's traditional rune construct than the new one he'd created.

"We don't expect everyone to be a genius with the constructs," Cat said approvingly once Landon and Jamel had gotten their chime of success. "But the delicacy to use them correctly—that, we need everyone to be good at. Great job, all of you."

Landon blushed: this was the first time he'd ever gotten anything "delicate" right.

Training continued on a variety of other tasks, until one day Cat pulled Finley aside after breakfast, sending the other three off with another trainer for the day.

"We've got a special visitor I'd like you to meet," Cat told him, taking him into one of the house's many large sitting rooms. An older man was already standing there waiting for them, and his dark, bushy eyebrows rose in delight when he saw Cat.

"My dear!" he said warmly, walking toward her with his arms spread for an embrace.

"It's good to see you, Monte," she said, returning the hug with energy. They held it for a moment, and then each stepped back.

"Monte, this is Finley, the boy I was telling you about." She looked carefully at Finley and added, "The runewright." She'd made it clear that his Rune Smith talent was still to be kept secret from most people, with the rare-but-not-unheard-of runewright talent being pretty much an open fact within the Order.

"Monte Bodin," the man said, taking Finley's hand for a quick shake. "Cat here tells me you've come up with something novel for iron?"

"Monte's a Thornwaith's alum," Cat interjected.

"Oh?" Finley asked.

"I am," Monte said with a nod. "We've an entire program at the school on building up a resistance to iron. Iron's been used against us more than a few times."

"It has?"

"Not too recently, but when I was young, there was a bit of a mob attack down near Nek. Carried iron pikes, long rods with a sharpened end. They'd gotten riled up by some rogue priest and were marching against the 'devil worshippers' in town. Witchkind, that is. Managed to kill a couple of us before the magic got riled up and... Well, you know how it is with us?"

Finley nodded. "Sort of. Landon's family—he's another trainee here—they're Thornwaith's."

Monte nodded. "It comes over us pretty intensely when magic feels threatened. Normally, it's a pretty last-ditch defense. It takes an immense amount of energy, but basically, the attackers get smashed flat. We've seen other attacks—huge gouts of intense heat aren't uncommon—but they never seem to have anything to do with the affinity of the alumni present. We do know that it takes at least three of us, and with too large of an attacking force, the amount of magic being channeled can kill us if there aren't enough to share the burden.

"But in that case, the magic itself seemed confused by the iron. The alums could all feel it take them in, feel it building. It struck once or twice, but they said it felt very hesitant. Eventually, as the attackers got closer, the magic made a real strike, but the iron just scattered it. That seemed to break its hold over the alums a bit, and they started to focus, concentrating on resisting the iron, as we're taught. That was enough.

Magic chose a heat strike and melted both the iron and the attackers into ash and slag."

He shook his head. "They still tell that story in school to this day, right before they toss us into a room with iron rails bolted to the walls and tell us to hang out for a couple of hours."

"Sounds familiar," Finley said dryly.

"Where do you think we got it from?" Cat grinned.

"So this new construct of yours sounds really interesting," Monte continued. "Can you show me?"

Finley looked to Cat for permission, and at her nod began sketching the construct in glowing runes between himself and Monte.

"*Interesting*," Monte said quietly, drawing out the word. "So if I—oh. Oh, I see." His eyes glazed over briefly and then cleared as he asked, "Cat, you guys still have an iron room here?"

She nodded and led the way into the basement. Monte stepped into the room by himself and came out just a few minutes later.

"It's interesting," he repeated. "And it works. I could probably hold that all day and be around iron. I could see it helping you guys with infiltration and stuff." Then he shook his head. "But I don't know that it'll help us. It's all about locking your magic inside; you can't cast anything without dropping it. I'm not even sure we could hold it if magic took control like it does. Heck, it might even keep magic from *doing* that. But I doubt we could hold it."

Cat frowned. "Well, it was worth a shot."

"Oh, absolutely, and I imagine the school will make it a part of the standard lessons. Heck, they *all* should."

"We've got the mines under control now," Cat reminded him.

He chuckled. "I'm too old-fashioned to believe they'll ever let go of iron now that they have it. They'll find more mines, you mark my words, and they'll keep them quiet for as long as they can. This construct will be useful for a good long time." He looked closely at Finley. "Runewright, huh? You cobbled all that together just from existing runes?"

Finley's voice caught in this throat. "Um, yessir," he stammered.

"Because that's all runewrights do, I'm told. Rearrange existing runes into new constructs."

Finley nodded.

"He's quick at it, too," Cat intervened. "Finley, you're due out with your friends. Why don't you go ahead and meet them?"

He nodded again and hastily made his way outside.



"How many others have picked it up?" Monte said after the boy had left.

"Just you, I think," she said quietly. "Most people don't have the memory for rune lore you do."

"We'll just hold off taking this to the school, then?" he said. "Professors will know straight away."

She nodded. "The faculty at Disemstoke's knows. Or must. Me. Our recruiter on the school faculty. We've tried to keep it quiet."

"Origin provide, I should hope so. It's been thousands of years since we had a—well, a *runewright* like that." He glanced around to ensure they were still alone. "Siuta must know."

"I assume."

Monte shook his head slowly. "Playing with fire, Cat. *Real* fire. Boy's going to be a hot commodity. Last one was an Adherent. She protected herself."

"We'll protect him," Cat said quickly.

"If you can."

With that, he gave her another brief hug and then strolled out of the house.



"Trainees, welcome to Lockstock Smallwares, the continent's premier purveyor of the finest small kitchenwares, guaranteed to last longer and stay cleaner than any competitor. I am Wilson Colet, head of sales training, and I am here to make you our newest official salespeople."

Cat had warned the foursome that Colet took his job seriously, but they hadn't quite expected a... sales pitch.

"You have, of course, been told that the Order runs a legitimate

business?" They nodded. "And that it is in the production and distribution of small kitchenwares?" Nods. "And that *all* members of the Order are trained as salespeople and expected to touch base with clients while on assignment in any given village, town, or city?" No nods. "Ah, then we shall begin there."

This morning, they'd taken over one of the mid-sized sitting rooms in the sprawling house, spreading out across the chairs and sofas in the room. Colet paced between them, turning and whirling as he did so to make eye contact with each of them as he spoke.

He took a deep breath and looked very earnestly at them. "The business was created nearly two hundred years ago and replaced a prior business that dealt in farm animals. A business I am pleased to have not been a part of, to be honest. All of the Order's businesses have one purpose: to provide us with cover. A reason to be in a town, to meet with people, and to spend some time there. Also a reason to *leave* a town after a bit and journey to another. And in order to be a successful, durable cover, it needs to be as real as possible. And I assure you, it is." He smiled. "Our products are enhanced with rune constructs, disguised as ornamental designs, that improve their durability, usability, and cleanability. We are the most respected premium brand on the market, used in homes of both witchkind and humans. We work primarily in brass, as it remains inexpensive enough for the poorer human families to afford and pretty enough for witchkind to demand.

"As field agents, you will be expected to check in with existing customers—these would be retail stores, and, in the cities or larger towns, wholesalers and distributors—who carry our proud brand. You will convey orders for product, follow up when payments have been missed, and collect feedback that can be used to improve and expand our growing line of offerings."

He paused, sweeping the room with his gaze. They were silent, and in fact slightly stunned. He beamed at them. "It's a lot to take in, and so the remainder of the day shall be spent familiarizing you with our catalog. I've even arranged a cooking demonstration, where you'll get to use some of our products in the exact same way a human might!" His grin was now slightly devilish.

"Will there be fire?" Landon muttered.

"In cooking? Of course!" Colet beamed.

"Yay," Arcadia said, distinctly unamused.



"Demonstration" had not been an apt description; Colet had directed them in *making lunch* for themselves and the half-dozen staff who were at the Farm at the time. "You're lucky the whole Order isn't here!" he'd said brightly when Jamel had moaned about having to cook "like a human."

Cat took them back for the afternoon, returning them to the same sitting room with a more serious look on her face.

"Do you know what these are?" she asked, holding out a handful of flat wooden discs about the size of her palm. They all leaned in to look, and she passed them out.

"Prayer discs," Landon said. "My sister collects them."

"Prayer discs?" Arcadia asked, bewildered.

Landon nodded. "It's part of the human religion. They carve them with little symbols, and then they say prayers to them. Things they wish for, basically. Churches have a collection box, and when you put the disc into the box, your wish is supposed to be granted or something."

Cat nodded. "That's basically it. But these prayer discs are very special, and we make them for ourselves. Take a good look."

The four of them peered intently at the intricate runes carved into the discs.

"These are Old Runic," Arcadia said at once. "Pretty inefficient."

"But they look more like what the humans carve into them," Landon said. "I wouldn't have known they were runes." He blushed, realizing he was admitting to yet another area where he hadn't excelled in school.

"This is a... transportation rune?" Jamel ventured, running a finger over the shallowly carved symbols.

"To a specific locus," Arcadia confirmed. "But I could never read the old locus runes."

"It's... it's *here,*" Finley said, sounding distracted as his runewright talent puzzled out the rune's meaning.

"But it's incomplete," Arcadia pointed out. "The input's missing. Instead..." She cocked her head to one side. "What's this bit, Finley?" she asked, pointing to her disc and leaning toward Finley's chair.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"It's peculiar to Old Runic," Cat said. "It connects this construct to another one, which ends in a mirror of that symbol—meaning the two have to come together for it to work."

Arcadia frowned. "What good is that?"

"The collection boxes!" Jamel said, delight in his voice.

Cat nodded. "Which happen to be made of brass, and happen to be made almost exclusively by a certain company you're now familiar with. It's one reason we started using Old Runic; New Runic doesn't have an equivalent connective structure."

"So when one of these goes into a collection box... it shows up here?" Landon asked, putting it all together.

"Exactly," Cat said. "The collection boxes are Forged items; they have a permanent power feed carved into their interiors, which picks up ambient magic. That connects to the runes on the discs and brings them back here."

"How'd you do all this during the time of the Adherents?" Finley asked. Old Runic wouldn't have worked back then, given how thin magic was during that time.

"We didn't," Cat said with a frown. "The scarcity of magic back then actually made our jobs more difficult. These were resurrected, oh, maybe a hundred years ago."

"Our jobs?" Arcadia said, picking up on that.

"Very much so. Churches, and their collection boxes, are ubiquitous in any human settlement. These discs allow us to almost instantly send messages back here to the Farm. Specifically to another house elsewhere on the property, where most of our actual staff live and work. And you're going to learn to use these." She pulled a fifth disc out of her pocket and held it up for them to see. "Notice how the edges are carved up?"

"They've been handled roughly," Arcadia noted. "Mine has chunks that are half ready to fall off along the edge."

"Not roughly. Those are intentional," Cat said. "And they're actu-

ally identical." They all took a moment to look at each others' discs, nodding as they saw that the seemingly random scoring along the edges was indeed the same on each. "They're sturdier than they look; none of these will come apart unless you do this." She put her thumb between two of the score marks, and her brow furrowed in a brief moment of concentration. With a *pop,* the tiny chunk of wood between the two marks broke off and fell to the floor. "The exact combination of chunks you pop out have a specific meaning. We can communicate about two dozen phrases this way, including things like 'send help,' 'things are fine,' 'fleeing danger,' things like that. And look here," she added, pointing to the center of the disc she held. "In this blank space, every disc you carry will have a unique identifier for yourself. That's how we know who a message came from. You'll never leave here without a dozen or more of these on your person, in your baggage, and scattered throughout your belongings."

She smiled again, this time with a devilish glint in her eyes. "And now you're going to learn every message that you can send home by using a prayer disc. What's more, you're going to learn to do them in the dark, with your eyes closed, behind your back."

They all groaned.

Cat was true to her word: for the remainder of the afternoon, they memorized every phrase that could be sent with the discs, until Cat brought them to the last one.

"This one is special," she said, her voice suddenly grim. "This one, we all hope you never have to send. The basic message is, 'all hope is lost.'" She ran her thumb quickly along the rim of a fresh disc, each of its segments popping off and falling to the floor. "It means you do not expect to survive, and you explicitly do not want a rescue attempt." She looked at them all for a long moment. "In many cases, you will be able to convince a human to deposit the disc for you, as a kind of last request. They're sentimental about these things. We will get it. Even if you just drop one on the street, a human will eventually pick it up and take it to the nearest church." She took a deep breath. "We will mourn you.

"But we will not send help."



After a sobering afternoon and evening of practicing with the discs until Cat was convinced they could indeed use them in the dark, with their eyes closed, behind their backs, they enjoyed a quiet dinner and went directly to their beds.

For the next week, they continued practicing both the discs and the other tasks the Order set before them: modifying books' contents, weakening structures, and more. Although the Control, Destroy, and Conceal alignments were the Order's go-to tools, their instructors also helped them become more proficient at other alignments. Speed was always valued, along with Power and Reach.

Jamel really began to master the finer, more delicate techniques they were being taught, becoming increasingly proficient at incredibly small-scale magics that were all but undetectable—even to Finley.

Finley, having mastered Power and Speed in school, focused on Reach and found himself enjoying it. Combined with Conceal and a fine touch, he found himself able to perform small, delicate magics at increasingly longer distances, almost to the point where he could modify the contents of a book that was halfway across the property and completely out of sight.

For her part, Arcadia finally mastered Power, the alignment she'd last worked on in school but never quite gotten full control of. Her magic wasn't strong enough for the brute-force blasts that Landon and Jamel could easily produce, but her tiny, delicate strikes on brass and bronze castings became so focused, and so intense, that she could cause an entire cast vessel to shatter with just a pinpoint strike.

Landon, unfortunately, continued to struggle. His proficiency with Power, combined with his Flame affinity, made the smaller, more precise manipulations of Speed almost impossible. Reach seemed to involve a level of patience and focus he couldn't quite achieve. Even his tenuous grasp of Control seemed to degrade, leaving him sweaty and frustrated after hours of attempts. Cat's expression grew more and more doubtful as she worked with Landon, and she summoned additional instructors to work with the young man.

Finley could *feel* Landon directing his magic in the right way, but there seemed to be... a *block* of some kind. Some point at which his magic would just spill out of the correct channels he'd formed in his mind and go blasting through whatever construct he was trying to empower. The results were often explosive and always destructive. Finley mentioned as much to Cat, pulling her aside and speaking in low tones.

"I know," she nodded. "We've a couple of other sensitives on the training staff, and they've told me as much." Her eyes were sad. "We'll continue working with him, but I can't help wonder if it's the thing that kept him out of Thornwaith's. There's just something... *missing*. I can't quite put my finger on it. But keep an eye on him. Anything you can offer to help, anything at all, it'd be appreciated."

Finley nodded and looked at Landon with concern and regret. The once-bully had gone through a complete reversal of personality since coming to the Farm: he'd been supportive of them all, excited at his friends' individual successes, and dedicated to trying to improve. Finley jaw set. If there was a way to help Landon through this, he'd do it.

CHAPTER 12

First Mission

Okay, you three. This is Luther. From here on out, he's in charge." Cat smiled as Luther—a short, slight man with medium-brown skin, short-cropped black hair, and hazel eyes—smiled at them.

"Welcome to your first real mission," he said. "Of course, this is expected to be fairly minor as missions go, and I'll be with you the entire time. But this is very much what the Order does on a daily basis, and so you're going to be getting a real feel for our work."

They were receiving their briefing in the main kitchen, gathered around one end of the broad island counter where they often took breakfast.

"As Cat's informed you, we've managed to close the last of the human iron mines. The ore normally requires a fairly deep dig, and our efforts over the past decades should deter them from any more major production. However, that leaves humans with two remaining sources of iron that are a bit more difficult to cut off.

"The first is reusing iron they've already mined. This has actually become quite common: as we engineer failures in the iron boilers of their iron horses, the humans are turning to brass and bronze for replacements. But that still leaves a substantial amount of iron scrap, which they melt down and sell off. On the one hand, it's a win, because we've taken an iron horse out of service and given it a less powerful boiler. But

on the other hand, it's a problem, because now we have smaller pieces of iron, which are harder to track, being distributed into cities and towns.

"The second source is the small number of low-production mining operations that have found ore closer to the surface, usually as a side benefit—to them, at least—of mining for copper and zinc. So far, none of these shallower mines has produced enough iron ore to let them resume production on iron horses, although they are getting a small number of roadway rails this way. But it's definitely producing enough ore to send off for smaller projects, which, again, can be a problem for us to keep track of.

"The Order has an entire team we call the Iron Breakers. We're scattered across the continent, and I'm part of that team. Our job is to find iron wherever the humans are using it and do whatever we can do dissuade them." He shrugged. "This is a problem we created ourselves. There's no longer enough iron ore being produced for the massive projects like the iron roadways, but there's still enough iron for smaller projects, which are harder to track.

"In this case, we've found a clock maker in Westhead who's been experimenting with smaller iron gears. That trade had never favored iron above brass and copper up to now, and so we need to find out why this has suddenly become of interest. And, of course, we need to dissuade him, if possible, likely by creating fatal flaws in the materials that make the craftsman distrust iron for its fragility or something."

"And we're to help?" Jamel asked.

"You are," Luther said with a smile. "We'll keep it simple. I'll pose as a potential buyer for his new product, and the three of you will focus on weakening it in some fashion. Our first visit to his shop will be to gather information and see the new device for ourselves. After that, we'll go to a pub and you can explain what you think will work. After that, we'll return either openly or under cover, depending on your plan, and you'll apply whatever magic you've decided on."

"And you're to follow Luther's guidance to the letter," Cat warned them, her face serious. "Even a seemingly simple mission can sometimes proceed in ways we can't anticipate, and Luther's the one with the experience to make the right calls. Got it?"

Jamel, Arcadia, and Finley nodded. Jamel asked, "Why's Landon not coming along?"

"We're still working with him," Cat said, her voice suddenly tired. "You've all seen him struggle. It just wouldn't be fair to send him on a mission like this. Not yet. But he's been applying himself really hard. I'm hoping he'll be ready for the next field mission."

"Okay, everyone," Luther said, standing from the tall stool he'd been perched on. "This should be an in-and-out, so get yourselves dressed as something passing for human, and we'll be on our way."



Westhead's humans dressed in the style that was common across the mid-sized towns, a style the initiates had become used to from their visits to Baythwaite: dour, dark-colored clothes made in simple styles. Brown linen shirts were more appropriate to the west coast's warmer temperatures, but the same sturdy, woven brown trousers were standard for men and women, children and adults. Simple black shoes, made with thick leather soles and woven tops that came midway to the knee, made for sure footing on the city's cobblestoned streets. The adults' outfits were completed by sturdy brown leather vests, each sporting a number of exterior and interior pockets. The left breast of each vest was deeply embossed with the logo of Lockstock Smallwares, a diamond shape with a small teakettle in the middle.

Arcadia, never one to give over entirely to the dull color palette of humanity, had tied a cheerful blue ribbon through her pale-yellow hair, which Luther immediate made her remove. "That pale skin of yours is going to stand out enough, especially this far west," he'd admonished her. "Let's not do anything else that would make you even more remarkable, hmm?"

They arrived just outside of town, carried by a group-travel magic that had been Forged into a bronze rod that Luther carried. "Dead useful, these," he said, tapping it against one forearm before stowing it in a pocket on the inside of his vest. "Heavy, but well-Forged. It holds enough charge to get us all home, so even if we're on the run, tired, and

in a panic, we can all get out safely, provided we can all get close enough to touch it."

Their first stop was not the clockmaker's shop, as the apprentices had expected, but rather the offices of an importer-distributor. These offices were located just off the city's wharves, and was staffed by a single young man when the four of them trooped in.

"Good morning," Luther said cheerfully. "Luther Tomil, Lockstock Smallwares. I was to see Mr. Alden?"

"Of course, of course," the young man said, nodding quickly from behind his counter. "And these are...?"

"Apprentices, nothing more," Luther said, giving them a careless wave. "Here to learn the trade, like as not to disappear before the day is done, you know how it goes."

The young man's hesitant smile suggested that he did not, in fact, know "how it goes," but that he wasn't going to argue. He ducked through a door and emerged a moment later with a spry-looking older man whose face split into a smile at once.

"Luther!" he said happily, walking up to the counter and shaking Luther's hand across it. "Saddled you with another batch, did they?"

"Either I'm the best journeyman we have or the worst; I haven't figured out which," Luther laughed.

"Well, the best by my account, to be sure," Mr. Alden said with a chuckle. "What news have you for me?"

"No news, no news, merely checking in our best customer in the region," Luther said.

"Well, the trade to Lastpointe and Bryssi has been brisk. That new little town on the island's west coast has had a booming business as well; I gather they've opened a gem mine, so they're all suddenly wealthy, wealthy. Good bit of their coin comes back here, though, and enriches us all. They *have* been on about those larger deep pots we've been having so much trouble keeping in stock," he said, his voice chiding.

"And I'm told the factory has that figured out," Luther said. "You should have a shipment next month by iron horse, out of Withring, with half a carriage full. They've created a bit of a set, so the deep pots contain a saucepan and a regular pot."

"To be sold that way?"

"Aye, at least to you. You're welcome to break up the sets if you like. Pricing is about ten percent less by the set, though, because it saves a bit on shipping to stack them that way."

Mr. Alden nodded. "That'll be fine. I assume my credit's still good?"

"Of course! And payable to the local branch as well, just as always."

"Well, then I've nought to complain about," he said cheerfully.

"Then I shall be on my way!" Luther said brightly. "Always good to see you, Mr. Alden."

"And you, young man."

Luther led them out of the small shop. "Mr. Alden truly is one of our best customers. We've almost tripled our output in the past five years just on his business alone. The coasts around here get marshy, but he invested in a small fleet of ships to service the coastal communities. More reliable, more predictable, and can carry far more. And of course, that fleet's a customer for all the brass fittings we make as well."

"But we ship via the iron roadways?" Arcadia asked quietly.

"Would be odd if we didn't," Luther said, nodding. "But we've ensured that more than a few shipments—of ours, as well as those of others—have gone late or missing from time to time. Our stuff's heavy, but already some of the lighter goods are going back to trade caravans. Used to be bandits made those dangerous, but we've been careful to provide protection, keep the roads firm, and push aside the worst weather. As the iron horses continue to break down and become less efficient, the caravans will become what they were hundreds of years ago. Ah, here we are."

They'd continued walking while Luther had spoken quietly, and soon came to a small, neat shop that announced itself as a clockworks, with one Hans Aleksandrowicz as the proprietor.

"Keep to the back."

Luther pushed his way into the shop and stepped up to its unmanned counter. The three apprentices barely fit into the rest of the small shop, taking up the width by standing abreast. Jamel, in the middle, effectively blocked the door. Luther tapped a small bell on the counter, and a middle-aged man—Mr. Aleksandrowicz, presumably—hurried through an open doorway that led to the back of the shop.

"Hello, yes?" he said, his voice friendly but hurried.

"Mr. Aleksandrowicz?" Luther asked politely.

"Yes, yes, of course," the man said, his voice still urgent. "What do you want? If it's a repair, my apprentice will be back in—"

"Actually, Mr. Aleksandrowicz," Luthor said, putting up a hand to interrupt, "we're not here about a repair. I represent Lockstock Smallwares. Rumor has it that you've worked out a new contrivance, one of iron, of all things, and my superiors have sent me to learn more about it. We manufacture a wide variety of—"

"Yes, yes, I know, of course," the man said, suddenly taking more interest. "My wife swears by your kettles. I didn't know you worked in such things, though. I'm certainly not making a teakettle."

"No, of course not," Luther said with a chuckle. "Our interests are actually quite diversified. And we're very honest about working with inventors such as yourself. No stealing of designs, strictly above-board payments to you, of course."

"Who are they?" Aleksandrowicz said, jerking his chin toward the three apprentices.

"My apprentices. One's quite keen on clockworks, you see, and so—"

"Isn't a clock, of course, but might be keeping on it nonetheless. You're all Guild-bonded?"

"Of course. Manufacturing Guild, out of Twynsits."

"Good, good. Amongst the best, in fact. Hmm." He thought for a moment "Yes, well, come along," he said, lifting a portion of the counter so that they could all walk through. "Follow me."

He led them through the door into the back of the shop, which turned out to be far more spacious. The perimeter of the room was lined with shelves, each packed with neatly arranged clocks, small wooden boxes, and more. In the center of the room was a split-level worktable, one side high enough that one could work comfortably while standing, the other low enough to require a seat. A comfortable-looking chair was pushed under that side. Mr. Aleksandrowicz led them to the higher side of the table.

On it was a small contraption, and they could all immediately feel the slight tug of iron as it dragged at their magic. They'd expected this,

and immediately cast Finley's rune construct, sealing their magic inside themselves.

The device consisted primarily of a hand crank, which Mr. Aleksandrowicz grasped and began turning slowly. As he did so, they could see a thin bar of metal attached to the crank, rotating within a somewhat larger ring. Finley stepped a bit closer, peering at the ring. He realized it wasn't a single ring, but instead a series of segments, with a small, almost imperceptible gap between each. Thick copper wires were attached to the ring segments, screwed through a hole in the ends of each. These wires appeared to be wrapped in butcher paper, and ran off to one side of the device, where they were gathered into two bundles. The ends of the two bundles faced each other, each resting on the opposite edge of a small wooden plank.

Aleksandrowicz released the crank and placed a thin, delicate-looking piece of black thread between the two bundles of copper wires.

"Watch this," he said, letting go of the black thread and returning to the hand crank. He began cranking it furiously, sweat immediately beading up on his forehead and running down his face. The little bar inside the circle of ring segments whirled so quickly it appeared to be a translucent disc.

"There!" Aleksandrowicz gasped, and they all looked toward the fragile-looking black thread.

It was glowing.

They all took an involuntary step back. Finley brushed against Jamel and felt the other boy's arm tense. This looked like *magic.*

The thread began glowing brighter, shifting from a dim red through a brighter orange, and then to an intense yellow, which began turning white at the center—so white, Finley almost looked away, almost missed the—

Snap!

The middle of the thread flared white for a moment, and then the light died. As the afterglow faded from their eyes, they could see that the thread had split and burned in the middle, the remaining edges now fading back to a deep red before dying to black.

Mr. Aleksandrowicz, panting heavily, released the handle of the device, and the whirling bar quickly spun to a stop.

"It... makes fire?" Luther said dubiously. There were far easier ways to create a spark that would light a fire, after all.

"No," Aleksandrowicz said, still panting and trying to catch his breath. "No, it's *light.* But it also produces heat, too much heat. The filament—that's the black thread in the middle, there—it keeps burning out. But if I can find a strong enough material, it'll cast an even light. Steadier than a candle. No wax needed, no wood."

"But where does the light come from?" Luther asked, confused.

"This," Aleksandrowicz said, tapping the little metal bar that had previously been spinning almost too fast to see. "And these," he added, tapping the ring of metal segments. "The bar in the middle is made of lode, such as you'd see in a compass. Just a much larger piece, of course. These," he said, caressing the ring segments, "are simple iron. When the lode is spun in that way, with the spacing to the segments so close, it... it *energizes* something in the iron. That... that *energy* flows out through the copper and into the filament. This is just the experimental version, of course. A much larger one could be constructed, could be powered with steam. The copper wires can carry the energy as far as you like, all throughout the building. Think of it! Light whenever you wanted, with no flame, no smoke."

"That is... indeed fascinating," Luther nodded, his mind racing. "Obviously there is much work to do, but this is interesting. Have you spoken to others about this?" he asked.

Aleksandrowicz shook his head. "Not really, just a couple of friends. They seemed to think I was trying to come up with an illuminated clock or something. Idiots, really," he muttered. "But your firm, you would have the money to invest in this. To help me finish it. And then to get it produced, manufactured. And distributed! I don't know much about all that. But I—"

"Could it use something other than iron?" Luther asked. "Brass, perhaps? Or just copper?"

"No," Aleksandrowicz said flatly, shaking his head. "No, whatever the lode is coaxing from the iron can *only* be coaxed from iron. I tried brass and bronze, of course; much easier to get. Copper, too. Copper can *carry* the energy, as you saw, but it cannot *produce* it. I've tried tin, even gold and silver. Zinc, of course. None of it worked. Only iron."

He paused, his face growing thoughtful. "You know, I believe it's because iron comes from such deep mines. The earth itself must hold this power, and the iron simply becomes infused with it. Which is why we must dig so deeply to get it in the first place." He shook his head. "With the mines closed, of course, it'll be harder. But with this!" His face lit up again, once more excited. "They'll reopen the mines for this!"

"Indeed," Luther mused quietly. "This is indeed... interesting. Iron being so brittle, of course—" he began.

"It's safe enough here because it simply sits," Aleksandrowicz said.

"Oh, of course. Hmm. You know, I believe I want to speak with you more about this. You say the filament has been the challenge?" Aleksandrowicz nodded rapidly. "Let me speak with a colleague this afternoon. May we return later, perhaps before dinner? Try it again, with something, as you said, a bit sturdier?"

"That would be wonderful!" Aleksandrowicz said, his eyes lighting up. "I'll clean up here and prepare it! I shall close the shop after lunch, but please, just knock and I will let you in. You truly think you may have something that could help?"

Luther nodded. "Something at least worth a try, if you're willing."

"I am!"

"Then I shall see you then!" Luther smiled, shook the man's hand, and turned to usher his apprentices out of the shop.



"I have to tell you, my first instinct was to put the man into unconsciousness and destroy the thing," Luther said, his voice tense. Rather than a pub, he'd led them to one of the spaces owned by the Order—"a safe house" was the term he'd used—so that they could have more privacy. "But this is your mission, so I want to hear your thoughts."

"I've never heard of iron containing some kind of latent energy you could coax out of it," Arcadia began. "It sounds an awful lot like magic."

"What if it is? What if iron sits around, gathering magic, and stores

it somehow? And he's found a way to release it? What if this light thing is just the beginning?" Jamel said. His tone was worried and urgent.

"It seems like that's what it *must* be," Finley said.

"I will tell you this," Luther said, his voice easing somewhat. "There is often an instinct just to end the human involved. We can do so painlessly, of course. But that always creates repercussions. He may have a family; he almost certainly has friends and acquaintances. He'll be missed. That will create investigations, even if we make it look natural. As a general policy, the Order tries to avoid death."

"Instead, we try to create confusion. Misinformation," Arcadia said, all but reciting what Cat had told them so many times. "He can then misinform others, which will set them off in the wrong directions."

"What exactly was done to close the mines?" Finley asked suddenly. "Cat told us a little about it, but I got the feeling she didn't tell us the whole thing."

Luther nodded, thinking for a moment before he said, "The human religion centers on three deities. All-powerful, supernatural forces. One governs what they call the Ascendent Domain, another is the Deeper Domain, and the third is the Middle Domain. The Middle Domain is the one they deal with day-to-day, that governs affairs during life. That's the one they pray to about their crops, about the weather, you name it. It's usually represented as a three-headed woman, with one head that of a young maid, the next of a middle-aged mother, and the third of an old woman. The other two domains rule of the souls of the dead: the Upper Domain for those who led lives of virtue, and the Deeper Domain for those who led lives of ill. The virtuous ones are said to exist in luxury and comfort, while the others are tortured and punished for eternity.

"The Deeper Domain's ruler is usually depicted as a monstrous being. Huge, with fiery eyes, a forked tail, horns upon its head, sharp teeth, that kind of thing. Basically a combination of different animals. So the teams tasked with closing the mines created an apparition in more or less that form."

"Cat had us make a fire beast," Finley said.

Luther nodded. "Basically. One designed to evoke the humans' representation of their deity."

"So... in keeping with that, perhaps this 'power' he found in iron... perhaps it's the power of that diety? Something they'd be afraid of?"

"Something *other* humans would definitely be afraid of," Arcadia said, her voice growing excited.

"Something they shouldn't mess with," Jamel said firmly.

Luther nodded. "I like where you're headed. I know one of the people who worked the mines. Let's 'cast them and get some specifics."



"Okay, everyone knows their places?"

They all nodded.

"Run it by me once more," Luther ordered.

"You're going to meet with Aleksandrowicz alone and tell him your apprentices are performing chores or something," Arcadia said. "I'm to head to the closest church—we've found one just two streets over—and tell the priest I've heard words in a strange language coming from the back of the shop at night. I'm to give him the impression I've heard something evil and convince him to come look. And I'll drop a disc in the collection box at the same time, letting the Order know what we're up to." They'd all been issued discs that would represent the four of them collectively, as well an assortment of individualized ones.

"Finley and I will be in the alley behind the shop," Jamel told Luther. "You'll send a signal when he begins—"

"I'm still pretty sure I'll feel it," Finley interjected.

"—just in case Finley doesn't feel it," Jamel amended. "Once he starts, and once the priest is nearby, Finley and I are going to create a fire apparition. It'll appear to emanate from the device, or as close as we can place it, and it'll blow right through the roof."

"It's going to be impressive," Finley said. "We're using the same shaping runes they used in the mines, but we're going to feed a lot more power into them."

"There's a chance it'll spark some of the neighboring roofs," Jamel warned.

"That'll just send a stronger message," Luther said. "Arcadia?"

"I'll work to minimize the damage by controlling the air flow," she

said. "They've a fire brigade between here and the church, so they'll respond quickly enough."

"And when the priest starts chanting?" Luther asked. His friend who'd worked the mines had said the priests had some standardized rituals to "banish" the fire constructs.

"I'm going to collapse the ground beneath the shop slightly as the 'demon' is banished back into the earth. Which aligns with how the mines were shut down," Finley said. "You are sure you're going to be okay?"

Luther nodded. "I've a strong enough Earth affinity to get Aleksandrowicz and myself out safely once I feel it coming. But I'll hit the device with a fireball, too, which should slag it."

"You'll have to put a ton more force into it to overcome the iron," Jamel pointed out.

"Who's the apprentice here?" Luther asked with a grin. "Don't worry. I've got it. Finley, you're completely certain you've got the apparition construct?"

Finley nodded. He'd gone over the construct a dozen times back in the safe house, and his runewright talent assured him the magic would flow exactly how it needed to.

"Okay. I'm due to meet Mr. Aleksandrowicz any moment now," Luther said. "And I've got a bit of carbonized thread that should last a good while if I drain some of the Flame energy off it as he starts. Presuming that works. Okay." He smiled. "Let's do this."



The timing went as perfectly as they'd hoped.

As predicted, Finley had felt it the moment Aleksandrowicz began cranking the device, a tickling sensation as the pull of the iron shifted in an odd, slippery way. He sketched the "demon" construct in the air so that he and Jamel could coordinate their efforts more easily, just as they heard Arcadia coming down the street at a trot, screaming about demons and danger, the sounds of several other feet following her closely.

They saw Acadia pass the alley entrance, moving toward the front

of the shop, three priests dressed in their billowing, cream-colored robes on her heels, just as they completed empowering the rune.

Immediately, a blazing rush of energy, accompanied by an almost blistering heat, towered above them as the fire beast took shape. Jamel pumped Flame magic into the construct while Finley controlled the apparition, twisting its horned, flowing head to the left and right before making it throw its head back and roar, sparks spewing from its mouth. The adjacent structure featured a peaked wooden roof, which immediately began smoldering. They could hear the priests now, chanting as one in the odd language of the churches' formal rites. A clanging alarm joined the fracas, summoning the fire brigade members as two other nearby roofs caught and began smoldering.

Finley bent at the waist and opened his mouth, as if roaring at the cobbles below his feet. Above, the apparition mimicked the movement, roaring at where Finley imagined the priests were standing. Their chanting got both faster and louder, and so he leaned back and roared again, gouts of flame blasting into the sky and hot sparks showering on the surrounding buildings.

With one more roar, Finley released the construct, feeling Jamel pull back his magic at the same instant. The apparition shrank back down into the clockmaker's shop, accompanied by a rush of wind that Arcadia must have added to the mix. Finley immediately called the final construct into his mind, flooding it with Earth magic and hoping Luther was ready. Almost instantly, a low *boom* shook half the town, and the clockmaker's shop collapsed, its four walls leaning inwards as its floor was swallowed by the earth.

Their job done, Finley and Jamel ran into the street, pushing through the crowd that had begun to gather and were now crouched on the ground, fearful that another tremor would knock them from their feet. Luther was there, dragging what seemed to be a half-conscious Mr. Aleksandrowicz to the feet of the priests.

"Thank all the domains you were here," Luther panted, dumping the clockmaker to the street. "It was the iron—he'd made some kind of contraption, said it was for bringing light, but—but it just erupted! It tried to take my soul, even as I ran!"

"Iron, you say?" one priest said, putting a hand on Luther's shoulder.

"Iron! Rings of it; he said they held power from deep inside the earth, and he'd discovered how to release it!"

Aleksandrowicz was awake now, coughing violently and pushing himself up to his knees. The other two priests grabbed his arms and helped him up, their faces stern.

"You'll be coming with us, Mr. Aleksandrowicz," one said firmly. "There'll be no more playing with the powers of the Deeper Domain."

Finley and Jamel threaded themselves back into the crowd, which was now being pushed out of the way by the arriving fire brigade members eager to get water onto the now-flaming roofs of the adjacent buildings. Arcadia maneuvered away, the priests' attention now fully on the clockmaker. Luther stepped into a shadow, his Earth magic drawing him away. Finley caught Jamel's arm and locked the same rune into his mind, letting the earth draw them both down and away from the scene.



"That was pretty much textbook, my friends," Luther said. They'd spent the night in the safe house, and Luther had set out in the morning to review the results of their efforts. He'd returned beaming, with cups of hot arbatos for each of them. "Aleksandrowicz, pity his soul, has been locked in a cell in the church while the priests question him. The town guard are picking through the rubble of his shop, and they've already recovered his device—which the priests immediately seized as a relic of the Deeper Domain." He sighed, blowing on the hot beverage to cool it. "Word is already going out: iron can contain residual energy from the Deeper Domain, even after it's long out of the ground. That energy can be released, allowing the deity of the Deeper Domain access to the world and all the people in it." He smiled. "We may have done more good for the Order today than we'd ever imagined. I'm betting the church is already looking at the iron horses, and even all the damn rails of the iron roadway, in an entirely new light.

"You've done well. Let's finish our drinks, clean this place up a bit, and get you back to the Farm."

CHAPTER 13

Second Mission

Okay, you four. Apparently your foray with Luther left him with a lot of after-action coordination," Cat said with a wry smile, "so Anunciata has offered to take you out on this mission."

"Call me Nunce," the shorter woman replied. "Everyone does."

"Same rules as your first mission. Landon, I realize yours was a smaller outing, so I'll just reiterate: Nunce is in charge. She'll give you your head as much as possible, and let you offer suggestions, but she has final approval. This is not a test of your ability to run your own mission, but a chance for you to participate in one led by another. Everyone clear?"

They all nodded. It had been a week since Finley, Arcadia, and Jamel had returned to the Farm. In that time, Landon had finally qualified for his own first field mission, returning with a look of quiet satisfaction on his face just two days ago. Cat had agreed to send the four of them this time on what had been presented as a "somewhat larger" mission.

"Here's the briefing," Nunce said, leaning toward them. They'd taken one of the sitting rooms for this conversation, the four of them perched on a large sofa, facing the chairs in which Cat and Nunce sat. "We're headed to Chiton. It's already cold up there, so we'll dress warm. As you know, nothing north of the Great Range has ever had connec-

tions on the iron roadway, mainly due to the difficulty getting through the mountain passes, especially given how inhospitable it is for most of the year.

"Now, a couple hundred years ago, even the hardiest humans knew to minimize their time in the mountains. More than a few of the Adherents of Sky made their homes in the Great Range, and they made sure people didn't linger. Since the end of the Axes, of course, humans have realized that there's no longer any organized opposition to their presence in the mountains. That means they've gotten braver, especially through the lower-altitude passes. Instead of just moving caravans through like they used to do, they've started building small, fortified way stations. On the one hand, that's made things easier and safer for the trade caravans, but it's also put more humans *in* the passes on a permanent basis.

"Leave humans alone long enough, and they'll find ways to get in trouble. They've invented something new, or at least the beginnings of it."

She took a deep breath.

"There's a little settlement in one of the higher passes. Been there about two years, with maybe a dozen or so humans. A month ago, it exploded. Completely shattered the whole place. Now, there wasn't much there to begin with—a couple of buildings they lived in, some storage, a stable, a building they used as a workshop. That had a decent amount of equipment, and we think they were prospecting for mines. Probably for gems, since those do occur a lot in the Great Range, but possibly also for iron. We've been tracking them, and they were carrying some of the equipment that we've seen used for deeper mines. They'd already taken some samples—they have equipment that bores out a cylinder of earth so they can bring it up and see what they need to drill through. But that's all we saw them doing.

"We checked in on them every couple of weeks. If they started a mine in earnest, we'd have had plenty of notice to work up a mission. One week, everything was fine. We sent someone in with a supply wagon full of food, some drinking water, that kind of thing. Perfectly ordinary. Two weeks later, the next wagon went up, and the place was just destroyed. Very little sign of fire, though: after the supply wagon

turned around and we got the news, we sent a Flame specialist up to look around. She said there were signs of small fires, but they appeared secondary to whatever had blasted the buildings down.

"Ordinarily, we'd have let it be. Whatever they were working on clearly went wrong, and there didn't seem to be anyone left to tell the tale. But last week, they sent a crew up with about a half-dozen wagons, and they started rebuilding. This time, our team in Chiton saw them taking some unusual supplies: jugs of different liquids, sacks of something heavy. The liquids weren't water, because we know they took plenty of that, too. We traced the liquids back to a supplier in Landshire —it was all slipoil. You ever touch the stuff?"

Four heads shook.

"It's harmless, made as a byproduct of soap manufacturing, apparently. Clear, no smell to it, really slick in your hands. Sweet taste if you get it into your mouth, and doesn't seem to hurt any if you swallow it. Some of the fisherfolk in the north make hand creams out of it, says it helps keep their skin from chafing. That's the stuff from Landshire.

"The heavy bags were from Soloton. Ground-up copper, apparently, and some kind of salt that they dig up from near the copper mines. That's the stuff that doesn't make any sense, especially along with slipoil. We've got a team investigating, but Soloton is pretty insular. Not a lot of witchkind, and it's hard to infiltrate new people and find out what's going on.

"But that's a way bigger mission than you kids need to take on. All we're going to do is head to the settlement they're rebuilding and see what they're doing. We'll start in Chiton; we've already got two supply wagons ready to go, loaded with food and building supplies. A crew of four or five is the usual for a two-wagon run, especially with heavy materials, so we won't be that remarkable. The usual schedule is to spend the night and head down the next morning. All we're to do is see what's happening and report back to the Order.

"Real talk, though? If there's something dangerous going on, I've authority to deal with it. Whatever the humans are doing, they *cannot* be allowed to create explosives with the kind of power we saw there before. So there's an element of danger to this, and it's one reason we're happy taking a bigger crew. Between us, we have all four affinities well

represented, so we should be able to deal with anything." Nunce looked completely confident.

Cat looked at them closely. "But if you're not ready for this yet, that's fine. Just say so. No negative points. We're pushing you a bit here, and we recognize that." She waited a moment, and when none of them objected, said, "Okay. Let's get you outfitted and on your way."



The trip was a long one. The magical journey to Chiton had been the quickest part of it, and they'd spent the night in an Order safe house to get an early start. But it had been a solid, three-day, plodding trip to the mountains from there, and another full day of slowly winding their way through and up the mountain pass. The snows had come a bit early this year but were still just laying down a light dusting at this altitude. It was enough to keep everyone's eyes open for slippery spots, but the horses were able to trudge through without incident. Jamel and Landon took turns casting wards of warmth over the group, holding off the worst of the biting cold that was already sinking into the mountains and promising another of the bone-shattering winters that the Great Range was famous for.

They arrived at the settlement by midday on the fifth day and were taken aback by its condition. Given that—according to Nunce—the humans had only been rebuilding for about two weeks, they'd made incredible progress. Already, four low buildings that looked like group residences were up, smoke billowing cheerfully from their chimneys. One wall of each was made of brick and stone, which must have been hauled up by wagon, with the other three walls made from rough-cut timbers that had likely been felled locally. A larger, somewhat taller building sat a ways off, and a rough-looking stable had obviously been recently finished. The original storage building was easy to spot, as a team of four men was working to remove the remains of the building, the broken, burnt lumber already stacked to one side, likely to serve as firewood at some point. One of their two wagons was loaded with wooden nails and other building supplies, clearly destined for the replacement building.

One of the men hailed them as they approached, stepping away from the building and meeting them at the edge of the road. The settlement was positioned in something of a hollow, almost a great widening of the road itself. Where most of the road could fit perhaps two wagons abreast—with even that being a tight fit in some places—this open area was maybe forty wagons across. It gave them plenty of room to pull off. Arcadia and Landon started unhitching the horses as Nunce greeted the human who'd come to meet them.

"You're right on time," the man said. "Name's Carver. There's room in the stable for your horses, although we've only three beds in the one building for your crew. Other two are welcome to the stable, if you like. Plenty warm enough, and it's got its own fireplace."

"That's do just fine. Need some help unloading?" Nunce asked him. "Not officially on the bill, but we're not afraid of a little lifting, and it'll help keep us all warm."

"That'd be appreciated," Carver said with a nod. He looked over the wagons, where Arcadia and Finley were just pulling off the tarps that covered their cargo. "You've none of those flagons from Soloton, have you?"

Nunce shook her head. "I wasn't been aware of any liquids from Soloton. I've got peg nails, brass strapping, and some tools in the one," she said, pointing to Finley's wagon. "Bags of dry mortar and a barrel of water, too. Other one has food. Fresh stuff is in crates, hard tack in the sacks. No flagons."

"Good," Carver said, wiping his forehead. "Picky things, those. Haul 'em all the way up the pass and they're fine, but twist 'em just the wrong way and they're leaking everywhere. Makes more than a mess, I can tell you."

"Even more glad we don't have them," Nunce said with a smile. "Where would you like all this stuff? Looks like your big storage barn is still a dream."

"Aye, 'tis that," Carver said. "A dream of sweat and tears, let me tell you. Load the food into the first bunkhouse," he said, indicating the nearer of the three low buildings. "That's why it's only got three bunks —it's also our supply house for the moment. Rest you can just pile up where we're working. We'll have use of it all soon enough."

"Don't see any new lumber, yet," Nunce pointed out.

"No, Darin and Antwan are out felling trees now with the horses. They'll drag a load back 'round sunset, and we'll start hewing it and posting them tomorrow, now that you're here with the peg nails."

"Just the six of you, then?" Nunce asked casually as she and Carver grabbed a crate apiece off the one wagon.

"Six that're more useful than a snowflake in winter," he grumbled. "*Misters* Dunlop and Modro, if you please, spend their time in yon workshop. Where all the fussy flagons go, along with most of their meals. Sees 'em for breakfast and at night, more often as not. Forget to light their own damn fire, distracted as they are." Indeed, Finley could see the workshop's chimney, but it stood cold and lifeless, even though the temperature outside was already falling as the sun crested across the sky.

"Well, happy to join you for dinner, at least," Nunce said, cheerfully directing the four apprentices to begin unburdening the wagons.

They worked for almost an hour to unload, and during that time Finley noticed that Nunce made sure to rotate between them all, helping each in turn so that she could impart instructions. Arcadia was to be their spy, using her Sky magic to discover whatever she could about the buildings, their contents, and the humans here. Finley was to use his Earth magic similarly, moving quietly through the compound at night and finding out whatever he could. Jamel and Landon were to keep their senses open at all times. Whatever had caused the explosion must have had at least some connection to Flame magic, and they'd be the ones most likely to detect it, apart from Finley.

They finished unloading a bit before dinner. Jamel offered to help prepare the meal, offering up some of the group's own provisions to supplement the settlement's newly restocked supplies. The men accepted his offer with good cheer, introducing him to Kai, who did most of their cooking. As predicted, Darin and Antwan returned with two horses dragging a sled of felled, de-limbed trees, and accepted Landon's offer of assistance to roll the logs off next to the construction site.

That left Finley, Arcadia, and Nunce some quiet time, which they

spent in the bunkhouse-cum-storage barn they'd been assigned to for the evening.

"Sense anything so far?" Nunce asked quietly as Arcadia wove a construct of silence over them.

Finley nodded. "There's something in the workshop."

"Something?"

"The Earth magic here feels... insulted, somehow. It's disrupted, and badly. There's Flame magic around it, but even that feels... odd."

"Tell me how it's odd," Nunce instructed, listening carefully.

"Earth magic is always settled. Even when you're doing a big working, it's always quiet and settled. It just lies there, and you move it around like pushing dirt with your hands. Flame magic moves in fast bursts. It'll puddle for a minute, sort of... roll around, I guess. It comes quickly when you call it, lingers after you're done with it, and moves in... in fits, I guess. Like a grackle-bird."

Nunce nodded slowly, understanding. "And now?"

"The Earth magic has holes in it. It's staying away from the workshop. The Flame magic is, too, except it keeps darting back like it's curious. But it stops. I can't feel any magic from within the workshop. It feels... dead."

"The Sky magic, too," Arcadia put in. "It's there, because it can't stand to *not* be everywhere, but it's reluctant."

"I wouldn't expect a strong presence of Sea magic here, of course," Nunce said. "But I agree—there's moisture here, at least, except in there."

"So what do we do next?" Arcadia asked.

"I was going to ask you," the older woman said with a smile.

"Well, I guess I'd want to get a look in there."

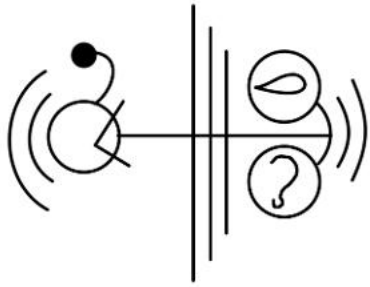
"Without being seen," Finley pointed out.

"Of course," Arcadia said. "And you know, I think I've an idea." She cast the simple magic that let her draw runes in the air. "The construct for 'casting. Could we use that?"

"That takes an active recipient," Finley objected.

"Yes, but it's not all that different from the runes the staff used to send announcements throughout the school, right?" She drew a second rune next to the first.

"Right, but that one is one-way *from* the caster... hmm." He looked at the construct for a moment, his runewright talent seizing the challenge. "What if..." he said, one finger poised to draw something. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Power wouldn't flow correctly." He paused again. "Hmm." His hand flew up, and he quickly sketched a new construct:



Nunce's eyes widened. "Wow. They told me, but... wow. That's an all-new construct, right?"

Finley nodded. "But the component runes already existed. This just has them in a different order. We should be able to see and hear them, but it'll be one-way."

"This is... complicated," she said, her eyes tracing the swooping lines and curves. "You're sure it'll work?"

"I'm sure. But... it needs Sky affinity."

"I can empower it," Arcadia said confidently. "Shall I?"

"No time like the present," Nunce said with a shrug. "Let's see what we can discover before the dinner bell."

Arcadia closed her eyes, holding Finley's new construct in her mind. Immediately, the wall she was facing began to ripple, as if it was no longer solid wood and was instead made from a viscous liquid. The ripples increased in frequency until the wall itself seemed to disappear, revealing the interior of the workshop.

"Wow," Finley said quietly.

Their view was from somewhere higher than eye level, giving them a good overview of the entire workshop. Two men—Dunlop and Modro, presumably—were in the high-ceilinged building. Each was dressed in layers of warm clothing, his face wrapped in scarves so that only his eyes were visible. Tables lined the perimeter of the workshop, covered in neatly arranged tools and large glass vessels. Supplies were stacked under the tables, and just at a glance, Finley could see a small pile of yellowish-white granules next to a similar pile of irregularly sized chunks of copper. Leather-covered flagons were lined up under another table.

The center of the space was empty, but the earthen floor was... full of holes. They were regularly spaced, as if they had been drilled out according to a grid, and each hole was only a thumb's length across.

"Wish we could get some damn heat in here," one man said.

"You know this stuff is even more delicate when it's warm. Might as well take advantage of the cold."

As they watched, the second man slowly poured a handful of ground-up copper chunks into one of the glass vessels, which was already filled with a clear liquid. As the copper hit the liquid, it steamed —as if the copper was hot, somehow.

"This batch looks ready," the first man said. He'd moved over to one of the other vessels and was peering carefully at it. "Copper's almost gone; we can probably strain the rest. Think you're up for a test today?"

"Absolutely not," the second man said forcefully. "We've got two delivery wagons and their crews out there, and they're staying for the night. No, we'll announce a test tomorrow. Lord knows it'll put those idiots off their work for the day as it is."

"Hope those wagons have some fresh food."

"They usually do. I'm just glad we stopped trying to ship the finished sprogi-water up here. Stuff's way too finicky. It's far easier to just make it here, even if it takes a little longer."

"Once we get a routine going, I don't even think that will be a problem. The boss estimated we'd only need a dozen flagons or so. Won't take us a month to make all that."

"True. When we—"

A loud gong interrupted him.

"That's dinner," Nunce said. "Let it go." Arcadia nodded, and the

wall rippled back into place. “I think we’ve seen what we need to see,” Nunce said, bundling back into the coat she’d only just removed. “Let’s have dinner, get to sleep, and head down at first light.”

Arcadia and Finley nodded, pulling their gloves back on and heading for the bunkhouse door.

“Although,” Finley said, stopping before he opened the door. “Would it be helpful to get some of that liquid?”

Nunce stopped and gave him a hard look. “Of course. And some of that granulated stuff, the salt or whatever it is. But—”

“I think we can,” Finley said.

“How?”

“I’ll tell you after dinner, and you can decide if you want to try. It’ll take... mmm, three of us, I think.”

Nunce nodded slowly. “Let’s talk after dinner, then.”



“You sure your other ’un will be okay?” Carver asked.

They’d filed into the fourth bunkhouse, which had been equipped as a common dining area—and which was still serving as temporary storage space, as evidenced by the crates and bags piled against the two long, wooden walls. The hearth at the back of the room, built into the stone wall, blazed merrily away, keeping the building warm and comfortable.

Arcadia had remained behind to execute her part of the plan.

“She’ll be fine,” Nunce said cheerfully, spooning a small portion of roasted tubers onto her metal plate. “She’s honestly not that social, not all quite right in the head, if you take my meaning. She’s got some trail rations, and she’ll prefer them to trying to be polite in company, trust me.”

Carver nodded and gave her a small smile before returning to his meal.

“You’ll be leaving in the morning, then?” one of the other men, who’d been introduced as Mr. Dunlop, asked.

Nunce nodded. "First light, if not just a bit 'afore. Hope to get down the mountain and well into warmer weather before we camp for the night."

"Safe journey to you, then. So it'll be an early night?"

Another nod. "Bed right after this excellent meal, yep. We certainly appreciate your hospitality for the night."

"That's what this will be, you know," Mr. Modro offered, a friendly smile on his face. He and Dunlop had strolled into the building just as the food was being laid out. "A waypoint for trading caravans. We mean to get the road a bit firmer, maybe a bit wider in places. Make a route straight to Farreach in the North. It'll become an even bigger hub for trade to the west and south."

Nunce offered a noncommittal reply of some kind, but Finley'd stopped following the conversation. As he ate, he eyed Landon carefully. The larger boy sat at the end of the table, with Jamel between him and most of the humans. Landon's eyes were glazed, and he ate distractedly. Finley could feel his magic darting around the room, his Control alignment barely sufficient to the task he'd been given.

As Finley had quickly laid out his plan, they'd realized that while they had the right affinities to execute it, those affinities weren't all in quite the right people. Arcadia would need to be the one to enter the humans' workshop, her Sky magic being the best suited to slipping her in and out unseen and unheard. It was too small a trip for any of their travel magics, so she'd need to use the door, but her magic could help quiet her movements and help her move the heavy-looking workshop door. Jamel's magic—and his considerable expertise with the Endurance alignment—was needed to create the eventual distraction their plan called for, meaning it fell to Landon's Earth power—and his much dicier mastery of Control—to deaden the air just outside the building, drawing any vibrations down into the still, solid ground and helping to muffle any sounds Arcadia might make in the workshop. Finley's own contribution required him to gently Forge magic into the building's lone door, something only Earth magic could accomplish, and their only hope of containing the humans if something went

wrong. Landon's Earth magic was far more powerful, but his Forge alignment was even weaker than his Control.

He hated that Arcadia was the one being sent into the most dangerous part of the plan, but Nunce couldn't have excused her own absence from dinner, and the two boys' Flame affinities worried her, having heard the humans' comments about their liquid being less stable around warmth. Her own Sea magic was all but useless, leaving it to her to carry on whatever dinnertime conversation was required.

Finley was also monitoring Arcadia, sensing her subtle magic as well as following her footsteps on the earthen floor of the workshop. She'd made it in, and was standing still—hopefully as she carefully extracted small samples of the liquid from the batch the humans had indicated as ready.

There: she was moving again, slowly but purposefully. Soon, she'd reach the door, which they'd discovered was both heavy and hinged in such a way that it was easy to close but difficult to open. They'd had only a vague idea of the kind of containers she'd be able to secure for carrying her samples, and so Jamel was to create an explosion high in the mountain above them, covering any noise she made while exiting the building. Finley locked eyes with Jamel across the table: one blink would indicate Arcadia's proximity to the door, and a second would be his cue to trigger the explosion. It would be loud but harmless, hopefully mimicking crash of snow or a falling tree, far above the encampment.

That was when Finley felt Landon's Control falter.

The boy's Earth magic was drawing too hard, pulling so much motion out of the air that the sound-deadening layer he'd created was actually growing colder than the air around it. The surrounding air was rushing in, creating the equivalent of a localized windstorm—and it definitely wasn't quiet.

"What in the void...?" Carver said, standing from his chair and looking at the wall that had suddenly begun shaking for no apparent reason.

Jamel's eyes flew open as even Nunce's attention was drawn to the wall. Landon gasped, his Control finally faltering completely and his magic dispersing. Finley felt Jamel's own power waver, and he gave the other boy a quick shake of his head. Jamel could hold that much power for a long time, but he'd neared the end of his limit. He nodded at Finley, releasing his power slowly and harmlessly into the ground below them. Finley reached out for Arcadia and found her still in the workshop, likely startled by the racket Landon had raised.

"The shop!" Dunlop said, alarm in his voice. He and Modro stood as one and moved toward the door.

Finley yanked on the threads of magic he'd been Forging into the door and its frame, magic becoming part of the wood and binding it all together as if it was a single piece. The two humans pushed on the door and, finding it frozen in place, began throwing themselves against it.

Now! Finley thought, willing Arcadia to leave the shop at once, but obviously she couldn't hear his thoughts without a rune construct to carry them to her. He started pulling together a 'casting construct in his mind, made more difficult by their lack of a shared affinity, when the door shattered, unable to resist the humans' combined weight, and they all spilled out into the night, the cold air rushing in and causing the fireplace to flicker violently.

Something exploded.

It was loud, but what struck them all was the force of it. The earth itself shuddered, muddying Finley's perceptions, and almost everyone fell to their knees. The air itself seemed to push against them for a brief moment, making them dizzy.

Nunce bolted out the door, hot on the humans' heels, Finley and Landon just steps behind her. They ran out into the night and skidded to a halt as they saw the workshop—or what remained of it. Something had blown off an entire corner of the building, including half of one wall, the door, and all of the wall that had contained the door. The remains of the roof sagged crazily into the open space in the center of the building.

Arcadia lay motionless in the frost-encrusted dirt, halfway between the workshop and their bunkhouse door.

The humans were screaming orders, running into the wrecked

remains of the workshop. Nunce immediately ran to Arcadia and tried to pick her up, but it was obvious she was unconscious—or worse. Landon pulled the girl off the ground, hoisting her up in his arms.

"In the wagon," Nunce ordered quickly, ducking into the bunkhouse and grabbing the small bags they'd had packed and ready. These she tossed toward Finley, who reflexively steadied himself with Earth magic as he caught them. In almost the same motion, he turned toward their wagons to dump the bags in.

"The horses!" Nunce called, running for the stables. There were four in total, Finley remembered: she'd need help.

The horses—include the humans'—were anxious, wide-eyed and neighing at the commotion. This was where Nunce's Sea magic could help, and Finley quickly felt a cool wave of calming, reassuring energy flow over the animals. They quickly led their horses out, Finley muttering thanks that they'd left the animals bridled and ready for an early departure.

Landon ran to help them, having left Arcadia safely in the back of one of the wagons. He and Nunce began hitching the animals while Finley checked on Arcadia. She was breathing, he saw, but only shallowly. Blood ran down her face, and he pushed a bit of healing Earth magic into her. More magic helped him pull the wagon's heavy canvas cover over her against the cold, while Flame magic created a small bubble of warmth around her. He trickled a bit of that into himself, too.

Jamel was standing a bit in front of the wagons as the humans came running out.

"What's this all about?" Dunlop shouted. "Was she sneaking in here?"

"It might have just been a damn animal," Carver shouted at the other man. "All it would take is a snow-squirrel to knock over one of those damn jars and set all of this off!"

"Why are you all off in such a hurry?" Dunlop shouted, ignoring Carver.

"If things are going to be exploding, I think we're best off on the road, even in the dark," Nunce shouted back, her voice full of fear.

"I think you'll need to answer some questions," Modro yelled, he and a couple of the other men starting to advance toward the wagon.

"Keep back!" Jamel cried firmly. "We don't know what's going on here, but we'll have no part of it!"

"There's no way this was spontaneous," Modro replied loudly. "Not with it this cold. Someone was tampering!"

Finley moved to help get the last two horses into their traces, and saw that Jamel was carrying a piece of wood about the length of his arm. He'd gotten the end of it to light, and Finley could feel his Flame magic keeping the wood burning even in the howling, freezing wind. He waved it back and forth a few times now, gouts of flame whooshing behind the wood as it swung. It was a far more impressive display than ordinary fire could be credited with, but hopefully the humans wouldn't realize that.

Orange light glinted off the long knives the humans had produced.

Finley's mind locked up, all his special talents abandoning him as if blown away by the fierce mountain winds. He reached for one of the most basic constructs he knew, grasping deep within the earth to bind the men's feet. Some of them stumbled, but Finley's execution was sloppy, and none of them were held fast. His magic slipped away, and he began running toward Jamel.

"Finley, no!" he heard Nunce yell, and he skidded to a stop, turning to look back at her.

A thunk drew his attention to the wagon Arcadia was in, which had suddenly sprouted a heavy-looking knife from its side. He blinked and turned back to the humans, who were slowly surrounding Jamel. One still had his arm outstretched toward the wagon just behind Finley and Jamel, and as Finley watched, he lowered his arm to his belt, withdrawing another heavy knife from a series of sheaths.

"In the wagon!" Nunce cried. She'd already taken the reins of one, and Landon was scrambling into the seat of the other.

Finley turned back to see Jamel rapidly backpedalling, attempting to stay in front of the humans without letting them surround him.

Finley leapt into the back of Nunce's wagon, and she slapped the horse's reins to get them moving.

"Jamel!" Finley cried. "Get in!"

The knife-thrower's arm snapped forward again, and Finley instinctively reached out with his mind and magic, pulling a rock out of the earth to meet the knife in midair. The thrower blinked in momentary confusion.

Jamel made a decision.

Finley felt the magic swirling into him; Flame magic was less common this high up and in this kind of cold, but was still sufficient to fuel what Jamel was doing. It took less than an eye blink for that magic to flow into Jamel, through his arms, and into the tip of the wood he was holding. He jammed that wood into the ground, an action that would ordinarily have snuffed the flame that had somehow managed to survive the fierce winds, but with Jamel's magic behind it, something entirely different happened.

A giant wall of flame rushed from Jamel directly into the workshop, ripping along the ground and nearly bowling the humans over in a great blast of heat. Nunce's wagon was already pulling away to safety, Landon's wagon right behind it. A clattering thud followed as Jamel leapt into the back of Landon's wagon.The horses, finally panicked beyond even Nunce's ability to calm them, were picking up speed rapidly, the nearly empty wagons presenting little impediment in their race to get away from all the chaos.

The workshop exploded.

An answering force of flame, heat, and pressure roared from Finley and Jamel, their Flame magic meeting and forming a rough shield behind Landon's wagon as the horses surged into a barely controlled gallop. As they rounded a bend and the destruction passed from sight, they could still see a pillar of smoke and flame pouring into the sky. Then the debris came raining down. A chunk of something clipped Finley on the head, and he saw only blackness.



"How're you feeling, my dear?" Nunce asked softly.

They'd kept moving quickly throughout the night, magic helping light the road so the horses wouldn't injure themselves or carelessly take them off a cliff as they descended the pass. Arcadia had started coming to about an hour after sunrise, and Nunce had traded places with Finley to care for the girl. Sea magic was even better at healing than Earth, although neither Finley nor Nunce were skilled in anything but the roughest field-healing magics.

"I'm—okay, I think," Arcadia said. Finley had managed to stop the bleeding, and Nunce had cleared some of the blood and dirt from her face, at least. She was badly bruised and had at least one broken rib.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Finley looked back and saw Arcadia nod slightly. "I'd gotten two small glass bottles filled with the liquid. It was clear, and smelled... metallic, I guess. I'd made it to the door and was about ready to push it open when I heard a—I don't know. It sounded like something was pounding on one of the buildings." *Landon,* Finley thought grimly. "There were no windows, so I couldn't see anything, and I had all my magic wrapped around me to muffle any noise. But the building seemed to... to vibrate, I think." She paused for a moment, and Finley heard her shift slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position. "I went to push the door again, and I heard something—something glass—fall behind me. Then it was..." She stopped and seemed to think for a moment. "I don't really remember. I was... flying, I think. I remember hitting the ground. It was... it was oddly quiet."

"The bottles?" Nunce asked quietly.

"I must have dropped them," she said. "What happened?"

"The sound you heard was Landon's Control going off," Nunce said, softly enough that Landon, in the wagon behind them, wouldn't hear. "It created a vibration against the wall of the building. It must have knocked over whatever fell in the shop."

"But all that was in there were those jars of liquid," Arcadia said.

"That liquid must be explosive," Nunce said. "After we got you into the wagon, Jamel sent a wave of fire into what was left of the building.

It went up like... honestly, I've no words. Like nothing I've ever seen. I'm surprised we weren't all killed."

"I almost was," Finley said ruefully. He'd woken not long after he'd been knocked senseless, but his head still throbbed where he'd been hit.

"There was a lot of debris, and no brave young woman of Sky magic to weave a shield for us," Nunce said, and Finley could hear the smile in her voice.

"So we failed?" Arcadia asked.

"Hardly," Nunce said, her voice suddenly stiff. "No, we may not have gotten a sample, but I think I know what was going on up there."

"What?"

"How much do you know about how the humans build their mines?"

"They dig?" Finley offered.

"They do, but they've found more efficient ways to dig than mere shovels. There's a black powder they make. They pack it into small sacks and drop it into holes they've drilled into the earth."

"Like the ones in that workshop?" Arcadia asked.

"Very much so. The bags have a string tied to them, and they set the string alight. The flame travels along the string until it reached the powder bag, which then explodes. It's quite forceful, and it fractures the rock, breaking it up for easier removal. I'm guessing they've been experimenting with something even more powerful," she concluded grimly.

Arcadia hissed slightly as the wagon hit a rut in the road.

"Sorry," Finley said.

"It's okay."

"Arcadia, can you use your magic, maybe? Hold yourself a bit off the wagon bed, at least for a bit?"

She was quiet for a moment, and Finley strained to feel her magic at work. She'd always been the hardest of them to detect, but he felt nothing.

"No," Arcadia said in a soft voice that was laced with fear.

"It'll come back," Nunce assured her. "A hard knock on the head will usually do that, and it's nothing to fret over. Here, let me bunch up this canvas a bit more, and we can try and make you more comfortable that way."

Finley's heart filled with dread and regret as he guided the horses back toward Chiton.

CHAPTER 14

Doubt Sets In

Finley pulled his arm back and snapped it forward, and the rock he'd been holding arced high into the sky before falling back into the meadow's tall grass.

They'd taken longer than planned to return to Chiton, taking it easy to help keep Arcadia more comfortable. Their supplies had lasted only because Nunce had decided to stop at smaller hamlets along the way rather than camp every night, figuring Arcadia could heal more quickly in a proper bed than in the back of the wagon. And she did: in one hamlet, they'd found an older woman of witchkind who was skilled at healing and who'd given them places in her own home for the night. She'd sent them off with a broth that she promised would make them all feel better, and that had seen them through to Chiton's gates. From there, they'd reported into the local coordinators for the Order and then magicked themselves back to the Farm.

Another team would be sent on foot—and therefore able to use magic, enabling them to travel far more swiftly—back to the humans' mountain encampment. Scouts had already surveyed the encampment, and sent back word that everyone appeared to have been killed in the final explosion: they'd found the right number of bodies, although they'd had to count arms and legs to be sure. The explosion apparently hadn't left much, and what it hadn't destroyed, the local wildlife was

already well into. The four bunkhouses and the under-construction storage building—as well as the stables and the humans' unfortunate horses—had been all but leveled. The team had recovered some of the salts and copper shavings the humans had been using, although they hadn't found evidence of anything else. Teams were already working to trace the supplies in an attempt to find whomever had set the humans' plans in motion.

"If there is any hope to take away from this," Cat had told them over breakfast, "it's that they'll be scared to try whatever they were doing again. That's two encampments lost to whatever trickery they're up to."

Arcadia's magic had slowly come back, just as Nunce had predicted, and after a day or two at the Farm, she pronounced herself feeling quite normal again.

Finley was feeling anything but.

They'd excused the apprentices from any further practice or training for a week, giving them time to recover and sort out their feelings. Three days in, and Finley wasn't feeling any more sorted than when they'd arrived. He'd taken to spending his mornings and afternoons in the fields and meadows, walking slowly, throwing rocks, and thinking.

"Quite an arm you've got there," a deep, gruff voice said behind him.

He jumped, startled, and saw a tall older man standing there. He had the pitch-black skin of a Southerner, and his face was weathered and deeply lined, like those of the older fisherwitches in Finley's home village. His hair was pure white and short-cropped, and his green eyes were hard. He was dressed simply, as almost everyone at the Farm was, in homespun black pants and a linen shirt, the top buttons of which were undone. Finley could see an angry, twisted mass of scar tissue on his chest, reaching almost to the hollow of his throat.

"Sorry," the man added with a small snort. "Didn't mean to startle you. You're Coughlan, right? Finley?"

Finley nodded.

"Call me Ram. I'm... well, I've been here a long time. I'm told you had a bit of a rough first outing?"

"Second, really," Finley said. "But yeah."

Ram snorted again. "First mission's always a cakewalk. You know you probably had ten of us backing you up, right?"

Finley blinked and shook his head.

"No chance of failing the first one. Second one's real. Guessing it felt real to you."

Finley nodded.

"So what's got you?"

Finley sighed. "I don't know. It just... Arcadia was almost killed."

"Konowol, right? The pale one?"

"Yeah."

"You went to school together, I take it?"

"We all did. Me, Jamel, Landon, and her."

"So you're close."

"I guess."

"Well," Ram said, sighing and looking off across the meadow. "There's no easy way to say it. This is dangerous work, sometimes. People get hurt. Killed. But it's good work. You been told what we think they were up to up there, those humans?"

"Explosives."

"For mining, if nothing else. To reopen their iron mines, or make new ones. Course, they'd explode *us* if they knew about us." He shook his head and looked back at Finley. "Thinking about quitting, I'm guessing?"

Finley thought for a moment. "Maybe. Yes. Maybe. I don't know."

"I get that," Ram said with a curt nod. "Smart thing to think about, really."

"It is?" Finley's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Course. Like I said, this is tough stuff." He sighed again. "You're close to graduating from our little program here, you know. Then you'll be off in the field. Sometimes on your own, sometimes with others. Won't always be dangerous." He shrugged. "Often is. Nature of being around humans, trying to thwart them." He paused for a long moment, scanning the grassy horizon. "They're not evil, you know."

"Who?"

"Humans. They're just careless. Don't think ahead. Don't under-

stand the damage they might do. Some are greedy, yes. Some are evil. Most are just…" He stopped and shrugged again. "They don't live as long. They don't think as long. They need magic, just as we do, although they can't *know* they need it. So we just stop them from doing stupid things."

He looked back at Finley, his eyes glinting with… anger?

"You've seen them do some stupid things," Ram said. It wasn't a question.

Finley nodded.

"And you're a rare talent. Very rare."

Nod.

"You still want to do this? That's what you've been asking yourself, walking around out here the past couple days, right?"

"Yeah."

"You haven't seen the good we've done, really. Just the cost we sometimes pay. Maybe what happens when we don't act." He shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment before continuing. "So, what's your answer?"

Finley looked at him for a moment, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

"Your answer. You staying in this or not?"

"I don't know. Professor Brys—he was back at Dismenstoke's, he—"

"I know Brys," Ram interrupted gruffly.

"If I don't graduate, they have to… they have to take all this away. It might hurt my magic, even."

Ram snorted. "A Rune Smith? Hardly. You can go. We'll keep an eye on you at most. Probably wind up in Evermore, working for the Taryba, I expect. Rent you out so you can make new runes for everyone. You'll be rich. Probably do a lot of good, too." He paused and took a step closer to Finley. He was tall, and Finley had to force himself to meet the man's eyes instead of looking at the mass of twisted brown scar tissue rising up his chest. "We're barely holding our own with the humans, you know," he said, his voice a soft growl.

"What do you mean?" Finley whispered.

"We've shut down their iron, but they'll find more. Some of them

suspect us. Witchkind, I mean. The Veil's thinning, after all these centuries. So they move carefully. The ones in charge, that is. They'll find more iron. They'll find a way to tell us apart from themselves again. They'll find out that we've lived amongst them in secret. They'll resent that. They'll find out we've held them back. They'll resent that, too. Even more. And they'll come Hunting us. Not much for living in harmony, humans. Never have been, as far as we know."

He stepped to one side and started walking past Finley toward the distant trees on the edge of the meadow, forcing Finley to turn around and follow him. "I've been here a long time, boy. Those damn iron roadways were my fault, my mistake. I was here when they happened, and we should have seen them coming. But I've never felt the humans so... so *close* to us before. Never felt like we were just hanging on. Barely hanging on."

He turned back to Finley. "We need your help, Coughlan. As I'm sure Brys told you. I could tell you more stories, stories worse than your friend—Lydia Stempak, was it? Far worse. I could even show you some of the good we do, where we've kept the humans at bay." He shook his head. "But you still need to have that answer of yours."

He took a step without turning toward Finley, and then took another. Finley started to follow him, but stopped when he sensed the conversation was over.

"Graduation's soon, boy. Have your answer by then."

CHAPTER 15

Graduation

Graduation day arrived.

Finley had spent the past week and more going over his feelings. He'd spoken with Cat, Nunce, and—perhaps most importantly—Arcadia, who was unwavering in her commitment to the Order.

"But you could have been killed," Finley had protested.

"I knew this was dangerous when I signed up," she'd countered. "It's more dangerous *not* to continue. Do you know how many people will be in this graduating class? How many of witchkind will join the Order *this year*?"

Finley hadn't.

"Four. The Order almost never grows; between people being injured or killed, aging out, or deciding they can't handle it anymore, they barely stay even. I can't *not* continue."

That had jarred Finley, realizing how delicate the Order's numbers were. That, and Arcadia's firm, thought-out decision to continue had been enough for him.

It hadn't, however, been enough for Landon.

"Graduation's tomorrow," Cat had told Finley, Arcadia, and Jamel the night before. They'd gathered in one of the smallest sitting rooms, a fire roaring in a fireplace that was completely outsized for the room. If it hadn't been for magically assisted ventilation, Finley suspected the

room would have been roasting. "And unfortunately, Landon isn't going to be joining you. It'll be you three and a young woman named Cora, who's been working with another group."

"What happened?" Jamel asked.

Cat sighed. "He just couldn't master the Control alignment, and too much of our work depends on precision. You all know what happened in the mountains. I've had two specialists working with him since you all got back, and he just can't get his magic to respond properly."

"What'll happen to him?" Arcadia asked quietly.

"He'll have his memories erased. Well, modified. He'll believe he signed on for an apprenticeship that didn't go well. We've placed him into an actual apprenticeship where he's likely to do just fine, one he can be proud of."

"His magic?" Finley asked. Brys had warned him of what the memory-erasing magic could do.

"It'll be fine," Cat assured them. "The memory modification can diminish someone's fine control over magic, but frankly, that's his problem to begin with." She sighed. "We felt we'd gotten him closer, these past months, but his magic just isn't suited to our missions. And he knew the risks." Her face looked a little sad, Finley thought. Maybe *resigned* was a better word.

They'd spoken for a while longer, and then Cat had left them alone to discuss. They all felt badly: Landon had really come around since arriving at the Farm, and they'd gotten closer to him in the past few months than in all their years at Disemstoke's.

The next morning, the three of them, joined by a steely eyed woman who introduced herself as Cora, assembled in one of the basement rooms. Built from stone and easily thirty feet underground, the room was big enough for no more than a dozen people and was clearly intended for formal ceremonies like this. A small wooden lectern sat at the front of the room, and magically powered torches on the walls provided a warm, flickering light. It struck Finley that the room strongly resembled the auditorium at Disemstoke's, rendered in extreme miniature.

Cat joined them as their trainer, along with an older man named

Shon, who had worked with Cora and her group. Finley wondered for a moment how many people in Cora's group had just had their memories modified. But he didn't wonder long: his thoughts were interrupted when Ram walked into the room, closed the door behind him, and moved to stand in front of the lectern.

"Good morning," he said in his deep, gruff voice. "My name is Ramirokovit Siuta, and I am Head of the Order of Some." He paused for a moment to let them absorb that, then continued. "I have worked with the Order for more than a century, starting directly from school, just as you are doing. I have been its Head for almost fifty years, shepherding our missions and our people, all in an effort to ensure humanity does not overtake us and once again threaten witchkind as they have in the distant past.

"The name of our Order was a deliberate choice, made thousands of years ago. Names, as you know, have power, especially names taken from the True Language of magic. As we sought to remain in the dark, unknown and unseen by humans and by most of witchkind, we chose for ourselves a name that has no power. It simply describes who we are: a group that only some few may belong to, that only some few may have knowledge of.

"You have all completed a rigorous course of training already, one that will continue throughout your time with us, however long that may be. You have proven your adaptability and reliability in field missions. While you all have much to learn, you have earned your place amongst us.

"Unlike at your graduation from whichever Great School you attended, we have no special proceedings for this. Instead, I greet you as equals, members of the Order of Some, and charge you to act in the interests and protection of all witchkind. I direct you to be subtle when you can, firm when you must, and decisive at all times.

"Do you accept?"

"I accept," the four students said together, as their trainers had coached them.

"Then welcome, brethren, to the Order of Some."

CHAPTER 16

Impact

I MEAN, this pretty much clinches it, doesn't it?" the older man said, tapping the sheaf of papers that contained the report.

"It easily could have been another accident," the younger man countered. The sprogti is incredibly volatile."

"Yes, but it shouldn't have been so in those temperatures. Besides, did you thoroughly read the account of the fire?"

"Of course."

"And you saw nothing suspicious?"

The younger man shrugged. "A fire out of control would have heated the liquid. That's where it became volatile."

"You didn't read it," the older man said flatly. He riffled through the stack of papers and then thumped one paragraph with his index finger. "Heat so intense that it melted and fused the earth itself in a direct line leading from the destroyed workshop where the sprogti was being made."

Another shrug. "What of it?"

"At the end of that line," the older man continued, "a crater-like formation, fused into the earth as if something incredibly hot had been thrust into the ground at that spot."

"I still don't see what you're getting at."

"What if the line of fused earth didn't lead *from* the workshop, but

rather *to* it? What if that crater-like formation was the *source* of the flame, and it shot from there *into* the workshop?"

The younger man blinked a couple of times and said, "I don't see how that's possible."

"*Magic,* you idiot," the older man hissed. "It's what I keep telling you."

"All the stories of witchkind are just that: stories," the younger man scoffed. "Fairy tales from thousands of years ago."

"The tri-city generator in Westhead. The sprogti experiment in the mountains. The mines—Danu above, man, do you seriously not see magic in what's happened to the iron mines?"

"The church—" the younger man began.

"The church's teachings have been co-opted by our enemies," a third voice spat from the back of the room. It came from a middle-aged man who'd been leaning against a bookcase there. He straightened now, stepping toward the other two. "Stories of demons and fire, conveniently made real for the first time ever? In mines that we've been working for four, five hundred years? *Just* as we've discovered a way to more efficiently blast the ore out of the earth?" He shook his head. "I dislike coincidences, and I see none here."

"Look at this," the older man said. He walked behind the small desk in the room, leaned down, and pulled something out of one of the drawers. "My great-great-great-grandfather had this made." He laid a heavy brass tablet onto the desk. "Read it."

The younger man leaned forward and saw that the tablet had neat words deeply embossed into its surface. "It's a formula for mixing iron that's to be used for a boiler. This one..." He paused for a moment, one finger tracing the words carved into the brass. "It calls for a pretty high amount of carbon in the mix," he finished.

"Now this," the older man said. He reached into a desk drawer again and withdrew another tablet, this one made of iron. He thunked it onto the desk, and the younger man could see that this one also had writing, but this time, the writing protruded from the surface rather than being embossed into it.

"More writing," the younger man said with a shrug. He looked closer and added, "It's backwards."

"Fit them together," the older man instructed.

The younger man stared at the two tablets for a moment, and then suddenly grasped the older man's meaning. He laid the two tablets against each other so that the writing from the iron tablet fit into the embossing on the brass one.

Except that they didn't *quite* fit.

"Can you see which bits don't fit?" the older man prompted.

Pulling the tablets back apart, the younger man took a moment to sound out the backwards writing on the iron piece. "It's the amount of carbon," he said carefully. "It's much, much lower on this one."

"My forebear made these as a set," the older man said. "The brass was actually poured atop the iron. When they were made, they matched precisely. He suspected, you see. And so he stored these two far apart, the brass one in his ironworks and the iron one in his home."

"They why are they different?"

"Because the witches *modified* one. My ancestor suspected that they do this all the time with written documents. They change our records, making them conflict, leading us astray. This recipe," he said, tapping the brass tablet, "produces iron of exceptional fragility. It's brittle. Use it to forge a pressure vessel, and it will burst the first time you pressurize it. But," he said with a grim smile, tapping the iron tablet, "they *can't* alter iron. And likely didn't know this duplicate existed. This was his proof, the first time anyone had *proven* that our records were being altered. That we have enemies—and that those enemies possess *magic."*

The room was quiet for a moment before the middle-aged man said, "So what do we do? Hunt them out?"

"No," the older man grumbled. "The Hunts from the fairy tales would do no good. We'd rouse the populace, nothing more. Besides, they've been careful with us, all these centuries. We *need* the bastards, now."

"What do you mean?" the younger man said, confused.

"Here," the older man said, extracting yet another item from his desk and placing it on the top. It was a long piece of wood, covered in old pitch that had worn off in places. "This is a plank from a fishing boat. See the carvings under the pitch?"

The other two men looked closely and nodded when they saw the

spidery lines etched into the wood and vanishing underneath the intact pitch.

"They're decorative," the younger man said confidently. "I've seen them doing this in the boatyards down south."

The older man said nothing, but instead reached for a wooden cup of water that was sitting on the edge of the desk. Carefully, he dribbled some water onto the plank. It beaded up, rolling around for a moment before coming to a rest.

"That wood's been treated with oil," the younger man said with another shrug. "It's supposed to do that."

Still silent, the older man took one of the sheets of paper from the report still lying to one side. Carefully, he laid the sheet on top of the wood plank and began sliding it slowly toward the beaded water. As the edge of the paper neared the water, the younger man expected it the water to soak into the paper—but it didn't. Instead, it slid slowly *beneath* the water.

"What..." the younger man breathed, leaning over the paper, his nose mere inches from the water.

That was enough to disrupt the moment, his breath nudging the water ever so slightly downward and onto the paper, which absorbed it immediately.

"Almost nothing we build," the older man said quietly, "would function without magic. Every building in almost every village, every boat, every carriage, *everything* has these engravings. Everything is held together, subtly, by magic. Everything except the iron roadways. Their magic can't affect cold iron, you see. So the iron horses are the one thing we've been able to make *on our own,* the one thing we can rely on.

"The thing they've cut us off from, in tampering with our mines."

He sighed. "I'm sure this was a deliberate tactic on their part. You've read the oldest histories, where men tried to bring magic to heel, and magic bit us in the hand. They're told as stories to keep us from tampering with magic, to cast it as a fiction. The church itself preaches against magic, and about the need to rely on what you can see and touch." He shook his head. "On the one hand, they tamper with our work and our records, keeping us from becoming proficient in anything. On the other, they cover for our incompetence, sneaking

magic in at every corner. You know the street lamps almost every town has?"

The other men nodded.

"Take one, sometime. Break one of its glass panes and replace it with a fresh piece of glass you've seen made and cut with your own eyes, never beyond your sight. That lamp will never hold its flame again. The glass fits too loosely, lets in too much breeze. Now, leave it to sit for a week, and suddenly it will work again. And if you examine it closely, you'll see these small, thin engravings etched along the edges of the panes. Barely noticeable, almost entirely covered by the brass flanges that the glass fits into.

"*Nothing* we have is our own. Hunt them, and our world would fall apart. We'd be set back centuries."

"So what do we do?" the younger man asked after a long moment, his voice cowed and his confidence shattered.

The older man gave him another grim smile. "I have a plan."

CHAPTER 17

Journeyman

It wasn't a week after graduation before they began sending them on solo missions.

"Think of it as a rite of passage," Cat advised Finley with a wink as she sat down to give him his briefing. "We have a number of situations that come up pretty frequently, so it makes sense to send you newbies out to handle them. In your case, it's a *bit* different. I think your runewright skills will come in handy here and possibly give us a better way to deal with these in the future."

They'd already determined that his runewright ability was very... hands-on. That was, he couldn't simply dream up new, working rune constructs by himself. He needed to be confronted with a *need* for them, and then his power would start poking around in his brain, pulling together what it required, and constructing something new. Give him an existing construct and he could tell you if it would work, but he couldn't seem to *modify* it unless he actually needed to use it.

Field work was very much called for.

"Here's the situation," Cat continued. "One of our major goals is to limit humans' ability to retain and spread accurate information. It means that each generation starts from scratch, or at most from a verbal record which is much less accurate."

"Sure," Finley said. "And even then, we try to modify their written records."

"Which your new construct will prove very helpful with, believe me," she said with a smile. "We're hoping you can do something similar here, in fact.

"One invention that humans keep developing—and someone comes up with this about every couple of years, believe it or not—is a mechanical way of producing written documents."

"How?" Finley asked. His mind was suddenly filled with complex brass contraptions that maneuvered a quill across pieces of parchment, driven entirely by someone turning an ornate hand crank.

"The exact implementation varies, but it comes down to this: they'll carve letters into tiny blocks of brass, or sometimes wood. Iron, once, which gave us no end of difficulty. Usually it's brass. They arrange the letters in wooden frames, forming words and sentences. Then they press those against an inked piece of felt and press that against a piece of paper. The carved letters pick up the ink and then transfer it to the page." She shrugged. "It's honestly very efficient, if you don't have magic to work with."

"But they could produce a hundred copies in, what, an hour?"

"Something like that," she said with a nod. "The problem is that it's so *simple.* We've tried weakening the material, but that just makes the letter blocks crumble or break, and it's easy enough for them to make new ones. We've tried messing with the ink, but they just make more. Most of the time we end up having to kill the inventor, which we hate doing—burn down their workshop and destroy the invention completely. And then--"

"Wait, kill them?" Finley asked, his eyes wide.

Cat nodded. "It's not ideal. But we can't remove their memories, and so it's the only way to keep them from making their invention again."

"But--" Finley started.

Cat shook her head. "You have to remember the mission. Besides, they're *human.* They'd Hunt us if they remembered we existed. We outlive them, but they have ten times the number of children we do. They outnumber us by an enormous margin." She shrugged. "One or

two here and there hardly makes a difference. Don't get me wrong, if we could use our magic not hem directly, we would. But only Thornwaith's can do that."

Finley paused to consider that. "How so?"

She shrugged again. "We don't know how it happens, but the only time magic has ever worked directly against humans is when Thornwaith's alum are... under magic's control, or whatever it is that happens to them."

Finley remembered Landon's tale, and nodded. "I get it. It just seems... cruel."

"It's the only way to protect ourselves," Cat said kindly. "You get used to it. And in the case of these document-making machines, it never even lasts for long. Eventually, it just occurs to someone else, and we're right back where we started from. The few times it's been done in wood, it's because they turned to wood after we kept softening the brass. And it's not like we can try and take brass away from them. It's already everywhere."

"And everything uses it," Finley agreed. "Carriages, fishing boats, everything. Okay. So you want me to see what I can come up with."

She nodded. "It's a common mission, but it's one I'm hoping your abilities can help us solve *permanently.* Like we believe we've finally managed with the iron mines." She smiled. "And maybe without killing them."

"Although, as far as we know, they're still mining in secret," Finley pointed out.

Cat sighed. "Yes, you make a good point. And we do run the risk of just driving this underground. I'm..." She paused for a moment, and then gave him a hard look. "You're never to repeat this, but I'm not sure using their own religion was such a great idea. Not all of them are bound to it, and those are the ones who won't be afraid to defy their churches in secret."

Finley nodded. "Yeah. Okay. I'll see what I can do. I assume you've got an incident ready?"

She nodded, and her expression softened with a grin. "You bet we do."



"A bit beyond what was expected," the younger man said.

"A bit?" The older man snorted in derision. "Can we all agree now that magic is real and being brought against us?"

"Our own printing presses are unharmed," the younger man pointed out.

"Because we haven't printed a copy of the gods-damned holy texts on them," the older man snapped. "And nor shall we. But this goes a step beyond. In the past, they've sabotaged, made people *believe* their inventions were failures. This... this is a trap for anyone thinking of the same thing in the future." He shook his head. "They're hemming us in. Reducing our options. Did any of our agents see theirs?"

A nod from the younger man. "Only one customer in the bookshop all day who wasn't local." He pushed a sheet of paper across the older man's desk. "They got a good look. Sat in a pub with him half the afternoon after he'd been in the shop. This is their sketch."

The old man turned the paper around, looking for the first time at the face of the only enemy they'd identified. He nodded slowly.

"Then we finally have a target."



Magic took Finley to Cuppton, a sizable village on the western coast that was bordering on being a full-grown town. Another few rows of sturdy wood-and-stone buildings on the inland side of the settlement, and nobody would call it a village any longer.

He let himself into the witchkind inn that he'd been directed to, touching the entry rune that whisked him into the lobby. The interior was entirely out of step with the simple, sturdy building that concealed it, with granite floors, elegantly paneled walls, and crystal overhead fixtures that glowed with magical light. He checked into his room—a luxurious space that far exceeded any he'd ever had to call his own—and took a moment to freshen up.

His mission briefing had suggested a daytime reconnoiter of the target, along with several suggestions for nighttime and daytime attacks,

depending on what he found. Cat had cautioned him to take those suggestions as lightly as possible. "They're standard for this mission," she'd said, "and they're not accounting for you being a runewright. If you get there and you see a better way, then that's do what you think is right."

He settled his belongings—just a change of clothes, really, since the inn provided soap to its guests—and checked his appearance in the room's looking glass. He appeared as human as could be, as did most of witchkind who moved amongst humans. While in private they might wear finer clothes in brighter hues; today, Finley wore simple homespun clothes in muted earth tones. Cuppton was particularly conservative, frowning on any kind of bright colors. Cat had even shown Finley how to distress the leather of his new boots, making them appear simpler and older than they really were.

"The better you blend in," she'd told him and his friends over and over throughout their training, "the greater protection the Veil can afford you."

Blend in and *never* be seen doing something that looked like magic, of course.

Confident in his appearance, he left his room, walked down the hallway's thick, woven carpet back to the lobby, and touched the exit rune that took him back to the street.

He blinked a few times, his eyes adjusting to both the bright afternoon light and the location. In order to prevent an obvious procession of people, the inn's exit rune randomized the location where he appeared, and it took a moment for him to orient himself. Although Cuppton's original waterfront district was laid out in the kind of neat grid that both humans and witchkind tended to prefer, the inland expansion of the village had happened with less planning. Streets curved this way and that, with oddly fashioned buildings taking up the triangle- and rhomboid-shaped corners where the streets intersected. He spotted a tobacconist's shop that served as a landmark in his briefing papers, turned to the right, and set off toward his destination.

Cuppton was a busy, prosperous town. It had once served as the western terminus of one of the iron roadway's two main east-west routes, but a natural disaster—ironically, a sinkhole that *hadn't* been

caused by witchkind—had disrupted the line a century or so back. The Order had worked furiously to prevent the humans from rebuilding and rerouting the line, creating swamps, sinkholes, iron shortages, and other inconveniences until the closure of the iron mines rendered rebuilding impossible. But Cuppton had survived, switching back to carriages to haul its plentiful fish catches inland, north, and south. A copper mine had been opened nearby in the past couple of decades—after, Finley had been told, a thorough scouting by the Order to ensure iron ore didn't exist alongside the harmless copper—increasing the amount of trade coming in and out of the town.

Both the inn he'd left and his quarry lay in roughly the same half-ring of buildings, about twenty minutes' walk from the wharfs. This was a district of middle-class merchants' homes and the businesses that served them. Finley passed tailors' shops, higher-end dry goods stores, stores selling small kitchenwares—Finley chuckled to himself, grateful his first solo mission wouldn't involve a sales call as well—and shops offering imported jewelry and trinkets. These were interspersed with tall, sturdy, stately homes with quarried rock foundations and carved-wood faces. Stout doors protected the occupants from what was doubtless a rising amount of petty theft.

He stopped at the bookshop that his briefing papers had identified as his target. It was an unassuming shop with a thick-glazed window set in a mortared stone face, next to a simple wooden door painted a deep brownish-green. A wooden plaque shaped like a book hung over the window, making clear the shop's offering, even to those—and here Finley chuckled again at the irony—who couldn't read.

He stepped inside, a small bell tinkling brightly as the door swung open.

The interior was dim; the afternoon's light slanted away from the building's only window. Shelves lined the walls from back to front, with two additional shelves marching down the middle, creating three narrow aisles. A small desk near the door contained a box of unlit tapers, which presumably would be issued to customers as needed and monitored closely to ensure none of the valuable books caught fire.

"Ah, hello!" The proprietor popped into view from amongst the shelves. He was a younger man, perhaps five or six years older than

Finley. He had the dark black hair of a native Westerner, the nut-brown skin of a midlander, and the wide, bright smile of someone from a friendlier town like Twynsits. Cuppton wasn't known for its smiling populace. "How can I help you?"

Finley's briefing had included some details with which to strike up a conversation and gather the few facts he might need, including a gambit that, Cat had told him, had been successful in past missions of this nature.

"I'm looking for a good copy of the Knygos," he said politely. "I don't mind a little wear, but something written in a larger hand would be great. My eyesight's a little blurry." The Knygos was the official book of the human church, and so, obviously, a book that would never raise any eyebrows at a bookshop.

"Hmm. I might have just the thing," the shopkeeper said, frowning in thought. "You prefer a modern edition or the older paprastai version?"

"Modern, please," Finley said. The older paprastai version was more popular in the west, but he could have gone to almost any church and gotten a cheaply scribed copy for free. The modern edition had, he'd been told, cleaned up some of the archaic language and was a popular choice with younger believers.

"Ah," the shopkeeper said, his smile returning to accompany a twinkle in his eye. "Then I've got *just* the thing. One moment." He scurried toward the back of the store, and Finley heard a door open and close. A moment later, it swung open and shut again, and the shopkeeper returned with two books. He laid both on the small table and tapped the first.

This one was bound in a battered brown leather and had clearly seen a good amount of use. "This one's a bit old, but it's in good condition. Just four coppers, if if suits, but you'll want to look at the hand first."

Finley opened the book about halfway and quickly skimmed the page. The scribe's hand was indeed larger than the usual crabbed writing, but it was also full of loops and curlicues that actually made it harder to read. The ink was fading a bit in places as well, turning a deep brown from the original black. Finley made a show of squinting and

leaning in to try and read the handwritten text. "It's okay," he said slowly. "A bit fancy perhaps, but I suppose it could work."

"I brought it mainly to illustrate the difference," the shopkeeper said, delight in his voice. "Try the other one."

Finley flipped the other book open and almost stepped back in surprise. The letters were clear and crisp, the ink still black and opaque. This book's black leather cover was still battered, but Finley suspected it had been salvaged from another book, because the interior looked brand new. The letters were still small, not much larger than the tiny, compressed writing that human scribes seemed to specialize in.

But they were so much *clearer*. The letters in this book, Finley knew, had not been produced by a human hand. The verticals were *too* straight, the horizontal lines *too* flat, and the letter joins *too* precise. The spaces between the words were absolutely uniform, and even the diacritical marks and punctuation looked like they had been formed by the most precise, un-creative scribe who'd ever lived. These letters were *beautiful*.

"How is this possible?" Finley asked.

"An invention of my own," the shopkeeper said proudly. "One I'm told many have struggled to perfect but that I've managed. This is the first book I've produced, finished just last night, in fact, and now I'll be able to produce hundreds of these in the time it takes a normal scribe to create just a single copy. I've a meeting tomorrow with the master priest at the church, in fact, to show him what I've done. Although," he added slowly, "that does mean I won't be able to sell this to you immediately. I've only the one so far, you see. But if you care to wait until I've received the church's permission to proceed, I can have another one for you within the week."

"Permission?" Finley blurted out without thinking.

The man's brow creased. "Of course. I'm no scribe, but everyone knows the rules. All editions of the holy text must be authorized." He gently closed the book, his voice suddenly suspicious. "I wouldn't let you read this one, of course," he said defensively. "It hasn't been authorized. But I wanted you to see the text, since you mentioned your eyesight. I couldn't—"

"No, no," Finley said, recovering quickly. "No, I quite understand.

I'm sorry, of course you'd need to show the church first. I was just... surprised. I've never seen writing so clear. And you say you can reproduce these that quickly? I could have one this week? With the church's permission, of course," he added hurriedly.

"Yes," the shopkeeper said, relieved. "It's not writing at all, you see. Are you—may I ask what your trade is?"

"Small housewares," Finley replied automatically, his training kicking in.

"Ah, so not in the book business at all?"

"Oh, no. No, other than buying for myself."

"Well," the shopkeeper said, his grin reasserting itself on his face, "would you like to see how I do it?"

Finley nodded enthusiastically. "Very much so! This seems a miracle, to be so clear to one with such poor eyes." He worried he might be pouring it on a little thick, but the shopkeeper smiled and seemed satisfied.

"Come right with me."

He scooped the printed book off the table and led Finley down one of the narrow aisles and through a door at the back of the shop.

This space was brightly lit, expensive oil lamps positioned strategically to eliminate almost all shadows. Finley blinked as his eyes adjusted and took in the scene.

Every inch of the walls, save for the narrow space of the door itself, was covered with shelves. Upon these shelves were stacked piles and piles of wooden racks, each perhaps a thumb-tip thick. From Cat's briefing, Finley knew these would contain the carved letters that formed the text on the final pages. Each rack was carefully numbered in a neat hand.

The shopkeeper drew one rack from the shelf, showing Finley how the little letters were neatly lined up against each other, forming orderly rows of text. These were carved from a dark-stained wood, the shapes of the letters barely higher than three sheets of paper.

"But they're backwards," Finley pointed out.

"Yes, of course," the shopkeeper said. "But when you press them against ink and then against a page, the letters come out forwards."

"Oh, I see," Finley said, nodding. "That makes sense."

"And this is the machine I use to do it," the shopkeeper said, pointing to the wooden mechanism in the center of the room. "The racks go in here," he continued, demonstrating as he spoke. "By turning this crank, the entire rack is pressed against this pad, which I normally soak in ink. As I continue cranking, it lifts, and this plate, which contains a stack of paper, slides in." The rack of letters pressed against the paper. "This roller here is made from gum rubber, so it's a little grippy."

As the shopkeeper turned the crank, the pile of paper slid back out from underneath the rack of letters, and the roller pulled the newly printed page off and into a separate stack.

"I finally figured out a quicker-drying ink, so if you keep cranking" —and he did so—"it keeps printing. I can do about a hundred pages at once this way, and then I have to change the rack for the next page."

Finley looked around the room, marveling at how much carving had been required for these tens of thousands of letters. "Wouldn't it have been easier to just make a few racks and keep reusing the same letters for different pages?"

The shopkeeper grimaced as he stopped cranking. "Er, yes. But these are made from skirt-wood, from the north. It shrinks a bit when you soak it in water, which makes it easier to carve, but then it expands just a little as it dries." He shrugged. "Once the letters are in, they're kind of stuck. I've a mind to try casting letters from brass at some point, but I don't have the funds for that now."

"These must have taken forever to carve," Finley said, impressed.

"I've four young boys who love the task," the shopkeeper admitted. "So that's been our family nights for the past many moons. But now that I've a completed book for the church's approval, I can make thousands of copies. Skirt-wood is exceptionally strong when it's dried, you know. These will hold up for a long time."

"It's impressive," Finley admitted. "Just to be able to read, with the letters so small yet so well-formed. I'd be very interested in a copy. Once the church approves, of course."

"Of course. If you'd care to stop back in perhaps a day or two?"

"I'd be happy to."

The shopkeeper smiled and said, "I shall see you then."

The two exchanged pleasantries as they walked back to the front of the shop, and Finley bade the shopkeeper a good day as the shop door tinkled shut behind him.

He walked across the cobbled street to a small pub, where the proprietor was more than happy to bring him a tall wooden mug of ale, along with chunky brown bread and sharp cheese for his lunch.

As he sat eating, Finley kept looking back at the bookshop. Burning the shop down would, as Cat had pointed out, solve the problem in the short term again. But it would be a delay of mere months unless Finley also killed the shopkeeper and his entire family—something he wasn't in the slightest amount willing to consider.

Really, *anything* he did to this one shop would affect only this instance of the problem. That might be fine, because others of the Order could repeat the construct in future instances. But the problem wasn't the shop. It wasn't even the letters: it was the *inventor.* Was there a way to affect the shopkeeper somehow so that his invention would no longer work?

What about the book? The Knygos would likely be the first subject of these inventions since it was the most-read book on the continent. Books valued by only one or two people wouldn't be worth the effort to machine-make, but the humans always needed new copies of the Knygos. Provided the church authorized them, of course.

The church. Finley was mindful of Cat's disagreement with how the mines had been closed, but perhaps an answer to the book-making problem lay within the church itself. They'd already established dominance over handwritten copies of the Knygos, enough that the shopkeeper had become nervous at his premature revelation of his unapproved text. Was there a way witchkind could parlay that into a solution?

His Rune Smith talent uncoiled from the base of his spine and lazily spread itself throughout his limbs. He was intrigued, and his power was responding with its own interest.

He had to forget what *was* possible and focus on what *might* be.

Any proposed copy of the Knygos would have to, eventually, wind up in a church. Only a master priest could approve new scribes, which meant only a master priest could approve a new mechanical scribe. So

perhaps a construct could be laid on a church. Or *all* of the churches? Once a construct was created, it was easily reproduced. A construct laid into a church's walls, for example, could have its magic renewed regularly by the Order or by any of witchkind.

What about the scribes? The professional humans who created new copies of books, and who—without the speed of a mechanized scribe—controlled access to copies of the Knygos, along with pricing? Surely the scribes would have an opinion about this invention, and surely it wouldn't be a positive one. How could they be linked in? How could they be notified and made to care?

Finley felt his talent perking up, analyzing the possibilities. Half-formed runes floated through his mind, not quite connecting. The invention... the church... the local scribes... or even *all* the scribes? They worked in well-known shops, of course. Could a construct be made in pieces that were then linked together somehow? One construct for scribes' shops, another piece for the church... those were known locations of known quantity. But how to connect them?

The book.

No, not the *book.* The *words.* The words of the Knygos were fixed and unchanging. Aside from the modern edition, which had been the first authorized deviation when it had been introduced a century ago. But even then—

"Good sir," Finley said suddenly, his head snapping back to the proprietor who'd been polishing table knives behind the bar. "Would you have a copy of the Knygos about you? Two, actually, one in the modern and the other original?"

The swarthy man blinked and then nodded. It was perhaps an unusual request, but probably not the most unusual he'd ever had. "Aye, I've a copy of the modern myself," he said, reaching down and drawing a battered book from beneath the bar. He laid it in front of Finley. "If you've a moment, I can fetch the traditional from me wife. Fancies herself a scholar," he said with a grin, "and won't have no truck with the modern text."

"I would be most appreciative," Finley said, pushing another brass coin across the bar top. "I find myself in need of counsel and want to see what each would offer."

The proprietor nodded absently, not caring in the slightest about Finley's need once there was brass on the bar. "I'll be right back," he said.

A few minutes later, Finley had both books open and was poring over the text. The differences were, he saw, fairly minor: every "thou" translated to "you," every "thine" to "yours," and so on. He rapidly scanned the pages, looking for a unique phrase. He smiled when he saw it:

Suffer not a witch to live, nor their ilk, nor those that give them succor or shade.

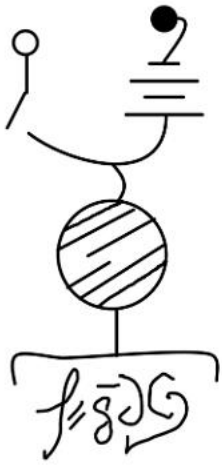
This will do nicely, he thought with satisfaction.



Finley returned to his room in the inn to work, letting his talent uncurl and run through his brain. He created two constructs, neither complete, but both capable of linking to the other. He set out well past moonfall that night. He asked the innkeeper for directions, found two shops of scribes in Cuppton, and quickly carved the first construct into the lintels over their shop doors:



Then he made his way to the village's largest church, where the master priest lived and preached, and carved the second construct into the wall at the back of the building:



His magic hand whispered at him the entire time, encouraging him to curve *this* line just a bit more, to carve *that* one just a bit wider. It teased him for incorporating human script into a construct of magic and then chuckled as it assured him everything would work as designed.

He finished well before sunup and skirted his way back to the inn, studiously avoiding the bookshop. If this worked, then it would require no prior knowledge of where the invention had been made. And while this construct would only work with the specific phrase he'd drawn from the Knygos, his magic assured him it could be extended to cover other texts.

He slipped into a deep, restful sleep the minute his head touched the pillow.



Finley woke abruptly the next morning, magically drawn sunlight pouring in through the window of his room. He dressed quickly, settled his bill with the innkeeper's assistant, and made his way into the streets of Cuppton.

Sure enough, there was the bookshop keeper, hurrying past with his mechanically scribed copy of the Knygos held tightly in his hand. Finley

followed him, casting a diffusion construct in case the shopkeeper happened to turn around.

The man never did. Instead, he made as direct a line as possible to the grand central church of Cuppton, striding up the stone stairs and through the building's ornate wooden door.

Finley couldn't see his runes from his vantage point across the street from the church's entrance, but he could feel them working. He'd given them more than enough power, and as the shopkeeper crossed the threshold of the church, he felt the runes scanning the book. The power reached out, touching the book and connecting to the scribes' shops he'd visited the night before. Another tendril of power thrust *through* the book, tracing it back to its origin in the bookshop. From there, he felt the power swirling around the mechanized scribe and then stabbing into the air. That magic chilled the air in a tall pillar above the shop, drawing in moisture and power.

The shopkeeper's copy of the Knygos would, he knew, be scrambled, a take on the magic he'd used back at the Farm to change the text in a book. The shopkeeper would be dumbfounded, the master priest angry at the blasphemy. They would march the shopkeeper back to his shop and find the same blasphemies set in tiny, carved letters carefully placed into their many racks. A thunderstorm would be gathering already, centered on the shop in a manifestation of the human gods' anger.

The magic stretching to the scribes' shop would draw moisture from the scribes themselves as they sat hunched over their work. They would become as dehydrated as a man walking through the hottest, driest part of the continent, and develop headaches and cramps. They would fall ill, the work of Earth magic invading their bodies and upsetting their humors. They would, Finley was certain, make the connection to the commotion that was about to happen at the bookshop: a heretic had created a mechanical scribe to blaspheme the Knygos, and the scribes of the village had suffered as a result.

With all the magic connected and flaring in his mind, Finley nodded in satisfaction. Members of the Order could attach these constructs to scribes' shops and churches. Anyone attempting to mechanically print a copy of the Knygos—the book every inventor was most likely to turn to

for their first effort—would quickly find themselves in the bad graces of the church and the local scribes. Word would spread; mechanized scribing would be banished, its practitioners forced into secrecy. But with the Knygos forbidden to them by their own gods, even secret practitioners would wonder at the value of the invention. What worth was it to produce just one or two books in such a fashion? While it might not deter *every* future inventor of such a machine, it should certainly deter the ordinary ones from even thinking of the idea.



"This... honestly, sir, it exceeds all expectations." Cat was in a private meeting with the Head of the Order, relaying Finley's success, along with diagrams of the constructs he'd created.

"No question, then," Ram said. "The boy is definitely a Rune Smith."

"I don't know how he could be anything but," Cat agreed. "To incorporate human script into a construct? It's impossible. Or I'd have thought it so. To link halves of a construct across a village? Not unheard of, I suppose, but outside weather runes, certainly rare."

"Pity about the inventor and his family, of course," Ram said absentmindedly.

"But the example here will deter others before they begin," Cat pointed out.

"We've begun adding these runes elsewhere?"

"Sama put word out this very morning," Cat said with a nod. "They'll be on every church and scribe's shop by the end of the week. The field agents on regular routes will renew them as they do their sales calls. The problem isn't solved, of course—"

"No, but the boy was clever in using their holy text against them. His reasoning is sound. There will be those in the shadows who suspect, but the effort involved won't be worth it. And we already know our alteration magics work against printed books, so we will continue with those efforts." Ram nodded slowly. "I'm pleased. This is a better outcome than I had expected, even knowing the boy's potential. It's... *elegant.*" He paused and then asked, "His minder?"

"No need to intervene," Cat said. "He'd have burned the shop down and killed the shopkeeper's family had Finley failed, of course."

Ram nodded. "Good. And his next mission?"

"As discussed, sir."

Another nod. "Keep me posted."



"A bit beyond what was expected," the younger man said.

"A bit?" The older man snorted in derision. "Can we all agree now that magic is real and being brought against us?"

"Our own printing presses are unharmed," the younger man pointed out.

"Because we haven't printed a copy of the gods-damned holy texts on them," the older man snapped. "And nor shall we. But this goes a step beyond. In the past, they've sabotaged, made people *believe* their inventions were failures. This... this is a trap for anyone thinking of the same thing in the future." He shook his head. "They're hemming us in. Reducing our options. Did any of our agents see theirs?"

A nod from the younger man. "Only one customer in the bookshop all day who wasn't local." He pushed a sheet of paper across the older man's desk. "They got a good look. Sat in a pub with him half the afternoon after he'd been in the shop. This is their sketch."

The old man turned the paper around, looking for the first time at the face of the only enemy they'd identified. He nodded slowly.

"Then we finally have a target."

CHAPTER 18

Interruption

I HATE to bring the three of you into this, but it's an emergency, and frankly, right now you're all we've got." Cat had pulled Finley, Arcadia, and Jamel into a sitting room before they'd even had breakfast, her voice urgent and her expression distressed. "We're hoping to have additional agents meet up with you, but whether they do or not, this must be handled immediately."

"What's happening?" Arcadia asked, her voice picking up some of Cat's alarm.

Cat sighed and wrapped her arms around herself in an almost defensive posture. "This comes up every so often," she said, forcing herself to speak slowly and clearly despite her obvious fear. "Not since I've been here, but, according to our records, about every hundred years or so. You're familiar with the black powder the humans use?" They all nodded. "We've looked into trying to take that away from them, but it's impossible. The basic ingredients are too plentiful, the recipe too simple, and it's become too great a part of their oral tradition. They use it for mining, of course, but it's also a big part of how they carve out space in the hills for their iron roadways." She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "But eventually, someone always thinks to make a weapon out of it."

The others' eyes widened.

Cat nodded. "Exactly. The forms differ, but it almost always involves using black powder to launch small iron balls through iron tubes. In the past, they've called them *rifles,* although those were more accurate and well crafted than what we've seen since. We've been careful to keep an eye out for this kind of development, to stop it before it gets refined into something truly deadly."

"Iron balls?" Jamel asked, his voice tight.

Another nod. "Small ones. You could fit a dozen or more in your hand. They forge an iron tube, pack the bottom of it with black powder, and then drop a ball on top of that. Sometimes more than one. Then they light the powder. It explodes, but the tube only gives one direction for all of the energy to go."

"Out," Arcadia said.

"Out," Cat confirmed. "So the ball, or balls, go flying. Hundreds of feet, from what I've read. They can easily punch through a body. For a human, it might be deadly or it might not, depending on where it hit. But for witchkind—"

"We'd die almost instantly," Finley said flatly. "Iron *inside* us would fracture our magic."

"Exactly," Cat said with another tight sigh.

"And they're doing it again?" Jamel asked. His voice was firm now, the tone of a man who was about to be given a mission that he fully expected to accept and complete.

"They are. In Greensea, which is probably why we're late in noticing. It's... it's an *odd* town. Insular. We've never been able to place an agent there for long. Witchkind there tend to not attend any of the Great Schools, and they live openly. Not with magic, of course, but not in hidden spaces. Everyone knows one another, and strangers tend to attract attention if they stay for too long." She shrugged. "And so the humans got ahead of us."

"What's the mission, then?" Jamel said.

"Understand that these inventions almost always start out with good intentions," Cat cautioned. "The beasts of the Great Northern Wood are fearsome, and Greensea deals with the worst of them. The witchkind of the Wood work to keep the beasts away from humans, but inevitably one gets through. This time, it seems to have inspired a

creative human to come up with a way to counterattack. So they're not hunting witchkind specifically."

"Okay," Finley said slowly. "But it sounds dangerous anyway."

"It is," Cat agreed. "And we have to stop it. You'll go in as traders—that's common enough in Greensea, provided you show up with some merchandise, which we'll provide, and that you don't stay too long, which you won't. And most importantly, be incredibly circumspect with your magic. Small area-effects and personal magic at most, nothing long-distance, not even a few blocks."

"Why?" Jamel asked.

"Greensea witchkind have a tradition: 'one's magic must reach no farther than one's arms.' It's a reaction to how close they are to the Great Northern Wood. The Wood—especially the northern edges—isn't... *friendly* with overt magic. Even the witchkind who live in the Wood are exceedingly careful with their magic."

"Okay," Jamel said. "That makes sense."

"There's a bit more," Cat said carefully, placing her hands flat on her thighs. Finley recognized the posture: it meant she had something serious and possibly uncomfortable to share. "The humans can be incredibly dangerous to us, which is why the Order exists. But that danger comes from their ignorance, both of us and of the long-term consequences of their actions. But they aren't *evil.* They're a threat, but they're not an enemy."

"The bookshop owner wasn't an enemy," Finley reminded her, "but he didn't come out too well. Nor did his family, from what you told me later."

"He and his family were punished by the church, not killed," Cat said bluntly. "That's not going to be the case here."

"Why are you telling us this?" Arcadia asked. Finley had shared the details of his solo mission.

"Because unlike your previous mission, this one's probably going to require more severe actions," Cat said quietly. "You need to be prepared for that."

They were all quiet for a moment before Jamel said it: "We're to kill them, then."

"You have to. At least some of them. We can't use magic directly on

humans, so we can't just modify their memories. And the knowledge of this invention *must* die. You'll need to discover who else has seen it. Origin help us, if you have to burn down the entire village, you'll do that, once we notify the witchkind living there." She looked carefully at them. "This is one of the worst things we can send you to do, especially being so new to the Order. But our other agents have been moving about, adding Finley's runes to churches and scribes' shops. And there's no chance of you being recognized in the village, as you've never been there. We've sent messages, and we'll try to have other agents be ready to back you up, but you're our agents for this."

The three nodded again, their expressions thoughtful.

"Also, you'll have no minders this time," Cat said.

"Minders?" Arcadia asked.

Jamel snorted. "You didn't need yours," he said ruefully. "But we all had them on our first solo mission. Mine... well, I *finished* my mission myself. Even if I almost didn't."

"You did," Cat said, a tiny smile flitting across her face. "Arcadia, Finley, it's our custom to send graduates on a solo mission, but we always send a minder along with them."

"In case we get in trouble?" Arcadia said archly.

Cat shook her head. "They were there to make sure the mission was completed. They wouldn't have helped you, no matter how badly you might have needed it."

Finley nodded slowly. It *had* seemed odd to send him on such an important mission, by himself, so soon after graduation. At least the Order had been taking the mission seriously.

"But there are no minders this time," Cat repeated. "As I said, we'll gather what agents we can as quickly as we can, but we're spread thin. Greensea's residents won't take it well if a dozen strangers show up all at once, so we'll infiltrate them slowly, but—"

"But the mission is ours," Jamel said confidently. "And we accept."

"I do, too," Arcadia said, tossing Jamel an irritated look.

"And I," Finley said, raising an eyebrow at Jamel.

"Sorry," the Jamel mumbled.

"Jamel, your Flame affinity is critical for this. It's possible to empower small area-effect constructs that reduce the effectiveness of any

black powder within range. That'll help protect you and your group, and I'll share the construct with you before you go." Cat sat up straighter, moving into the logistics of the mission. "Arcadia, your Sky affinity will provide stealth and cover. Finley, Earth affinity will help shield and strengthen you. It's also the only magic that can help draw iron out of a body, if need be. I'll provide you all with the healing runes we've used in the past." She paused. "Finley, it goes without saying that we'd welcome any more... *permanent* solutions that might occur to you." She looked intently at him. "Make no mistake: this is an existential threat to our people. You're to remove it, no matter what."

They all nodded silently, the seriousness of the situation lying over the room like a thick, suffocating blanket.



Cat provided a complete set of mission logistics, small crates of copper and brass housewares, warm clothing, and other necessities before letting Arcadia's magic carry them to Greensea. It was one of the few walled, fortified villages on the continent, a throwback to a time when humans marched against each other with regrettable regularity. In Greensea's case, the walls were rigorously maintained not against enemy attack, but against the dreadful beasts that sometimes ventured out of the Great Northern Wood, eager for a taste of something different from their usual woodland fare.

Arcadia took them into the edge of the Wood itself, where they quickly moved to the sole path that led into the wide clearing that surrounded the village, and up to the single gate that provided access to the village proper. Very few buildings had been constructed outside these heavy walls: a small farm growing only plants, and raising no animals of any kind, was accompanied by a small storage building that was clearly not anyone's residence. Shed-like buildings along the road provided shelter for carriages that were too large to roll into the village —but not shelter for horses, which were always led into the village proper for safety.

The guards at the gate eyed them suspiciously as they walked up, demanding they open the two crates that Jamel and Finley had been

carrying between them. Once they saw the small piles of pans, teakettles, and other small kitchen items, they lost interest and waved the trio through.

They made their way to the nearest inn—one of only two in town, where the Order's business paid to maintain an available room—and unloaded their burdens.

"Okay, we know where we're headed, right?" Arcadia said quietly, and only after checking to make sure they wouldn't be overheard.

"Brass-smith's shop, up near the docks," Finley said just as quietly.

Cat had explained how reports like this worked: the witchkind of Greensea had seen the black powder weapon being tested, and grown alarmed. They'd sent word to Evermore, which had rapidly filtered the information through the bureaucracy of witchkind until it had made it to the ears of an agent of the Order. From there, word had made it to the Farm almost instantly, and their team had quickly assembled and deployed.

"They don't know of the Order, and they'll be reluctant to help you," Cat had cautioned them of the witchkind in Greensea. "They're just as distrustful as the humans in many ways."

"But they're saving themselves," Arcadia had pointed out.

"Yes, but they don't want to be a part of it. These are their neighbors. Their friends, in some cases. Witchkind and humans mix more freely in Greensea than in most other places. They're happy for someone to take care of the threat, so long as it isn't them."

So they had a location and little more. "Do we go now?" Finley continued.

Arcadia nodded. She'd been placed in charge of the mission by Cat, and the other two had been warned to follow her lead. "Scouting only. We'll come back here and make a plan of attack. We need to try and sell some of the wares this afternoon anyway so we don't look suspicious."

They made their way down to the docks, following the tall stone wall of the city until it ended in the pounding surf. Then they turned inward, following the cobbled street along the waterfront until they came to the brass-smith's shop they'd been told about.

It was a three-sided building of stone, with an immense hearth along one wall. The fourth side could be covered by two stout doors

that slid back and forth along the face of the building, but right now, those were pulled back, exposing the entire shop to the open. Despite the cold, biting winds blowing in from the sea, a small crowd had gathered along that opening, peering intently into the shop. The three spread out and took up places just behind the existing crowd. Waves of heat poured out of the building, taking the edge off the wet gusts of wind.

"Stand back a bit," a deep male voice called from within the shop. "Last two burst after three shots, and this one's on its fourth."

The crowd dutifully took a step backward.

Finley positioned himself so he could see between two humans. The brass-smith had cleared out most of his shop's floor, creating an open lane the length of the building. On one side, he'd piled up heavy stone blocks. Finley noticed their faces were chipped and battered, as if someone had been hammering at them with a magically hardened pick. At the opposite end of the building, a wooden trestle had been set up, and a thick, black iron rod was held to its top by heavy leather straps. Even at this distance, Finley could feel the iron licking hungrily at his magic. The rod was hollow, he saw, and pointed directly at the pile of stone blocks.

As they watched, the brass-smith laid a small metal ball—a bit larger than a pea, but not much so—in the opening of the pipe and gently pushed it back as far as he could. Then he carefully inserted a brass rod into the opening, using it to slowly push the iron ball further and further back. When the brass rod was almost fully inserted, it stopped. The smith nodded to himself and used a small hammer to gently tamp the brass rod a bit further. Then he withdrew the rod and laid it carefully to one side.

"Step back," the smith warned again as he moved to the far end of the trestle. The iron tube's back end was pressed firmly against the stone-block wall of the shop itself, and Finley spotted a piece of white string threading out of that end.

The smith stepped over to his hearth and, using a set of tongs, picked up a glowing hot coal from the fire. He held this briefly against the white string, which began burning almost immediately.

"Mind your ears!" the smith yelled, dropping the tongs and still-

glowing coal onto the dirt floor and clapping his hands over his own ears.

Finley's own hands were belatedly moving into place when the string's flame vanished inside the iron tube and—

CRACK!

Three things happened at once:

A gout of flame burst from the tip of the iron tube.

A shower of sparks and stone chips flew from the face of the blocks of stone that the iron tube had been pointed at.

A echoing sound, like a clap of thunder, blasted out of the smith's shop.

The crowd fell back instinctively, then caught itself. A few people laughed uncomfortably while others began to applaud. The smith jumped up and down, pumping his fists over his head and shouting. Finley couldn't hear a thing through the ringing in his ears.

A tug on his jacket caught his attention. Arcadia jerked her head away from the shop, toward the center of town. Jamel had already fallen in behind her, and so Finley followed them away from the shop.

After their ears had stopped ringing and they could hear normally again, Arcadia said, "Let's take care of business first. Then we'll talk."

The other two nodded, and they made their way back to the inn to collect their wares. Cat had given them a set of merchants and shopkeepers in the village to make contact with.

"Chores first," Jamel said quietly.

"Agreed," Arcadia said. "And then we'll work on our plan."

The smith was still shouting with glee behind them, unaware of what was to come.



The afternoon went well enough: they unloaded all of the merchandise they'd been sent with, one shopkeeper even chiding them for not bringing more. They had a quiet dinner in the dining room of their inn and then returned to their rooms to discuss.

Arcadia laid out a simple, concise plan, one that was consistent with the Order's previous missions of this type. She left room for Finley to

come up with something novel, but echoed Cat's instructions: "It'll be nice if you can, but we're assuming you can't, and we're proceeding on that assumption." Finley agreed wholeheartedly, the thundering voice of the black powder weapon still vibrating in his chest and ears.

They set out after moonfall, dressed in dark clothing, Arcadia's magic blurring the air around them. As far as stealth went, it was almost overkill: the winds were now howling in from the sea, making it nearly impossible to speak or stand up straight. Nobody would have noticed or overheard them regardless, but there was no point taking any chances.

They made their way back to the smith's shop by way of the village church, where Jamel carefully punched out segments of a prayer disc and dropped it into the collection box to be magically transported back to the Order. *Mission proceeding,* the message would tell Cat and the others.

They'd spent much of the evening after dinner deciding exactly what to do. Jamel had been in favor of simply 'casting Cat to ask for further instructions, but such magics were banned. There was too much risk of being overheard and too much risk of a sensitive person of witchkind detecting the magic. That level of sensitivity was rare, they knew, but the secrecy of the Order—even from the rest of witchkind—was paramount.

In the end, the smith's own words had driven their decision.

Past mission logs indicated that whenever humans had twigged the idea of black powder weapons, they'd invariably started with brass or bronze. Those metals were far too soft to contain the explosive power, though, and so the inventors had inevitably turned to iron. Many started by rolling an iron sheet into a tube and then sealing the edges, but those inevitably failed, the seals never sufficient to keep the tube from splitting open when the black powder exploded. From there, it became a race to see if the inventor could refine a technique that let them cast a tube as a single piece, using a strong enough form of iron, before the Order caught on and ended their efforts.

Greensea's brass-smith had clearly been through several of those steps and seemed to have arrived at a technique that let him cast a sufficiently strong tube of solid iron. This was the terminal step in the race,

the point where the Order *must* succeed. Indeed, it was possible they'd already missed their mark and that the smith had told others of his techniques. Regardless, it wouldn't be long before he cast more of those tubes, and before news of the invention spread beyond this isolated village.

The smith's shop would have to be destroyed, the demolition made to look as much like an accident as possible. They would ensure that the obliteration of the shop accompanied the destruction of whatever iron tubes the smith had already made.

The smith himself would have to die as well, ideally in the same not-accident. The techniques in his head couldn't be permitted to survive and spread.

They would remain in town for a few days more, visiting other merchants and shopkeepers and taking orders for a future delivery of small kitchenwares. On the side, they'd be looking for evidence that others knew of the smith's techniques. There'd been no sign of an apprentice in the shop, so they were hopeful this would end with just the single fatality.

As they approached the shop, they saw the heavy doors had been pulled closed, providing some protection against the increasingly fierce winds. Light spilled out beneath the doors, suggesting that the smith was continuing to work late into the night—everything they'd hoped for.

They crept up to the doors, and Arcadia cast a small, unobtrusive bit of magic that would let her, and her alone, see inside the shop for a brief moment. She nodded as the magic faded. *He's alone,* she mouthed, not even attempting to make herself heard above the roaring winds.

Finley began thinking about the situation and felt his Rune Smith talent unwind within him. It reached out, then coiled back, repelled by the iron it smelled inside the shop. Finley urged it on regardless, trying to imagine an outcome where the smith wouldn't simply keep trying harder to make his weapon. Weakening his materials wouldn't do it. Draining the potency of his black powder wouldn't do it. They'd agreed to give Finley a few minutes to come up with something before they proceeded, but his talent simply swayed back and forth in his mind, confused and uninterested. What if something

could be tied to the *shape* of the weapon? It was necessarily a tube, so perhaps—

He looked up sharply as a flare of magic attracted his attention. He felt Jamel stiffen beside him as he, too, felt something amiss. Arcadia seemed to sense Jamel's reaction but not the magic: it was Flame magic, poorly controlled and inexpertly wielded. Finley quickly pointed to his own ears and then to the wooden door, signaling Arcadia to risk the additional magic to let them hear what was happening. That kind of Sky magic was subtle and affected a small enough area that it shouldn't betray their—

"—the eleven hells are you?" The brass-smith's voice sprang to life in their ears as Arcadia wove them into the construct she'd built in her mind.

"A messenger from heaven!" another voice said brashly. "Your work here is a sin, and both you and it shall be destroyed this night!"

Arcadia, Jamel, and Finley looked at each other in disbelief.

They knew that voice.

It was a voice they'd heard for five years at Disemstoke's, a voice that had more often than not been mocking them. A voice they'd heard mellow after it had come with them to the Farm. A voice they'd never expected to hear again.

A voice that certainly shouldn't be inside the brass-smith's shop.

Landon.

Without asking the others, Jamel shouldered Finley aside and pushed the heavy shop doors open enough for them all to see inside.

The brass-smith stood near the wooden trestle where his iron tube was still strapped down. His head had already turned toward the opening door, a confused and angry expression on his face. In his hands were a pair of tongs, which gripped a glowing chunk of coal.

Landon stood in front of the chip-faced stone blocks, a halo of orange-and-red Flame magic coruscating around his body. One arm was outstretched, a finger still pointing peremptorily at the bewildered brass-smith.

Landon's head turned, and his face twisted in annoyance when he saw them. "What're *you* doing here?" he spat, still pointing at the brass-smith.

"What are *you* doing here?" Arcadia asked in nearly the same breath.

The smith's grip on the tongs loosened ever so slightly.

"Get out of here!" Finley cried.

The red-hot coal began to slip out of the tongs.

Arcadia's mouth opened to say something more, but Jamel and Finley both saw the coal drop from the tongs. Finley reached out, the fire-dampening construct Cat had given them taking shape in his mind and his Flame power already flowing into it. Another part of his mind screamed in panic and terror, forcing an Earth-based shielding rune into his mind. The two constructs twisted around one another, each drawing the wrong kind of magic and canceling itself.

The coal dropped onto a piece of white string snaking out of the end of the iron tube.

Finley cleared his mind and again tried to picture the dampening construct in his mind.

It wasn't going to be fast enough.

Fortunately, Jamel had already had the same idea, and he didn't have the additional Earth affinity to tangle his thoughts. The Flame magic roared into Jamel, and Finley felt an almost-perceptible *click* as the final strokes of the dampening rune fell into place in Jamel's mind.

It's not right, something said in Finley's head. His Rune Smith talent poked forward, examining the flow of magic in and around Jamel. It recreated the construct Jamel had used in Finley's thoughts, banishing the construct Finley himself had been ready to empower.

Jamel's construct was wrong.

The construct Cat had provided them included an area-of-effect limiter designed to contain the magic within a defined space. It would normally have limited itself to the interior of the shop, since that was where Jamel's attention was focused. The construct also included a modulation rune, one that would have smoothed the flow of Flame magic through the construct, absorbing and grounding the amplified energy created by the burning black powder.

Jamel's rune, Finley's talent told him, contained neither of these crucial elements.

The flame on the little white string vanished inside the iron tube.

His senses heightened by his talent, Finley *felt* the tiny spark worm its way into the little pile of black powder that had been packed into the end of the iron tube.

He sensed the powder ignite, a pulse of Flame-affinity magic accompanying the sudden eruption.

And then Jamel's magic took over.

Magic that was tied to an elemental affinity which, they'd all learned in school, both relied upon that element and controlled that element. Earth magic drew on the sturdy, eternal nature of the earth itself, but it could also move that earth, manipulate it, and direct it. Similarly, Flame magic could produce fire and could control heat.

It could also deny the heat and cancel the fire.

Jamel's construct, improperly formed and fueled by his substantial Flame power, tried to suppress all fire within the entire village of Greensea. The black powder sitting in the iron tube immediately lost its spark, settling back into an inert pile between the end of the tube and the iron ball that had been stuffed against it.

The roaring hearth at the back of the shop died in an instant, as did the two oil lamps that had made the room so bright.

Half the hearths in the village died, too.

But all of that flaming energy couldn't just be snuffed out. A small wick of flame, of course—that was easily absorbed. But half the hearths in a village that was accustomed to freezing cold nights? No. It was too much to simply *end*.

And without the modulating rune that was supposed to have been in the construct, all that energy came back to Jamel, looking for instructions. It found Jamel's attention locked onto the brass-smith, who was still standing there, holding an empty pair of tongs.

The man's body, turned instantly to ash by the fury of a hundred fires, exploded backwards, blackening the wall of the shop. The intensity of the heat melted the tongs from his nonexistent hands and softened the iron tube into a pile of glowing slag. The black powder, once the sole focus of everyone's concern, was incinerated so rapidly that it didn't even have time to explode.

An overpowering amount of Flame energy remained.

Finley felt something in Jamel *snap*.

It all happened in a heartbeat.

His face burning from the onslaught of searing heat within the shop, Finley turned and tried to catch Jamel as he crumpled to the ground, but failed to do more than slow his fall. Arcadia stood, completely stunned. Finley looked up and saw her turn a cold gaze on Landon, who had let his showy aura of fire flicker away—an aura that, ironically, had served to protect him from Jamel's scorching blast of energy. Finley felt Arcadia's Sky magic swirl coldly around her, emboldened and empowered by the winds roaring in from the sea.

We're supposed to be circumspect, he thought as he realized what she was doing.

But then it was done anyway.



"I don't even know where to start," Cat said sadly as she slumped onto the couch.

She'd invited Finley and Arcadia to her private rooms, which featured a small reading area. Finley had taken the worn reading chair, while Arcadia had taken one end of a small couch that she and Cat now shared.

"Start with Jamel," Arcadia said quietly.

Arcadia's magic had brought them back late last night, her use of a near-proscribed spell—"you'd better not ever use this unless there's a dire emergency"—setting off alarms and bringing the Farm's staff running to the front porch. Jamel had been unconscious, Landon stunned, and Finley almost beyond rational thought. Arcadia had ordered Landon bound, physically and magically, and no one had questioned her. Finley had called for help with Jamel, and the staff had bundled him off to the Farm's healers.

That had been when Cat had arrived, and she'd then stayed up through the night and well into the morning with them, checking on Jamel and bringing them hot beverages.

"It's backlash," Cat said with a heavy sigh. "It's rare, extremely rare, but the healers say they've heard of it. They say they won't know more for days, possibly weeks. He hasn't woken up yet."

"Worst case?" Arcadia asked.

Cat paused for a moment before saying, "He could lose his magic. If his body retains enough to sustain itself, then he'll live, but he might not have enough to empower runes. He's... They call it 'burned out,' although they say it's not unique to Flame magic."

"And Landon?" Finley asked.

Cat shook her head. "He's a strange one. The memory magic didn't take, apparently. He's strong in the Preserve alignment, and it apparently was enough to protect him. The magic set in, and we sent him on his way, but then it faded. He says he was trying to prove himself, win back a place here." She sighed again. "Our 'secure channels' aren't as secure as we'd like. We'd placed him in a good position with the Taryba in Evermore, and apparently that's how how found out about this mission." She shrugged. "He's bound now, and the Head of the Order is considering what to do with him."

"Can we see Jamel?" Arcadia asked.

"They're taking him to Duocastella's in a few moments. They said no visitors. He's... he's physically fine, Arcadia," Cat said, her voice suddenly torn with pain. "But they can't reach him. From what Finley said, he tried to pull an entire village's worth of Flame into himself and then cast it in a single strike."

"I don't think he *meant* to do anything," Finley corrected her. "He just *did*."

"Same thing," Cat said heavily. "It was too much for his spirit. He's breathing on his own, but that's all."

"And the village?" Arcadia asked. "The brass-smith?"

"The witchkind of Greensea are in an uproar. Everyone felt what Jamel did. Or tried to do. The least sensitive of us would have felt it like a brick to the head, I expect. We can't send another agent in there, not now, so word is mainly coming back through our people in Evermore. The Taryba has promised an investigation, of course, but they'll make sure it will go nowhere. We're told the smith's shop was destroyed, nearly everything in it except you four melted to slag or blown to ash." She gave a small shrug. "If nobody else knew his technique, then we'll be safe enough for a while. The humans seem to be blaming the keg of black powder he kept, so perhaps they'll be wary of that for a bit."

"They think a keg of black powder put out half the hearth fires in the village?" Arcadia said skeptically.

"You'd be surprised what humans can justify, especially with the Veil encouraging them think of non-magical explanations."

"Is there anything else we can do?" Finley asked.

Cat shook her head slowly. "I don't know. Ask the Origin to intervene for Jamel, if you believe in that sort of thing. But no. No, there's nothing any of us can do. Just wait."

CHAPTER 19

Identifying a Target

Well," the oldest man said, "that was unexpected. It seems we may have *two* organizations working against us. And apparently without each others' knowledge."

"Does this change our plans, then?" the middle-aged man asked.

"No," the oldest man said, shaking his head, "I don't think so." He tapped the sketches laid out in front of him. "This one, the smaller young man, is clearly a senior operative of some kind. This is the second instance where our people have gotten a good look at him, and we suspect he was present at the mountain incident. The girl we've not seen before."

"Senior at such a young age?" the youngest man asked, a touch of jealousy in his voice.

"Don't let their appearances fool you. My great-grandfather believed they can live well over twelve decades. This one could easily be close to my age and still look yours, if that's true." He tapped the third sketch. "And this one... Tell me again what your agents overheard?"

"That he'd been 'burned out' was how it was being whispered around the town," the youngest man said. "We've a pretty clear idea who the magic users in the village are, based on their conversations the next day. You were wise to make so many contacts in Greensea before deploying this."

"I didn't 'deploy' it, but we certainly saw an opportunity to take advantage," the oldest man corrected him. "We know that the creation of any kind of weapon, especially something involving iron, draws them out quickly. They act quickly and decisively but seem to err on the side of not killing too many people. That brass-smith's experiments were fairly well-known throughout Greensea. Clearly, more than just the brass-smith knew about the weapon, so why kill just him?"

"From what you're saying, leaving witnesses to the aftermath is important to them," the middle-aged man said.

The oldest man sighed. "It seems to be. Put the blame on the invention, or the inventor. We have stories like this going back decades. It's always easy, in the moment, to blame the inventor, or the black powder, or the ironwork, or whatever. Disasters of that scale tend to put people off, and so nobody pursues the experiment any further. Stories are created and passed down, cautionary tales that keep the following generations from trying anything similar."

"Greensea is already collecting every speck of black powder inside their walls and shifting it to storage sheds outside," the middle-aged man said.

"Exactly. And so we'll end up doing the witches' jobs for them, hunting down anyone working on anything that might cause a similar disaster and putting a stop to it. I suspect our own reactions weigh heavily into how they operate. They could simply have killed the brass-smith and destroyed his invention, no? But they wanted something bigger, something more impressive, to deter future experiments."

"They had no way of knowing we'd given the brass-smith the basic technique," the middle-aged man said.

"No, and so they'll think they're safe for now," the oldest man said with a nod. "They won't realize we've something bigger in the wings. Although the introduction of a possible second organization... it's troubling. We got nothing further on the other one?"

"None of our people got a good look at the fourth witch," the youngest man said. "But they say he seemed to be the one who started the explosion. They described him as 'glowing with fire' and acting like a messenger from the gods."

"Yes, it's clear they've used our own religion against us more than

once," the oldest man said with a snort. "We know not to trust any of the church's teachings at this point. As far as we know, the witches created the church in the first place, specifically to help mislead us." He thought for a moment. "The fact that they literally vanished is troubling as well."

"How so?" the youngest man said.

"I've frankly never known of an instance where they've used their magic so openly. They wouldn't have known they were being observed, of course, but they're usually far more circumspect."

"You believe the fourth person threw them off?" the middle-aged man asked.

The oldest man nodded. "I do. I don't think they were expecting it, and I think they had to act quickly."

"Do you think the 'burnout' comments have any use?" the middle-aged man asked, thinking tactically as always.

"I don't know," the oldest man admitted. "There's nothing in my personal records about that even being possible, but then we've few instances where we've actually seen them use magic, especially at that scale." He stroked his chin for a moment. "There's some evidence that the witches have become more powerful in the past couple of centuries —witness what they've accomplished with the iron mines, to say nothing of whatever they pulled off in Cuppton with the scribes. Perhaps some of them can't control the additional power?" He shook his head. "It's an interesting data point, but not something we can operate on as yet, no.

"No, the plan remains." He nodded at the youngest man. "You're to head to the coast tomorrow. We'll unveil the carronade. Do something flashy, firing it into the sea a few times. We'll announce that it's to be fitted to a new ship, one intended to provide protection against these new sea bandits that have been cropping up in the South. A weapon that size will draw their attention."

His mouth twisted into a cruel smile.

"And then we'll have them where we want them."

CHAPTER 20

Carronade

I HATE to pull the two of you into this, but Finley, I think we're going to need your talent more than ever, here. And Arcadia..." Cat paused for a moment, chewing her lip as if she were trying to think of a polite way to say what was on her mind.

"I could use the distraction," Arcadia supplied. "What's happened?"

"Another black powder weapon," Cat said grimly.

"What?" Finley asked, blinking in surprise. "I thought you said these things only came up once every few decades or so?"

Cat nodded. "That used to be the case. There's something... something not *right* here. I don't know what, but this feels too sudden, too close. Too... *purposeful*."

"What is it?" Arcadia asked, sitting up straighter. Cat had found her and Finley lingering over breakfast, perched on stools at one of the high tables in the Farm's spacious kitchen.

"It's Harbsmouth. A group of humans apparently test-fired a black powder weapon early this morning. Woke the half of the village that wasn't already up before sunset to head out on their fishing boards. And this one was *huge.* Our sources are telling us they fired iron balls bigger than your fist."

"Origin defend us," Arcadia whispered. "How heavy must such a thing be?"

Finley remembered how heavy the much smaller weapon had looked in Greensea and couldn't imagine carrying something much larger as a weapon.

"It's apparently mounted on wheels," Cat said. "Word is they're planning to mount it on the new ship that's in the Harbsmouth shipyard."

"Why in the world would anyone need a weapon like that on a boat?" Finley wondered aloud. "Can you actually kill fish with it?"

"There have been a rash of sea bandits along the Southern coast," Cat said. "Fisherwitches have even taken to making sure someone of witchkind is on every boat that goes out. The bandits threaten to lob flaming jars of oil unless your ship heaves to and turns over its catch. Fisherwitches can defend against the fire, and at least a few of them have unbound the bandits' ships, causing them to sink."

"But they'd just have to sell the fish somewhere else, wouldn't they?" Arcadia said with a frown. "That doesn't make any sense."

"They just take them down the coast further until they find a village that's happy to process an extra catch and not ask too many questions. But look, the thing is that this has happened maybe a half-dozen times in all. Since the fisherwitches started going out, it's all but stopped. Everyone's best guess is that it was three or four sea bandit ships total and that they've all been dealt with by now."

"So why this black powder weapon, then?" Finley asked, his brow furrowed.

Cat looked at them for a moment before replying. "Honestly, it feels like it's meant to draw us out. There's no need for the weapon. We're scarcely a week from the incident in Greensea. I've told the Head this, and he agrees, but we can't allow this weapon to stand."

"But..." Arcadia started, and then stopped as her mind seemed to furiously spin through the information. "You're suggesting that the brass-smith in Greensea shared his plans with someone else, then. Someone who's made a bigger version of the weapon in just a week."

"It's more likely *they* shared the design with the brass-smith, actual-

ly," Cat said. "They've had this bigger one, what they're calling a 'carronade,' ready to go."

"I'm not understanding," Finley said, shaking his head. "What're you saying?"

Cat sighed and sat on one of the table's empty stools. She rested her palms on the table and took a deep breath. "The Head and I—and several others whose counsel he respects—think that there's an organized group among the humans that knows of, or suspects, the Order's existence. The incident in Greensea was a test of sorts, a way to feel us out. Landon's presence may have thrown them off, or they may have thought he was part of our plan. Harbsmouth is the next step in their plan. We fully expect it to be a trap of some kind. But we have to go in anyway."

"And you don't have anyone more experienced?" Finley said quietly.

Cat shook her head. "Of course we do, but we need *you*, specifically."

"As a runewright," Arcadia said. It wasn't a question, but there was a note in her voice that suggested she expected Cat to contradict her.

Cat sighed again. "You might as well know, but keep it between us. Finley's runewright talent is real, but it's bigger than just that. He's a Rune Smith. An inexperienced one, but his talent seems to manage itself pretty well."

Arcadia nodded slowly, as if she'd expected something along those lines. "Well. I suppose having a friend with a legendary ability is nice."

"You don't sound surprised," Finley said.

"I'm not. I know what a runewright is. That book-changing spell you cooked up? I looked up the constituent runes. Or tried to. One of them doesn't exist. Or didn't exist, I guess. Obviously, you could have known about something that wasn't documented anywhere else, but I've always been better at rune lore than you. I suspected you'd *created* something. And that's a Rune Smith." She shrugged. "So I'm not surprised. But what's that got to do with this mission?"

"The cat's out of the bag on this carronade," Cat said, frustration filling her voice. "We've agents in every village on the continent scouring books for mentions of the techniques, but if the humans are aware of us —if the Veil is thinning to the point where they *can* be aware of us—

then they're being careful to keep their records in places we can't find them. We can't just destroy this weapon; we have to either destroy all knowledge of it or destroy something fundamental about the way it works. Either of those tasks is going to require new magic. New constructs, new runes. Something only a Rune Smith can do."

"But they're going to be expecting us," Finley said slowly.

Cat nodded. "Which is why it'll just be the three of us. Any large group of agents from the Order will be too easy to spot. We'll go in separately, and we'll go in disguises. We need to minimize our use of magic, too."

"You think this group of humans has witchkind helping them?" Arcadia asked.

The thought seemed—impossible. And terrifying.

"No, but witchkind talk. They can be overheard. If the humans are well organized, and at this point we've no reason to think they're not, then all they have to do is listen for whispers and gossip in the sorting houses and other places where witchkind work alongside humans. If they're *aware* of us, then the Veil can only do so much to keep us hidden."

"When the Veil was created, didn't the Adherent also wipe out humans' memories? So that the magic got a fresh start?" Arcadia tapped the table as she thought. "Couldn't we use the same magic?"

Cat shook her head. "First, that was done by an Adherent of the Sixth Axis. They were incredibly powerful and operated largely outside the bounds of runes and the True Language. The Adherents could do things just by *wanting* to. Everything we know about them, even the records they left behind, suggests they controlled magic through sheer force of will. Even when they created runes, they weren't... they weren't *real.* They were just convenient symbols for an effect that was happening entirely within the Adherents' minds. Every attempt to translate those runes to New Runic have failed, because their runes—unlike others of the time—were more mnemonic than functional. So no, we can't use that exact same thing. But," she continued, raising a finger to emphasize her point, "Finley *may* be able to do something similar. Create an actual rune construct, something we can empower."

"You're Sea-affinity, aren't you?" Finley asked suddenly.

Cat smiled. "In part. But yes, that's the part that matters here. Between us, we can control all four elemental affinities. We're all well-versed in the major alignments I'd expect us to need. Control, Power, Preserve—"

"Destroy," Finley said flatly.

"Destroy," Cat agreed with a nod. "The Head has given us broad latitude. Even if you wind up creating an area-effect construct that renders black powder useless, we'll have that carved into every hamlet, village, and town on the continent within a week. It won't solve the problem of the knowledge being out there, but it would solve the immediate threat against witchkind. We were hoping you'd have been able to do something like that in Greensea, in fact." She shrugged. "Didn't turn out that way."

Finley nodded slowly. His talent had already perked up and was twisting curiously inside him. *Interesting,* he imagined it whispering. "Then I guess I'm in."

"As am I," Arcadia pronounced.

"Supplies are already being assembled for us," Cat said. "We leave within the hour."



That hour was spent on their disguises.

"We want to avoid overt disguise magic as much as possible," Cat told them. "Most of witchkind would be able to sense it, and they'd wonder why we're there. Again, we want to minimize whispers of unusual newcomers that might catch the ears of whatever humans are organizing this. So I've assembled some physical items to help alter our appearances."

Finley's hair was permanently magicked to a deep red, and his normally tightly curled locks were straightened and lengthened until they fell just past his shoulders. "A minor disguise spell to change your eye color won't be noticed," Cat told him, and so his eyes became a deep gray. "We can change your hair back when you return," she said with a chuckle as he frowned at himself in a looking glass.

Arcadia was the toughest, her pale white skin making her stand out

almost anywhere but the deep North. Cat had her smear a foul-smelling black lotion all over her face, neck, and hands, made her sit for fifteen minutes until it turned brown and crusty, and then had her wash it off. When she did so, her skin had been stained a light brown, although the color was patchy and uneven. Cat gave her a construct to empower that smoothed the color. "Everyone uses this spell to cover blemishes," Cat said, "and so nobody will think anything of it." Her hair was stained with a stronger version of the lotion and turned almost black. "This'll have to grow out," Cat apologized, "but the construct I used on Finley won't work on someone with as much Sky magic as you have."

Cat's own "disguise" was limited to her clothing, as the humans in Greensea couldn't have seen her already. Finley's clothes made him look bulkier and, given his diminutive height, almost squat. Cat coached Arcadia into affecting a small limp, and put her in chunky shoes that added two inches to her height.

Arcadia and Cat took themselves to Harbsmouth first, traveling together using one of the simplest traveling spells they knew. Finley would follow an hour later, again hoping to break up the group that the humans might be looking for. They would check into separate lodgings: a traveler's hostel for Finley and a decent inn for the others. As magic was used more profligately by the witchkind of Harbsmouth than those of Greensea, the trio would be able to keep in touch through small 'castings now and then. They would remain apart as much as possible, giving Finley a chance to scout the waterfront workshop where the so-called carronade had been demonstrated.

When Finley arrived, he 'cast Cat immediately and discovered that she and Arcadia had already arranged a quick walk down the waterfront street.

"The workshop's good-sized," she told him. "Kegs of black powder, piles of iron balls, and the carronade sitting right out front on full display. There's been a small crowd there all day, talking to the shopkeeper and his two apprentices. You should be able to blend in and get a good look."

While working on their disguises, they'd discussed their plans, making several of them to handle different circumstances they imagined encountering. Most ideal was for Finley and his talent to come up with

a solution that *wouldn't* require a great deal of human death—it being almost assured at this point that, no matter how many they killed, the knowledge of the weapons' making would survive anyway. Other plans included destroying the carronade itself, burning down the almost-finished ship that the weapon was destined for, and igniting the kegs of black powder and letting nature take its course.

"There's a complication, though," Cat continued now as Finley strode toward the waterfront. "There's a family of witchkind whose space is in the workshop. If it comes down to destroying it, we're going to have to find a way to evacuate them without revealing what we're doing."

"I could control a small fire long enough to roust them," Finley said, "and then let it spread to the powder kegs."

"We'll keep that in mind, then," Cat said. "Let us know what you think once you've had a look."

The 'cast ended, and Finley felt a small wisp of Sky magic settle around his shoulders—tracking magic, cast by Arcadia, so she and Cat would know his location at all times.

As planned, Finley stopped at a human pub for a small lunch, taking his time despite the tense anticipation that gripped his entire body. He then made his way along the waterfront, stopping for a moment to admire the new ship that was rising from the shipyard's dry dock and then allowing the small crowd at the nearby workshop to attract his attention. He joined the group of curious humans, gradually wedging himself in until he had a clear view of the shop.

Already, the immense iron of the carronade was licking at his magic, the pile of iron balls—a pyramid nearly his own height—pulling even harder at it. He quickly cast his protective construct, bottling his magic up inside him and trusting that nobody was looking at his eyes right now to notice they'd changed color. He immediately felt better and started looking around the inside of the shop.

There wasn't much to see. It was almost as if the building had been purposed entirely for the carronade, which Finley realized might be precisely the case. An empty work table sat along the shop's back wall, four small kegs of black powder stacked up next to it. A little crate sat next to them, holding a pile of white rags that could, according to

Cat's description, be used to carry fire into the carronade once it was loaded.

The carronade itself sat at the front of the shop and was the center of the crowd's attention. It was a crude-looking device, ugly in both finish and form. It was shaped like a stubby tube, the front ground flat around the opening. The back was rounded, and the entire thing sat on a sturdy wooden frame, two hefty wooden wheels attached to either side. There would be no aiming this weapon, save for positioning the frame itself. The exterior of the carronade was black, pitted iron, with small patches of rust showing here and there.

The pile of balls looked no different, although their surfaces were a bit smoother, perhaps, and they showed fewer signs of orange rust.

Finley felt his Rune Smith talent unwinding lazily. It climbed up his spine and seemed to take note of the protective shell Finley was casting over himself. It sniffed, unimpressed, and slithered out to examine the shop on its own. He felt it acknowledge the mechanics of the weapon: pour black powder down the hole, stuff a rag into the smaller hole that had been bored through near the back, and then roll an iron ball down the hole. Light the rag, ignore the powder, and the ball would thunder outward with great velocity.

Cat had even brought them up to speed on the "lost investment" technique required to cast weapons like this. A large vat was filled with fine, wet sand, packed down until it was almost solid. Then a cylinder was laboriously carved into it, leaving a small pillar of compacted sand in its center. Molten iron was poured over it all, filling the carved-out space and, once cooled, becoming a seamless tube with an opening at one end. Removing the iron demolished the carefully sculpted sand, that being the "lost investment" part of the technique. A new vat of sand would have to be prepared for each new casting, and it was the texture of the sand itself that gave the carronade its pitted, pebbly finish.

Inefficient, his power muttered to him as half-formed rune constructs—each capable of achieving the same effect far more elegantly—floated through his mind.

I need to stop it, not replicate it, he reminded himself, unsure what it said about his mental state that he was standing here amongst a group of humans, next to a pile of iron, arguing with his own magic.

Mmmm, his talent replied, still looping slowly through the workshop.

I can't just tie a construct to the shape, Finley thought. *Any deviation and the magic wouldn't recognize it. And it'd ruin every other kind of tube of a similar shape. The black powder seems to be the key.*

His talent, as if agreeing, focused on the small powder kegs, sniffing carefully at them and studiously avoiding the pile of iron balls.

What about iron itself? Finley thought suddenly. *It grounds magic, but allowing the humans to have iron was a mistake in the first place, right? What if we could... deny it to them, somehow?*

His talent whipped back at him in a sudden lunge, and he had a clear vision of a glowing red line of power coiled before him, staring intently into his eyes.

Commitment, it seemed to say.

Finley thought about it for a moment. Magic capable of somehow destroying iron would be... immense. It was the rust, he thought, that had given him the idea. All iron was subject to rust: the humans spent thousands of hours a year scrubbing the tracks of their iron roadways, especially in the wetter parts of the world. Witchkind's records on the properties of iron weren't extensive, but they knew that water somehow caused or accelerated the rusting. What if Earth magic and Sea magic could be used to—

Commitment, his talent repeated. In his mind's eye, the power dimmed to a dull orange and returned to its investigation of the shop.

Any magic capable of affecting iron on a *worldwide* basis would be extensive, he knew. He typically had a good sense for how much power a given rune construct would require, but in this case he simply couldn't imagine the amount of power needed. Even with all of witchkind available to empower it, the construct would need constant maintenance until all the iron in the world was rusted away.

So perhaps the black powder offered a better alternative. A means of dampening it, something limited to a single village or town, that could be repeated in each of them. Something the Order's itinerant agent-salespeople could keep topped up with power over time. Or perhaps there was a way for a rune construct to draw power directly from the

world around it? It would require a substantial amount of power to initiate, but—

His talent seemed to turn and look at him from the back of the shop, where it was still sniffing around the powder kegs. A half-formed rune formed in his mind, teasing the ability to create a power loop that would keep a construct self-sustained for an indefinite period of time. But then it faded: *too much,* his talent seemed to say. And there *would* be a risk of such a construct consuming too much local power, denying magic to all of witchkind until the construct itself was destroyed.

His talent's curiosity satisfied, he felt the power reeling back into himself. It felt... *satiated.* Somewhat excited, even. He could feel a hundred unborn runes flitting through his mind, each forming and flashing out of existence before he could quite perceive it. *Something* was possible... but he needed to sleep on it. His talent curled itself back around the base of his spine, muttering deep thoughts to itself as it turned the problem over in his mind.



"I don't see how. No matter how stealthy you can make me, they're going to be watching the place, aren't they? And I can't travel directly into the shop, not with all that iron."

Finley was seated alone on the small patio of a pub, halfway across town from the workshop. He disguised his muttering behind a handful of meat layered between two slabs of bread, his magic carrying his voice to Arcadia and Cat. They were seated far away in another pub, pretending to have a conversation with each other.

"We had a chance to explore a bit more," Arcadia's voice said in Finley's ears. "There's a trade agent's office just behind the workshop. They share a wall. We stopped and talked to the agent for a bit, and it looks like there's a small storage closet behind his desk. The back of that closet should be the same wooden wall as the back of the workshop."

"You should be able to easily persuade the wood to move," Cat added.

Earth magic was excellent for "persuading" wood, and Finley knew of at least two constructs that would do the trick. He nodded—seem-

ingly to himself—and said, "I need to sleep on it, I think. There's... there's something there, but I don't quite have it."

"You'll have to do it from inside the agent's office, won't you? There's all that iron stacked up against the back wall." Arcadia sounded concerned.

"I know," Finley said. "But... I think I actually need to be in the space with it all. I need to see it. My talent seemed to operate fine yesterday, even with the iron-shield construct protecting me."

"You know, if nothing else, I think I could put you directly in the workshop," Arcadia mused. "The arrival might not be comfortable, and I wouldn't be able to get you out, but it'd at least get you there."

"Let's stick with the agent's office," Finley said after thinking for a moment. "It'll let me go a bit slower, feel it out a little."

"Let's stay away from it for the rest of the day, then," Cat said, her voice firm. "You sleep on it. We'll discuss and finalize in the morning, and I'll get a prayer disc message back to the Order. We can head to bed early and wake back up once the sun is down."

"Have we checked to see if the smith is in his shop after dark?" Finley asked. No point repeating the Greensea situation.

"We'll check it out tonight after you've gone to bed," Cat said.

"I wish we could 'cast someone instead of just sending those discs," Arcadia muttered. "I can feel Sky magic all over the place here; it's not like anyone would notice a little more."

"Sea magic would be safer, but you're right. I'll send the disc as a backup, but I've a couple of other agents I should be able to contact as well, at least to let them know where we're at in case something goes wrong."

"Can they be on standby?" Finley asked. "Going in with all that iron isn't exactly comforting."

"I think that's the best plan, actually," Cat said. "Tomas and Ilia are both strong in Sea magic and could get here in a moment if we needed them to. I hesitate to show our full strength in advance, but... yes. Let's plan on having them on call."

"We'll talk again in the morning, then?" Arcadia asked.

"In the morning," Finley confirmed. "I'm going to go sit and think and try to get some sleep." He had a strong sense that his talent needed

to be left alone for a bit, because he could still feel it muttering away inside his soul. Sleep—however fitful or brief, given the circumstances—would be the best way to give it some space.

"Talk to you then," Cat said, and Finley felt Arcadia's magic slip away.



A rush of air deposited Finley into the agent's office. *I hate traveling like that,* he thought as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The office featured only a single small, thickly glazed window that admitted very little light—especially on a night like tonight, when more of Arcadia's magic had dragged clouds to obscure the half-moon. Both women weren't far, and as close as they were to the waterfront, Finley knew Cat could have them here in an eye blink if needed.

"I'm in," he whispered, feeling the tendril of Sky magic carry his voice to them.

The room was still too dark to see clearly, and so Finley summoned up a construct that enhanced the light already in the room, making his eyes more sensitive to it. It was a delicate piece of Flame magic, one he'd spent almost a week mastering at the Farm. Slowly, the room's shadowy shapes resolved into something clearer: a simple desk with a chair behind it and two chairs in front of it. A cabinet on the opposite wall, behind him. The door to his right, a blank wall to his left. Behind the desk, the door to the storage closet. As he concentrated, he felt the slight pull of the iron even through the insulating wood, and he prepared himself to cast the iron-shield construct.

He stepped behind the desk and gripped the small hole that allowed the door to be opened. "Opening the door," he said softly.

The closet wasn't deep: he'd have room to step in and close the door behind him, and perhaps extend his arms out to the sides so long as he remained facing the back wall. That wall was made from vertical planks of wood that strongly resembled those of the workshop's exterior. It wouldn't be difficult to use his Earth magic to temporarily pry them apart.

"You're sure there's nobody in there?" he whispered.

"I've checked it twice," Arcadia said.

"And I can't pick up anything living inside," Cat added. Her Sea magic, if properly focused, could detect living things by sensing the water in their bodies. Between her and Arcadia checking, the workshop should indeed be empty.

"Okay," Finley whispered, gathering himself. "I'm stepping in."

The plan was to move into the closet, close it behind him, and cast his own light-magic while he worked. He'd move the planks of the wall apart and step into the workshop, casting his iron-shield around him and letting his talent go to work. He had a strong sense that his talent had come to conclusions while he slept: it felt eager, wound loosely about his spine and ready to leap out at his request. The plan for tonight was to do nothing more than try and *create* a solution; Finley had no expectation that he alone would be able to empower whatever he came up with. Once a construct was in place, he'd return to the closet, close up the wall, and let Arcadia's stealthy travel magic whisk him away. They'd return on another night with whomever of witchkind they needed and empower his construct then.

He took another deep breath and stepped into the closet. He kept one hand hooked through the hole in the closet door, ready to pull it closed behind him.

That finger was almost wrenched off his hand as the floor caved in, and he fell through.



He landed on his rump, rolling to one side. His magic was in a panic, being torn out of him as he lay there and gasped. Quickly, he cast the iron-shield, bottling his magic up inside him. He could still sense the iron that had been pulling so insistently—it *surrounded* him.

"Finley!" Arcadia's voice was thin in his ears. "What—"

Her voice cut off as a clanking noise above announced more iron closing over the hole he'd fallen through.

His magic stabilized; he levered himself to his knees and tried looking around. It was no good: the entire space was pitch black, entirely without light.

A *snick* and a flare of light made him squint, the sudden brightness blinding him for a moment. He heard a soft hiss as an oil-soaked wick took up the flame, and he cautiously opened his eyes.

He was facing a veritable wall of iron, a series of closely spaced vertical rods each as thick as two of his fingers. He slowly rotated his head, taking in the rest of the room, and he realized it, too, was bound entirely in iron. On three sides, the iron rested against the stone blocks of the building's foundation, and Finley realized he was in some kind of basement space. His cage was complete: he could feel more iron bars shallowly buried in the dirt beneath him, and even more covered the ceiling above him.

An open space sat beyond the fourth wall of the cage, and in that space sat an elderly human man. His head was covered by a thick shock of unruly white hair, his brown skin was deeply lined, and his gray eyes flickered cruelly in the light of the oil lamp he'd lit.

"Hello," he said softly, his voice deep and rough.

Finley looked up as thumping sounds came from the wooden floorboards overhead. There was the sound of a brief scuffle, and he felt a sudden pull of cold air rush past the man and up into the hole he'd fallen through. The oil lamp guttered for a moment in the breeze and then fell still.

"That would be your friends, I think, come to try and rescue you," the man said, his voice unsurprised. "We were prepared for that, of course. Any other little surprises you'd like to share?"

"Who are you?" Finley asked, his voice scratchy.

"My name is Nickolas Kielsa," the man said. "I'm honored to meet you. You're a witch, then? A magic user?"

Finley's eyes narrowed, and he frowned, saying nothing.

"I'll take that as a yes," Nickolas said, nodding slightly. "You look much younger than I expected. May I ask how old you are?"

"Eighteen," Finley said roughly.

"Goodness. You can't possibly be a senior member in whatever organization you work for, can you?"

Finley blinked, not understanding.

"Of course not, so young. Well. May I know your name, then?"

Finley thought for a moment before deciding there was no harm in it. "Finley."

The man nodded again. "Finley. Well, honored, as I said, although I understand this can't be pleasant for you. Tell me—does all the iron, these bars," he said, waving at the cage Finley was kneeling in, "does it bother you?"

"I can handle it." Finley unleashed his talent, sending it poking through the room looking for a way out. It seemed... *amused,* somehow, and not at all threatened. Finley certain didn't share its apparent optimism.

"I see. It seems much of what I thought I knew is... more nuanced, in reality. Well. I would like to tell you why you're here. Why I'm here. We've been working at cross-purposes, your people and mine, and I'd like to understand why, if I can."

Finley blinked again and tilted his head in curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"The carronade," the man said. "You're here to destroy it, or the shop above, or something, aren't you? As you did in Greensea? And you —your people, that is, whatever organization you are with—you're the ones who've stopped the printing presses as well, no? Caused swamps to appear whenever we try to extend the iron roadways? You hate iron, that much is clear. But do you hate us? Do you hate humans?"

Finley's jaw worked for a moment. This man was... well-informed. No, not just this man. He'd said *people.* That meant an organization—and whoever they were, the iron bars on Finley's every side warned him that they were serious. "We don't hate you," he said at last.

"Then why? Is it solely because iron affects your powers? That's why you hate iron, isn't it?"

"It's not just that," Finley admitted, unsure where this was leading. "Magic *is* our life. Iron doesn't just ground our magic, it bleeds it from us. Kills us."

"And yet here you sit, unbothered."

"I'm special."

"Special indeed. And why the printing press? Why the books? We know you modify our books, somehow. I've proof. We've known for

years, decades. Generations, really, but we could never catch you at it. Never point a finger at you."

"Humans misuse their knowledge," Finley said, his voice still low. "You've no regard for the consequences."

"To you, you mean. Consequences to magic users, whom we're not even supposed to know about."

"Consequences to yourselves, too. You do more damage than you know. You upset the balances of the world. If we weren't here to stop you, to guide you—"

"*Guide,*" the man said, his voice sarcastic. "Now there's an interesting word. So you're really just looking out for us all, is that it? This is just your way of keeping us poor, stupid humans from hurting ourselves?"

Finley recognized the bait. But what could he do besides take it? "Yes."

"And you've done this for centuries, haven't you?"

Finley nodded.

"Never thought to ask us what we thought of the arrangement?"

"What do you mean?"

"You could have told us magic existed. Could have told us, really at any point, that you used it to shore up our buildings, strengthen our ships—yes, I know about all that. I've seen your scratchings in wood and stone," Nickolas added as Finley's eyes widened. "But you sought to keep it all secret."

"You'd Hunt us," Finley spat.

"Ah, the Hunts," Nickolas said, nodding thoughtfully. "I wondered if it might not come back to that. Greedy humans seeking to control your magic, burning your families if you didn't comply? Isn't that how the stories go?"

"They're not stories."

"No, I suppose not. But, my word, those go back thousands of years. And you've just been hiding amongst us all this time? And why use your magic on us? Why strengthen our buildings, why make our street lamps work better?" He paused only briefly, not giving Finley time to answer. "It's so you could take it all away from us, isn't it? It's your people's one lever against us. Stop us from building the knowledge

to fend for ourselves, make us reliant on your power, knowing you could snatch it away if you were discovered? If the Hunts resumed?"

Finley nodded slightly. It wasn't that hard to figure out once you had all the pieces. He felt his talent still sliding through the room, but nothing had caught its interest. Until now.

He's interesting, it seemed to say suddenly, briefly nudging against the old man, who took no notice of the invisible power next to him.

Nickolas sighed. "I'd like to end the war, Finley. And I'd like your help."

"What do you mean?"

"Come out in the open. Let the world know of—what is it your people call themselves?"

"Witchkind."

"Ah, I'd always taken that for a mistranslation. Witchkind, then. Tell all the humans. Work alongside us. We'll work to dismantle the iron roadways, if we must. Truth be told, now that you've convinced the church to lock us out of our iron mines—yes, I know about that as well, and it was a clever piece of work, I'll admit—the iron horses' days are numbered anyway. I'm sure with your magic we can create something to replace them."

He stood, brushing dust off his dark pants and picking the oil lamp up from where he'd left it on the dirt floor. "You don't have to answer now. I'll give you the night to think about it. It's worth at least a conversation, isn't it, Finley? If perhaps you need to get word out to your organization, to its actual leaders, I'm sure we can arrange for that. In the meantime, I'll return in the morning with some food, and we'll talk more, yes?"

He turned to go. Finley stood and felt a lump in his pocket. His hand dove in just as his talent coiled back up within him. *Pointless,* it muttered, and went back to contemplating the problem of the black powder.

"Wait," Finley said. His thumbs worked, quickly snapping off pieces of wood, and he was glad they'd made him practice this so often. He held the prayer disc out through the iron bars. "Would you... would you take this to the church for me?"

The old man turned back to Finley, looking curiously at the little

wooden disc. "You people follow the same religion?" he asked, his voice hovering between interest and disbelief.

"We always have," Finley lied. "Our histories tell us it was the one thing that held us together in the old days."

The man took the disc and looked at it suspiciously. "And what is your prayer?"

"To understand," Finley said simply. "I... I hear what you're saying," he said, forcing his voice to sound confused. "It's not... You're not what I expected. I just want to understand."

"I see," the old man said, nodding but not taking his eyes from the disc. "Well. I suppose... Hmm." He deposited the disc in his pocket, and turned away again. "I'll see you in the morning."

Finley hoped he'd drop the disc in the church's collection box. All its little wooden tabs broken away, it sent a clear message to the Order: *All is lost. Send no rescue.*

Nickolas Kielsa might have captured a young man of witchkind, but he'd get no closer to the Order. And he had put himself before a Rune Smith. If there was a way to steal Nickolas' knowledge, to end *his* organization, Finley meant to find it.

But he'd do it alone.



"Finley!"

Finley started at the hissing voice. He'd nearly dozed off, curled into a pitiful ball in the middle of his cage. The iron-shield construct was still hovering in his mind, his magic still bottled up safely inside him. The effort of maintaining the construct for all these hours had left him feeling dazed.

"Finley!" the voice hissed again.

He came fully awake. "Arcadia?" The voice seemed to be coming from above.

"Up here," she whispered sharply.

Finley looked up and saw a small, glowing light.

"How?"

"You're in a basement," she said. "There's a slot window right at ground level."

"How big?"

"Just a handspan, maybe less. Not enough." She sounded mournful.

"I sent the no-rescue signal."

"They got it. I'll do your chores for a week if you tell me how you got that through. But... I was already here."

"I thought they captured you."

"No, they attacked us. They were waiting; there was a false wall at the side of the office. Cat... Cat was hurt, Finley. They hit her in the head with a bar of iron. I managed to get us out. She's with a healer. They... My arm's broken. It's set, I'll be fine, but I'm no good with healing." Healing magic was of Sea and Earth, not the capricious whims of Sky. "You're surrounded by iron," she said plaintively.

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. He... There's a human." Finley started speaking quickly, trying to relay as much information as possible. "Nickolas Kielsa. There's an organization. They know of witchkind, Arcadia. They know what the Order does. They know about magic, they know of our runes. Ships, buildings, everything. He even mentioned street lights. You have to go!" Finley's voice rose sharply. "You have to tell them! The Veil, it's gotten thin. They know about us!"

"How many are there?" Anxiety tinged her voice, too.

"I don't know. But you have to go!"

"I can't just leave you here, I—"

"No, you have to! No rescue, Arcadia. I sent the signal."

"I won't abandon you."

"You will. We took the oath at graduation. I'll... I think I'll be okay. But I need to do this on my own. They can't know about the rest. They're probably watching now, sketching your face. You need to go!"

She was silent for a moment, and Finley could hear the resignation in her voice when she spoke again. "You're not all-powerful."

"I know."

"I'll go."

"I'll meet you at the Farm."

"You'd better."

Another rush of wind signaled her magical departure, and Finley lay down on the ground again. *I need to get out of here,* he thought sadly.

How badly? asked a voice in his soul.



Finley rested... restlessly. He lay still on the dirt-and-iron floor of his cage, eyes closed, but he never really slept. With his magic bottled up, his senses felt dulled, and the world seemed dark beyond even the lightless basement in which he lay. The only bright light, visible solely to himself, was his Rune Smith talent.

As he relaxed onto the ground, it unrolled slowly from his body, stretching out into the room it had already explored. With the rest of his magic trapped within himself, it was as if his talent gave Finley a new set of eyes. His perspective shifted as it swirled lazily around the basement cage.

The first thing it noticed, of course, was the neat arrangement of iron bars. They were no longer pulling at his magic, since his iron-shield kept that locked within him, but—

No.

The voice, the intuition he'd always associated with his talent, was clearer. It was neither deep nor sharp, but rather spoke a medium tone. It carried a weight to it, a weight of centuries. And, somehow, it had gray eyes and pale skin as it spoke to him.

No? he asked it.

Rather than answering, it stretched into the iron bars. They weren't solid, Finley saw. Once you got into them, they were an intricate lattice, with ample space between the vertices of...

Of earth.

The iron came from earth, *was* earth, or an aspect of it. It was really no different than copper, or the brass or bronze that humans made from copper. The iron wasn't *drawing* magic, it was simply offering to be the best possible conductor for it outside of someone of witchkind. It accepted magic eagerly, letting power flow through its lattice and...

and into whatever the iron was connected to. The ground, in most cases. Magic returning to its source, especially in the case of Earth magic.

He could see how the salty spray of the nearby sea attached to the iron, bringing with it the small particles of air that floated everywhere. Those bound together, Sea carrying Sky and touching Earth, changing the shape of the iron's lattice, creating a protective, fragile orange shell on the iron's exterior. The rust floated on the outside, denying further intrusion from Sea or Sky, protecting the core of Earth that still offered to carry magic as fast and as far as one might want.

It carries it too fast, Finley thought, seeing, through his talent, how quickly magic could flow through the iron bars and into the earth.

Loop, the voice said.

Finley's talent dove into the iron, soaring through it and into the earth, and emerging again into Finley's bare cheek, which rested in the dirt of his cell's floor. Round and round it went, through Finley and into the iron, through the iron and into the ground, from the ground into Finley again.

But only Earth magic? Finley thought, his mind grappling with this new idea.

In response, his talent shifted perspective. The iron had come from the earth, where once it had been imbued with fire and Flame swirling deep beneath the ground. Flame magic was part of it—a forgotten part, but not long forgotten.

As the truth fully dawned on him, his talent reared up and plunged back into Finley's body, drawing in his mind a rune construct of greater complexity and more simplicity than Finley had ever imagined possible.



"Good morning," Nickolas said as he settled once more onto the wooden chair that sat outside of Finley's cage.

A dim trickle of sunlight had lit the room an hour prior, rousing Finley from the near-trance in which he'd spent most of the night. "It's been morning an hour past," Finley pointed out, his voice calm.

"So it has. The old perhaps need that additional hour of rest,"

Nickolas said wryly. "Have you had a chance to think about what I've said?"

"I have," Finley said. "I've had little else to do."

"Yes. And?"

Finley paused for a moment before answering. "I appreciate your perspective," he said. "I acknowledge that keeping witchkind apart from humans is not the only way. But the histories teach us that humans will never be content to work *with* witchkind. Eventually, some of you will grow greedy. You'll use your weapons against us. Force us to do your bidding. Make us your slaves."

"And if I could promise that wouldn't happen?"

"You'd be lying."

"True," the old man chuckled. "But it isn't your decision to make, is it? Shouldn't we contact the leaders of your organization?"

Finley shook his head slowly. "There's no organization. Not one you'll ever find. Not one that matters. You'll never let me be free enough to communicate, anyway. And if there were more, I'd never lead you to them."

"So we've a stalemate," Nickolas said, nodding slowly. "You're right in that I'm reluctant to release the only one of your people we've ever managed to capture."

"Proving my point."

"Perhaps."

They sat, the old man in his chair and Finley on the dirt, for a long while, regarding each other carefully.

"We know how to attack you now," the old man said.

"Do you?"

"We captured you."

"That's a bit different. And that won't work again."

"So there are more of you." It wasn't a question.

Finley shrugged. "There are more of witchkind, of course. But word has already been spread. They'll go back into hiding. You won't find them."

"Seems your scratchings need attention now and then."

"The runes? Yes. But you'll let them be tended to. You risk too much otherwise."

"A stalemate, then."

"Not exactly."

The old man's eyes widened. "Oh?"

"Nothing more. Just that. You'll leave me here for a while yet. Your greed won't let you do anything but. You *should* try and kill me before I can do whatever I'm going to do next." Finley shook his head, his voice full of confidence. "But your desire is to *possess* me. So you won't."

"The iron holds you."

"As you say."

They sat a while longer, and then Nickolas stood. "I'll return shortly. We've a means of transporting you, at least."

"I'll see you then."

The old man huffed as he turned and walked out of Finley's sight.



Finley's talent chuffed its amusement as Nickolas left the room. *Dangerous,* it whispered.

Finley had seen the construct, and the new runes, his talent had drawn in his mind. He knew it was more than he could safely empower on his own. But Jamel had served as an unfortunate example, if nothing else. One could, at need, draw more power than one *should* draw.

Finley sat upright, hugging his knees as he thought. The Order's mission was still righteous. This human, this Nickolas Kielsa, could have approached them any number of ways other than trapping Finley. But no. He'd sought out the one weakness he'd been able to figure out, iron, and deployed it as a trap. He'd drawn them out with the threat of an existential weapon. He'd tracked them, spied on them.

He delivered the prayer disc, a small voice in Finley's head reminded him.

Proof of nothing more than the fact that everyone had depth and complexity, Finley thought.

Death, his talent whispered in his soul.

For cause, Finley responded instantly. The Order and its mission was bigger than him. He'd dedicated himself to that mission, sworn oaths to uphold that purpose. And death was... well, not unlikely, if he

was reading this construct correctly—and he couldn't do anything except, of course—but it was at least not assured. Burnout, on the other hand, was all but certain.

He took a deep breath, his mind made up. If the stories were true, he was about to attempt Adherent-level magic. To, in the words of the histories, end... no, *End,* something's fundamental purpose.

To change the world.

And what else, in the end, was a Rune Smith for?



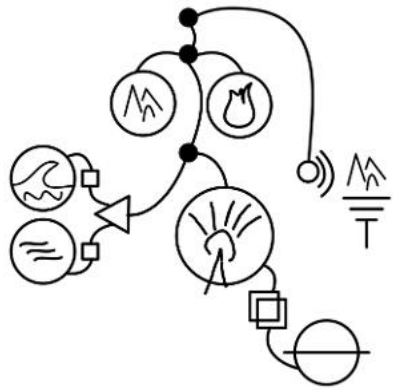
Finley waited until he heard a commotion above, the floorboards of the agent's office thudding with heavy steps. Waited until those steps seemed to descend into the basement, until it became clear that they were coming for him.

Let's begin, he thought, once again drawing in his mind the construct his talent had created. He'd formed it a dozen or more times in the past hours, holding it firmly in his mind until he understood not only the shape, but the exact order of the strokes, the sequence of the curves, the importance of each piece falling into place at precisely the right time.

Be certain, his talent whispered, seeming more amused than concerned.

He ignored it.

This time, when the construct was complete, he held it for a long moment, admiring it.



And, unlike any previous time, Finley connected his mind to the inputs of the construct and dropped the iron-shield he'd been holding in his mind for uncountable hours.

Magic, as anyone knew, was useless when used directly against humans. Their bodies, unlike those of witchkind, embraced all four of the major elements: Sky, Flame, Sea, and Earth. That combination, along with their natural connection to the earth itself, tended to funnel magic away from them, dispersing it and canceling any effects the caster had intended.

Iron had always been seen as a kind of inert human: absorbing magic, *grasping* at it, even, and funneling it harmlessly into the earth.

But Finley realized now that there was a more subtle difference.

Earth and Flame magic ripped out of his body in a barely controlled tide, pounding into the iron bars that surrounded him. But this was still *his* magic, drawn by his body from the world around him and subject to his sole control. He forced it through the iron, channeled it back into the construct in his mind, and back out into the iron again. The power swirled, growing in speed as he drew more energy out of the world.

As the momentum of magic seemed to grow beyond control, Finley reached out for *more.* This time, he touched on the Sky and Sea magic that were so close but had never responded to his call. Ordinarily, he could only sip at the edges of those foreign powers, but he realized now that being a Rune Smith meant something far more than being able to create new runes.

All magic connected back to the Origin, the place where all magic came from. It flowed into the world through channels of Sea and Sky, through gouts of Flame, through crevices of Earth, but it was all, in the end, the same. The elements colored magic but did not define it.

And runes themselves were not magic at all. They provided a way to channel magic, to direct it, to communicate intent and suggest effect. This had been what the Adherents, possessors of more magic than any others of their day, had known instinctively: the runes helped *shape* magic, but they in no way *limited* magic.

Through the rushing cascade of energy, Finley reached into the center of his construct, tapping an input node that would otherwise have no place in such a position. The looping magic fed into it, identifying the unique pattern of the world that called itself *black powder*.

Embodying Sky, Flame, and Earth magic—something Finley had only realized in these past, quiet hours—black powder waited for the slightest spark to activate it, at which point it would release plumes of Sky in the form of gasses. These would expand far faster, and far more powerfully, than the hot air that rose from a hearth's fire. Packed into a constrained space, these gasses would long for freedom, pushing anything out of their way in their rush to escape confinement.

Finley's magic suggested another possibility.

He'd never have allowed this much magic to rush through his body. He could feel it burning him and solidifying him in the same instance, tearing his body apart, even as the magic rebuilt it.

But now? He gave himself over to his task, released himself fully to the mission. The magic could do whatever it wanted, so long as, in the end, it achieved the outcome he'd directed.

With a sound like that of a thousand thunderstorms coming home to rest, the agent's office, the workshop, and a dozen buildings around them blew skyward. Finley grasped the threads of magic that held spaces of witchkind hidden within those structures and set them to the side with a gentle flow of quieting Sea magic.

The iron of Finley's cage momentarily adopted the attitude of black powder, blasting a crater a hundred feet wide and a dozen feet deep. Sky magic kept Finley suspended in the middle of it, unharmed except for the unleashed magic that ravaged his body.

A wave of power burst out from that body, quickly engulfing the village. It didn't stop there: it flowed outward at speed, spreading across the continent and rapidly covering the entire world. *Quietly,* it whispered to the elements that formed black powder. *Softly.*

Forevermore, black powder would burn no more fiercely than wood shavings, offering nothing beyond a novel, blue-orange light.

Feeling the change take hold across the world, Finley relaxed, offering his thanks to the magic and to the Origin from which it all flowed.

Oh, the voice of his talent said in his head, for the first time a strong, firm sound instead of a suggestion or a whisper, *you're so very welcome.*

Epilogue

How do you feel?"

"Like a carriage ran over my head."

Finley had been confined to his bed at the Farm for a week after the "Harbsmouth Incident," as everyone was calling it. After the explosion —and the subsequent release of magic that had been felt by every single man, woman, and child of witchkind across the world—Arcadia had returned to the village to find Finley lying comatose in the middle of the waterfront crater he'd created. She'd carried him to the Farm as quickly as she could manage, which had wound up taking close to two days as the world's magic had roiled and frothed in the wake of whatever he'd done. He'd woken for the first time just a day ago, and, after one abortive attempt at sitting upright, had decided to follow the healers' advice and stay put.

Arcadia hadn't left his side for a moment of that time, ordering her meals be brought to her in his room and having a larger chair lugged in, which she'd turned into a sort of nest for sleeping.

"Do you have the slightest idea what you did?" she asked. It was a question he'd been asked over and over since he'd opened his eyes, to the point where Arcadia had used her magic to shove everyone else out of the room.

"No," Finley said and then groaned. "It hurts to shake my head."

"Then don't do that," she said playfully. Her mood had improved considerably since he'd awoken.

"Noted, O mighty healer," he teased. Then, more seriously: "I actually don't remember. I know I called on my talent, let it... let it free, I guess. I didn't think I'd survive. I wasn't even trying to survive."

"Reports are coming in now that the magic's settling. Black powder is apparently a thing of the past. You can use it to light a fire, but it's useless for explosions."

"I think that was my intent."

"What does your talent tell you?"

"That's the thing," he said quietly. "Ever since I woke up it's been... not gone. I think I can still feel it. But it won't answer to me. If you gave me a set of runes, I could probably cobble them together, but the idea of asking it for something new... just isn't there."

"Still a runewright, then."

"I'm guessing."

"Maybe it'll come back."

"Ow. It hurts to shrug, too. But maybe. I don't know. Maybe it's better that it hasn't."

Arcadia was quiet for a moment, surprised. "Oh?"

"What we do to the humans—holding them back, I mean. I know why it's necessary. Nickolas' own greed, his desire just to possess me, shows humans haven't changed. But... but it's also wrong. Their society hasn't advanced in millennia, aside from the iron roadways. It just seems... sad."

"What's that got to do with you being a Rune Smith?"

"We've been in a race with the humans all this time," Finley said even more softly. "And neither of us is winning. But I'm the game changer. I *ended* black powder, Arcadia. The Head of the Order knows that. I made their word press functionally useless in any decent-sized village. With me, we could *win* the game."

"And?"

"I guess I don't know if I want it to be that easy."

She nodded slowly. "I get your point. They're still... they're still so dangerous. And there are so few of us in the Order. From what you've been telling us, this Nickolas has hidden their knowledge so that even

we can't get to it, and that gives them a leg up. I guess it'd be nice to know we had a Rune Smith still."

"Maybe. Maybe we will."

They sat quietly for a long time, thinking their own private thoughts. Arcadia spoke first. "Feel like some soup?"

"That'd be nice."

She got up from her chair nest and said, "I'll be right back."

After she closed the door behind her, Finley turned his sight inward. His talent *was* still there. It was part and parcel of him being a runewright, he knew; he couldn't have that and somehow not be a Rune Smith as well. But his talent was restful, curled up into a tight ball within his gut.

You're still there, aren't you? Finley asked it.

It gave a quiet, satisfied murmur in return.

DON JONES



a story of witchkind

THE CONSPIRACY OF ONE

CHAPTER 1

Apprentice Review

So I GATHER your first mission didn't go so well?" Finley Coughlin offered an gentle smile to Rey Rinwander, his newest apprentice, as they strolled along the packed-earth road that led to Sowsea. "I remember my first time out. It was definitely stressful. Mind telling me what happened?"

Rey sighed. "It was in Reedsedge. You know it?"

Finley considered. "Tiny little village along the southern coast, right?"

"Calling it a village is overselling it, but yeah."

"What was the mission?"

"Printing press." Rey looked up at Finley with a bit of suspicion. "They plant those, don't they?"

"The Order? Possibly," Finley allowed. "First missions aren't supposed to be all that complicated. But... well, there are some measures in place specifically for printing presses." He'd invented those measures, relying on printers' almost inevitable tendency to use the human religion books as their first printing project. New runes carved into the foundations of every church on the continent ensured the projects didn't get far. "So yeah, it might have been a setup."

"Well, it didn't go well."

I gathered, since they sent you on a second one with me. "Who were you with?"

"Ujjwal."

"Ah." An older member of the Order with the curmudgeonly demeanor of most older witchkind with an Earth affinity.

"So you know him."

"Let's just say I'm surprised they sent him out with an apprentice. But you're Earth affinity as well, right?"

"Yeah, but nothing was good enough for him. I can't work if I can't concentrate, and if he wasn't staring through the back of my head, he was making that sound he makes. To let you know you're never going to be good enough."

Having been on the receiving end of Ujjwal's *harrumphs,* Finley could only grin. "But what about the mission itself?"

Rey sighed even more deeply. "I blew it. Ujjwal gave me the rune construct to use, but I couldn't get it empowered. It... kind of backfired."

"How badly?"

"The entire cottage was swallowed by the earth."

"Oh, my."

"Yeah. So Ujjwal had to conjure up a quake and damage a few more, so it looked natural. Then he had to call four others to keep the quakes going for a few days, and put out the story that it was a sinkhole."

"Anyone hurt?"

"No."

"Well, there's that. And they're giving you a second chance, with me."

"And you're Earth affinity, too?"

"I am. Earth and Flame, actually."

"That's an odd combination."

"My whole family's an odd combination," Finley chuckled. "In a good way." He scanned the road ahead. "We should be in sight of the village pretty soon. Want to go over the plan?"

Rey sighed again, and Finley wondered if the constant, dramatic exhalations had been part of what set Ujjwal off. "We touch base with the local reseller."

"Right." The Order's cover story for having agents traveling all over the continent was its kitchenwares business—an extremely real, and quite lucrative, business. Standard procedure in most cases was to stop in and check on the merchants—almost always human shopkeepers—who purchased and resold their products. "Then what?"

"I didn't understand the brief," Rey admitted. "It sounds like something to do with dirt and bricks."

And with an Earth affinity, that didn't interest you more? Finley thought sharply. *Where'd they recruit this kid?* "Well, I can assure you it's not a plant. It says someone's found a process to create a stronger brick. Like, *massively* stronger. And it's apparently quite an involved process, which is good for us."

"Why are bricks bad?"

Seriously? "What would your trainer say?"

Another sigh preceded a desultory recitation. "We can't have humans building better structures, because one, it'll reduce their reliance on magic should they ever find out about witchkind, and two, it'll just encourage them to spread out more. Their population is already large and limiting structures helps rein them in."

That's the theory, Finley thought a bit sourly. *Although there's no evidence it's true.* But better to stick with the official narrative for now. "Correct. And why is it good for us that it's a complex process?"

Rey had to think about that one. "Easier to mess up?"

"Basically," Finley confirmed. "The more steps that are involved, the more opportunity we can usually find to break part of it in a way that'll look natural. And after we do that?"

Rey took longer this time. "Mind-wipe the inventor?"

"Memory wipe," Finley corrected, "but yes. Have you practiced that one?"

"No. It's Sky magic and I'm no good at it."

"So what would you do if I wasn't here?"

"Call someone else?"

"Correct. And it *is* tricky magic, so it's definitely better to not even try it if you're not pretty skilled at it."

"Are you?"

"I can get by." *Understatement of the era.* Finley might not have a

direct affinity for Sky magic, but his talent as a runewright—and more importantly as a far rarer Rune Smith—gave him an uncanny knack for whatever magic he put his mind to. *Although my talent still isn't talking to me after Harbsmouth.* He worried, some days, that the encounter with the human weapon maker in that little fishing village had damaged his talent, somehow. Other days, he could almost swear he heard it muttering in the back of his brain, only to vanish when he considered it too closely.

He shook his head. *Mind on the game.* "There's the edge of the village, ahead," he pointed out. "Ready to prove you can do this?"

Another sigh. "I guess."

Don't act all enthusiastic about it, Finley thought sarcastically, wondering for the first time if maybe Ujjwal'd had the right of it with this one.

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The village had turned out to be surprisingly small and barely worth the title—little more than a dozen buildings clustered together, with various barns and shacks scattered around the perimeter. Their "reseller" ran the community's tiny dry good store, and had dourly proclaimed himself well-stocked with pots and pans. They'd taken a light lunch at a similarly minuscule inn before walking as discretely as possible toward their target.

"Did you notice," Finley said softly as they strolled to the edge of the clustered buildings, "that there's no church?"

Rey shook her head and Finley rolled his eyes. Even as an apprentice, she should know how much the Order made use of the humans' churches. Magically modifying their religious texts in subtle ways, adding magic runes to the structures themselves, and other tricks helped suppress dangerous human innovation. Other runes helped connect Order agents with each other, while still others provided primitive monitoring of every human community. "Without a church..." he murmured. *Without a church, they could be doing anything here.* "I wonder how we found this one."

"The brief said the new bricks were being shipped to a larger town," Rey said.

Finley flushed slightly. *How did I miss that?*

They continued past the edge of the "village," where the landscape flattened into hardscrabble dirt, tall grass, and the thick, low shrubs that led to the adjacent farmlands. The sun was growing low, and as they walked Finley cast a light glamour about them, encouraging human eyes to look elsewhere.

"Why are we skulking?" Rey asked. "That glamour makes my eyes itch."

No sense of discretion, Finley thought, gritting his teeth. "Are you saying you and Ujjwal just strolled up to that cottage?"

Rey shrugged. "Basically."

"It's so surprising it didn't go well." Finley kept his own voice barely above a whisper as they surveyed the workshop. Situated on the very edge of the small village, it looked as if it had once been used to keep livestock. A small, ramshackle building was surrounded by a large yard, enclosed by an even more ramshackle split-log fence. Where pigs and chickens had once roamed, there were now large piles of... sand? "What do you think it all is?"

"Who can tell?" Rey sounded completely disinterested.

Finley suppressed the urge to shout. "Someone with Earth affinity, perhaps?"

"So then why can't you—oh, right."

"Right."

"Sure, just a second." Rey closed her eyes and concentrated, while Finley rolled his own again in exasperation. He listened—not with his ears, but with his on-again, off-again Rune Smith talent—to see if he could sense what she was doing. But this afternoon was his talent's day off again, and he could detect nothing.

"That pile is just rocks. Small ones. Probably leavings from the granite quarry not too far away." Finley had known that much at a glance, but at least Rey was trying, now. "Second one is sand. From the shore line. Nothing special." Her eyes squeezed shut even harder, and Finley wondered for a moment who'd taught this girl to use magic. "The white stuff isn't sand, it's ground limestone. Weird." She opened her eyes. "That other pile is firewood."

"Fire—" Finley stopped himself with a quiet sigh, forcing his jaw to unclench. "Then he frowned. "What are they heating?"

"Maybe something in the shack?"

"Possibly." In his mind, Finley pictured a rune of seeing, called *matau pro sienas* in the True Language of magic. Feeding it a touch of Sky magic, he let his eyes drift slightly out of focus as the walls of the shed seemed to grow translucent. "Odd," he said softly.

"What?"

"It's like a tube made of rock," he mused. "Roughly made, at that. As long as the shack itself. Actually," he added, letting his eyes snap back into focus. "It extends out the far side. They've been lighting a fire underneath it, although it's cold now." He shook his head. "I've no idea what—ah, here we go."

On the far side of the shack, a human man was stepping through a gap in the fence, whistling happily. Finley stood at once and waved, urging Rey to step through a similar gap on their side.

"Hello!" the man called. "Hello, hello! What can I help you with?"

"My apprentice and I were noticing your supplies. My employer works with a number of specialized earths—clays, glazes, that sort of thing. I was just wondering if you might have any interest?"

"Clays—oh, spirits no!" the man laughed. "No, you must think we're manufacturing stoneware or something!" He chuckled, shaking his head. "No, we're up to something else entirely!"

"Oh?" Finley asked curiously, elbowing Rey. This was *her* apprentice mission, after all.

"We're making a new type of construction material," the human continued. "Officially, it's called *portlandcementis*, but trust me, we're working on something less of a tongue-twister."

Finley's eyes widened—the word sounded very much like one from the True Language.

"Port—" Rey attempted. She gave up with a quick shake of her head. "What's it do?"

"Well, the process is a bit secret, but the end product is a gray powder. Mix it with pure water and within a couple of marks it begins to solidify. Give it two or three days and it's hard as any rock. It will even cure underwater! Far stronger than wood, all but impervious to seawater! It's going to revolutionize building!"

Finley's eyes had widened even more. "That... sounds amazing."

More than amazing, he thought quickly. *That sounds like magic.* "You've been able to do this consistently?"

The man nodded proudly. "Once we got the specifics of the process figured out. In fact, we're just about to close up this shop. We've built a much larger one further down the coast. Should be able to produce a ton of the stuff every few days." He grinned and gave them a wink. "The stuff's incredibly durable, too. Great with heat. I imagine your employer could use it to build kilns. Mix it with small rocks and it'll support an entire house."

Finley blinked a few times, and then forced himself to smile and nod. "Could be! I'll certainly pass that along—what was your name?"

"Tomas Clincker," the man said, extending his hand for Finley to shake. "Going to revolutionize the world!"

No, you're not, Finley thought to himself.

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The twin moons hung low and pregnant in the night sky, bathing the countryside in an ethereal silver glow. Crickets and night birds sang their nocturnal chorus as Finley and Rey crept silently through the tall grass toward the abandoned shack.

A light breeze whispered through the leaves of the nearby trees, carrying with it the rich scents of earth and growing things. Finley breathed deeply, feeling his Earth affinity resonate with the living land around them. He glanced over at Rey, noting how the moonlight glinted off her dark hair and made her green eyes gleam like a cat's. She moved with a fluid grace, barely disturbing a blade of grass. Maybe there was hope for this apprentice after all.

As they drew closer, the ramshackle structure resolved out of the shadows. It slouched tiredly against the landscape, looking even more dilapidated in the moonlight. The rough hewn logs were weathered to a silvery gray and the thatched roof sagged in the middle. No light shone from the single shuttered window.

Finley held up a hand, signaling Rey to stop. He closed his eyes and waited.

There were no lights in the shack itself, and even after several moments no movement. He signaled Rey again, and they crept forward, easing through the same gap in the fence Tomas had used earlier. They crossed the yard, weaving between the piles of rock, dirt, and wood, and slipped into the shack.

"Minkštiausia šviesa," Rey whispered, and the interior of the shack took on a faint glow.

Finley nodded approvingly. Earth affinity was terrible for delicate illumination, and he knew Rey must have concentrated intently to empower the rune she'd held in her mind.

In the dim magical light, the strange stone contraption dominated the interior of the shack. It was a long, narrow tube, roughly the length and height of a tall man lying down, carved out of a single massive piece of granite. The surface was rough hewn, with chisel marks still visible, as if the maker had been more concerned with function than aesthetics.

One end of the tube was raised up on a sturdy platform of clay bricks, elevating it about three feet off the packed dirt floor. Directly beneath this end was a fire ring, also crafted from clay bricks. The bricks were blackened and cracked from repeated heating and cooling cycles. A few chunks of charred wood and a fine layer of ash dusted the inside of the ring, evidencing its recent use.

From the raised end, the stone tube sloped gradually downward, extending through the wall of the shack. The far end disappeared into the night outside, aiming toward a pit dug into the earth where the processed material would be collected. Along the bottom of the tube, a series of small holes had been bored into the rock at regular intervals, allowing heat and gases to flow through the interior.

Rey walked slowly around the apparatus, running her hand over its rough surface. Finley sniffed, and wrinkled his nose. "It smells like burned rock."

"What do we do with it?"

Finley gave her a sharp look. "This is your mission. What would you suggest?"

"We could break it."

He nodded. "We could. And that would doubtless slow them down. But he mentioned they're already building a larger one."

"Right." Rey chewed her lip as she thought. "We could change how it works."

Finley nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

Rey stared at the rock tube, and Finley knew she was using magic to study how it had been used. "They're heating the limestone. And pushing it down the tube to cool." She tilted her head. "Limestone and clay. Hmm."

Finley waited patiently while Rey continued to study the tube. He resisted the urge to use his own magic to do the same.

"There's something else."

"Oh?"

"It's a sulfate."

Finley raised an eyebrow. *"Gipsas?"*

She nodded. "I think so."

"How odd. I didn't think the humans had any use for it." The soft white powder had specific uses for several highly specialized Earth magic workings, but he'd never heard of humans bothering with the stuff.

"It's easy to decompose," Rey said thoughtfully. "It's a simple rune."

Finley knew it well. "And so..." he prompted.

"Carve it on the bottom of the tube," Rey said. "Really small. If that's really important, it should ruin the result."

"And then?"

She considered. "We'd need to have people go do it to the other one. Maybe if their process stops working, they'll give up. These can't be easy to make."

"Nor cheap," Finley agreed. "All right, then. Go ahead."

"What, now?" Rey looked surprised.

"Did you have some other plans this evening?"

Rey stared at him for a moment, shrugged, and turned back to the tube. She knelt and reached up to the blackened underside, where whatever she carved would be quickly covered by more soot once the humans relit their fire. She reached up to the stone, and Finley dimly sensed power gathering at her extended fingertip.

Odd technique, he thought. Most of witchkind would carve first and empower second, rather than doing both at once. He wondered if someone had taught her differently, or if she was just being lazy. *Lazy and dangerous.* Small mistakes would be amplified this way.

She began tracing her finger through the soot, leaving a shallow furrow in the rock itself, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Focus, Rey," Finley instructed softly. A *twang* in his mind suggested she wasn't holding her magic in check. *Good timing,* he told his erratic talent. "Your alignment is all over the place. Gather it. Control is key."

"I'm trying," Rey snapped back, the air around her suddenly crackling with uncontrolled energy. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. Within seconds, her frustration became palpable, an aura of desperation emanating from her as she struggled to align her magic with the task at hand.

"Trying isn't enough." Finley warned, sensing the chaotic dance of power swirling around Rey. "Magic is about balance, especially for those of us with Earth affinity. You must learn to wield with precision, not brute force." Already, the tracery in the stone was widening and deepening as she fed too much power. "Maybe you should—"

Rey exhaled sharply, and then, with a sudden burst of determination, her finger darted along the granite, her fingertip whitening as she pressed down hard. The half-finished rune she'd carved glowed briefly before fizzling out like a dying star. She cursed under her breath.

"Language," Finley chided.

"Sorry," Rey mumbled, her shoulders slumping. "It's just... hard."

"Hard is what we do. But you've obviously got potential. That's why they paired you with me, instead of accepting Ujjwal's judgement of you."

"Potential to do what? I can barely manage basic spells." Rey's voice wavered, and Finley could see the doubt clouding her green eyes.

"For one, stick with carving first and empowering later. Who taught you that, anyway?"

"Uncle," she mumbled.

"Well, he's wrong." Her eyes fell. "But you do have potential. Potential to make decisions that matter," Finley added, his thoughts returning

to the mission—an 'easy' task, they'd called it. A chance to prove Rey's worth to the Order. "Let's try again. This time, clear your mind. Picture the rune. Feel its shape, its edges, and let your magic flow through it. Carve first, without empowering it. Just that much." Finley watched as Rey closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

She waved her hand over the charred rock, erasing her previous carving. Finley grinned. *Only Earth affinity gets a redo with rock.* As she extended her finger and began the carving anew, Finley couldn't help but admire her resolve. She was raw, unpolished—but there was a spark there, something that reminded him of his own early days in the Order.

The rune took shape, more slowly this time, and without magic flowing into it. Finley nodded. "Good. Now empower it. Steadily. Slowly."

"Like this?" Rey's voice held a hint of hope as the rune began to glow softly.

"Exactly like that," Finley confirmed, allowing himself a small smile. "You see? You're capable."

"But what if I fail?" Rey's concern was evident, even as, with growing confidence, she maintained the trickle of power flowing into the rune. The glow faded as the magic took hold in the loops and lines of her carving.

"Then we reassess. But failure is not the end, Rey. It's merely a step on the path to mastery." Finley's voice was firm, bolstering.

"Is that what happened to you?" Rey asked, her curiosity piqued as she finally lowered her hands, the rune dissipating into the ether. "Did you fail before you succeeded?"

"More times than I care to count," Finley admitted with a wry chuckle. "But each failure taught me something new."

Rey seemed to consider this, her expression softening. "So, what's the verdict, then? Am I ready or not?"

Finley contemplated the question, weighing the potential he saw against the stakes of their mission. It was his call to make—a go/no-go decision that could alter Rey's path forever.

He met her gaze squarely. "You're ready to take the next step. Just remember, it's about more than the spells. It's about making choices that uphold the balance. Can you do that, Rey?"

"I can," she said, her voice steady now, filled with newfound determination.

"Then let's get out of here." Finley extended his hand, offering to help her to her feet.

"Let's," Rey agreed, taking his hand firmly in hers. Then she frowned. “Do we have to go do the other one? The one he said they’re building?”

Finley chuckled. “You know someone else who’s going to?”

***

Finley and Rey had traveled for two days, following the vague directions Tomas had provided, until they reached the larger coastal village. It was a bustling hub compared to the tiny hamlet they had left behind, with sturdy wooden buildings, cobblestone streets, and a busy marketplace filled with merchants hawking their wares. The salty tang of the sea hung heavy in the air, mingling with the earthy scents of livestock and freshly baked bread.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink, Finley and Rey made their way to the outskirts of the village. There, nestled against a rocky hillside, stood an enormous barn. Its weathered wooden walls rose two stories high, dwarfing the other structures nearby. A heavy brass padlock secured the oversized doors, but it proved no match for Finley's deft manipulation of a simple unlocking rune.

They slipped inside, closing the doors behind them with a soft thud. Pale moonlight filtered in through gaps in the walls, casting long shadows across the dirt floor. At Finley’s nod, Rey conjured a small orb of soft white light, no larger than a pearl.

The orb of light floated upward, illuminating the cavernous interior of the barn. Finley and Rey gasped in unison as the true scale of the operation was revealed. The barn was filled with an enormous, crudely constructed cement kiln, a rough stone tube whose end rose nearly to the rafters, an enormous cousin of the one they’d seen before. The kiln

stretched the entire length of the barn, a behemoth of granite that radiated a palpable heat, even in its dormant state.

Surrounding the kiln were towering piles of aggregate—mounds of sand and gravel that glittered in the magical light. The sand was a pale, moonlit silver, its fine grains shifting and whispering with every errant breeze. In contrast, the gravel was a riot of earthy hues—rich browns, rusty reds, and deep, inky blacks—the stones worn smooth by the relentless pounding of the sea.

Stacked neatly along one wall were rows upon rows of sturdy gray bricks, each one bearing the word "Betono" stamped deeply into its surface. The bricks were uniform in size and shape, their edges crisp and their faces smooth, a testament to the efficiency of whatever process the humans had developed.

"Let's get this over with," Finley muttered, his eyes rising to the underside of the kiln, high above them both.

Rey nodded, her brow furrowing in concentration as she reached out with her magic, attempting to trace the delicate lines of the rune into the soot-stained underside of the massive kiln. The rough granite surface seemed to resist her efforts, the stone unyielding beneath her ethereal touch.

Finley watched closely, his own magic at the ready, as Rey struggled to maintain control. Her hand trembled slightly as she carved, pouring her power into the nascent rune even as she shaped it.

Finley's eyes widened. "Rey—"

The air around them began to hum with barely restrained energy, the hairs on Finley's arms standing on end.

"Careful," he cautioned, struggling to keep his voice low and steady. "Remember, precision over power. Just carve it first."

Rey gritted her teeth, sweat beading on her forehead as she redoubled her efforts. The rune began to take shape, its lines glowing with a faint, pulsing light. But even as it formed, Finley could sense the imbalance in Rey's magic, the way her Earth affinity strained against the confines of the spell.

And then, with a sudden, sickening lurch, Rey's control slipped. Without warning, the incomplete rune flared to life, a blinding white light erupting from its core. The massive kiln shuddered and groaned,

the stone writhing as if in pain. Spiderweb cracks raced along its surface, spreading outward from the glowing rune like bolts of lightning.

Rey cried out, her voice lost in the cacophony of splitting rock and surging magic. The backlash of power slammed into her like a physical blow, hurling her backwards. She crashed into a towering stack of bricks, sending them tumbling to the ground in a deafening avalanche of stone and dust.

Finley threw up a hasty shield, a shimmering barrier of Earth magic that deflected the worst of the debris. But even his quick reflexes couldn't fully protect him from the wild, untamed energy that ricocheted through the barn. It struck him like a fist, driving the air from his lungs and sending him staggering.

The orb of light Rey had conjured flickered and died, plunging the barn into darkness. In the sudden gloom, the rune's glow was a brief beacon, pulsing with an angry, malevolent light that slowly faded.

Finley fought to catch his breath as he pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the sharp pain lancing through his ribs. His eyes darted around the darkened barn, searching for Rey amidst the rubble and settling dust.

"Rey!" he called out softly, his voice raw and strained. "Rey, where are you?"

A muffled groan answered him from the far side of the barn. Finley stumbled forward, his feet crunching on shattered bricks as he made his way towards the sound. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he spotted Rey's crumpled form, half-buried beneath a pile of debris.

"I'm here," she croaked, pushing feebly at the stones that pinned her. "I'm sorry, Finley. I tried, but—"

"Hush now," Finley soothed, kneeling beside her. With a flick of his wrist, he summoned a gentle gust of wind, carefully shifting the rubble away from Rey's battered body. "We need to get you out of here. There's no way nobody heard that."

Rey nodded weakly, her face pale and streaked with dust. Finley helped her to her feet, slinging her arm over his shoulder as he supported her weight. Together, they limped towards the barn doors, each step an agonizing effort.

Outside, the night had come alive with shouts and the flickering

glow of torches. Villagers were emerging from their homes, roused by the thunderous noise that had shattered the evening calm. Finley could hear the pounding of footsteps drawing nearer, the clamor of voices raised in alarm and confusion.

"We need to move," he urged, half-dragging Rey along as they skirted the edge of the barn. "Can you cast a cloak?" This was still her mission, after all.

Rey shook her head, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "I'm sorry, I don't think I can..."

Finley nodded grimly, understanding all too well the toll the failed spell had taken on her. Summoning his own magic, he sketched a hasty rune in his mind, blurring their forms and allowing them to blend into the deepening shadows. It was a weak glamour, one that wouldn't hold up under close scrutiny, but it would have to suffice.

This was, at least, a large enough village to have a population of witchkind. They'd find shelter, hopefully a healing specialist, and see what the humans made of their shattered kiln.

And then they'd share a difficult journey home.

CHAPTER 2

The Weary Soldier

As the sun began its descent, the sprawling fields of the Order's headquarters known as "the Farm" were cast in shadows that stretched long and thin across the landscape. The air was infused with a heady scent of earth and growth, a tangible reminder of the powerful magic that permeated every inch of this hidden retreat. It was as if the very soil itself had absorbed the mystical energy, giving life to the plants and creatures that called this place home. Even the delicate breeze carried a faint whisper of enchantment, stirring the senses and beckoning one deeper into the heart of the Farm.

Finley sat at a worn desk in one of the main building's many side rooms, a stack of parchment dispatches spread out before him like fallen leaves, a fireplace flickering calmly to one side. His green eyes moved swiftly over the inked reports, each one a whisper from the field, a tale of concerns and unseen influences.

Many were simply new versions of old problems. While Finley believed they'd solved the printing press problem for good, humans were forever trying new ways of joining wood for fishing boat hulls, new ways of building lamps that wouldn't blow out in a wind, and new ways of forging metals—including their precious iron.

He frowned at a dispatch which described exactly that: a new means of more efficiently producing rails for their hated Iron Roadway. The

Order had been plagued by it since its founding, back in the days of the Last Adherent. Witchkind had sorely underestimated the effect of magic-blocking iron rails spanning the continent, of iron horses and carriages plying those roads laden with goods. Witchkind had been forced to evacuate entire sections of cities where the iron depots had been built, fleeing ahead of their own magic collapsing. Iron remained one of the biggest—

"Finley," boomed a voice, powerful despite the creeping touch of age.

He looked up to see Ram filling the doorway. Formally, Ramirokovit Siuta, although few of the Order likely remembered his full name, let alone used it. The Head of the Order stood with shoulders back, his pale, yellowed hair almost glowing in the dimming light of the room. His intense orange-brown eyes fixed Finley with a gaze that commanded attention.

"Hey Ram," Finley smiled, standing. He placed his hands respectfully behind his back, noting how the evening light played upon the rugged lines of Ram's face.

"No, sit," Ram ordered curtly, making his way to the opposite side of the wooden desk. "I need to discuss Rey with you."

Had to happen eventually, Finley thought. He'd been expecting this conversation for days, and was beginning to wonder if the Head even knew Rey was preparing to go home. "Of course." He resumed his seat, a mild tension building within him. He folded his hands atop the dispatches, his mind already formulating thoughts on the young girl of witchkind whose control over her magic had become the subject of many whispered conversations.

"Give me your honest evaluation," Ram said as he leaned forward, hands resting heavily on the desk. "No platitudes. Her audition... was it truly as dire as they say?"

"Her control is lacking," Finley admitted, recalling the chaotic energy that had radiated from Rey in the barn. "But she has potential—her strength is undeniable, if raw."

"Strength means nothing without direction." Ram's eyes narrowed slightly. "Can she be trained? Or is she a danger to herself and to the Order?"

Finley considered the question, weighing his words carefully. "Training could harness her power, but it will require patience and a skilled mentor. Unfortunately..."

"Go on."

Finley sighed. "She doesn't seem even vaguely interested. Even her own magic seems largely disinteresting to her. She sparked up a bit at one point, but..." He spread his hands.

"Undirected," Ram echoed, a frown creasing his forehead. "And disinterested. That is a combination we cannot afford. Not now, not with the humans' advancements. Their 'Benoto' blocks are crude, yet they show an alarming ingenuity."

"They do," Finley agreed, thinking of the human attempts contained within the reports in front of him. "Their progress is worrying on several fronts. But as long as the Veil holds, their reliance on our magic remains our advantage."

"Advantage?" Ram gave a short, humorless chuckle. "You speak as though we play a game, Finley. This is about survival—the survival of our kind above all else. Humans are ignorant, yes, but ignorance paired with ambition is a dangerous combination. And they outnumber us by the hundreds."

"Understood," Finley acquiesced. He respected Ram's wisdom, even if his own views were sometimes less stringent.

"Your talent for runes, it could be the key to reinforcing our position," Ram stated, his gaze piercing. "What are your thoughts on this? Is there a rune, some construct, that could tighten our hold?"

"You mean like I've done before?"

"Exactly that," Ram smiled. "Something we can carve in their villages, on their churches, that will suppress this... *innovation.* Keep them docile, happy with what they have."

"Runes are a focus for shaping magic," Finley replied slowly, his fingers absently tracing the edge of a parchment. "They're not inherently magical. It's possible that there could be a more efficient approach, a new method that we haven't yet discovered. We had some success with persistent runes. But this village Rey and I were in—even calling it a 'village' is generous—didn't have a church. We've focused much of our efforts on using the humans' religion."

"But," Ram pressed, "what about something more *global?*"

Finley frowned. "You're talking about something to literally keep them... docile." His stomach churned with disgust.

"Yes."

"It wouldn't work. Runes exist for that, of course. I could probably increase their area of effect. We could put them on every building on the continent. But how would we cover the fields? If we dulled their minds and dimmed their aspirations, would they still go out on boats and fish every morning? Would they still plow their fields? We *need* them, as much as they need us and our magic."

"Hmm," Ram murmured, pushing himself upright. "Perhaps. But we must always be ten steps ahead, Finley. Remember that." He turned to go.

"Sir?" Finley's fingers ceased their absent tracing as he considered his next words with care. The quiet of the room seemed to press upon him, urging him to speak. "About Rey," he began tentatively. "We were speaking of Rey. Her control over magic is... erratic at best."

"Erratic?" Ram's voice was cutting. He turned on his heel, his eyes flashing. "I've seen the reports. Her magic isn't just erratic—it's dangerous."

"Indeed." Finley nodded, collecting his thoughts. "Her habit of empowering runes as she goes... I cautioned her against it, and she had far greater success. But the second time, she forgot. It's habitual. She claims an Uncle—"

"Hah!" Ram barked, shaking his head.

"Sir?"

"Did you know that the girl is my great-grandniece?"

Finley blinked. "I, ah... did not."

"Her audition was no more than a favor," Ram confided, his voice taking on a harder edge. "A nod to the family. Too many of whom know of our existence, to be frank. But now..." He paused, and for a moment, vulnerability flickered across his weathered face before it was quickly masked. "Now I have a reason to erase the Order from all of their memories."

"Is there truly no other way?" Finley asked, although he knew the answer even before Ram responded.

"None. She's spoiled—always has been—and clearly lacks the discipline required of our Order." Ram's gaze drifted toward the window, where the stars seemed to mock them with their serene glow. "It's a pity. I had hoped she might rise above her upbringing." Then he shook his head. “Did you know all of the Great Schools refused her?”

“Truly?”

The older man nodded slowly. “Truly. She was tutored privately. An indulgence. Her mother is... little better, frankly.”

Finley felt the weight of Ram's disappointment, mirrored by his own disillusionment. The potential of a new member always brought a spark of hope, yet here they were again, confronting the stark reality that not all who wielded magic were fit to stand among them.

"Then it shall be done," Finley said quietly, knowing full well the gravity of what they were agreeing to. "We must protect the Order above all else."

"Indeed." Ram gave a curt nod, the finality in his voice echoing off the stone walls. With one last piercing look, he turned and strode out of the room, leaving Finley alone once more.

Alone with his thoughts and the disquieting notion that perhaps they were too quick to judge. And yet, the necessity of their actions was undeniable. For the survival of witchkind, they would do what must be done. That was the Order’s mission, its mantra.

Still... Finley thought sadly. *Do better building blocks truly threaten us?*

He shuffled through the dispatches, his fingers again grazing over the parchment as if by touch alone he might discern the urgency of their contents. Amongst them lay a report that caught his attention, its seal broken hastily as if the messenger couldn't deliver it fast enough.

"Benoto blocks," Finley murmured, eyes scanning the text. "So it wasn’t just the one village."

“Finley?”

He looked up at the new voice. “Jasen! I didn’t know you were here!”

Jasen grinned, running a hand through his thick, black, ever-unruly hair. “Just yesterday. Did I hear you say ‘benoto?’”

Finley tapped the dispatch. “Just going through the field reports.”

"That one was mine. They've come up with some process—"

"Heating limestone and some other minerals? Cooling the result, mixing it with water, forming incredibly strong blocks? Like gray bricks?"

Jasen's eyes widened. "I thought I'd caught the first one."

Finley grimaced. "Afraid not. I took a new apprentice out—no, don't ask," he added as Jasen opened his mouth, "and we compromised a small kiln and destroyed a larger one. But it's apparently already spread." He looked down at the dispatch. "Where is Rinceriver?"

"Minuscule little collection of hovels on the western coast, just a bit south of the Great Northern Wood."

A trickle of chill slid through Finley's heart. "No church?"

Jasen frowned. "No, not big enough. Why?"

"I don't believe in coincidences. Small kiln, then? Experimental?"

"Yeah."

"What did you do?"

"Compromised it, as you said."

"Yes, but specifically."

"Oh. I was with Kayte Goldrun. She's amazing with Flame magic. No matter what they do, they'll never get the heat right again. The stone tube will dissipate it far too quickly now, until suddenly... it doesn't. It should shatter."

Finley nodded. "Good enough, I suppose. We modified ours to split the gypsum they use. I doubt they'll ever find a working recipe again."

"So then we're good." Jasen's voice was hopeful.

"Doubtful. I was far to the south. If you've found this... there will be more. Tiny communities, no church."

"I don't get the church connection."

Finley sighed and looked out the window. The grassy fields of the Farm always seemed to promise relaxation and respite, but they always seemed to wave mockingly as the crisis of the day took over. "I think the humans know we're watching them. Manipulating them."

"We believed we'd dealt with that." Jasen turned to the door, and Finley looked past him to see Ram stalking back into the room. *Was he standing out there listening?* "No?"

"We dealt with that a few *inventions*," Finley said. "The

carronade. Their printing press. But no, we didn't deal with the... watches. There's at least a small group that's aware of us, and resentful."

Jasen's brow furrowed. "And they're... what? Moving their experiments to smaller settlements?"

"Indeed." Ram's voice was hard. "Their latest tactic, it seems. Away from what monitoring we can conduct."

Finley looked up, meeting Ram's intense gaze. "They've progressed further than anticipated."

"An advancement, yes," Ram conceded, his lips thinning. "But they'll try again. These benoto blocks could be a considerable threat if developed further."

"Are they truly so dangerous?" Finley questioned, skepticism inching into his tone. "Or merely an inconvenience? They're just brick. They've had—"

Ram's expression hardened. "You underestimate the peril, Finley. Humans are persistent. Like pests, they burrow and gnaw through barriers with relentless ambition." He thought for a moment before continuing. "Remember, our dominion over magic is what separates us from them," Ram recited, his voice falling into a lecturing tone. It was an argument Finley had heard him make often in the past few years. "It is the fulcrum upon which the balance of power rests. Should humans discover us—our true nature—and we did not have the threat of withholding magic to hold over them..."

He trailed off, leaving an ominous silence. Ram fixed Finley with a piercing look, as if to brand the significance of his words upon him.

"Then we become obsolete," Jasen finished the thought aloud, the gravity of the statement settling heavily in the room. "If they can build stronger buildings without magic—"

"Buildings. Bridges. Roads. *Walls."* He nodded to Finley's desk. "Jasen, is that your dispatch?" The other man nodded. "I've read it. You said they've subjected those bricks to pressures that would crush an ordinary brick of baked clay, no? Stronger than rocks, even, and shaped perfectly for stacking?"

"Yes."

"And they have emerged in *two* small villages, each well separated?"

"Yes," Finley confirmed. "Although if they're stamping the same name into them, it's likely that it's just one—"

"Don't you see what they're doing?" Ram snapped. "Do you have a rune, runewright, that can affect them across those two villages?"

Finley shook his head.

"They're spreading out. Making it harder for us to monitor them. Making it harder for us to *counter* them."

"They're actively working against us," Jasen whispered.

"Exactly," Ram said sharply. "And if they succeed, they can tell everyone about us. It would be genocide. We have magic, but they have iron. And numbers. Only their unwitting reliance on magic, gathered and wielded by witchkind alone, is our lever over them. Should we lose that advantage..." He let the implication hang in the air like a specter.

Finley's eyes flicked to Jasen, who'd paled.

"Without that leverage," Ram continued, his voice cold and curt, "humans would see us as equals—or worse, as threats. And we know it will be threats—we've tried for centuries to shape their religion away from a hatred of witches. We must never allow them the luxury of autonomy."

"Nekęsk ragana gyventi," Jasen whispered. *Suffer not a witch to live.* One of the oldest phrases witchkind and humans still shared, a phrase that meant as much in the True Language as it did in the humans' religious texts. "It would be chaos."

"Chaos," Ram echoed, nodding slowly. "And chaos is a luxury we cannot afford. Not now, not ever."

"What can we do?" Jasen asked.

"Send warnings. Practice care with magic. Stay hidden. Let the Veil work. Report signs of human advancement, of suspicious activity." Ram's jaw set. "More patrols. We have the kitchenware business as cover. We clearly need to be visiting more of these small, churchless towns."

The Head of the Order turned away, his silhouette framed against the flickering flames in the fireplace. In his stance was the unyielding resolve that had guided witchkind for close to a century. Finley watched him, knowing that beneath the surface of their conversation lurked an unspoken truth.

Stay hidden. Practice care with magic. Finley was careful to keep his expression neutral, but he heard the underlying directive. *We don't just hold the humans in check. It's all of witchkind as well.*

"Jasen, come with me. We'll review the patrol assignments."

"Yes, sir."

They left, and Finley listened as their footsteps receded. Alone now, Finley sank into the high-backed chair, its wooden frame creaking slightly under his weight. His gaze drifted toward the window where the sun dipped low, casting long shadows across the room.

It was true, what Ram had said about humans. Their lives were brief and fraught with struggle, absent the grace of magic that flowed so naturally through witchkind. They toiled upon the earth, ignorant of the arcane currents that danced just beyond their perception—a dance that could uplift or obliterate, depending on who led it.

Finley's thoughts, unbidden, shifted to Rey—specifically, to the rune she had been carving when he last saw her. The lines had been rough, yet imbued with a promise of power that she couldn't quite harness. It was a fairly simple Earth sigil, meant to separate the fundamental components of minerals. Yet it had seemed... overwrought.

It wasn't just her, he thought idly as his hands shuffled the dispatches into a neat stack. *With a more direct rune, she'd have been fine. Even empowering it as she carved.* The problem with runes were that they were each a creation, a complete work. Partly finished, they were unstable, their alignments unable to process magic. Finished, of course, they let witchkind's minds shape magic. That's what they were for. *They represent outcomes. Intent.*

His fingers twitched as if they yearned to correct her work, to smooth the jagged edges of her intent into something purer, more potent. Such was the burden of his talents: the uncommon runewright, coupled with the secretive whisper of the Rune Smith within him, always urging him toward creation, toward perfection.

"Hmm," he murmured, the sound hanging in the air like a question. The potential in Rey's magic had been raw, untamed—dangerous, even —but wasn't the problem more in how it was being applied? *Isn't that the problem with all of us? The magic is* there, *we just shape it. Why can't*

it be shaped as we go? There was something there, something itching behind his eyes, refusing to let this go.

He closed his eyes, envisioning the rune again, feeling the thrum of the Earth magic inside him. His mind reached out, his talent prodding at the edges of the memory, seeking the core of what Rey had tried to invoke. There was something there, a spark waiting to be stoked by a steady hand.

"Control," he whispered, the word a mantra. "Control and understanding."

The Farm settled around him in silence, the quiet hum of gathered magic vibrating through the walls. In this moment of solitude, Finley Coughlan, pragmatic yet hopeful, stood at the precipice of discovery, wondering not for the first time if there might be a path forward—one that could bridge the chasm between human and witchkind, chaos and control.

"Finley, do you have a moment?"

Finley's eyes flew open before he even realized they'd fallen shut. "Dmitry?"

Dmitry Aganin was a slightly built man with the jet-black skin of the southwest and a shock of unruly, coarse white hair. He was Ram's personal assistant, and had been for decades. He gave Finley a hesitant smile. "I was waiting until Ram left."

"He's... intense, today."

Dmitry nodded sadly. "The pressure has been weighing on him. The responsibility. We've never been *actively* opposed, you know."

"This cabal of humans has been doing this since I joined."

"Probably before," Dmitry acknowledged. He stepped into the room and leaned against the wall next to the doorway. "Ram's starting to worry we might not be enough."

Finley frowned.

"We've never been large, and right now we have more field operatives than we've ever had. More people running the kitchenware business. More eyes, all across the continent. Yet... they're still finding ways to elude us."

"And we're allowing them fewer and fewer inventions," Finley pointed out.

"Ram's starting to regret every one we've let slide."

"It's not sustainable."

Dmitry looked away for a moment and sighed. "I know. Something has to give."

"What will it be?"

"It may be *us.* I've... there's some pressure for Ram to end the secrecy around the Order."

Finley's frown deepened. "To what end?"

"To enlist all of witchkind."

"Wouldn't that be... dangerous? We've always stayed small, always stayed secret, precisely to—"

"To specialize, and to protect everyone else. I know." Dmitry gave Finley a wan smile. "I helped develop the current policy, you know. And the recruiting process."

"Oh." Dmitry had been in the Order for a *very* long time, then. "But to end the secrecy... it would be declaring all-out war against the humans."

Dmitry's eyes narrowed and he nodded slowly. "It would."

Finley's chest tightened slightly. "Dmitry, they outnumber us hundreds to one."

"But we have magic."

"We *need* them. The farms, the fishing fleets, we can't—"

"We wouldn't destroy them. Not like they'd do to us, if they knew." Dmitry's voice had gone hard. "We'd simply need to... keep them under control."

Finley suddenly felt sick. "It... we can't let it come to that."

Dmitry's expression relaxed and he stood upright. "No. No, we can't. And we won't." He smiled, but there was no joy in it. "We'll hold the line." And with another curt nod, he turned and stepped out.

Finley watched him go, whatever energy he had remaining seeming to drain out of his body.

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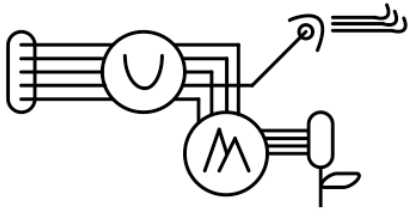
Finley abandoned his dispatches and the small office, commandeered a mug of hot, spicy *kava* from the kitchen, and returned to his room. The conversations with Ram and Dmitry had left him feeling tense, and a sullen weariness pulled at the edges of his mind.

He could *feel* something—his talent, he hoped—rolling something around in his brain. Something even it wasn't certain of, something Rey had sparked. *I've known that rune for years,* he thought, picturing it in his mind. He'd learned it from his parents, even before he'd gone to school. They used a version of it to strengthen the mortar in the sea wall of their village.

"Runes," he said to himself, the word falling flat in the silence of the room. "They're not the magic itself; they merely give it shape." He contemplated the history of runic orders, each evolving from its predecessor—Old Runic's angular markings giving way to Middle Runic's flowing scripts, and now New Runic's sharp geometries, brimming with potential.

"We've used many different shapes to achieve the same outcomes. The shapes don't matter." Old Runic had required great power and fairly little precision, and power had been abundant back then. After the Forging of the Axes and the rise of the Adherents, magic had grown thin in the world, far too insufficient to power the runes. Middle Runic had been the answer: simpler, thick strokes that could be filled with what little magic witchkind had available. But they'd been *too* simple once the Last Adherent fell and magic splintered, flowing back into the world like a flood. New Runic harkened back to Old, but explicitly recognized the elemental alignments of Earth, Sea, Flame, and Sky that had been more lore than fact in the oldest days.

He recalled the harvest spell that his professors had used to illustrate the differences, and summoned the Old Runic version in his mind.



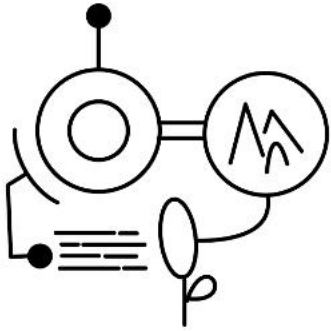
Straight lines and sharp angles carried magic from rune to rune. *They even called them Intents,* he remembered, ways of shaping the mind's desire in a way to which magic would respond. Some professors theorized that even these constructs were greatly simplified from witchkind's originals, from structures vastly more intricate.

Middle Runic's calligraphy-like strokes captured the same intent, but with a blunter, less nuanced approach.



They were better suited for carving into things, he thought wryly as his talent sketched how magic would flow through the heavy loops and whirls.

And New Runic, the language he'd known his entire life.



So similar to Old Runic, in many ways. Intent was depicted in much the same way, although the flow of magic was much the same. *They tell a story, of sorts.* This is the sun, this is the Earth magic we'll use. This is the outcome, directing strength and nutrients into the crop. Magic neatly categorized, neatly structured.

He pondered the purpose behind the intricate designs, how each curve and line must be understood by the caster to properly channel the magic. The runes were like a complex language spoken between the mage and the forces at play—a language that required fluency for mastery.

"Yet, what if..." Finley's voice trailed off, his mind racing ahead. He walked over to the expansive window that looked out over the Farm's lush grounds, the greenery a stark contrast to the dark thoughts clouding his mind.

"Magic is formless, bound only by our understanding of it," he continued, speaking as much to the wind as to himself. "What if the runes themselves are a limitation? A crutch we've grown too dependent upon?"

The idea was heretical, almost blasphemous within the Order's hallowed halls. Runes were the bedrock of their practice, the foundation upon which all witchkind's magical prowess was built. Yet, the Rune Smith within him—the rare gift that allowed him to craft new magic from the ether—whispered of possibilities unexplored, of boundaries yet to be pushed.

"Perhaps there is a way to transcend the runes," Finley mused, his heart quickening at the thought. "To tap directly into the essence of magic itself, without the intermediary of these prescribed symbols."

But still, magic had to be *shaped.* The caster's mind must be in a precise configuration, focused on its intent. That's what the runes did: they provided structure, along with cantrips recited in the True Language. Without placing your mind into the proper set, the magic couldn't flow.

Is that really true? something whispered in his own mind.

His gaze drifted back to the materials scattered across the table: scrolls, quills, and various implements for carving. They seemed suddenly antiquarian, relics of a bygone era that begged to be surpassed.

"Efficiency...directness...purity," he uttered, as if casting a spell with his words alone. Each term resonated with the power of untapped potential. Finley's green eyes gleamed with the reflection of the late afternoon sun filtering through the window, igniting a fire within him.

"Could it be?" he whispered to the empty room, the question hanging in the air, charged with the promise of revolutionizing magic as they knew it. "Is there a more efficient way?" A more efficient form of magic would be more *powerful.* Less waste meant more outcome, and already his talent was pointing out areas where New Runic wasted magic in its precise, geometric structures. *Circles contain, lines transmit,* he considered. *But is magic truly so banal?*

If he could devise a broader, more powerful way of discouraging humans from their inventions, then Ram would quickly turn to other priorities. Speeches about *docility* would give way to the practical matters of the day. Would it be possible, practical, for magic to stretch across the continent? Something akin to the Veil, but designed to gently steer humans to more pastoral tasks than inventing weapons and new building methods?

In that moment, Finley stood on the cusp of something monumental. If he could just unravel the mysteries that beckoned, he might forge a new path for all witchkind—one where the shackles of tradition would fall away, leaving pure, unbridled magic in their stead.

His eyelids felt suddenly heavy, and he turned to his bed.

CHAPTER 3

Everburn

Finley's eyes flew open at a pounding on the sturdy wooden door of his room. He flew out of bed, pulling the door open. Before him was Marlowe, one of the oldest members of the Order aside from Ram himself. "What is it?" His eyes were still swimming with sleep, and half-formed runes skittered through his mind, a side effect of his talent reawakening.

"Finley," Marlowe began, his voice carrying the weight of urgency, "Dmitry sent me. We have a situation that requires your unique talents."

"What kind of situation?"

"A report has come in. A human—reckless as usual—has concocted something... dangerous. They call it Everburn. Our agent describes it as a fuel of some kind, says it burns extremely hot." Marlowe's fingers drummed on the wooden door frame, betraying his concern. "It burns without ceasing, water or no. It could decimate entire cities if left unchecked. The man is distilling it into glass containers, which can be..." he swallowed heavily before continuing. "Launched. Or thrown."

Finley felt a surge of adrenaline. This was no mundane task; it was a mission that could tip the scales. "You believe I can stop it?"

"Your runewright abilities are second to none, and your secret talent..." Marlowe let the sentence hang, a coded nod to Finley's rare Rune Smith gift. The oldest members of the Order knew of it, although

they were careful to contain that knowledge. Having a Rune Smith in the Order was a rare advantage, one that witchkind's great council, the Taryba, might deny them if discovered. "We require a *permanent* solution, if one can be devised. Ram is concerned—"

Finley nodded quickly. "It's likely this has already been spread to other villages, like the bricks were."

"Exactly."

"Understood." Finley's mind raced. He would need to invent new magic, something that could counteract the Everburn without causing further destruction.

"Finley," Marlowe added urgently, "some of the larger human towns have been... agitating. You know how they are."

Finley's heart beat more quickly. "Have there been attacks?"

"Not as such, but... yes. Not attacks exactly. More along the lines of bandits. But curiously only against caravans originating from specific towns."

Finley sighed heavily. "So they're boiling again."

"Simmering heavily, at the least, yes," Marlowe agreed. "Which is why it's imperative—"

"—that they not have efficient new weapons, yes," Finley nodded. One of the best outcomes of the Order's work had been depriving humans of any kind of effective weapons for centuries. They'd left humans with little more than rocks and sticks to work with until they'd figured out how to forge spears and swords, and the result had been centuries of relative peace between the notoriously combative population.

"Ram asks that you remember that time is not our ally. You must act with both precision and discretion." Marlowe leaned forward, his gaze locking onto Finley's. "The balance between humans and witchkind must be maintained."

"And between humans," Finley agreed. "I'll begin at once."

Finley nodded and turned away, his thoughts already weaving through the complexities of his Alignments. This mission would need to use Control to manage the delicate balance of the spell, Reach to ensure it covered the necessary area, and Destroy to dismantle the Everburn's effectiveness. *A tricky combination.* Destroy often contradicted

control, although it was compatible enough with Reach. *Perhaps there's a way to modify the Everburn, limit is own reach. Turn something destructive into something useful.*

As he closed the door to his room and began tossing clothing into a traveling bag, Finley concentrated on the task ahead. Stopping the Everburn wouldn't just be about harnessing his affinity for Flame; it would be about—once again—bending the principles of magic to his will. He had no doubt that more than one agent of the Order had already considered this problem—Ram himself was exceptionally clever with runes. But they'd obviously come up empty, and when that happened these days, Finley was inevitably the one they turned to. It wasn't just his Rune Smith talent, or even his lesser runewright ability. *It's my dual affinities and the dual-gender affinity.* Gifts from his sister, who'd died before they'd come into their magic, leaving him with a combination of abilities.

"Expandable, durable, detailed, adaptable..." Finley murmured, listing the qualities he'd need as he strode through the quiet streets. Each word sparked an idea, a potential rune that could form the linchpin of his plan. The thought of creating new magic always thrilled him—a whisper of excitement that danced through his veins. But tonight, it was tempered by the knowledge that lives hung in the balance. He couldn't afford to get this wrong.

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Finley's boots scuffed against the hard-packed dirt, his shadow stretching long and thin beneath the crescent moon. He knew every second mattered; the Order's efforts to suppress human weapons had been a delicate dance of magic and secrecy. Everburn threatened that balance. The substance had been detected in—once again—a tiny settlement that lacked a church, a true general store, or any of the other amenities of civilization. Rockpoint, as it was called, lay a half-day's walk from Cuppton, along the continent's west coast, bracketed by sea and forest. According to the dispatch he'd been given, fewer than three

dozen buildings formed the tiny village, along with a rickety pier and a surprisingly robust seawall.

And no church.

And none of witchkind living there.

This isn't coincidence, all these tiny settlements cropping up without any of us living there, and without the trappings of a normal human village.

He'd used travel magic to speed his way to Cuppton, and then set out at a brisk pace, just as the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. Now he strode along the caravan path, his boots crunching softly on the dew-laden grass. The sky was a deep indigo, the stars beginning to fade as the horizon lightened to a pale lavender. The two moons hung low, their silver light casting long shadows across the rolling hills.

The air was crisp and cool, carrying the earthy scent of the soil and the sweet perfume of night-blooming flowers. Finley breathed deeply, letting the fresh air fill his lungs and clear his mind. As he walked, he let his senses expand, feeling the thrum of magic that pulsed through the land. It was a subtle thing, a whisper on the wind, but to Finley it was as tangible as the ground beneath his feet.

The path wound its way through the hills, following the natural contours of the land. It was well-worn from the passage of countless caravans, the grass trampled down to bare earth in places. Finley could almost hear the creaking of wagon wheels and the soft nicker of horses, though the path was empty now, save for himself.

He crested a particularly steep hill, and there was Rockpoint.

The dispatch had been quite accurate: the low, two-story wood-and-stone buildings hunkered just back from the pier, arranged around a cross-shaped road that led straight through from north to south, and from the pier to the thick forest from west to east. None sported the characteristic steeple of the humans' churches. While all of the buildings looked sturdy...

Finley frowned as he set off down the hill toward the town, his discerning eye picking out details the dispatch had omitted.

They're sturdy, but they're new. Very new. Rough-hewn lumber hadn't yet been worn by wind and rain. Thatched roofs still glowed a honey-gold in the growing light, not yet faded to gray and black. And

even the rickety pier was new—and as he approached, Finley detected workers clambering over the structure, wrapping lengths of heavy rope around the wood joints to strengthen them. *They're still working on it.*

He scanned the village one last time, looking for one that seemed a bit set back, or a bit more heavily built. A structure designed to accommodate someone working on deadly mass-effect weapons.

That'll be it, he thought as his eye lit on the most likely candidate. The only building in town with two-story stone walls, tightly mortared, rather than wood set atop a waist-high stone foundation. Its roof was black slate rather than thatch, and its neighbors were at least a narrow alley away, rather than directly against it.

In a town this size, it would be difficult for a stranger to pass unnoticed. As Finley walked into the village's center, his eyes scanned for an excuse. *Ah, there.* An inn was always a good starting point. This one sat along the north-south road, just one building from where the roads intersected. *Although not much of an inn,* he thought with disappointment as he stepped inside.

The inn's interior was as rough and new as the rest of the village. The common room held a scattering of mismatched tables and chairs, the wood still pale and unvarnished. A long bar ran along one wall, its surface still rough from the mill. A few early rising patrons—*locals, if I'm any judge,* Finley thought—sat hunched over their meals, their conversation a low murmur that ceased as Finley entered.

The innkeeper, a burly man with a thick beard and suspicious eyes, looked up from wiping down the bar. "What'll it be?" he grunted.

Finley approached the bar, offering a friendly smile. "A room for the night, if you have one available. And perhaps a meal and a mug of ale."

The innkeeper's eyes narrowed, his gaze flicking over Finley's travel-worn clothing and the pack slung over his shoulder. "We don't get many visitors here," he said slowly. "What brings you to Rockpoint?"

"Just passing through," Finley replied easily. "I'm a trader, headed down the coast. Thought I'd stop for the night, rest my feet a bit before moving on. And if you've a dry good store or any such, I might try and ply my wares. Some of the best kitchenwares in the world!"

The innkeeper grunted. "No dry goods. Goods come in on wagon from Cuppton, fish goes back. Room's two for the night. Meal's one

extra each." He paused, and then in a friendlier tone, added, "Not much to do or see here. Tomorrow's wagon will continue on south."

Finley nodded amiably. "I'm ultimately headed for Farreach in the South. Might see if they've room."

Although a few of the other patrons were still eyeing Finley suspiciously, most returned to their meals and muttered conversations. Finley slid payment—one room, four meals—across the bar and settled into a stool as the innkeeper stepped into the back to retrieve his food.

The meal was a simple yet satisfying one. A small, crispy rasher of bacon sat atop a thick slice of bread, its edges glistening with the drippings that had been smeared generously. A perfectly fried egg rested on top, its yolk still runny and inviting. Finley wasted no time in eagerly digging into the dish, savoring each bite with gusto as the flavors melded together in his mouth.

He pretended to be so completely absorbed by his meal that he didn't notice what was happening around him.

He wasn't by any means an expert on humans, but these ones acted... strange. He quickly cast *akys pakaušyje* and then squinted as his eyes were filled with an oddly distorted image of the entire room, as if he'd grown eyes on the back and sides of his head.

Finley kept his eyes down, focused on his meal, but his magically enhanced senses took in every detail of the room. The inn's patrons were a rough-looking lot, with weathered faces and calloused hands that spoke of hard labor. They huddled together in small groups, their voices low and urgent as they conversed.

One man, his face half-hidden beneath a wide-brimmed hat, kept casting furtive glances in Finley's direction. Another, a burly fellow with a scar running down his cheek, leaned in close to his companion, muttering something that made the other man's eyes widen in alarm. A third patron, a wiry man with sharp features, slipped out of his chair and made his way to the door, his movements quick and furtive like a startled hare.

There was a palpable sense of unease in the room, a tension that hung thick in the air like smoke. These men had the look of those who were hunted or had been, their eyes darting to the shadows as if expecting danger to leap out at any moment. They carried themselves

with a wary alertness, their muscles coiled and ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

"What takes you to Farreach?" the innkeeper asked in his gruff, gravelly voice.

Conversation in the room stopped, and Finley could see everyone looking at him out of the corners of their eyes.

A strategy fitted itself into his mind. It was sure, certain, and calm.

Yet it hadn't come from his own mind.

Still, he wasn't one to look askance at a gift, so he went with it.

"If I'm being honest," he said quietly, watching everyone else in the room lean very slightly toward him, "I've had a bit of trouble." He shrugged. "If I'm being more honest, those six pieces I gave you are close to all I have left."

"You said you sold kitchenwares," the innkeeper growled.

Right, I did do that, didn't I? "Sold. Past tense. Lost that job a fortnight ago."

"Stealing?" the innkeeper asked gently.

Finley shrugged. "That's what the owner claimed. I didn't, but he put it out, and every door was closed to me."

The innkeeper's eyes tracked slowly to the left, then to the far right, and then back to Finley. "What kind of work do you know?"

"Not fishing," Finley said quickly. *For all that my parents are fisher-witches. I can barely be on a boat before I'm getting sick, and it's gotten worse as I get older.* "But good with my hands. Woodwork. Stone. I can make bricks, if you've a kiln." He took another bite of food, chewed, and looked into the innkeeper's eyes. "I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"Now why," said the man sitting next to him at the bar, "would that be important?"

The man who had spoken was of average height, but his broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms suggested a life of hard labor. His skin was tanned and weathered, the creases around his eyes and mouth etched deep by years of squinting into the sun and salt-spray. His hair, once a rich chestnut brown, was now liberally shot through with gray, and a short, neatly trimmed beard covered his jaw.

He wore a well-made linen shirt, the fabric a crisp white that stood

out in stark contrast to the rough, homespun garments of the other patrons. Over this, he had donned a leather vest, the hide supple and well-oiled, adorned with intricate tooling along the edges. His trousers, tucked into sturdy leather boots, were of a finer weave than those around him, the deep blue fabric unmarred by patches or darning.

There was an air of authority about the man, a quiet confidence that spoke of a life spent giving orders and having them obeyed without question. Yet there was also a roughness to him, a sense that he was no stranger to getting his hands dirty when the need arose.

"Just saying a lot of men talk too much," Finley said, nodding politely at the man. "Can get on your nerves, after a long day of hard work. I'm no gossip."

The man looked at Finley for a long moment, and then nodded slightly. "Might be we could use a man like you, then. Can you lift a brace?"

About half my own weight, Finley thought quickly, remembering the heavy crates the fisherfolk used in his parents' town. He nodded slowly. "I believe I can."

The innkeeper had backed away, busying himself polishing a tankard, but he kept an eye on the two. Everyone else had turned back to their own business, and Finley let his magic dissipate, blinking hard as his vision snapped back to normal.

"Ever work with fire?" the man asked. "Forge, maybe? See, we need men who can lift, who can be quiet, and who know how to be careful. Respectful, you might say."

Everburn, Finley thought, excitement rising in his chest. *But there's no way they're asking a complete stranger to see their new invention. Either this is some kind of test, or they've been going through menial assistants really fast. Maybe both.* "I know how to be careful. Follow instructions. Real good at following instructions." It was too late to make a play as a thick-skulled laborer, but he could certainly try for *desperate* and *obedient.*

That earned him another long, searching look, which was followed by a gap-toothed grin. "Name's Harm," the man said. "Finish your meal and I'll show you the job."

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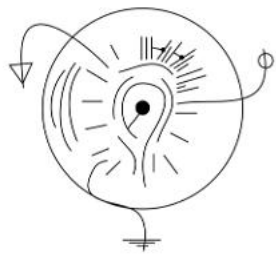
Harm led Finley directly to the all-stone, slate-roofed building Finley had noticed earlier. Harm pushed open the heavy wooden door, its new leather hinges creaking. Finley followed him inside, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dim interior after the brightness of the morning sun.

The first thing that struck Finley was the smell—a pungent, chemical odor that stung his nostrils and made his eyes water. It was a sharp, acrid scent, like burning oil mixed with something else, something harsher and more caustic. The air was thick with it, hanging heavy and oppressive in the stale, unmoving air of the building.

As his vision cleared, Finley took in the details of the room. The walls were of rough-hewn stone, the blocks fitted tightly together with only the thinnest lines of mortar visible between them. The ceiling was low, supported by heavy wooden beams that looked as though they had been hewn from ancient trees, their surfaces rough and unfinished. *They took great care with this building,* he thought.

Along one wall stood a row of large, cylindrical glass canisters, each one taller than a man and nearly as wide. They were scuffed and chipped, but whole. Piles of some white substance—it reminded him of limestone powder, but there was something different about it—sat on the opposite side of the room. In one corner, a testing area of sorts had been erected. It was little more than three double-thick stone walls, capped with—

Finley's breath caught as he felt the unmistakable pull of iron on his magic. He quickly cast the rune that locked his magic inside him.



Iron rails, looking for all the world like those used on the iron road-

way, were laid across the testing area, providing a sturdy roof. The interior of the three walls were chipped and blackened, testament to the power of this new weapon.

The room was cluttered with an array of smaller glass containers and wooden barrels, each one carefully placed in a specific location. Finley's gaze traced across the space, taking in the organized chaos before him. The delicate bottles glimmered in the light, their contents unknown but undoubtedly precious. The barrels appeared old and well-worn, hinting at years of use and refinement. Despite their seemingly random distribution, there was a clear method to their placement.

"You're to stand guard, and carry as needed," Harm said. He pointed to a reed-thin young man who was struggling to pry the top from a small barrel. "Aldarae!" The man turned with a start, his eyes blinking owlishly in the dim light. "Got you another helper." Then, to Finley, "Man's a genius, but distracted. Just help him however he asks."

"You said 'stand guard?'"

Harm waved it away. "Everyone knows not to come in here uninvited. Just make sure of it."

"What's all this for?"

Harm's eyes narrowed. "Forgot to mention that we don't like questions, either."

Finley smiled affably. "Then just one more. What's the pay?"

Harm's expression relaxed. "Ten a day."

"I'll take it."

"Then I'll leave you at it. Work day ends when he says so, but take yourself a break for nuncheon."

"Understood."

***

"Do you know what we do here?" Aldarae asked.

"I don't really ask questions," Finley replied carefully.

Aldarae turned to fully face Finley, his movements quick and birdlike. He was a thin man, with pale skin that looked like it had rarely seen

the sun. His hair was a shock of unkempt brown curls, sticking out at odd angles as if he had been running his hands through it in thought.

But it was his eyes that truly caught Finley's attention. They were large and round, a striking pale blue, and seemed to take up half his face. They darted about the room, never resting on one spot for long, as if his mind was constantly racing ahead, wrestling with a thousand ideas at once.

There was an intensity to Aldarae's gaze, a sharp intelligence that burned bright and hot. It was the look of a man consumed by his work, driven by a relentless need to discover, to invent, to push the boundaries of what was possible.

He wore a simple tunic and trousers, both liberally splattered with stains and scorch marks. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, revealing forearms crisscrossed with thin, pale scars - a testament to the hazards of his craft.

He snorted. "Don't mind Harm. It's important that you know a bit about this, so you know to be careful. Respectful."

"He used those exact words."

Another snort. "Well he should. What we make here is a kind of chemical—do you know what a chemical is?" Finley shrugged. "It burns. Once set alight, it is almost impossible to extinguish it. It will burn underwater, even. Even if smothered in sand, it will remain hot for hours—dozens of hours—and re-ignite at the slightest touch of air. That means it is *dangerous,* do you understand?"

Finley nodded vigorously.

"Good. Most of the components are not dangerous by themselves, but if combined, they can be dangerous. The white powder there," and he waved to the neat piles Finley had seen, "is called *kalcio oksidas.* Have you heard of it?"

Finley shook his head, although he was once again struck at a human's use of the True Language.

"Don't touch it with bare hands. Always wear gloves, long sleeves, and ideally move it only with a long-handled shovel. It prefers to be in glass or wood containers, not metal."

"Okay." Finley paused. "Can I ask a question?"

Aldarae's response was enthusiastic. "Of course! Questions beg

answers, and finding answers is how we learn!" He smiled encouragingly.

"What's it for?"

"Ah, well, nothing nice, I'm afraid," the slim man said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "It is mainly used as a weapon. We will be packaging it into glass jars. When thrown, they shatter, and quickly ignite. As I've said, once ignited they tend to keep burning."

"So... we're attacking someone?"

"God in his heaven, no," Aldarae said, his eyes widening further. "Not us. Well, certainly not me. No, the intent, which I have been given to understand... that is, it is mainly as a defense."

Finley's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"I'm told the point is that only an insane person would attack a party that was liberally equipped with Everburn. Which is what I've named it. Everburn. Because it burns for quite a long time, do you see?"

Finley nodded.

"And so, if one opponent was well-supplied with Everburn, nobody would dare attack them, for fear of retribution."

"I see." *They're mad.*

"So these won't actually hurt anyone."

"Of course."

Aldarae paused for a moment, his eyes settling on Finley's for several moments. "Can you help me open a barrel of sulphur? I'll warn you, the stuff reeks."

***

Finley spent the day assisting Aldarae in his work, moving barrels and containers of various substances around the cramped workshop. The physical labor was taxing under normal circumstances, but with the added complication of the heavy, acrid air, it quickly became exhausting. Sweat poured down Finley's face as he hefted the weighty materials, his lungs burning with each breath of the noxious fumes.

As he worked, Finley surreptitiously called upon his Earth magic,

letting his senses probe the composition of the materials he handled. The *kalcio oksidas* felt curiously inert to his magical senses, almost as if it existed outside the realm of Earth entirely. It was an unsettling sensation, like a void where substance should be.

The sulphur, on the other hand, fairly buzzed with potential energy, its essence almost eager to combine and transform. Finley could sense the latent power within it, a kind of chemical hunger waiting to be unleashed. He made a mental note to be especially cautious when handling it.

Throughout the day, Finley's Rune Smith talent whispered in the back of his mind, offering tantalizing glimpses of potential solutions. He could sense the intricate interplay of the chemicals, the delicate balance that allowed them to combine into such a volatile substance. With each new insight, a corresponding rune would flicker through his thoughts—a twist here, a flourish there, each one a key to potentially neutralizing Everburn.

But he couldn't risk experimenting here, not with Aldarae watching his every move. He needed time and space to fully explore the possibilities his talent presented. And so he bided his time, committing each fleeting rune to memory, building a mental library of potential countermeasures.

And... *I'm reticent,* he admitted. *All my talent wants to do is invent new things, invent new runes. Invent new* magic. *When will that get away from me?* The whispering had grown more interested and more insistent throughout the day, and for the first time, Finley wondered if his talent was *his* talent, or if he was just a body for his talent to live in.

As the sun began to dip towards the horizon, Aldarae finally called a halt to their labors. "That's enough for today," he said, his voice hoarse from the fumes. "You've done well. I think you'll fit in nicely here."

Finley nodded his thanks, his mind already racing ahead to the solitude of his rented room at the inn. There, he could finally give his Rune Smith some room to wander, and see what it came up with.

One thing was for sure: he didn't know a single existing rune construct that would change Everburn. Every element was too basic, too focused on what it did. Oil *would burn,* no matter what you did.

But a tickle at the back of his brain was saying, *nothing is impossible.*

. . .

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Finley hurried back to the inn, his mind awhirl with the day's discoveries. The common room was bustling with the evening crowd, the air thick with the scent of roasted meat and the clamor of raised voices. He made his way to the bar, signaling the innkeeper for a meal.

"Job working out?"

Finley shrugged, but said nothing.

The innkeeper nodded approvingly. "You'll be looking for something more permanent, then? Someplace to stay?"

Another shrug.

"Go see Kemal around noon tomorrow. He's got a room to let. Last place along the north-south road, east side."

Finley nodded silently, and the innkeeper stepped away. A few minutes later, a plate was slid in front of him - a slab of dark bread, a wedge of sharp cheese, and a bowl of hearty stew, steam curling invitingly from its surface. Finley ate quickly, barely tasting the food, his thoughts consumed by the challenge that lay ahead.

The Rune Smith talent whispered insistently in his mind, a constant stream of possibilities and permutations. It was eager, almost impatient, straining against Finley's restraint like a hound pulling at its leash. He could feel it pulsing through his veins, a living thing with a will of its own. *Something new,* it muttered eagerly. *Why does oil burn? Why does the* kalcio oksidas *encourage it? How do you shape an intent that you don't understand?*

That last piece is what bothered him the most.

Finley finished his meal in record time, pushing away from the table with a nod of thanks to the innkeeper. He made his way up the narrow stairs to his room, the worn floorboards creaking under his feet.

Let's see if I can rest a bit before nightfall, he thought tiredly.

***

. . .

"Odd time for a stroll," a voice sliced through the silence, tethering Finley's swift steps.

Finley had taken a fitful nap of just a couple of hours as the sun set and the air cooled. His mind had churned restlessly, his Rune Smith talent weaving intricate patterns behind his eyelids, teasing him with glimpses of a solution just out of reach. When he could bear it no longer, he'd thrown off the thin blanket and risen from the narrow bed, his body protesting the sudden movement.

He'd dressed quickly in the dim light, pulling on his sturdy trousers and tunic, fingers fumbling with the laces. He'd reached for his boots, the leather soft and supple from years of wear, and tugged them on, the soles whispering against the rough floorboards.

And then he had paused for a moment, his hand resting on the cool metal of the door handle. He'd closed his eyes, reaching for the well of magic that pulsed within him, and carefully started to weave a glamour. It was a subtle thing, a gentle nudge to the mind rather than an outright illusion. It would make him less noticeable, encouraging the eye to slide past him without registering his presence.

And despite that, someone had seen him.

He turned, spotting the figure leaning against a building's rough brickwork. She was inconspicuous, almost too much so, with keen eyes that didn't miss a beat. "And you're out here because...?" Finley quirked an eyebrow, his voice steady despite the prickle of suspicion crawling up his spine.

"Curiosity," she said, pushing away from the wall. "You're Finley, aren't you? The Order's golden boy."

Finley's heart nearly stopped.

His mind began weaving a dozen runes: this one for shielding, this one to launch an attack, another to carry him far from this town, a fourth to imprison this stranger. It wasn't until he dropped the magic that had been holding his power inside him that he remembered casting it in the first place.

"Golden is a bit much. I prefer just 'boy,'" Finley retorted, clasping his hands behind his back to conceal the sudden shaking in his hands.

This is a trap. It always was. "What does your curiosity want with me?"

He could feel his magic licking out of him, drawn to the woman. *She's wearing iron,* he realized. He reinstated the protective magic, torn between protecting himself and giving himself options.

"Everburn," she stated flatly, locking her gaze with his. "You're here to extinguish it."

"Maybe I'm just fond of fires," he shot back, though his mind raced. She knew more than she should—more than any human ought to know about witchkind.

"Or maybe you're trying to maintain a status quo that's suffocating us," she countered, crossing her arms. "Humans deserve to forge their own path, free from your chains."

"Chains? Those 'chains' keep your world from collapsing under the weight of its own chaos." Finley's tone was a mix of frustration and an unyielding sense of duty. "You don't understand the forces you're meddling with."

"Enlighten me, then," she challenged, taking a step closer.

He suppressed an urge to step back. *She's with the cabal. The ones who know about us. The ones who trapped me.* He forced his mind to focus, forced it to put off the flashback he felt coming. "War. Destruction. Suffering. All held at bay by what you call 'chains.' Without us, your path would lead straight into darkness," Finley explained, his green eyes reflecting his earnest belief. "Everburn is the best example. Why do you need so badly to destroy each other?"

"Your kind always thinks they know best," she huffed, but there was a flicker of doubt in her eyes now.

"Because we've seen the worst," Finley replied softly. "You hunted us, and you warred against each other. Our oldest stories, that's all they're about. This isn't just about better bricks or printing books faster. And we don't hold you back. We just..." He struggled to finish the sentence. "You go too fast. You reach for things you don't need. We're just..."

"Slowing us down?" she asked, a smirk in her voice.

He shrugged. "Maybe. A bit."

"Even if it means denying us our potential?" There was a tremor in her voice now, a crack in her resolve.

"Especially then," Finley affirmed, turning away from her. In a single mental motion, he dropped his protective magic and engaged a more powerful glamour, his eyes itching as the magic took hold, cloaking him from sight. "Goodnight," he murmured, disappearing into the shadows.

He cast one additional rune.

Nesek paskui mane was anti-tracking magic, one not known to most of witchkind but an old friend to the agents of the Order. Finley reached into a pocket for one of the segmented wooden coins the Order used, planning to snap off pieces in a brief message, before he remembered that this little settlement didn't have a church. No church, no donation box. No box, no way of getting the coin back to the Order.

I'm truly alone, he thought.

We always are, his talent whispered.

***

The factory was dark and quiet at this time of night. A quick rune of sleeping dispatched the single already sleepy guard standing next to the door, and a moment later Finley was inside.

The interior of the factory loomed dark, its stone walls black and forbidding in the moonlight. The building seemed to absorb the faint illumination, hunching in on itself like a great beast. The high, narrow windows were like eyes, staring down at him accusingly.

The heavy wooden door creaked shut behind him with a dull thud that echoed through the cavernous space. The air was thick and still, heavy with the acrid tang of chemicals. It coated his tongue and stung his eyes, making them water.

In the dim light filtering through the slit windows high above, the contents of the factory took on a sinister aspect. The towering glass canisters glinted dully, their curves distorting the faint moonbeams into twisted shapes. They stood in silent rows like an army of ghosts, sentinel

and waiting. Who knew what volatile substances they contained, just waiting for the right spark to erupt into deadly conflagration?

The piles of white *kalcio oksidas* powder formed eerie mounds, their surfaces smooth and unnaturally pristine. In the shadows, they looked like snowdrifts or piles of bone meal.

He had no idea what he was going to do.

He'd initially thought to render some of the materials inert, an achievable enough goal for someone with Earth affinity as strong as his. But the woman in the street... there was no possible way that the cabal didn't have another factory just like this one, elsewhere. Probably more than one.

The petroleum oil is pretty bad stuff, his talent whispered, more lucid than he'd ever experienced. *We could probably just end it. It doesn't even belong here.*

What? Finley asked silently.

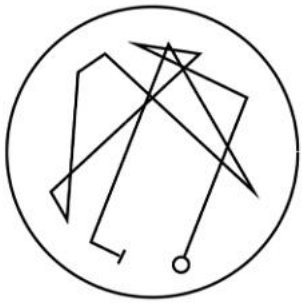
His only reply was a muffled sense of irritation, a shaking of the head and a grumbling return to slumber.

But of all the ingredients, the oil was the most intriguing. He'd read about the stuff, but never encountered it. Might as well introduce himself.

A new rune flared in his mind as he stepped toward a wooden barrel of the black, sticky substance. Thinner than pitch but smelling exactly the same, capable of burning hotter than tallow.

Papasakok man apie save.

A phrase in the True Language, one that, according to the stories, predated witchkind itself.



What in the name of the elements? Finley asked himself, startled at the image that appeared in his mind. This wasn't the rune he'd pictured. This was something... new. Different.

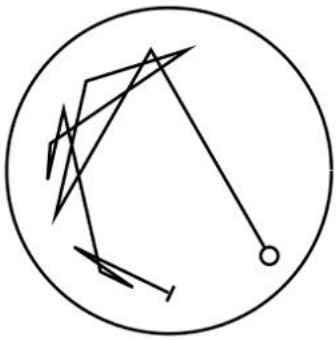
Unwelcome, at this particular moment.

But it worked.

Trees, even small animals. Born, growing to reach high into the sky, and then dying. Falling, lying on the soft ground. The rains come, and wood rots. What was once structured, is no more. Is instead a collapsing mass, rejoining the earth from which it came. Years go by, new growth above reaches high, dies, falls, and disintegrates. Over and over in the endless cycle, the infinite circle. Pressure now, as more and more from above pushes down and down. More and more pressure, until nothing solid can remain, and all that is left is a liquid. The components of life, distilled into a slick elixir.

Finley gasped.

His mind still whirling, a new rune took shape in his mind.



He gasped again at the grandeur of it, the compelling asymmetry, the *purpose.*

Inelegant, his talent muttered unhappily, before turning over and returning to its sleep.

It isn't... there's no shape to it. Except that there was. A shape that had less to do with intent, and less to do with outcome, and more to do with *action.* With what the magic must *do*, here in this moment.

Finley's mind spun and he fell to his knees.

Earth magic drained from Finley as the new rune empowered, energy driving deep into the earth, small tendrils spinning lazily around him as if examining the containers there.

This is change, he thought to himself in awe as he sensed his magic spiraling away. He quickly activated a rune for Gathering, drawing more magic into himself despite the hulking, glowering presence of iron nearby.

Finley's magic surged, thick tendrils of earth magic rushing down into the depths of the earth. He could feel the magic reaching, probing, seeking the hidden reservoirs of oil far below. They lay in layers, each representing an epoch from the past, each one pressed down by the present and future, crushed until nothing but this thick liquid remains. It was as if his consciousness expanded, merging with the very soil and stone, sensing the vast interconnected web of the earth itself.

The magic found what it sought, and Finley inhaled sharply as he felt the raw power of his spell take hold. It started as a tremor, deep in

the earth's bones. A slow, inexorable shift, like the grinding of continents. The oil began to change, its structure unraveling and reforming under the guidance of Finley's magic.

He could see it in his mind's eye—countless tiny chains of matter breaking apart, the building blocks of the oil rearranging themselves into new configurations. The long, sinuous elements coiled and twisted, latching onto particles of rock and soil, imbuing them with their essence.

In the hidden chambers of the earth, the liquid oil thickened, grew dense, and became heavy. Its glossy black sheen dulled to a matte, earthen hue as it absorbed the minerals around it.

What was left was simple clay.

Finley passed out.

CHAPTER 4

The Mentor

It was afternoon at the Farm, and Finley had decided to abandon his usual office for a small table on the main building's wide front patio, under the shade of a broad overhang. *There are always more dispatches,* he thought tiredly as he perused a stack of them, *but there's no reason to huddle inside when it's so nice out.*

"Finley."

He looked up. "Ah, Ram. They said you wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

The older man shrugged and pulled an empty chair over to Finley's table. "My business in Evermore ended early, and I'd prefer to be here. It's more peaceful." He settled into the chair with a sigh. "I'm told your mission was a success."

Finley hesitated. He'd glossed over most of the details in his own dispatch, which he was sure Ram had already seen. "The basic mission, yes. It obviously raised even more concerns."

"Let's start with the basic mission."

"They were making some kind of long-burning substance. I was able to neutralize all of it, and their current stock of supplies."

"But they'll be able to start over."

Finley nodded, and pushed his dispatches back into a neat pile. "We

should assume so. We should probably assume they already have. It would be reasonable to assume they're doing this in multiple locations already, and that my work will have no practical impact on their efforts."

His mind drifted back to the little village. His blackout had fortunately lasted only a few minutes. He'd come to in the same dark building, slowly and carefully made his way out, and snuck to the edge of town. He'd taken great pains to ensure he was unobserved before using travel magic to whisk himself away. He'd avoided any towns or villages on his return to the Farm, fearful of being seen by agents of the human cabal.

"Which leads us to the bigger issue," Ram was saying.

"Yes," Finley nodded, dragging his thoughts back to the present.

"Walk me through it."

"There was a human woman. She recognized me. Called me 'the golden boy of the Order,' or something like that. Which means they know of me, and they know of us. She spoke specifically of us holding them back—although she hesitated a bit when it came to weaponry."

"So you exchanged words."

"I did." Finley hesitated a moment before continuing. "It seemed pointless not to. And now I know that they're not universally aligned on their principles. She *did* genuinely hesitate about the weapons. We've always tried to keep them from killing each other, after all."

"Go on."

"She didn't say much more of use. But the fact that this happened in a tiny settlement—one new-built in the last year or so, I would say, based on the condition of the buildings—without a church and without any of the things we normally use to cover ourselves... that's pretty telling. And that's on top of the two with the new bricks they've developed. They're clearly aware of us, and they're clearly taking steps to mitigate our interference."

Ram frowned. "Interference?"

"I mean, it is. It's to our benefit, but obviously they don't see it that way."

Ram nodded once, and the fingers of one hand began drumming

out a slow beat on the tabletop. "You said you nullified their materials. Could this rune be replicated?"

I'm not even sure it was a rune as we understand them, Finley thought. Aloud, he merely said, "Of course."

"Then—"

"But *where?*"

Ram's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"The area effect of that magic was maybe a hundred steps. You know Earth magic doesn't lend itself to wide-area effects. So where would we put the rune? This isn't one we can just carve into the walls of their churches—that's Sky magic, and only a limited set of things work that way even then. Do we start carving it into every building in the world? Someone's bound to notice, especially since this cabal is looking for us. And what about the buildings we don't even know about? The people in that... village, if you like... were suspicious. The population is so small that any stranger will stand out instantly, and be watched. I very much got the impression that the men working there were... if not criminals, then at least down on their luck. They've probably been *told* to watch for strangers."

"Odd," Ram mused, "that one woman knew you, yet the others did not."

Finley sighed heavily. "I'm not at all certain they didn't *all* know who I was. Or at least *what* I was."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, the first thing they offered me was a job working in the exact building they'd have known I was looking for."

"So a trap."

"One that they didn't spring, which begs the question why they didn't."

"Trapping you didn't work the last time," Ram pointed out.

"It damn well nearly did," Finley countered.

"So they *knew* you'd find a way to neutralize them."

"Yes, and what if *that's* what they wanted? To see what I would do? After all, if they've set up similar operations elsewhere—and there's no reason to think they haven't—they had little to risk and much to learn."

"Because the other operations will be unaffected," Ram agreed.

Well. Yes, although no, because I haven't told you that I somehow managed to use Earth magic to neutralize petroleum oil across the entire continent. And now our enemies will know that, too, and that has me worried that I went too far.

It had, in fact, kept Finley up every night since his return. *I did nothing to eliminate* knowledge *of oil, and in that timeframe I'm not sure I could have done anything along those lines anyway. So now there's a world full of people who know about oil, living in a world that doesn't actually contain any. Stupid.*

But it had been his Rune Smith talent, carried away with itself, eager to invent something new.

What if a change is neither a beginning nor an end? it whispered sleepily in the back of his mind.

"The point is that every member of the Order is in danger. The humans know us, they know about us, they know our faces, and they know our mission. Anything that this cabal is overseeing is going to be well-guarded, and I fear that they've grown better at deceit and trickery than we have." Finley's eyes were drawn to Ram's gently tapping fingers, thumping the table almost hypnotically.

"Then we must change our ways." *Thumpa-thump.*

"How so?"

"We have always been reactive." *Thumpy-thumpy-thump.*

"Yes, but—"

"Waiting for humans to innovate, then stopping them." *Thump-thump.* "Covering their tracks." *Thumpa-thumpa.*

"When we—"

"And so now they have caught us at our game." *Thump.* His fingers stopped moving and he stared at Finley. "And they move to counter us."

"You've said this isn't a game," Finley said quietly.

"I have. And it is not. It is survival. We were threatened, and we countered the threat. And now our enemy has countered *us,* and so we must counter *back.*"

"Meaning...?"

"I am taking you off of active assignments," Ram announced.

Finley blinked several times. "Okay."

"We must find a new way. And so I am assigning you an apprentice."

"I thought the mission with Rey—"

Ram waved that away. "No. I had doubts about her from the outset. We should have put you to something simpler, something contrived. It was stupid to risk you with such a person. No, I have someone else in mind. Someone newly come to us, with a background different from our usual recruits."

Finley was intrigued despite himself. "Different how?"

"Where do our recruits traditionally come from?"

"Duocastella's and Disemstoke's. Well, with the odd exception, like—"

"Yes, yes, I made that exception for Rey just to get it over with," Ram said testily. "I have no other young relatives, so it will not happen again. And yes, from those two schools. But," he added, a sly grin spreading over his features, "are there not *three* Great Schools of witchkind?"

Finley sat back. "Thornwaithe's has never—"

But Ram was already nodding. "They have not, but we have found ourselves a unique opportunity, it seems. And a timely one, as we seek to adapt our tactics to the world in which we find ourselves."

"You're saying we have an apprentice from *Thornwaithe's?"*

"I am saying," Ram said, his smile growing wider, "that *you* do."

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Finley made his way to Challa's office. The spry old woman had taken over from Cat, who had overseen much of Finley's apprenticeship.

She looked up as he entered and smiled. "Finley! I take it you've heard the good news?"

"That I'm to be a babysitter?" he joked. "Indeed, Ram just filled me in."

"Your 'baby' should be here momentarily—ah, right on time, Kelden!"

Finley turned as Kelden Stirrim stepped into the warmly lit room. They were taller than Finley had expected, their presence commanding even in silence. Short-cropped white hair framed a face that seemed carved from stone, with violet eyes that held a gravity Finley seldom saw in someone so young.

"Kelden, this is Finley Coughlan," Challa said, her sunny voice bridging the gap between them like a handshake. "Finley will be your guide and mentor during your time here."

"An honor," Kelden said, their voice methodical and concise. "I've heard much about your work with runes."

Finley nodded, feeling the elephant in the room swell. "And I, about your achievements at Thornwaithe's. Rare for one of their kind to join us."

"Unheard-of," Kelden agreed, "but alignments and affinities know no school loyalty. It's the application that matters."

"Indeed." Finley gestured towards the door. "Shall we? The farm's different in the afternoon. Easier to feel the magic in the soil."

“I’m more Sky-aligned than Earth, but certainly.”

“I should point out,” Challa said quickly as they turned to go, “that Kelvin’s technically already cleared his initial assessments. We’d normally put them right on field work, but Ram had something a bit different in mind. I assume he’s shared that?”

Finley nodded hesitantly, then more firmly. “I’m sure we’ll be fine. Thank you, Challa. Always so good to see you.”

“Don’t be a stranger!”

Finley and Kelden stepped outside into the warm afternoon air, where distant rows of crops whispered secrets to the wind. “How long have you been here, then?” Finley asked.

“Here, just an evening. My evaluation was held elsewhere, and my escorted mission was in Harbsmouth.”

Finley shuddered involuntarily at the name. “I know the place... well.”

Kelden merely nodded politely, and Finley turned to change the topic, gesturing to the fields that lay beyond the Farm’s central clearing. "Here we cultivate more than just food," Finley explained. “Many of these plants have uses in more advanced magic, or take to magic particu-

larly well. There are whisperwillows—they carry messages on the breeze. And there, the glowleaf. It absorbs moonlight, useful for night spells."

Kelden listened intently, their eyes scanning the landscape with a scholar's curiosity. "We didn't do much herb lore at Thornwaithe's obviously. But the interplay of Earth and Sky must be strong here. I can almost hear it hum."

"Exactly," Finley replied, impressed. *I wonder if that's a natural sensitivity, or something Thornwaithe's cultivated?* "We use the natural alignments to enhance growth and protect against pests. No fences needed when you have a hedge of firethorn—the secretions from the tips of its leaves keep the unwanted at bay."

"Resourceful," Kelden noted, stopping before a particularly robust plant. "And this?"

"Ah, that's heartroot. Heals the flesh, mends the spirit. Hard to grow but worth the effort. All but useless to anyone who hasn't specialized in healing, by the way. But worth the effort."

"Much like our talents," Kelden mused, a hint of a smile touching their lips.

"Indeed," Finley echoed, the word becoming their refrain. They continued the tour, steps falling into a comfortable rhythm, until afternoon cooled into evening.

"Thank you, Finley," Kelden said as they circled back to the farmhouse. "This place... it's unlike any other I've seen. I suspect there's much I can learn here." They raised an eyebrow. "Assuming we will be staying here?"

"We'll learn from each other, I reckon," Finley admitted, finding hope in the idea. "And... honestly, I doubt it. I don't know if Ram or anyone has filled you in on our current... priorities?" Kelden shook their head and Finley sighed. "Let's head back to the main building, they'll have dinner on soon. But... I suspect we'll be on the road a good bit. The humans... well. I don't know how much of this is common knowledge, but if we're going to be working together, you need to know."

As they walked, Finley filled Kelden in on the events of the past few weeks. The apprentice's eyes grew wider and wider as they went.

"If I may summarize," Kelden said politely when Finley had

finished, "the humans know about us, can identify at least some of us on sight, and are actively mitigating our efforts. We can expect many new inventions from off-the-map settlements with no connection to the Order's usual tactics, such as the churches or general stores."

"That's pretty much it."

"And do you have a plan to deal with this... change?"

Change is good, came a whisper in Finley's mind. His talent, rolling over in its sleep.

"I have... look, really honestly, one of my strengths had been kind of figuring it out as I go."

"Ah." Kelden smiled. "Mine too."

Finley grinned. "Then let's begin by figuring out dinner."

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The small dining hall was especially crowded, and so Finley and Kelden kept their conversation to small talk as they ate. When they finished, Kelden explained he was to check in with the Order's quartermaster to draw some supplies and clothing.

"Go take care of that," Finley agreed. "I think I'm going to go through some more dispatches, maybe get a feel for the big picture we're looking at. If I'm not on the covered porch of the main building, I'll be in one of the little offices. Come find me, and we'll pick up where we left off."

Kelden nodded politely and strolled off toward the large barn the Order used as a warehouse.

Finley settled back into the table where Ram had met him earlier. The evening, while cool, was still pleasant. The usual hordes of biting bugs, so common to this part of the continent, were held at bay by the plantings of thistlespark the Order's gardeners had cultivated. Even at a dozen paces away, Finley could feel the trickle of Earth magic feeding the plants, and could almost taste their gentle, yet persistent, discouragement of the insects.

"Tų dokumentų man reikia," he said softly, picturing the accompanying rune in his mind. A pile of dispatches appeared before him. Again, he found himself distracted by the process of it. Words and runes to guide the mind, the mind to shape the magic, the magic to effect change in the world. But why did the words have to be in the True

Language? Haltingly, he translated the ancient phrase into the modern tongue: *Bring me the documents I need.* Astoundingly vague! And the rune was no better. But his mind had known what he wanted, and the magic had responded.

As a test, he pictured another stack of documents, but none appeared. So the words and rune acted more like... *a trigger,* he thought suddenly. *Otherwise, every little thing that flitted to my mind would set off the magic, no?*

But could the words be from a different language? He chuckled. *And what language would that be? Horse? Dragon?* The world *had* only one language, and it had, over centuries, evolved from the True Language. Even humans had never evolved their own distinct language, maturing alongside witchkind as they had.

But what about the rune? Everyone knew there were different ones to choose from. Old Runic, although it was a bit overwrought. Middle Runic. *Imprecise.* New Runic... *Which is fine, but it's so... structured.* Wasn't Middle Runic proof that you didn't need something so complex to guide the mind?

Another flick of magic summoned a quill to his hand, and he turned over one of the dispatches and began sketching. He let his hand work on its own, free of supervision from his conscious mind, and wasn't wholly surprised when a version of the oil-negating rune began to take shape. *Not really a rune,* he mused as he began paying attention, filling in the smaller details his memory provided. *Construct is a better word. Diagram, maybe.* A map to an outcome, a complex set of instructions that had turned one Earthen substance into another.

"What's this?"

Finley jumped and looked up to see Kelden looking over his shoulder. "Sorry, you startled me," he chuckled. "Not a very good role model for field work, am I?"

Kelden grinned. "You just seemed a bit engrossed." They looked closer. "Is that... it's not a rune construct?"

Finley turned back to his drawing. "It's not... traditional."

Kelden sank into an empty chair, their eyes still on the sketch. "It certainly isn't. But it does... it feels like magic, doesn't it?"

Finley looked up. "What do you mean?"

Kelden met his eyes. “It just does.” Then they tilted their head. “What do you know about Thornwaithe’s alum?”

Finley laughed. “You could fill a thimble with what people know, and an ocean with what they don’t. It’s a very mysterious school.”

Kelden smiled, but their eyes remained serious. “It isn’t exactly a secret but it’s... very personal. We don’t speak of it often. Still, as you say, if we’re to be working together, then you should know.”

They took a deep breath. “You get to Thornwaithe’s because you’re a... problem. Elsewhere. I spent two years at Duocastella’s. I never fit in. My magic was... strange. Not unstable, but it didn’t respond like everyone expected. I used the same runes, the same words, but it was always a struggle.” They sighed. “I got into fights. I don’t even know why. People just felt... strange around me.

“My little sister, Tabeka, she... died. When we were really young. She’d always been weak, and it was a really bad winter. She got sick, and the healers couldn’t do anything for her. She went fast.” They looked away. “I got her power. Her affinity. It sets people off sometimes, it’s—”

“It happened to me too,” Finley said softly. Kelvin’s eyes snapped back to his. “School was definitely tough. but I got lucky, I had good friends.”

Kelden nodded slowly. “I appreciate that. Thank you. I think... I just didn’t have friends.”

“I’m sure you—”

“No, that’s the point, though. Sorry. But that’s the point. A few dozen kids a year, that’s what happens. Their magic is strange. People feel strange around them. They don’t make friends.” They chuckled. “You know, one of my professors—and she was the nicest one I had—told me, ‘It’s like you know something about magic that nobody else does, and you’re not telling them. It feels weird.’”

Finley spoke slowly. “But that’s actually it, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Kelden confirmed. “Although you don’t find that out until you’re at Thornwaithe’s. Do you know the school has no sports? No contests? Absolutely no organized competition whatsoever?”

“I... did not.”

“Even between years. It sounds impossible at first, doesn’t it? Kids

are so competitive. But once you've been there for a few days... you don't even want to. Everyone helps you out. And nobody feels weird."

"There are legends..." Finley prompted.

"All true. Every word, most of them. Not even exaggerations." Finley raised his eyebrows. "No, I'm serious. If there's ever a big enough threat to witchkind, to magic itself... Thornwaithe's is called. Every alum. You know how much power true teleportation takes? What they used to call translocation magic, before the Age of the Adherents?"

"Impossible amounts," Finley agreed.

"Not if we're summoned. We... it's never happened to me, but the faculty and staff are all alum too, and they try to prepare us. It's like you're taken over. You're still in your body, but something else is with you, and it's telling you what to do. *Magic* itself. And it'll lash out at whatever's attacking it. Usually with brute force."

"Entire armies smashed to the ground."

"Well, mobs. But yes, that's actually happened. You can still find some of the depressions, if you know where to look."

"That's incredible."

"But that closeness to magic... it's with us all the time. It's why, when you leave Thornwaithe's, you tend to go into more solitary jobs. People still find us weird. Strange to be around. Even our families. Did you know that no family, ever, has sent two consecutive generations to Thornwaithe's?"

"Again, I did not."

"It's true. Whatever it is skips a generation at least. Usually a dozen or more."

"So... what brought you to the Order? Ram said we'd never had a Thornwaithe's alum."

Kelden shrugged. "They recruited me."

"Yes, but why *you?* Why now?"

"Oh, I think it's because I'm immune to iron."

***

. . .

Finley stood with Kelden at the edge of a clearing, the ground soft and yielding underfoot. The sun was still low in the morning sky, and they'd both slept well. "You sure you're okay with a little practice?" Finley asked.

"Of course. And it's beautiful out, so why not?"

"Perfect. But the thing is, I'm not sure if this is going to make any sense to you or not, but I'd like to try. At least show you what the rest of us have to do. The first step in protecting against iron is to sense its presence," he said, his voice steady as he retrieved a small, dull iron nail from his pocket.

"Right," Kelden replied, their eyes narrowing in focus. "Feel it draw the magic in, like a sinkhole for power. Except mine doesn't get drawn in."

"Exactly. Well, except for that last bit. But can you at least sense it?" Finley held the nail out before him, letting his inner reserve of magic rise to the surface. The air around them hummed with potential as he channeled Earth's resilience and Flame's defiance into a shield around the iron spike. "Now you try."

Kelden extended their hand. "I can try and *send* it to the spike."

Finley's wide-open senses, and a curious second set of mental eyes that he attributed to his talent, watched carefully. Magic *was* flowing. "And you don't feel that a bit?"

"I mean, I can feel my magic leaving. I'm telling it to."

"But if you just stop?"

They did so, and Finley sensed the *snap* as Kelden's magic snapped back, exactly as magic would do with any of witchkind who'd simply stopped using it.

"That's incredible. And you've always been able to do that?"

"I never *started* doing it. It wasn't until we were doing drills at school that anyone realized I *was* doing it."

"You drilled with iron?"

Kelden nodded. "Pretty standard. If you can amass enough magic, you can get by. Iron can only absorb so much."

"We have a technique for blocking it."

Kelden laughed. "I was told. And you developed it. But it bottles you up, right? You can't *use* your magic, it just helps you hold it in?"

"True. Yours is better."

"I wish I could tell you how it's done."

"Hold that thought. You might do just that, before it's all over."

"Deal."

"Okay, while we're here, let's practice rapid Gathering," Finley transitioned, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. He demonstrated, drawing energy quickly from the surroundings—pulling from the earth beneath their feet and the air around them. He exhaled slowly as his body filled with magic. "This comes up more than you'd believe in the field."

"And not something we practiced at school," Kelden said. "The assumption is that if we're ever summoned, we'll have basically all the magic we can handle."

"Try to get it aligned to breathing. That's how most people Gather anyway, right? Throughout the day, with each breath, even at night."

"Sure."

"So just make it deeper." Again, Finley inhaled deeply, focusing on pulling in magic along with air. Already full, he couldn't pull in much more, so he exhaled more quickly. "Your turn," he prompted, watching Kelden mimic the motion.

Kelden's face relaxed as they inhaled, and a telltale breeze of Sky magic played through their short-cropped hair. They exhaled, and Finley could dimly sense the magic gathering in their chest.

"Nice work," Finley praised, genuinely impressed. "You wouldn't know you'd never done that before."

"It's just like breathing, as you say."

"Now, for travel magic. We don't need to do everything, but I do need to know which ones you're comfortable with."

Kelden grimaced. "Honestly my weakest subject at school. I can do *Nuvesti mane ten* and *Dešimties lygos žingsnis.* I can manage *Grupinė procesija,* but not with more than four or five others. Almost anything else will fizzle."

Finley considered. "What about *Išeik iš miesto?*"

"Not with any confidence."

"That's one you should practice, I think. We use it a lot."

Kelden looked confused. "It's short-distance, though."

"The idea is to get away from where you are right then, stop, and reassess. Less about escaping, more about giving yourself room to think."

"Hmm. I'll work on it."

Finley hesitated. "While we're out here... actually, wait." He summoned a rune to mind. *"Tylos kūgis,"* he intoned softly.

The clearing, which moments before had been alive with the chatter of birds and the rustle of small creatures in the underbrush, fell into an eerie hush as Finley's magic took hold. It was as if a heavy blanket had been draped over the glade, muffling the usual symphony of the forest. The breeze still stirred the leaves overhead, but the sound of their whispering was distant, as if heard from the bottom of a deep well.

Even the colors seemed more muted, the vibrant greens and browns of the foliage fading to more somber shades within the spell's influence. Shafts of sunlight still lanced down through gaps in the dense canopy, but they had a filtered quality, as if passing through gauze on their way to dapple the forest floor.

Finley could feel the weight of the magic settling around them, a palpable pressure that seemed to press against his ears. It wasn't uncomfortable, but it was impossible to ignore—a constant reminder of the power he had brought to bear. The air within the clearing felt thicker somehow, laden with the potential of their words, which would now fall only upon each other's ears.

"I've never experienced this," Kelden murmured. Their words felt thicker, softer, almost deadened.

"This isn't common knowledge," Finley said, "and both I and the Order have reason to keep it that way. But, as we've said, we'll be working together. Do you know what a runewright is?"

"One of you," Kelden grinned. "But yes. You can recombine existing rune elements to make entirely new constructs."

"And what about a Rune Smith?"

Kelden's grin faded. "There are legends."

"We're pretty rare." Kelden's eyes widened, and Finley smiled back. "And yes, I am one." His own smile faded. "It means I can create entirely new... well, at least runes. New constructs, entirely from scratch. I'm starting to think it means more. New magic."

"Your sketch, from last night...?"

Finley nodded confirmation. "That was a construct I... imagined. On the spot. It's difficult to—actually, for you, it probably isn't. You've said magic kind of talks to you, right?"

"Not *talk* exactly, but... there's an awareness."

Finley's expression changed as he spoke, his focus shifting to some distant memory. "My Rune Smith talent... I think of it as a separate being. It speaks to me. In actual words sometimes. And that night, it had a lot to say." He recounted the events of the mission to Kelden, his voice filled with a mix of awe and disbelief. "And that rune—construct, diagram, whatever it is—was what did it all."

Kelden's doubt was evident in his tone. "It turned all the oil in the world into clay?"

"Yes, unbelievable as it may sound. But I assure you, it did. At least, from what I can gather. There used to be a rune for locating oil deposits —they tend to gather just below the surface—but since that night, I haven't been able to make it work. The magic seems to have disappeared from the rune, as if it no longer serves its purpose. I know what it looks like, but it just won't take power anymore." Finley shook his head, still trying to make sense of it all.

"That is... if I may say so, frightening."

"You're telling me."

"I begin to imagine why you might not want a great many people to know this about you."

"Yeah even..." Finley paused, thinking back to the recent conversations he'd had with Ram. "Kelden, can I be really honest with you?"

Kelden's expression grew somber. "Of course."

Finley took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then exhaled heavily. "Ram—the Head of the Order, I don't know if you've—"

"Briefly."

"Okay. So... he's been at this a long time. And what the Order does is necessary. That Everburn wouldn't have affected witchkind, but the humans would have used it to wage battles against each other. Wars, maybe. We haven't had a significant battle between towns in *centuries,* because the Order stops humans from creating any kind of weapon that

would be useful in battles. They're left to bash at each other with swords."

"Agreed."

"And the argument for stopping other inventions... I get it. If humans ever discover us, if the Veil ever falls, we can say, 'look, your whole society will collapse without magic, so let's just work together.'"

"It's a theory."

Finley cocked his head to one side. "You disagree?"

Kelden shrugged. "The Veil *did* fall, one time. Or nearly did."

"You're talking about the Last Adherent."

"Yes. A Thornwaithe's alum was there. Involved. Many were, actually—magic was threatened. We have *detailed* archives at the school."

"I... would love to read those sometime."

"They won't let you."

"Okay. But you still don't think it'll work?"

Kelden sighed and looked away. "Everything in them says that the humans called for Hunts. That they tried to burn people. They relied upon magic as much then as now, and there was never any *time* to make that conversation. Even the Adherent of the Sixth Axis couldn't stop them. He barely slowed them down. I think, if it happens, that humans will come for us regardless."

"Yeah, but back then they never went to the lengths of withdrawing magic. They didn't have house collapsing, boats sinking, that kind of thing."

"True, but could we do so much so quickly? We eat fish, too. We live in the same buildings, in our hidden spaces."

Finley hesitated, then nodded. "True. But you're almost making my point for me."

Kelden turned back to him with a confused expression. "I am?"

"Ram's going... further. He's asked me to create a rune that will... I don't know, exactly. Make humans calmer. More domesticated."

"Like what, livestock?"

Finley nodded sadly. "He doesn't know what I did to the oil."

Kelden's eyes widened. "Ah. And if he does, he will know you can do large-area magic."

"Yeah."

"Possibly the entire world."

"Yeah."

"Yet you continue, because the Order's ordinary work is still worthwhile."

"I believe so, yes."

Kelden smiled. "Then, for the time we are together, I will have your back, and keep your secret." Their smile widened. "You will find that Thornwaith's alum are *very* good at keeping secrets."

"Well, there's one more for you." Kelden raised an eyebrow. "There's a group of humans, probably small, who know we exist."

Both of Kelden's eyebrows climbed to their hairline as they paled. "You're joking."

"I wouldn't joke about that."

"How? Who?"

"I call them 'the cabal.' I met one of them, once. Shortly after my own apprenticeship. They've been... quiet, since then. But we know they work against us."

Kelden's alarm grew. "Work against us how?"

"Preserving knowledge we'd suppress. They've set traps for witchkind, although not recently. Not that we can tell. I suspect they watch us."

"Ram knows?"

"He does."

"And... we do nothing?"

Finley shrugged. "They stay hidden. They're small enough—they know we could eliminate them, if we could find them. I think they test us. See what we'll notice, see what they can keep hidden from us. See what we'll respond to. See what we'll take action against, what we'll leave alone."

"Finley, if they threaten magic itself..."

"I know. It's frustrating. Intellectually, I can understand their motives. We hold them back. But if *more* of them knew of us, if the Hunts began, if Evermore was exposed..."

"This is bad."

"It is."

"So what do we do?"

Finley sighed and looked away. “We keep an eye out. We deal with their agents as we can. We remain alert. We try to learn more about them, if we can. We can’t move openly any more than they can. Less so, even.”

Kelden nodded slowly, their eyes still wide with alarm. “This adds some... urgency to our work.”

Finley responded with a dark, humorless laugh. “You think?”

CHAPTER 5

Blue Bread Mold

The sapphire expanse of Lake Serein lapped gently at the hull of their modest vessel, a speck upon its vast, mirror-like surface. Kelden set their gaze upon the distant shore where the quaint village of Little Bay nestled. Beside them, Finley stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his dark eyes reflecting the water's serenity.

"We couldn't go by land?" Kelden grumbled. "I've never been a fan of boats."

"Other than the Fisherwitches," Finley smiled, "few are. I myself have been seasick the entire day."

It took Kelden only a moment. "This is meant as a disguise, then."

Finley nodded. "In truth, the voyage by land from Harbsmouth isn't that bad. You have to be in a hurry, or fairly poor, or both, to go by boat."

"The smell alone..."

The pungent aroma of the day's catch permeated the air, an inescapable reminder of their maritime disguise. Baskets of silvery fish, scales glistening in the midday sun, were stacked haphazardly across the deck. The sharp tang of brine mingled with the earthy scent of wet wood, creating a unique bouquet that seemed to cling to every surface.

Beneath their feet, the weathered planks creaked and groaned with each gentle swell, a symphony of the sea accompanied by the rhythmic

slap of waves against the hull. Overhead, seagulls wheeled and cried, their raucous calls carrying across the tranquil waters of Lake Serein.

Kelden wrinkled their nose, unaccustomed to the assault on their senses. "How do the Fisherwitches stand it?" they asked.

Finley chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Years of practice, I suppose. And a genuine love for their craft. To them, this," he gestured to the aromatic chaos surrounding them, "is home. I grew up in a fishing village, you know."

"So you're used to it."

"You would think. The motion still upsets me."

Kelden lowered their voice. "A rune?"

Finley nodded. "I can show it to you sometime. It's called *jokio vėmimo*. It was quite the scandal in my family when my mother had to show it to me, but she's never been comfortable on the water, either."

"Making a fishing village an odd choice."

"Oh, there's always plenty of land work. Sorting fish, packing fish, shipping fish. Repairing the docks—my parents were specialists in sea walls, actually. Not much call for the meeting of Earth and Sea anywhere else."

As they spoke, the bustling activity of the fishing vessel continued around them, a microcosm of life and labor upon the peaceful lake. Weathered fishermen, their skin tanned and hands calloused from years of toil, moved about the deck with practiced efficiency. They carried baskets and crates laden with silvery fish, their muscles straining against the weight. The air was filled with the grunts and shouts of the ship's crew as they worked in unison, a well-oiled machine born of necessity and camaraderie.

Nearby, a grizzled sailor with a salt-and-pepper beard expertly mended a torn net, his nimble fingers weaving the frayed strands back together with the skill of a master craftsman. He hummed a sea shanty under his breath, the melody lost amidst the cacophony of the boat's daily operations.

A young deckhand, no more than sixteen, scurried past Finley and Kelden, his arms laden with coils of rope. His face was flushed with exertion, but his eyes sparkled with the excitement of youth, eager to prove himself among the seasoned crew.

"According to the missive, it's here in Little Bay," Finley said, breaking the silence that had settled between them like a soft shroud. "A healer whose prowess borders on the miraculous." His voice was thick with sarcasm.

"Or so they claim," Kelden smirked, their voice a study in measured skepticism. "Many have claimed miracles before, only for us to find clever tricks or fortunate coincidences. Rarely true innovation, from what I've read."

Finley hummed thoughtfully, watching as the shore drew closer. A pragmatic edge sharpened his demeanor; his mind revolving around the gravitational pull of logic and possibility. His Rune Smith talent whispered at the fringes of his consciousness, the promise of an undiscovered *something* like a melody only he could hear. "Probably," he mused aloud, "but if there's truth to it, we must understand how."

"And stop it?"

"That depends."

"Oh?"

"Mmm. Some years ago, before I was with the Order, there was a similar investigation. Some healer had, it was said, gained the ability to reduce aching heads. Initially, I gather it was the town drunks who took him up on his miracle cure, but before long everyone was swearing by it."

"Surely you're not referring to willow bark," Kelden chuckled.

"Oh, don't laugh. That's exactly it."

The apprentices's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"No magic to it at all. Just a fortunate coincidence. The tale is, the healer had been making teas out of all manner of things. Most made people sick as could be, but that one was a miracle cure. We could be sailing into another such circumstance."

Kelden nodded slowly. "Makes sense. And what would the alternative be?"

"You mean something that we'd have to stop?" Finley asked quietly. "I'm not sure. We typically stay out of healer affairs. They have little downside. I think, at present, there's more a... heightened sense of alertness. But there have been a couple of instances, I suppose."

"Oh?"

"Mmm. I'm thinking of one... this would have been a century ago. Actually, two, if I'm remembering correctly. You know how... humans" —and he pronounced this word more quietly, glancing quickly at the fishermen and sailors around them—"sometimes suffer an injury so bad, a limb must be removed entirely?"

Kelden grimaced and nodded.

"Normally, they dose the patient with ample alcoholic beverage before doing so. *Likeris* is popular, as it's cheap. *Viskis,* for those who can afford it. *Degtinė* is popular in the east."

"You know an awful lot about this."

"I read a lot. And have had some unpleasant missions. Anyway, this human healer, a chirurgeon, discovered a means of making someone pass out so completely they wouldn't feel a thing until they woke up."

"Is this *Eteris?"*

"In the True Language, yes, although at the time the... *they* called it letheon. In any event, the Order judged it to be too dangerous."

"I'd think the patients would have suggested differently," Kelden said wryly.

"No doubt. But the Order substituted opijus instead."

"Not exactly safe stuff."

"No, but incapable of being delivered as a gas. That was the concern, you see. Weaponizing it. That's very much the point—the fear that what started as a very beneficial tool to help those in need would be repurposed to gas an entire neighborhood. And you know how witchkind react to *Eteris."*

"No. Badly?"

Finley snorted. "To say the least. You start hallucinating runes, and they just... activate. Pretty obvious stuff, not easy to hide. Enough to thin the Veil."

"I had no idea."

"Read some of the legends about the oldest Hunts. It was one way the humans who were railing against witchkind would drum up fear of us."

"Well," Kelden said softly, "let's hope that's not what we're walking into." They paused and lowered their voice further. "Is it actually *possible* they've found some magical substance?"

Finley hesitated, then nodded. “Nothing naturally occurring, obviously. No such thing. But there are Earth magics that... linger. Our own healers gather moss from the edges of fields that have been empowered for health.”

“So they could have found something like that.”

Finley’s jaw tightened. “And that, we would have to do something about.”

“Like?”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“So just keep an open mind.”

"Indeed," Finley responded more loudly, standing up straighter, his violet eyes scanning the approaching docks. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First, we must find this healer."

“Any concern,” Kelden asked in a whisper, “about a trap?”

Finley shook his head slowly. “No. I mean, always, yes, but this isn’t the pattern we’ve seen. Little Bay is a good-sized village, with multiple general stores and at least two churches. A *normal* village. We may be seen, but this doesn’t feel like how I’d expect a trap to go.”

The two men remained silent for the short duration of the voyage, watching over the boat’s rails as Little Bay’s harbor slid closer and closer.

The boat touched land with a gentle thud, and they disembarked onto the wooden planks of the dock. They advanced towards the heart of Little Bay, the small village alive with the sounds of daily hustle. The fragrance of fresh fish and baked bread wafted through the air, mingling with the gentle scent of lake water.

"Shall we split up, or would you prefer to stick together?" Kelden asked.

"Stick together," Finley decided. "Two sets of ears are better than one. And if this 'magical' substance is real, I want to be there when we find it."

"Very well," Kelden conceded, their solid build moving with effortless grace as they made their way through the throng of villagers. He turned to the first villager who walked close by them, a slightly built woman carrying a basket of linens. “Excuse me. We’ve heard tell of a...”

"My pardon," Finley said smoothly, cutting off his apprentice. "I believe I know the way."

The woman shrugged and continued on her way.

"What was that for?" Kelden asked.

"A bit of discretion. This *could* be a trap. We want to be seen as normal travelers. Neither of us has any obvious injury; why would we be seeking some miracle healer?"

Kelden's eyes lowered. "Sorry."

"No harm done. Come, I'll show you how I usually do this."

They walked casually away from the docks and into the heart of the town. "It's rare for healers to be located so close to the docks," Finley murmured as they walked. "The spaces are too valuable. What isn't taken by storehouses and fishmongers will be for taverns and inns and the like. Same with the edges of the village where the trade road intersects. Where that road winds through you'll find more inns, more taverns, and the more prosperous merchants. Moneylenders, as well."

"So where do we head?"

"Usually off that main road, usually a bit away from the docks. Not too rich, not too poor. Often close to a church. There'll be a sign, shaped like a serpent coiled around a staff. All healers post one. And in the meantime," he added, giving Kelden a significant look, "keep an eye out. See if anyone appears to be paying more than a little attention to us."

Kelden's eyes widened slightly, and they nodded.

The village wasn't large, and it spread itself out along the lakeside, hugging the trade road. It wasn't long before the two men rounded a corner and spotted the tall steeple of a church.

"There," Kelden said, nodding to it.

"Let's stop for a bite," Finley said abruptly, turning sharply into a small tavern. Kelden scrambled to keep up.

The interior of the tavern was a study in rustic simplicity, its rough-hewn walls and sturdy wooden furniture bearing the marks of countless patrons who had sought respite within its confines. The air was heavy with the aroma of a hearty fish stew, its savory scent mingling with the earthy notes of freshly-baked bread and the sharp tang of small beer.

Finley and Kelden settled themselves at a table near the entrance, their eyes adjusting to the dim light that filtered through the single window that faced the street. The tavern keeper, a stout man with a ruddy complexion and a shock of graying hair, bustled over to take their order, his weathered hands wiping down the table with a well-worn cloth.

"The stew," Finley said. "And two small ales."

The man nodded and bustled off.

Kelden raised an eyebrow and Finley grinned. Likely the younger man's stomach was still rolling with them motion of the boat that had carried them here. "As the locals," he said softly, his grin widening as Kelden rolled their eyes and nodded assent.

The villagers went about their daily business, their faces etched with the lines of hard work and the weight of life's burdens. A group of children darted past the tavern, their laughter and shouts a bright counterpoint to the somber atmosphere within.

Their order arrived and they ate in silence, taking turns to glance out the door at the street. As they spooned up the last of the excellent stew, Kelden raised an eyebrow.

Finley nodded. "Looks fine." He left a few human coins on the table as they rose and stepped back onto the street.

As they blinked in the bright midday light, the human church loomed before them, its simple yet imposing structure a stark contrast to the bustling village life surrounding it. The white-washed walls gleamed in the midday sun, the light reflecting off the tall, narrow windows that punctuated the facade. The steeple rose from the center of the roof, a slender spire reaching towards the heavens, a weathered copper icon glinting at the apex.

The roads on either side of the church were well-trodden, the packed earth bearing the imprints of countless feet and hooves. Villagers hurried past, their arms laden with baskets of produce and freshly-caught fish, their faces lined with the cares of daily life. The air was filled with the mingled scents of baking bread, smoked meats, and the ever-present tang of the lake, a heady bouquet that spoke of the simple yet fulfilling existence of Little Bay's inhabitants.

Finley's sharp eyes scanned the surroundings, his gaze alighting on a

weathered wooden sign that hung from a wrought-iron bracket beside a modest, two-story building adjacent to the church. “There.”

Kelden looked and nodded as they spotted it: a carved wooden sign depicting a serpent coiled around a staff. Then he frowned. “You didn’t mention a knife.” A simple depiction of a blade had been carved at the top of the sign, lying horizontally across the top of the staff.

“Chirurgeon,” Finley said. “The ones who heal people by cutting into them. That’s actually a strong candidate for us.”

“Wouldn’t there be more than one?”

“In a village this small? Doubtful. There’ll be other healers, ones who deal mainly in herbs and poultices. There wouldn’t be enough work for two chirurgeons, I wouldn’t think.”

“Do we go in?”

“Let’s walk.”

They joined the busy stream of humans and walked past the healer’s, not sparing it even a glance as they did. Kelden seemed confused, but then their eyes started darting back and forth and Finley knew they’d realized the tactic. He led them down the street, turned up another, and down yet another, until they were passing the church on its opposite side. They cut in front of it to return to the healer’s.

"Now we go in,” Finley said quietly. “With discretion. Ready?" Finley felt familiar warmth within him as he unconsciously reached for his reserves of Earth and Flame magic.

"Always," Kelden replied, and together they stepped into the shop.

The wooden door swung quietly shut behind them. Fortunately, the healer’s shop appeared unoccupied, save for a young girl minding a small desk just inside the door. “May I help you?” she chirped, giving them both a bright smile.

“We were told to seek out Master Johan,” Finley said hesitantly.

“For an injury or a sickness?” the girl asked.

“An injury,” Kelden said, holding out his arm.

Finley's eyes widened and he almost gasped as he caught sight of the angry, inflamed gash that marred Kelden's forearm. The wound was several inches long, its edges ragged and puckered, as if torn by some vicious creature. The skin surrounding the laceration was an alarming shade of red, contrasting starkly with Kelden's

medium-brown complexion. Tendrils of infection snaked outward from the wound, tracing ominous paths beneath the surface of the skin.

Though the injury appeared to be a few days old, it showed no signs of proper healing. Instead, a thin, sickly discharge seeped from the depths of the cut, glistening in the muted light of the healer's shop. The pungent odor of infection hung in the air, mingling with the earthy scent of dried herbs that lined the shelves.

Finley suppressed a smile as he studied the wound more closely, and a telltale itching sensation began to prickle behind his eyes—a subtle yet unmistakable indication that the injury was not entirely as it seemed. *Fast reaction,* he thought approvingly. *And his Sky magic would create a better illusion—obviously—than my own.*

"Goodness," the girl said, peering over the desk. She didn't sound alarmed or look the least bit discomfited. "This looks to be a few days old."

"Seemed to be healing fine," Kelden said with a shrug. "Kept it clean and covered."

"Infection can be difficult to prevent, especially in something so deep," she mused. "Let me get Father. Why don't you step into the back? He can see you there."

Finley and Kelden followed the girl through the doorway into the back room, their footsteps echoing softly against the aged wooden floorboards.

The room was spacious, its walls lined with shelves that reached towards the ceiling. Upon these shelves rested an array of jars and bottles, each containing herbs, tinctures, and salves in various hues. Labels, meticulously handwritten in a neat script, adorned each container, hinting at the potent remedies within. The air was heavy with the mingled scents of medicinal plants—the sharp tang of peppermint, the earthy aroma of valerian root, and the sweet fragrance of lavender.

In the center of the room stood a sturdy wooden table, its surface worn smooth by countless years of use. Atop the table lay an assortment of surgical instruments, their polished metal gleaming in the soft light that filtered through the room's small windows. Scalpels, forceps, and

needles were arranged with meticulous precision, a testament to the chirurgeon's skill and attention to detail.

Adjacent to the table, a small brazier smoldered, its glowing embers casting a warm, flickering light across the room. From the brazier's depths, tendrils of fragrant smoke curled upwards, carrying with it the subtle scent of burning herbs—a blend designed to purify the air and soothe the senses.

As Finley and Kelden took in their surroundings, the door at the far end of the room opened, and a man stepped through. He was of an age that was difficult to determine, his features both youthful and wise, as if he had witnessed the passing of many seasons yet retained the vigor of a man in his prime. His hair, a rich chestnut hue, was neatly combed and pulled back, revealing a high forehead and a pair of piercing blue eyes that seemed to hold a depth of knowledge and understanding.

The man's attire was simple yet elegant, consisting of a well-tailored tunic in a deep shade of green, paired with trousers of a darker hue.

"I am Master Johan," he introduced himself with a gentle smile. "Who's got this gash that sent my daughter running?"

"She didn't look the slightest bit alarmed," Kelden chuckled, holding out his arm. "I'm Kelden."

Master Johan took Kelden's arm in one hand and studied it closely. "Animal?"

"Hunting accident. My own fault."

"Those claws contain more maladies than you can imagine. Almost impossible to clean out, truth be told. Infection set in a couple of days ago?"

"The redness and swelling?" Kelden asked. "Yeah. Seemed fine until then. Hurts the blazes now, I don't mind telling you."

"Well, I've just the thing." The healer turned to a shelf behind him, pulling down a glass jar filled with a blue-green powder. "I'll need to pack this into the wound. I'll be honest with you—it'll hurt a bit. And I'll give you some to take with you. You'll need to wash it out with clear water every day, and re-pack it. That'll need to go on for around seven days at least—no less, even if the infection seems to clear. Is that acceptable?"

Finley and Kelden exchanged glances. The visually compelling

wound wouldn't hold up to much manual inspection, especially not packing it with a blue-green powder. Finley gave Kelden a slight nod and started pulling together an Earth magic construct that would lend some tactile veracity to the "wound."

"What is that stuff?" Kelden asked uncertainly, playing for time.

Master Johan chuckled. "Bread mold."

"I'm sorry," Kelden said after a moment. "Did you say 'bread mold?'"

"My daughter says I'm foolish for not keeping it a secret, but I don't believe in secrets when it comes to healing. Yes, bread mold. From clean wheat bread, in fact. Grows in a few days if you leave it in the open, with a bit of indirect light and a comfortable temperature. Scrape it off, grind it up, and you've got this powder. It'll grow back on the same piece of bread in a couple more days, and you just repeat." He shrugged. "There's doubtless some bread in here as well, but it won't do any more harm than you've already experienced."

"Bread mold," Kelden repeated, genuinely amazed.

"Bread mold," Master Johan nodded with a grin. "Seems to kill whatever causes the infection. I can't explain it, but it's worked for over a month now."

"Well, might as well get on with it," Finley suggested. He'd had a moment to do some gentle sculpting of Kelden's forearm skin, so that it would feel a bit more like the open wound it appeared to be.

Master Johan got to work, moving quickly and skillfully as he packed a small amount of powder into the wound. Kelden winced and grunted appropriately at the "discomfort," and then stepped back and inspected the result. "That's it?" he asked dubiously.

"That's it." The healer turned back to his shelves, replacing the glass container and turning back with seven small paper packets. "And this is for the next seven days. Remember: clean the wound as thoroughly as possible, preferably before bed. Use clean water—boiled for quite some time, if you can, although absolutely let it cool before using it. Clean your hands as well as you can, and then pack in a full packet of powder. Cover the wound—a wrap of linen will do well. And *keep* it clean, understand? All day. If it's dirtied, wash it again, repack it, and use a clean wrap. You can come back for more powder, if you need."

"Or leave some bread to go moldy," Finley joked.

Master Johan shrugged. "If you like. That's two pieces for everything."

Finley frowned. "Only two?"

"You've been in here for a short period of time and I've given you bread mold," the old man smiled. "Only two."

They paid three, insisting the extra piece was for his honesty and ingenuity, and made their way back into the must market square.

"So do we let this one go?" Kelden asked, wiping the powder off his uninjured arm.

"Absolutely. In fact, I'm going to put it out that Master Johan's invention is something we should be spreading around. No reason everyone can't benefit for this knowledge, especially as he's been so free with it."

"So what next?"

"A meal, I think," Finley said after a moment's thought. "We can touch base with some of our kitchenware dealers here, and keep our ears to the ground for any... opportunities." *Rumors of inventions and off-the-map villages,* was the unspoken translation.

"Anything," Kelden said firmly, "but more fish. That stew was fine, but I find myself quite uninterested in more of the stuff. And I'd like to insist on a land journey home."

"Agreed," Finley laughed.

CHAPTER 6

Any Pier in a Storm

Finley stood by the small hearth in the little room he'd adopted as an office, while Kelden leaned uneasily against the adjacent wall. A crackling fire cast flickering shadows on his dark skin. His green eyes, usually bright with purpose, now reflected frustration and wariness.

"I dislike giving the humans any advantage," Ram growled as he sunk into the chair behind Finley's desk.

Dmitry bustled over, setting a steaming mug of *kava* in front of Ram.

"It's hardly an advantage," Finley said mildly, holding his frustration in check. "It's not like we've ever used magic to heal humans."

"Maybe we should," Ram grumbled, staring at the fireplace and ignoring the mug.

"You know it wouldn't work. We can't use magic on them directly."

The Order's Head simply grunted.

Finley and Kelden waited.

"Perhaps—" Dmitry started.

"Agreed, then," Ram interrupted, his voice gruff as he conceded. "There was no other choice—no action to be taken."

Finley nodded slowly, his thoughts already shifting. The debriefing had been terse, the mission closed with a sense of unease that clung like morning fog over the fields.

Ram's eyes snapped to Finley's. "You will not be not idle for long. A new assignment has arrived."

"We can be ready to leave in the morning, I think," Finley agreed as, from the corner of his eye, he saw Kelden stiffen. Sending them back out so quickly, even after such an uneventful mission, was unusual, if not exactly against protocol.

Dmitry watched them both carefully, but said nothing.

"The humans' ingenuity has again led them astray," Ram began, his eyes flashing. "A fishing pier, built by their hands, is our target."

Finley frowned. "Why does it concern us?"

"Because it was damaged in a storm, and they've used recycled iron as reinforcement as they rebuilt," Ram replied sharply.

"Wouldn't the Fisherwitches—" Kelden began.

"None left," Dmitry said softly. "Haven't been witchkind in this little place for years."

"The runes on the pier would have faded, then," Finley said slowly. "Is that how it was damaged?"

"Probably."

"And so we're to fix it?" Kelden asked uncertainly.

"Destroy it entirely," Ram said, his voice growing even harder. "We've put the word out to see if a Fisherwitch family is interested in moving, but until then... no magic, no piers. No docks. Let them wonder why their structures fail and fall."

"But destroy it?" Kelden's brow furrowed. "Why not just remove the iron? Seems a waste of a perfectly good—"

"Because," Dmitry interjected, his voice steady, "we cannot reveal ourselves. And we want it to appear as if the strapping failed naturally. Reduce their confidence in the metal."

"Exactly," Ram agreed.

"Where's the village?" Finley asked.

Ram snorted. "Less than a village. There'll be a map in your kit."

Finley's breath caught in his chest. "How much less than a village?"

Ram nodded slowly and rose from the chair. "No church. An older settlement than we've seen before, but..."

"Be careful," Finley finished.

"Very."

"We'll leave at first light."

Dmitry's eyes tracked them as they left the office.

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"Look at it, Kelden," Finley said, his voice barely audible over the crash of waves against the damaged pier. The structure stretched along the shoreline before them, a testament to human ingenuity and ignorance —a once-sturdy platform now crippled by their unwitting use of iron. "See there? The runes themselves are damaged. Half are missing. They must have faded completely. Without a Fisherwitch's care, the rest are as good as dust. And now with the iron..."

Rough iron bars had been attached to the pier's remaining structure, attached by iron nails thicker than Finley's thumb. It was an inexpert job, and even with the heavy sturdy iron, the pier creaked ominously.

"Looks like parts from the iron roadway," Kelden noted.

"Old parts," Finley agreed. "And heavily rusted. The sea water will make short work of them."

"How short?"

Finley considered. "A few months, perhaps, before those spikes begin to give way."

"Can we just let that happen?"

Finley sighed and shook his head. "Ram's in a mood. He's sent us here to make it happen *much* faster."

Kelden nodded, their violet eyes scanning the horizon where dark clouds began to gather. "Storm's brewing. Give it a few days, and this pier will be nothing but memories and driftwood."

"A few days..." Finley murmured.

"Help you?" a wizened voice asked from behind them.

Finley and Kelden turned to see a hunched old man squinting at them, his weathered face etched with deep lines. His clothes, showing signs of numerous repairs, hung loosely on his frail frame, and his gnarled hands gripped a twisted wooden cane.

"Ah, no, we're just passing through," Finley replied smoothly, forcing a pleasant smile. "Admiring your pier here. Looks like it's seen better days though, hasn't it?"

The old man hobbled closer, his rheumy eyes studying the battered structure. "Aye, that she has. Was a mighty storm that did her in, it was. Waves higher than the rooftops, crashing and smashing all night long. Thought the whole village might get swept away."

He paused, his gaze distant as if reliving the harrowing memory. "But she held, at least some of her. Enough for the young lads to patch her up best they could. Used bits of that fancy metal roadway they're rebuilding inland. Strong stuff, that is. Figured it might keep her standing a while longer."

The old man shook his head slowly. "But between you and me," his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "I don't think she'll last more than a few days once this next storm hits. The sea, she's a fickle mistress. Takes what she wants, and no bit of metal will stop her when she's in a temper."

Finley exchanged a glance with Kelden, a silent understanding passing between them. The storm would provide the perfect cover for their task.

"You may be right," Finley said, turning back to the old man. "Best to stay clear of her when the winds start to howl, I'd wager."

The old man chuckled, a dry rasping sound. "Oh, I learned that lesson long ago, lad. These old bones know when to seek shelter." He squinted at the darkening sky. "And it seems that time is coming sooner than later."

With a nod of farewell, the old man shuffled away toward the settlement, leaving Finley and Kelden alone on the windswept shore.

“An opportunity, then,” Kelden said quietly.

“Agreed. But...” Finley paused as he cast his eyes out over the gray sea.

“What is it?”

Finley’s affinity with Sea magic didn’t extend so far as to let him read the weather, but he could certainly get a sense of the ocean’s mood. “It doesn’t feel like that strong a storm, to be honest.”

Kelden slowly nodded agreement. “Feels like a lot of blow and blus-

ter. A Fisherwitch would know for sure." Those of witchkind who made their lives on and next to the sea were renowned for their ability to read the weather days into the future.

"If we had a Fisherwitch," Finley said wryly, "the pier probably wouldn't have been damaged."

"True."

"Think we can whip it up a bit?"

Kelden chewed their lip for a moment and then nodded. "I think so. It'll take me some time."

"I had intended to spend the evening. The map indicated there's a small inn."

Kelden sighed. "More fish stew?"

"Very likely."

The apprentice looked up. "I'll handle the storm. By the time I'm done, they'll think nature's fury claimed the pier, not us." They spoke with methodical certainty, each word underscored by the stiff, salty breeze.

"Good. I should be able to coax the sea into lending some added corrosion. The iron will rust faster than time alone would allow."

"Does it bother you?" Kelden asked suddenly, watching Finley's concentration. "To destroy what they've built without them knowing why?"

"Every time," Finley admitted, opening his green eyes to behold the pier's imminent demise. "But our purpose is greater than our comfort. We preserve the balance, even if it means unmaking what should never have been made." He considered the pier. "I'll need some time as well. Let's head into the village."

"'Village,'" Kelden snorted. "Ram wasn't kidding."

Finley and Kelden turned away from the battered pier, their footsteps crunching on the rocky shore as they made their way toward the cluster of weathered buildings huddled against the slate-gray sky. The settlement, if one could call it even that, consisted of a handful of structures that seemed to lean on each other for support, their rough-hewn walls and sagging roofs a testament to the hardscrabble existence eked out by the hardy souls who called this place home.

As they drew closer, the scent of woodsmoke and brine mingled in

the air, carried on the relentless wind that whipped at their cloaks and tugged at their hair. The buildings, constructed from a patchwork of driftwood, salvaged timber, and stone, appeared to have been built and rebuilt countless times over the years, each repair a defiant act of stubborn independence in the face of an unforgiving environment.

The narrow, winding paths between the structures were little more than well-worn tracks in the hard-packed earth, lined with bits of broken shells and the occasional tuft of wiry grass that had managed to take root in the unyielding soil.

A few scrawny chickens pecked and scratched in the dirt, their feathers ruffled by the cold, persistent breeze. An old, half-blind dog lifted its head as Finley and Kelden passed by, its tail thumping once against the ground in a halfhearted greeting before it settled back into its spot.

The local inn, if one could grace such a structure with the name, was little more than a slightly larger version of the other buildings, distinguished only by a weathered sign hanging crookedly above the door. The faded lettering, barely legible, proclaimed it to be "The Salty Dog."

Finley pushed open the heavy wooden door, its hinges protesting with a rusty creak. The interior was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of smoke, ale, and the unmistakable aroma of fish stew simmering over the hearth. A few rough-hewn tables and benches were scattered about the room, their surfaces worn smooth by countless elbows and tankards.

The innkeeper, a stout, middle-aged woman with a no-nonsense air about her, looked up from the hearth as they entered.

Her sharp eyes appraised them quickly, taking in their travel-worn cloaks and the subtle air of otherness that clung to them like a second skin.

"Strangers, eh?" she said, her voice rough as the sea wind. "Don't get many of those 'round here. What brings you to our little corner of the world?"

Finley stepped forward, a disarming smile on his face. "Just passing through, ma'am. We were hoping you might have a room available for the night, and perhaps a bit of that stew we smell simmering."

The innkeeper's gaze lingered on them a moment longer before she nodded, wiping her hands on her apron. "Aye, I've got a room. It ain't much, but it's clean and dry. As for the stew, you're in luck. Just pulled a fresh pot off the fire. This morning's catch, too." She offered a firm smile. "We may be small, but we ain't savage." She gestured to one of the tables. "Have a seat, and I'll bring you a bowl. Ale to wash it down?

"Please," Finley said as he and Kelden settled onto the benches, the rough wood creaking beneath their weight.

"Fish," Kelden sighed quietly.

"Be alert," Finley warned, his voice barely audible. "If there's going to be a trap, it'll be here."

The innkeeper returned a few moments later, setting down two steaming bowls of stew and two tankards of ale before them. The rich aroma of the stew filled their nostrils, and despite Kelden's earlier reservations, their stomach rumbled in anticipation.

Finley and Kelden ate in silence, their senses on high alert for any signs of danger. Other patrons wandered in, ordering stew and perhaps an ale before wandering out. They paid the two strangers little mind, too engrossed in their own conversations and meals to spare more than a cursory glance at the newcomers.

As they finished their stew, the innkeeper approached their table once more, a curious glint in her eye. "So, where you headed?" she asked, her tone casual but her gaze sharp.

Finley met her eyes steadily. "Just passing through, as I said. We've been on the road a long while and thought to rest here a night before moving on."

The innkeeper nodded slowly, seeming to weigh his words. "Funny thing, that pier out there," she said, jerking her chin toward the door. "Been standing longer than anyone can remember, through storms that would tear the roof off this very inn. But lately..." She trailed off.

"Time and nature will break anything," Finley said sagely. It was a phrase he'd heard more than a few times back home.

"Aye," the innkeeper said heavily, turning to greet another pair of customers.

"I could use with some time," Kelden said softly. "If you think it's safe."

Finley's eyes darted around the room. "It should be. Let's see this room of ours."

***

The room was small, barely large enough to accommodate the two narrow beds that stood on either side, their rough-spun blankets and lumpy mattresses a testament to the inn's rustic simplicity. A single, flickering candle illuminated the space, casting dancing shadows on the whitewashed walls and the low, raftered ceiling.

The floorboards creaked underfoot as Finley and Kelden entered, the worn wood polished smooth by countless footsteps over the years. A small, shuttered window looked out over the windswept shore, the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks a constant, muted roar in the background.

A battered wooden table stood between the beds, its surface marked with countless rings from tankards and bowls, each stain a silent story of the many travelers who had sought shelter within these walls. A chipped ceramic basin and pitcher rested on a shelf above the table, the water within cold and fresh, drawn from the inn's well.

Finley set his pack down on one of the beds, the frame groaning slightly under the weight. He ran a hand over his face, feeling the weariness of the road settling deep into his bones. Kelden moved to the other bed and sat on the edge, closing their eyes and beginning a breathing exercise.

"Have you ever worked tandem?" Finley asked quietly.

Kelden opened their eyes. "No. It isn't exactly... I mean, Thornwaithe's..."

"Right. Of course," Finley said quickly, flushing with embarrassment. "We didn't either, at school. It's not... taught."

"I've heard of it," Kelden allowed.

"My parents learned it from my mother's parents," Finley explained. "It's kind of a family tradition."

"And they showed you?"

Finley's flush intensified. "They explained. But you... I mean..."

"You have to have someone you're close to."

"Normally, yes." Finley spoke faster now. "But I have dual gender affinity. You do as well. That kind of changes it."

Kelden's eyebrows rose. "How so?"

"It's the flow of the magic." Finley sat on the edge of his own bed. "I don't know if it'll work, but given that we have to move both Sea and Sky..."

Kelden nodded slowly. "It might pay to work together. You have a rune construct in mind?"

So to speak, Finley thought anxiously. His Rune Smith talent had been poking at him ever since he laid eyes on the damaged pier. "Sort of."

Kelden's eyebrows rose again. "Your..."

"Talent, yes," Finley nodded. "It's... unusual."

"I can't wait."

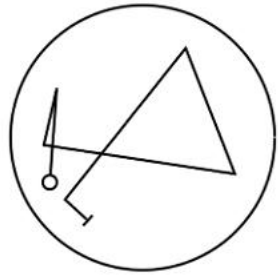
"No, really. It's nothing like any rune you've ever seen."

"At Thornwaithe's—"

"It's not Old Runic. Or Middle Runic."

"I feel like you should just show me."

Finley nodded and held his index finger in the air. *"Transkribuoti."* The tip of his finger began to glow a gentle orange, and the glow lingered as he started tracing the rune.



Finley wasn't even halfway through when Kelden's eyebrows

reached maximum height, but the apprentice stayed silent until Finley finished. The glow faded from his fingertip, but the completed rune remained hanging in the air, a dull orange shot through with yellow.

"Well, you weren't wrong," Kelden chuckled. "You're sure this'll work?"

It'll work, something whispered in Finley's mind. "If we do it together, yes," Finley said, forcing into his voice a confidence he didn't quite share.

"A rune for a storm," Kelden said appreciatively. "Well. Let's get started."

***

The wind howled like a pack of wolves and the sea churned wildly, as Finley and Kelden watched from their concealed vantage point. The pier, once a proud structure jutting into the ocean, now bore the scars of nature's ferocity and the hidden hand of witchkind. Iron strappings, meant to be a quick human fix, screamed against the relentless push and pull of the elements.

"Look at it buckle," Finley said, his voice steady despite the turmoil before them. "They didn't mean any harm—just humans with their iron and ignorance."

They'd lay in their shared room for the entire afternoon, holding the strange new runes in their minds as they fed it with magic. They'd fallen into the ancient, half-forgotten rhythm of tandem magic without even trying, Sea and Sky magic complementing each other. The rune led their thoughts, conscious and unconscious, into the proper pattern, and their magic filled the construct with power.

"Intentions don't change the outcome," Kelden shouted over the roar, violet eyes fixed on the pier. "Better a lost dock than a war between worlds."

The water in the settlement's shallow little bay had grown warm, while the air above had grown cold. Before long, moist, warm air was rushing up, pushing the colder, drier air aside. But the updraft's energy

didn't last long, and it quickly collapsed, falling to the side as fresh air shot up from beneath.

"True." Finley nodded, focusing back on the task. With each wave, he sent a subtle pulse of Sea magic, encouraging the rust that crept over metal like a deadly vine. It was painstaking work, forcing decay without a trace of witchkind influence.

Before long, the storm had become a self-sustaining monster, the air whirling in a tight vortex. Moisture from the ocean lost its warmth and began falling as a fierce, pounding rain. Finley and Kelden's eyes had flown open in the same moment, and they'd rushed outside to fine-tune their work and observe its results.

"Safer night to stay abed!" the innkeeper had called after them.

"More?" Kelden asked, hands outstretched to maintain the tempest they had summoned.

"Nearly done," Finley assured them, drawing upon his Flame affinity to quicken the oxidation process. Steam rose as heat met cold saltwater, the stench of corroding metal filling the air.

"Make sure the strapping is what gives way first," Kelden reminded him, eyes narrowed in concentration. "It needs to look like a structural failure, nothing more."

Finley poured more Flame magic into a simple heat spell, keeping his focus well away from the actual iron and instead feeding energy into the seawater he'd churned up. "Right." His gaze didn't waver from the task. He pictured the structure's integrity hanging by a thread, the iron yielding under the onslaught of nature and his hidden craft, wishing he could just focus his power directly on the offending metal. "Almost there," he murmured, feeling the magic respond, a symphony of destruction played on an invisible stage. He looked away from the pier for a moment, catching Kelden's eye. "That feel good?"

"More than," Kelden affirmed, the storm above echoing their resolve.

With one final nudge of power, Finley released his hold on the elements. A crescendo of cracking timber filled the air as the central section of the pier gave way, the iron strapping snapping loudly as if to punctuate the end of their task. The remaining structure swayed

perilously before succumbing to the ocean's embrace, leaving behind a jagged silhouette against the stormy backdrop.

"Let's go," Finley said, clapping a hand on Kelden's shoulder. "Our work here is done." Together, they turned their backs on the wreckage, retreating into the shadows as the storm began to abate, leaving only the sound of waves devouring what remained of human endeavor.

"Back to the inn?" Kelden called through the howling wind.

Finley shook his head, cold water splashing down his face. "I've no appetite for it. Let them think we fell in."

Kelden grinned as rain streamed down his head, plastering his hair to his face. "I know a great travel spell."

"Do you have enough magic?" Finley asked warily. "I'm all but tapped out."

"If the choices are to head home or eat more fish stew," Kelden sighed, gathering more Sky magic to himself, "I've more than enough magic to head home."

CHAPTER 7

Construction Technique

And no sign of the human cabal?" Ram asked suspiciously.

"Not that we saw," Finley replied wearily. He and Kelden had scarcely set foot into the Farm's main building before Ram had cornered them. "To be fair, we didn't stay long."

"They'll know it was magic," Ram muttered.

Once again, Dmitry leaned against the far wall, saying nothing.

"They might not," Kelden offered, earning a foul glare from the Head. "There was a storm already brewing. We just encouraged it—and we did that from within the inn. We didn't go out until it was already in full blow, and nobody else was crazy enough to join us."

"That you know of."

"The mist was so thick we could barely see each other," Finley assured the older man. "They may suspect, but we weren't observed."

"And that storm will take days to blow out completely," Kelden added, a tinge of regret in his voice. "And it'll drift, just like any storm. It *is* just like any storm—we just used magic to make it more powerful."

"And the pier is gone?" Ram asked for the third time.

"Gone, and the iron strapping corroded and snapped in the doing," Finley said. "If there thought was that iron could beat a storm, we've disabused them of the notion."

"Humph," Ram muttered. Then he shrugged. "Mission's done, then. Rest up. New one for you tomorrow."

"New—" Kelden began, heat in his voice.

"We could use some rest to Gather," Finley said more gently. "We expended a lot of magic."

Ram stared at him for a moment and then nodded. Even the too-tense Head of the Order couldn't change how magic worked. "Sleep, then. Gather. See me in the morning, but this one can wait a day. Perhaps two." He gave them a cold smile. "It's a sheet of music you've seen before. Dmitry will have a pack ready for you."

And with that bare clue, he stalked off toward his rooms, leaving Finley and Kelden to dry themselves off and find a dinner than wasn't fish.

Dmitry's expression was unreadable as he followed Ram.

***

"I wouldn't have expected Pease to be the innovator in construction," Kelden said quietly as the village came into sight.

"This... is a recurring issue, actually. Like printing presses were. But consider it: Pease sits on the edge of one of the largest forests on the continent." Finley shrugged. "Plenty of wood. So people tend to experiment."

"You've seen this before?"

"Sadly, yes."

"Care to explain it to me?"

Finley sighed. "Human buildings, at least as they're usually built, are really just solid boxes. They raise four walls, lay a few beams across them for a roof, and thatch the roof. Usually thatch. Some places use slate, when they have it. But the technique is the same. It's why none of their buildings can be that big—the walls can't be furthest apart than a beam can support, and even with a village full of people, you can only hoist so large a beam. And I mean, trees only grow so big. So they hit the upper limit pretty quickly. Went past it, really."

"Which is where we come in."

"Exactly. The right runes carved into a beam can let it support a good bit more weight. That's how they got to two-story structures. Runes carved into the walls keep them from bowing—that's how the few three-story structures stay upright. Humans put the buildings up, witchkind creates some of our hidden spaces in them, and the witchkind residents or businesspeople or whatever, they're responsible for keeping the building's runes charged."

"And this new technique disrupts that balance?"

Finley sighed again. "It threatens to."

"How so?"

"Stronger buildings. With less material, even. And entirely from wood—far easier to build than with stone. Bigger buildings, potentially taller buildings. But certainly sturdier."

Kelden chuckled as they walked. "I guess my imagination doesn't extend to anything more than boxes with roofs."

Finley grinned. "It's straightforward once you see it, I guess. Come on, it's supposed to be on the outskirts. Experimental buildings almost always are. We should see it soon." Then he grew more somber. "And stay alert. *Very* alert. This kind of repeated 'innovation' is exactly where I'd expect a trap. Or at least to be observed."

"Got it."

Finley led Kelden to the edge of the village, where a large structure was taking shape. It looked like any other building at first glance, with walls and a roof, but as they drew closer, the differences became apparent.

"See how the walls are thinner?" Finley said, pointing. "And there are fewer of them. That's because the weight of the roof isn't resting on the walls anymore. It's resting on those big vertical timbers."

Kelden peered at the massive wooden posts rising from the ground at regular intervals. They were easily as thick as a man's torso and twice as tall as Kelden himself. Stout horizontal beams connected the posts at their tops.

"The posts are sunk deep into the ground for stability," Finley explained. "And those beams tying them together at the top create a sturdy frame. From there, they lay more beams across to form the roof.

The walls become just a way to enclose the space, not support anything."

Kelden whistled appreciatively. "That's brilliant. You could make a much bigger building this way."

"Exactly. If you can get big enough trees, obviously. See how far apart those posts are spaced compared to the traditional beam spans in the other buildings? This design lets them create a significantly larger interior space."

Kelden nodded thoughtfully as he examined the framework. "I can see why this would be concerning. It could disrupt our hidden spaces if it catches on. Undermine our quiet influence."

"Not to mention make it easier for them to expand and progress even further without our magic to assist," Finley added grimly.

"So you've seen this before?"

"Once. And the Order has records of far more attempts than that. It's the kind of thing that's just... obvious. To humans, I mean. They seem to keep reinventing it."

"So what's the plan? Sabotage the building somehow?"

Finley shook his head. "Maybe. That's what we usually do. We might need to be more subtle." He scanned the area, noting the workers milling about, the tools and materials strewn across the site. "We have two problems. One is these humans. This experiment. Which is going well, by the way—they've moved quickly. And that brings us to the second, more worrying problem."

"This cabal you've mentioned."

"Exactly. They're documenting these innovations. I'm sure of it. We can sabotage them, but they catch us at it. Or now, they probably just assume it's witchkind. And our sabotage does no good, because they've documented what works."

"Have we tried altering the documentation?"

"We have. We do, when we find it. I invented a rune construct that makes it easier."

"Truly?"

"It's carved into the foundations of their churches, everywhere on the continent. Which is why they've moved to the edge of town, or why they're working in smaller settlements with no churches at all.

Worse, we know they've etched some of their documentation into iron plates."

"Dust and winter," Kelden swore softly. "It's that bad?"

"It's likely worse," Finley said grimly. "And Ram keeps it from most of the Order. He thinks everyone would panic and abandon him."

"But you're telling me."

Finley hesitated. "I don't entirely agree with Ram's approach. I don't... fully understand it."

"But you follow his orders?"

"I do trust him. He's led the Order for decades." Finley paused. "I *think* I trust him."

Kelden was quiet for a moment as they watched the workers hoist another beam into place. "So what do we do?"

"Ideally, something more permanent, this time. We plant doubt. Make them question the stability and longevity of this new method. A few well-placed magical 'accidents' to make the timbers warp or crack over time should sow enough uncertainty to stall the adoption of the technique."

"Won't they just think it's a flaw with this particular building though? Or blame the quality of wood?"

Finley's jaw tightened. "They probably will."

"So that won't work?"

"It probably won't."

"Then why—"

"Because I dislike the alternative."

"Then what—"

"Let's go talk to them."

***

"So you heard about us all the way from Nworlins?" The human who'd been introduced to them as the lead designer on the project gave them a suspicious look.

But Finley was quite practiced in spinning stories on the fly. "A

colleague, actually. I work for a kitchenwares firm, and one of our salespeople comes through here pretty regularly. I guess you were just started out then, although it was only a fortnight ago. You've made remarkable progress."

The man's expression eased a bit. "No secrets, really. It's just a better construction technique." The corners of his eyes wrinkled in mild amusement. "It's astounded me that the traditional buildings manage to stay intact, really."

If only you knew, Finley thought. "We actually had a couple of pretty bad failures in my hometown. That's why I decided to come see what you were doing."

"It's a solid design," the man said slowly, "but I'll be honest. We've had some problems. Sabotage, mainly. It's why we're a little careful with who we let into the site." Indeed, the man's crew had held them back a few dozen paces while one of them ran to fetch him. "But if we can prove it out, it'll be a revolution."

Finley nodded slowly. "I can appreciate the ambition, and I understand the desire to keep your methods secret while you're still perfecting them." He looked up at the building. "But I'm afraid I've got some concerns."

The man's brow furrowed. "Concerns?"

"Yes," Finley said. "I'm just an amateur, of course, but I've worked with wood all my life. And I can't help but notice that your beams are all resting on top of each other, rather than being mortised and tenoned together. Wouldn't that make them more susceptible to shearing forces?"

The man scoffed. "Shearing forces? This building is designed to withstand the worst storms nature can throw at it."

"I'm sure it is," Finley said soothingly. "But storms are one thing. What about earthquakes? Or even just the settling of the ground over time? Wouldn't it be safer to have the beams locked together?"

The man hesitated. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt."

Finley pressed his advantage. "And what about the roof? It seems to be relying on a lot of small, individual pieces. Wouldn't it be stronger if you used larger, more substantial timbers?"

The man's jaw tightened. "Look, I appreciate your concerns, but I'm confident in my design."

"I'm sure you are," Finley said with a conciliatory smile. "But wouldn't it be better to be safe than sorry? Just think of it as a way to buy yourself some peace of mind."

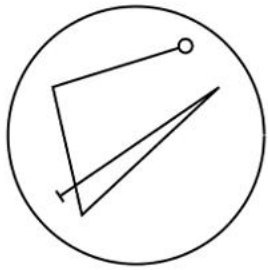
The man sighed. "I suppose you have a point." He looked up at the building again.

"There's more," Finley suggested. The man raised an eyebrow. "I mean, have you really thought hard about the wood species you're using? Softer woods might be more malleable, able to flex more in a storm or even a quake. And what about the moisture content? That will surely change over time and affect the stability. And the walls themselves—without the weight of the roof bearing down on them, aren't they going to be more susceptible to damage in a storm? I could think they'd even blow inwards."

The man's eyes narrowed and Finley cringed inside. He knew his arguments were specious, but he'd been hoping the man was more of a try-and-see experimenter, not someone actually experienced with the issues he'd raised.

"Who did you say you were, again?" the man asked, his voice hardening.

Finley held up his hands as if to forestall the builder's growing suspicions. "My name's Almet. And I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply you weren't being thorough." Quickly, he called up a rune in his mind, and cringed again when his Rune Smith talent peremptorily discarded it and substituted one of its newer ideas.



He trickled magic into it, and although his particular affinities weren't well-suited to this kind of work, he couldn't see a way to get Kelden to do this instead. The rune he'd called to mind was designed to sooth emotions, but this new one seemed more purpose-built to allay suspicion. But even as the magic took hold, he could feel it wasn't sufficient. His magic just didn't have the right nuance to it.

The builder took a step backwards. "I need to get back to work."

"Of course," Finley said, stepping back himself.

The man nodded curtly and turned to go. The members of his crew who'd remained followed him slowly, casting sharp glances back over their shoulders as they went.

"That went well," Kelden said quietly as the humans walked out of earshot. "I felt you doing something—didn't work?"

"It did not," Finley sighed.

"So now what?"

"We find an inn for the night. I have another idea, but I'll need your help."

***

The village of Pease had a couple of inns, and they were both nicer and less rustic than what Finley and Kelden had become used to. The first, the Sun and Moon, was small and cozy, with a warm fire in the hearth

and a friendly innkeeper who served them a hearty meal of roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy. The second, the Blue Boar, was larger and more boisterous, with a lively taproom and a menu featuring a variety of exotic dishes. They opted for the Blue Boar, drawn in by the promise of a bustling clientele that would make it easier for them to blend in.

The inn was indeed lively, filled with the sounds of laughter and conversation. The air was thick with the smell of roasted meat and ale, and the walls were adorned with tapestries depicting scenes of hunting and battle. Finley and Kelden found a table in a corner and settled down to order their food.

"I'll have the wild boar stew," Finley said to the barmaid, a buxom woman with a warm smile.

"And I'll have the dragon steak," Kelden added. “What is it, exactly?”

The barmaid chuckled. "A bold choice, sir. It’s just venison, but our cook has a way with spices that livens it up quite a bit. I assure you, it's the best dragon steak you'll ever taste!"

The food arrived promptly, and Finley and Kelden tucked in with gusto. The boar stew was rich and flavorful, the meat tender and falling off the bone. The “dragon steak” was surprisingly tender, with a highly spiced and smoky flavor.

"This is delicious," Finley said, licking his lips.

"I've never had anything like it," Kelden agreed.

They finished their meal and then retired to their room, which was small but comfortable. There was a bed for each of them, a chest of drawers, and a small table with two chairs.

"I'm going to go for a walk," Finley said. "Want to come?"

"Sure," Kelden said.

They stepped out into the cool night air. The moon was full, casting a silvery light over the village. They walked along the cobblestone streets, admiring the quaint houses and shops. The buildings here were sturdy, neatly decorated, and far less ramshackle than the last place they’d stopped.

"What's your plan?" Kelden asked.

"I’m wondering if we can have one of those timber beams split

open. Maybe more than one," Finley said. "And have some kind of insects come pouring out."

Kelden tilted their head. “Insects?”

“There’s no way they could have cut the trees to this point and not noticed an infestation, right?”

“Sure.”

“So if the inside of those beams turns out to be mostly hollow and filled with insects—that’s going to throw them off.”

“Wouldn’t they just... I don’t know. Try new trees?”

Finley’s lips thinned. “We have to try something short of... what Ram would actually want us to do.”

Kelden stopped, and turned to face Finley. “He’ll want them all killed, won’t he?”

Finley nodded silently.

They stared at each other for several long moments until Kelden spoke. “In the past... I mean, I’ve read about some of the past missions. The human religion...”

Finley looked away as he considered it. “You’re not wrong. We’ll often try to find a way to make whatever they’re doing objectionable to the religion.”

“Isn’t that something we could do now?”

“I don’t... hmm.”

“You have an idea?” Kelden asked after a few minutes.

“Did you ever,” Finley said slowly, a grin spreading across his face, “read about the time the Veil almost failed? A few hundred years ago? It was the beginning of the end of the Age of the Adherents.”

“In school, we—wait. The dragon thing?”

Finley’s grin widened. “The dragon thing. C’mon, we’re going to need to find someone with Earth alignment, and I bet the inn has a hidden space where we can start looking.”

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. . .

Dawn broke over Pease, bathing the village in an eerie, misty light. The usual morning sounds of roosters crowing and villagers beginning their daily routines were shattered by an unholy creaking and groaning, like the tortured moans of a dying giant.

Three colossal trees, easily a hundred feet tall, were lumbering into the village center on gnarled, twisted roots that served as makeshift legs. Their branches, once lush with leaves, were now bare and razor-sharp, slashing through the air like the claws of a ravenous beast.

The trees' bark was blackened and cracked, oozing a foul, oily sap that sizzled and smoked where it dripped onto the cobblestones. Their trunks were riddled with knotholes that glowed with an infernal red light, like the eyes of a demon.

Leading the charge was an ancient oak, its trunk as wide as a house. With a bone-shaking roar, it reared back and brought its massive branches crashing down onto the roof of the village church. Timbers splintered and stone crumbled under the assault, the once-sturdy walls collapsing inward like a house of cards.

Villagers poured out of their homes, some still in their nightclothes, their eyes wide with terror. Screams filled the air as they fled in all directions, desperate to escape the rampaging trees.

One tree lashed out with a branch, impaling a fleeing man and lifting him high into the air. His agonized shrieks were cut short as the tree shook him violently, then flung his broken body aside like a rag doll.

Finley watched in grim silence from the roof of the inn as the trees continued their rampage, smashing through buildings and crushing anything in their path. The experimental construction site was reduced to a pile of splinters in seconds, the sturdy posts and beams snapping like twigs under the onslaught. "That's enough," he called, a wisp of magic carrying his words into his room at the inn.

"I don't think Marta could keep this up anyway," came the reply, a whisper carried on the back of a breeze.

A sprinkle of dust held a curmudgeonly retort: "Marta can outmagic you all day long, boy."

"Do you need to march them out?" Finley asked.

Marta replied, "It'll be more impressive to just let them drop where

they stand." Already, Finley could see the ambulatory trees flagging as Kelden and Marta's magic dwindled.

"You just don't want to march them back," Kelden teased.

"Quiet, boy," Marta snapped, although Finley could hear the good-natured fatigue in her tone.

As one, the trees toppled.

And that's when Finley saw her.

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"You're sure it was one of their agents?" Kelden asked.

Finley cinched his travel sack tightly shut and nodded. "She was the only one not running around in terror. Certainly nobody else was staring at me, standing on the roof."

"So they'll know."

Finley laughed—a dry, hollow sound that lacked any mirth. "We marched a bunch of trees into town to attack their church. If you know that magic exists, and this cabal certainly does, we couldn't have left a better calling card."

"If we go back to the roof, I know a travel magic that—"

"We're going to go by the building site," Finley said firmly, looping his bag's strap over one shoulder. "You ready?"

"Yes, but—"

"We'll be careful. Keep a defensive rune on the edge of your mind, along with the iron-defense one I showed you."

The sun was well above the horizon by the time Finley and Kelden emerged from the Blue Boar. The once-lively village of Pease was now a scene of devastation, the streets strewn with debris and the air thick with the whimpers of the wounded.

Villagers picked their way through the wreckage, their faces ashen with shock and grief. Some were helping to carry the injured to the local healer, which had miraculously survived the attack unscathed. Others were sifting through the rubble of the damaged buildings, salvaging what little they could.

The church was a complete ruin, its once-sturdy walls reduced to a heap of shattered stone and splintered wood. The great oak tree that had dealt the final blow lay across the ruins like a fallen giant, its branches still twitching feebly as the last of Marta's magic drained away.

On the edge of the village, a group of men were struggling to lift a heavy beam off the crushed remains of the experimental construction site. The massive timbers that had once seemed so promising now lay in a tangled heap, their ends jagged and splintered where they had snapped like twigs under the onslaught of the rampaging trees.

The builder saw them walking past and trudged over to them. "I suppose you've lost interest in our project."

Finley feigned shock and amazement. "It seems clear that you're not meant to proceed! The trees themselves... if ever there was a clear message of the god's will, that was it. We were terrified for our lives this morning! Our inn would have been the next to go!" He glanced at Kelden, who'd managed a drawn, ashen expression and was nodding in silent agreement.

The builder opened his mouth to protest, but then closed it and shook his head. "I'm not normally a religious man..."

"The forest stirring itself to protest has given me a renewed commitment," Finley said firmly. "I assume you'll abandon these efforts?"

Again, the man opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. "Nobody will support us, now. And word will spread." He turned back to his ruined project. "I'm finished." He glanced at Finley and Kelden. "I hope your travels are safer than they've been."

Finley nodded silently, and he and Kelden began picking their way around the construction site, heading out of town on the main trade road.

"Do you know how many were killed?" Kelden asked quietly as the town slowly fell away behind them.

"Four," Finley said tensely. "And at least thirty injured."

They walked silently for a ways before Kelden asked, "Do you think he'll try again?"

"I hope not," Finley said, shaking his head. "Did you count his crew?"

"The builder's? I saw around three dozen."

"As did I. And we'd have had to kill them all. Anyone who knew what they were doing."

"But you said the cabal probably had the technique documented."

"Exactly. Their deaths would have been pointless, because the cabal would have just found someone else to try. Somewhere we might not notice. This way... the humans themselves might put a stop to it."

"Marta felt pretty confident of it."

"She's reason to. That kind of thing has worked well in the past, so long as there's no reason to suspect magic."

Kelden snorted. "Walking trees aren't magic?"

"Not if they're summoned by their god."

They trudged along the road for another ten minutes. "That's probably far enough," Finley said, stopping and scanning the road behind them. "I can handle the travel magic, this time. You must be spent."

"Mostly," Kelden admitted. "Finley..." he added, hesitation in his tone.

"Yeah?"

"Do you ever wonder?"

"Wonder what?"

Kelden hesitated again. "Wonder if it's really necessary? If the humans having better buildings, stronger homes... if it's so dangerous?"

Finley's jaw clenched as he began weaving magic into a traveling rune in his mind. "I do wonder. More and more, actually."

CHAPTER 8

More Bricks for the Wall

Ram was unexpectedly out when they returned to the Farm, giving them an equally unexpected reprieve. "Something urgent with the Taryba," Delcie, one of the Order's mission administrators, told them. "Dmitry's in charge until Ram's back."

Finley frowned. He'd been told that only one member of witchkind's Great Council even knew about the Order, and even that councilor was given only limited information about their operations and missions. What could have been so urgent that the Head of the Order needed to attend in person? Then he shook his head and let it go. Perhaps their reprieve would include a couple of nights in a comfortable bed around their own kind, before they were sent out again.

He was surprised to find a number of other field agents at the Farm for at least a few nights—more than he'd seen in the past year or so. Aistė, who specialized in long-term assignments where she strove to become part of small human communities; Dovilas, who'd made a career out of hindering expansions to the Iron Roadway; Genovaitė, one of the Order's oldest field agents, with a keen mind for forestalling technological advances; and Raimondas, who normally kept himself to the bitter-cold towns and villages of the northeast. Finley felt a pang of regret that Arcadia wasn't there as well—it had been months since he'd seen her, and they'd always been close.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, the gathered field agents settled around the crackling campfire. The flames danced and swayed, casting a warm glow on their faces and creating flickering shadows that mingled with the lengthening shadows of the surrounding trees. The air was filled with the gentle chirping of crickets and the distant hooting of an owl, a soothing symphony of nature that helped to ease the tension from their weary bodies and minds.

Dovilas leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he stared into the mesmerizing flames. "I've been trying a new approach lately," he began, his voice low and thoughtful. "Instead of just creating sinkholes to disrupt the Iron Roadway, I've been focusing on transforming the land into marshes."

The others looked at him with curiosity, their eyes glinting in the firelight. Aistė, her long blonde hair plaited into a neat braid, tilted her head. "Marshes? How does that help?"

Dovilas smiled, a hint of mischief in his expression. "Well, you see, the Iron Roadway requires firm, level ground to function properly. By turning the land into a boggy, waterlogged mess, it becomes nearly impossible for them to lay down the tracks and maintain the stability they need."

Genovaitė nodded slowly, her weathered face creased with understanding. "Clever. But don't they notice when land they'd previously surveyed is suddenly a bog?"

"Ah," Dovilas said, his smile widening. "I'm even more clever than you think. I've been timing the storms, you see. A little push at the right time and I can get a nearby stream to overflow its banks. Makes it look seasonal, which is even harder to deal with than just filling in a marsh." Then he frowned. "Although they're starting to experiment with raising stream banks." He nodded to Finley. "Your work ruining their Benoto blocks has set them back, though. They were relying on that material to build—well, sea walls, basically. 'Stream walls' sounds strange to my ears." His grin returned.

Aistė leaned back, a wistful expression on her face as she gazed up at the star-studded sky. "Speaking of sea walls," she began, her voice soft and melodic, "my last assignment was in a small coastal community

called Svyturys. It was a picturesque little village, nestled between rolling hills and the vast expanse of the ocean. The people there were hardworking and determined, their lives intertwined with the rhythms of the sea. No Fisherwitches, though."

She paused, her eyes shimmering with memories. "Without magic, they had been struggling for years to build a sea wall that could withstand the relentless pounding of the waves and the fury of the storms that battered their shores. Their homes and livelihoods were constantly under threat, and they knew that they needed a solution that would stand the test of time."

Aistė shifted, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. "That's where the Benoto material came in, although they weren't calling it that. They named it *cementis.* It was a revolutionary new material, designed to be stronger and more durable than anything they had ever seen before. I never did learn where they got it from, but the villagers were thrilled when they learned that they would be among the first to use it in their sea wall construction. They imported wagonloads of the raw materials, built this incredible tube-shaped over out of solid rock—just an enormous amount of work."

Finley's stomach tightened.

She smiled, a hint of pride in her voice. "I worked alongside them, day after day, as they poured their hearts and souls into building that wall. I did every little thing I could to undermine the work, as ordered. The stuff was notoriously susceptible to an improper ingredient mix—really, really picky. But in the end, all I was doing was slowing them down. They'd managed to pour a length of wall taller than myself, and... well, Ram was getting irritable."

Why didn't he ever mention this to me? Finley thought, getting irritated himself.

Aistė shrugged. "But then it all stopped working. Even perfectly measured, they couldn't get it to work anymore. One of the key ingredients stopped arriving entirely. What they'd constructed already is still there, and I tell you—it's amazing. Half the Fisherwitches on the continent would probably use the stuff, and save their magic for other tasks."

"Which is, of course, the problem," Genovaitė said in her gravelly voice. "A slow progression to where magic itself is no longer needed.

And then, once we're discovered... nothing stopping them from Hunting us to extinction."

"Oh, surely it's not so bad as that," Dovilas scoffed. Finley raised an eyebrow—Genovaitė was simply repeating the Order's well-established dogma. "Magic keeps everything together in a thousand little ways. Sure, the Iron Roadway has been a disaster, but sea walls? Or street lamps that don't blow out in the slightest breeze? Or glass windows you can actually see through?"

"They've been improving windows?" Kelden asked, speaking up for the first time that evening.

Genovaitė leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with a mixture of fascination and concern. "Indeed, they have been making remarkable strides in glassmaking. It's quite astonishing, really." She reached into her satchel and pulled out a small, perfectly square pane of glass, holding it up for the others to see. The firelight danced across its surface, revealing a clarity and smoothness that was unlike anything they had ever seen before—without the use of magic in the process.

"This," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "is what they're calling 'crown glass.' The process is quite ingenious, actually. They take a glob of molten glass on the end of a blowpipe and spin it rapidly, using centrifugal force to flatten it into a large, circular disk. As it spins, the glass becomes thinner and more uniform, with any bubbles or imperfections being pushed toward the edges."

The others leaned in closer, their eyes wide with wonder as they examined the glass. It was so clear, so flawless, that it almost seemed to disappear in Genovaitė's hand. Finley reached out tentatively, his fingertips brushing against the cool, smooth surface. "Incredible," he murmured, shaking his head in disbelief.

Genovaitė nodded, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "But that's not all. Once the disk is formed, they allow it to cool slightly before cutting it into smaller panes like this one."

"How did you stop them?" Kelden asked.

Genovaitė's smile widened, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Oh, I had a few tricks up my sleeve," she said, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest. "You see, the key to the crown glass process is maintaining a precise temperature throughout the spinning and cooling

stages. Too hot, and the glass becomes too fluid, losing its shape and clarity. Too cold, and it becomes brittle, prone to cracking and shattering."

She reached into her satchel again, this time pulling out a small, intricately carved wooden box. Opening the lid, she revealed a fine, silvery powder that sparkled in the firelight. "This," she said, "is a special blend of minerals I created. When added to the molten glass, it alters the thermal properties ever so slightly, making it nearly impossible to maintain the perfect temperature range."

Dovilas let out a low whistle, his eyebrows raised in appreciation. "Clever. But how did you manage to get it into their supply without being noticed?"

Genovaitė chuckled, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Well, that's where a bit of glamour magic came in handy. I disguised myself as one of the glassmakers' apprentices and slipped the powder into their batch during the night shift. By the time they realized something was amiss, it was too late. The entire batch was ruined, and they had no idea what had caused it." She shrugged. "Lost interest in the project entirely."

Finley and Kelden exchanged a glance. The majority of the Order's operatives were unaware of the human cabal that opposed them, and Finley was all but certain that the 'crown glass' technique was well-documented somewhere. It would come up again, likely in some smaller settlement where the Order had fewer eyes.

Raimondas spoke next. "It seems like their pace of experimentation has increased," he said in his deep, rumbling tone. "I've been chasing down rumors of some miracle building material myself. *Sustiprintas molis,* it's called."

"The *humans* call it that?" Genovaitė frowned. "It sounds like something from the True Language."

It is, Finley thought. Yet another example of humans using the old tongue—a language they'd left behind centuries ago.

"They do," Raimondas nodded. "Although I've traveled to every town and village in the northeast and found no evidence of it. Apparently some miracle building block."

"The Benot—" Finley started.

Raimondas shook his head. "No, not those. Something made with the local clay, and reinforced, somehow."

Finley and Kelden exchanged another wary glance. "When you say every town and village," Finley asked slowly, "do you mean the smaller settlements that crop up between them? The ones mainly populated by malcontents? The ones not even big enough for a small church?"

Raimondas frowned. "Why would I bother with those?"

Finley groaned inside and gave a slight nod to Kelden. They'd look into this in the morning. *There goes a few days of home comfort,* he sighed to himself.

The conversation continued well into the deep of the night, but Finley's mind was now awhirl with planning.

And, strangely, his Rune Smith talent was murmuring softly in the back of his mind.

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"This seems like it was a little too easy," Kelden remarked. He and Finley had visited just two small villages before finding their target on the outskirts of Landshire.

Finley shrugged. "Honestly, Raimondas isn't that creative. Like I told you, we just needed to find one village with new brick buildings going up, wait for a supply wagon to come in, and then figure out where it came from."

"By bribing the driver," Kelden grinned.

Finley smiled back. "Surely buying a man an ale or two isn't a bribe." Then he nodded to the brickyard they'd found. "And it isn't like this is being kept a secret. I mean, it's right here." Finding the brickyard hadn't even been difficult, as it seemed like a tenth of the town's population was employed there. They'd found a small inn that made its business housing the brick-wagon drivers in between runs, and settled onto a sturdy old table on the inn's front patio, directly overlooking the broad yard where piles of bricks were being loaded onto empty wagons.

The brickworks building itself was set further off, but they could still see the neat piles being wheeled out.

"So what do you think the secret is?"

Finley considered. "I don't know, honestly. We have reinforced bricks already—the ones my parents used in sea walls had horse hair pressed into the wet clay to add strength and help prevent cracks. But they still broke fairly easily, which is why their runes were in such demand. But—look, did you see that?"

A pile of dark-red bricks had tumbled off their wheeled cart, scattering in the dry dirt.

Kelden let out a low whistle. "Not a single one broke."

"So they're doing something pretty different." Finley's eyes narrowed. "Hmm."

"What are you thinking?"

Finley didn't respond, but instead summoned his magic. There was a simple rune for cracking bricks, often employed in demolishing old structures to make way for new ones. He held the rune in his mind, ignoring his talent's sudden urge to rewrite it in the half-random, angular style it had invented.

In the brickyard, a half-dozen bricks cracked with a dull sound, even as the man who'd been pushing the cart tried to re-stack them.

"What's that prove?" Kelden asked.

"That they haven't stuck iron into them as reinforcement," Finley said, relief coloring his tone. "So it's something else, but at least something a little less immediately threatening to us."

"So we sneak in tonight?"

"That's my preference. Come on, let's see if this inn has an empty room to let."

As the two men stood, a young girl inside the inn's common room whirled and hurried out a back door.

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“Do you have a light spell you prefer?” Kelden asked softly as they crept through the brick yard, threading their way through precise stacks of bricks.

Finley shook his head, his eyes already adjusting to the deep shadows that blanketed the brickyard. "Not in the open," he whispered back. "We don't want to risk alerting anyone to our presence."

The night was thick and heavy, the air redolent with the earthy scent of clay and the sharp tang of smoke from the brickworks' chimneys. A sliver of moon hung low in the sky, its feeble light barely penetrating the inky darkness that pooled between the towering stacks of bricks. The two men moved with practiced stealth, their footsteps nearly silent on the hard-packed dirt.

As they drew closer to the brickworks building, Finley could make out more details in the wan moonlight. The structure was long and low, constructed of the same dark-red bricks that surrounded them. Smoke curled lazily from a trio of tall, narrow chimneys, hinting at the furnaces that burned within. The windows were shuttered tight, not a glimmer of light escaping to betray the secrets that lay inside.

“I have a rune I’ll teach you,” Kelden whispered. “Better than a light spell. Something Thornwaithe’s has used for years. *Aštrus įbrėžimas.”*

Finley’s eyes felt like they’d received a sharp scratch of some kind, and then he blinked, marveling at the transformation before his eyes. The once impenetrable darkness had given way to a world awash in a soft, ethereal glow. It was as if the very fabric of the night had been peeled back, revealing a hidden realm.

The stacks of bricks, previously mere shadows in the gloom, now stood out in stark relief. Each brick was a tiny masterpiece, its surface etched with intricate patterns and subtle variations in color. The dark-red hues seemed to pulse with a life of their own, as if the clay itself held secrets waiting to be unlocked. The precise lines and angles of the stacks created a mesmerizing geometry, a labyrinth of form and function that drew the eye and captured the imagination.

The brickworks building, once a featureless silhouette against the night sky, now revealed itself in stunning detail. The weathered wood of the shutters and doors was a tapestry of texture, each grain and knot telling a story of the hands that had shaped them. The bricks themselves

were a symphony of shades, from the deepest crimson to the palest rose, each one a testament to the skill and dedication of the craftsmen who had laid them.

Even the smoke that drifted from the chimneys took on a new life under the influence of Kelden's rune. The tendrils of vapor were no longer mere wisps, but rather sinuous dancers, weaving and twirling in an intricate, glowing dance.

"What does that even do?" Finley whispered in amazement. But his Rune Smith talent was already analyzing the magic. "Somehow amplify the moonlight?"

"Any light," Kelden whispered back, clearly satisfied with themselves. "Even on a moonless night, it'll pick up starlight. You do need to be a bit careful of any actually bright lights—they'll blind you until you dismiss the magic." They gestured to a small side door on the brickworks building, barely visible in the shadows. "There."

Finley nodded, his senses on high alert as they crept towards the entrance. The scent of clay grew stronger here, mingling with the acrid bite of chemicals that Finley couldn't quite place. The door was secured with a simple latch, easily overcome with a whispered incantation from Kelden. It swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing a narrow passageway that led deeper into the heart of the brickworks.

The two slipped inside, closing the door softly behind them. The passageway was lined with shelves laden with an array of tools and supplies - trowels, molds, buckets, and strange metal implements that Finley had never seen before. The air was thick and heavy, the heat from the banked furnaces still seeping through the walls like a living thing.

As they ventured further, the passageway opened up into a vast, cavernous space. It was the sight at the center of the room that drew Finley's attention like a lodestone. There, arranged in neat rows, were the molds for the bricks themselves. They were, in and of themselves, unremarkable—simple rectangular blocks into which clay could be packed. But it's what they contained.

"Is that... iron?" Kelden asked, freezing in their tracks.

Each mold contained a simple cage, made out of thin rods of metal.

"It's metal," Finley said hesitantly. His talent's awareness drifted

outward, tentatively brushing near the heavy wooden molds, but he didn't feel any draw on his magic. "But it isn't iron."

"It isn't copper, brass, or bronze, either," Kelden said, their brow wrinkling. "It's silvery."

"They're what's reinforcing the bricks," Finley said. "Silver would be too soft."

"Silver*y,* I said."

"True."

The interior of the brickworks must have been nearly pitch-black, with the single moon's thin light barely filtering through grimy windows high overhead. But Kelden's magic still showed the little metal cages sparkling silver-white.

"They must have more of it in here somewhere," Finley said, looking around. "There." He led Kelden to a large wooden drum, which had been tightly wound with the thin, silvery metal. "Thicker than horse hair, but not by much," Finley observed, gently running a finger over the densely wrapped metal. "My magic isn't responding at all. It's not iron."

"We call it *plienas,"* a voice said behind them.

Alarmed, the two men whirled just as a nondescript, middle-aged man carefully withdrew the shield that had hidden the light from the candle he was carrying.

"It starts as iron, but things are added to it. No," he said as Kelden opened their mouth to speak, "I don't know. But it is documented. In iron. You cannot take it from us. Any more than you can stop this innovation."

"Who are you?" Finley asked. His magic pooled into his mind, where a half-formed defensive rune was already taking place. Annoyingly, his talent was more focused on *that,* trying to twist it into a new shape.

"My name is unimportant. You know who I represent."

"We do."

"We knew one of you would come here, in time."

"Or one of the other places you're doing the same thing, I presume," Finley said.

The man shrugged.

"So what now?"

"I was sent to ask you a question."

Finley and Kelden waited silence.

"Why?" the man eventually asked.

"Why what?"

"You know what. Why must this be taken from us?"

Finley's shoulders dropped slightly. "I've had this conversation before."

"Before, it was things that you thought threatened you. How do stronger buildings threaten you? We presume you live in them as well."

He's not wrong, the whisper in Finley's mind pointed out.

"You let some things go. The curative mold."

"You know about that?" Kelden asked.

"We watch everything."

"I... don't have an answer for you," Finley admitted.

The man nodded slowly. "So what will you do here? Tonight?"

Finley hesitated. "I... nothing." From the corner of his eye, he saw Kelden's eyebrows rise.

The man's head tilted slightly. "Because it doesn't threaten your... magic." It was a statement, not a question.

Finley hesitated again. "I think so."

"This is a decision *you* are making. Not your superiors."

Finley nodded silently.

"We wondered. This *plieninė viela*—that is what it is called, this *wire*—we tested it. We suspect it would not affect your... powers."

"Why does it not?" Kelden asked.

The man shrugged. "We do not know. It also does not attract lodestone. We—some of us—have a theory they are related."

They're not, Finley's talent whispered dismissively. *But it's an interesting theory.*

So why doesn't it? Finley asked it.

He received a feeling of mild frustration. *It's complicated. The substance is... adulterated. Too far removed from what it once was. The roots... it is complicated,* it repeated before falling silent.

"What will you tell your superiors, then?" the man asked, unaware of Finley's inner conversation.

"I don't know."

"Well then. I will leave you to it."

With that, the man turned, not bothering to shield his candle, and walked calmly out of the brickworks.

When he was gone, Kelden spoke first. "We're doing nothing at all?"

Finley didn't trust the cabal to not still be listening, so he simply shook his head and gave his apprentice a searching stare. "We should go."

"To the inn?"

"What would be the point?" he snorted. And with that, he gathered the Earth magic that fueled his most powerful travel magic, whisking the two of them away.

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"This isn't the Farm," Kelden said with some surprise as they materialized.

They found themselves standing in a vast, open meadow, the lush green grass swaying gently in the cool breeze. The air was crisp and invigorating, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of the nearby sea. In the distance, they could hear the soft, rhythmic babbling of a river, its waters rushing over smooth stones and cascading down small, natural falls. The meadow stretched out before them, a seemingly endless expanse of verdant beauty, even under the dim light of the single moon.

"No," Finley agreed. "I wanted to speak with you."

"About the man?"

"What did you think of him?"

"He sounded genuinely curious."

"And the bricks. If you were in charge, what would you have done?"

"I... honestly don't know," Kelden said, their brow wrinkling. "Metal reinforcement... it would make their buildings useless to us, on top of reducing their reliance on magic."

"But that metal doesn't affect our magic."

"Exactly. So... what's the harm? Shouldn't our magic be for more than just holding buildings together?"

"You could make the same argument for the timber construction we destroyed."

Kelden nodded. "I would, I think."

Finley fell silent for several moments, listening to the sound of water and the smooth breeze rustling the grass. "I think I'm getting tired. And... I think we work against ourselves."

Kelden frowned. "How so?"

"Consider: we stop the humans from advancing, yes?"

"Of course."

"And this cabal is aware of us. But every time we stop them, they simply become more determined to advance in spite of us."

"Sure."

"So when we stop them on these things—things that shouldn't truly be a threat to witchkind—does that not mean they'll simply try harder, and be more secretive, about everything? Even the things that do threaten us?"

Kelden considered. "I see your point. You're saying we should be more choosy."

"We used to be," Finley sighed. "I think the message we're sending is that we'll give them no quarter. And yet, with this brick issue, they come to us with a compromise."

Kelden's forehead wrinkled further. "I didn't hear a compromise."

"No? Kelden, they've invented a metal that they obviously think is as strong as iron, but it doesn't interfere with our magic. You heard the man—they even attempted to test it. Wasn't that an attempt at compromise? 'We've found a metal you can tolerate, now let us be?'"

Now the apprentice's eyes widened. "I see what you mean."

Finley tilted his head back a bit, looking at the moon's pale, blue-white light. "I think we need to learn a little more."

"About that man?"

Now Finley's eyes fell to his apprentice's. "About that wire. And I think I want someone to help us."

"Who?"

"An old friend."

CHAPTER 9

Reunion

Dmitry is *not* happy about this," Arcadia said, her mischievous grin countering the seriousness of her words. "I'm supposed to be on the other side of the continent right now."

Finley couldn't help but smile back at her, despite the gravity of the situation. It had been far too long since he'd last seen Arcadia. Her porcelain skin seemed even paler than he remembered, almost translucent in the dim light. But her hair, once a shimmering platinum blonde, now held a dull, ashen hue—as if life had been especially wearing for her over these long months apart.

It was her eyes that captivated him, just as they always had. Those deep, obsidian pools seemed to hold secrets and mysteries. They sparkled with keen intelligence and a hint of mirth, even as dark shadows lurked beneath them, hinting at the trials and hardships she'd clearly faced in their time apart.

Despite the weariness etched into her delicate features, Arcadia's presence filled the room with an electric energy. Her sharp wit and brilliant mind were as intoxicating as ever, drawing Finley in like a moth to a flame.

"Well, when has Dmitry ever happy about anything, lately?" Finley quipped, falling easily back into their old rhythm of playful banter. "But exactly why? What's on the other side of the world for you?"

She shrugged and took a long swallow from her mug of ale. “The usual. Mission, mission, mission.” She set the mug gently on the table and gave him a tired look. “Does it ever feel like the list of things humans can threaten us with has gotten impossibly long?”

Finley leaned back in his chair, surveying the inn's interior. The River's Respite was one of Carvendam's finest establishments, a perfect blend of rustic charm and modern comforts. Rough-hewn wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling, while polished oak tables gleamed in the warm light cast by wrought-iron chandeliers. The floors were a patchwork of well-worn flagstones, smoothed by countless footsteps over the years.

At this time of day, the inn was quiet, with only a handful of patrons scattered about the spacious common room. A fire crackled merrily in the massive stone hearth, casting dancing shadows on the walls. The air was filled with the mouthwatering aroma of roasting meat and freshly baked bread, mingling with the subtler scents of ale and whiskey.

Finley couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort and familiarity wash over him. He had spent so much of his adult life in places like this, moving from one town to another, always on missions, never settling down. It was a strange realization, that he felt more at home in an inn than anywhere else. What did that say about his life, about the choices he had made? He pushed the thought aside and focused on Arcadia, who was studying him with those piercing eyes. "It does.”

She nodded slowly before taking a quick glance around the inn—an ingrained habit Finley had to actively suppress himself from mirroring. “So what’s this about?”

“You’re sure you’re not going to get in trouble?” he asked.

She looked down at the trestle table for a moment, and then raised her eyes to meet his. “Trouble? No. You want to know something? I haven’t actually done half the missions I’ve said I have.”

Finley blinked in confusion.

“What’s that mean?” Kelden asked.

Arcadia turned to him. “I’ll assume Finley will stop me if you’re not trustworthy.” She waited a beat before continuing. “Some of these missions are *stupid,* and others are downright *evil.* You know what they

asked me to do a moon ago? Wipe out all the willowbark within a two-day ride of Baythwaite."

Finley drew back in surprise. "What? Why?"

"Because they brew it into a tea to ease their hangovers."

Kelden's brow wrinkled. "I don't get it."

"They drink a lot there, but they also invent some of the most amazing things. The theory, as I was told, was that if they all had more hangovers, they'd invent less. Less willowbark, harder hangovers."

Kelden almost choked on a mouthful of ale. "That's ridiculous!" they sputtered.

Arcadia shrugged. "I don't know what missions you've been on, but that's what most of us are dealing with. Ridiculous."

"So you're just... not doing it," Kelden said, almost in awe.

"No."

"And nobody cares?"

Arcadia looked away. "I hate saying this, but the Order *trusts* us. Nobody's following up. I'm abusing that, I know. But I'm just... I'm sick of it. It doesn't make sense."

Finley nodded slowly. "So you're..." He paused. "You never cared much for humans, before."

Arcadia sighed. "They've both done bad things to people we know. And love. But... I'm not cruel. I joined to stop them from being a danger to themselves and to witchkind. But not to... not to stop them from preventing hangovers."

"Yeah," Finley said. "Us too."

"What do you mean?"

He relayed the story of the brickworks in Landshire.

"Exactly that," Arcadia said with conviction when he finished. "Why are better bricks a problem? Especially if they don't threaten our magic?" Her voice lowered on that last word, and she did another automatic scan of the common room. "Why," she continued in a low, dangerous voice, "does witchkind need to use *our* magic just to keep *their* buildings upright? Why are we *slaves* to the humans' ineptitude? An ineptitude *we* perpetuate!" She exhaled sharply and leaned back. "I can't even tell you how many smithies I've had to... you know. Because they were trying something new with iron." Then one of her eyebrows

quirked upward. "Isn't that what you told me, when you said to meet here?"

Finley nodded. "New alloys."

"When you say 'new—'"

"Finley thinks," Kelden interrupted carefully before Finley could speak for himself, "they're trying to offer a compromise."

Arcadia's brow furrowed. "Compromise?"

"They know iron hurts us," Kelden continued.

"Of course they do," Arcadia snorted. "So what kind of—wait. New alloys." Finley could see it working through her brain. "You're talking about a metal that doesn't affect our... us."

Finley gave a shallow nod.

"But brass. Bronze. Copper. They've had—"

"They're all soft," he pointed out. "You couldn't make rails for their iron roadway from bronze or brass."

She paused, and then slowly nodded.

"And you couldn't reinforce brick with copper. It's too soft. It wouldn't make a difference."

"No," she agreed quietly. "But they've found something that works."

Finley nodded.

"And doesn't affect us."

Another nod.

"And you're letting it go."

"I have to, don't I?"

"Runes and ruin, Finley, what if that's what they're really doing? What if they're *trying* to work with us? And we're just coming in harder, taking them down at every possible turn?"

"And some of us have no... discretion," Finley said softly, thinking of Genovaitė's hardline devotion to the Order. "The smallest thing, the tiniest advancement, is met with..."

"Death and destruction," Arcadia muttered, emptying her stein. She looked up and waved to a server for another round. "This isn't what I signed up for. It isn't what the Order *used* to be."

"That's why I want to look into this 'wire,'" Finley said. "It's why I need your help."

"Why, exactly?"

He sighed. "Because I'm pretty sure it's true, but I need to test it more thoroughly. I mean, I was there, but..."

"You need to see it again."

He nodded.

She tilted her head and accepted another stein from the server. "That isn't the only reason you wanted me here. You've more than enough affinities to test it yourself."

"True," he allowed. "It's also because I'm pretty sure it's a trap."

"Ah," Arcadia grinned as she sipped her ale. "Now we're in territory I know."

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Well past midnight, Finley led them back to the brickworks and watched with satisfaction as Kelden's magic unlocked the doors and let them in.

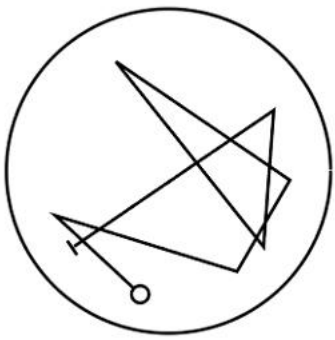
They crept through the darkened brickworks, their footsteps echoing softly on the stone floor. The cavernous space was filled with hulking shapes, casting eerie shadows in the faint moonlight filtering through the high windows. The air hung heavy with the scent of clay and coal dust, tinged with an undercurrent of something metallic that set Finley's nerves on edge.

They moved cautiously, senses heightened, alert for any sign of danger. Arcadia took the lead, her lithe form gliding silently through the gloom. Finley followed close behind, his magic pooled and ready in his mind. Kelden brought up the rear, their eyes darting nervously about, fingers twitching with barely restrained power.

Despite their thorough scan for iron before entering, Finley couldn't shake the feeling that they were walking into a trap. The brickworks felt too still, too quiet. The hair on the back of his neck prickled with unease, and he found himself straining to hear the slightest sound that might signal an ambush.

As they ventured deeper into the building, the shadows seemed to

press in around them, thick and oppressive. The towering brick kilns loomed like silent sentinels, their gaping maws yawning open like portals to some dark, forgotten realm. Finley formed Kelden's *Aštrus įbrėžimas* rune in his mind, but his talent immediately seized upon it, disassembling its broad strokes and gentle curves. *Inefficient,* it muttered. In less than a heartbeat, it re-formed the rune in a dozen different ways, finally settling on an entirely new configuration.



Far better, it said with satisfaction. Finley noted that the voice continued to seem more... *sentient.* More human, as if it wasn't him speaking to himself, but rather someone, or some*thing* else, speaking to him.

What's the difference? it mused in response.

Finley trickled a bit of magic into the new rune and the interior of the brickworks flared to life as the rune captured the dim, blue-white moonlight and amplified it for their eyes.

Arcadia gasped. "What did you do?"

"It's... the same *Aštrus įbrėžimas,* isn't it? You're using more power?" Kelden asked uncertainly.

"Later," Finley said softly. "Focus on the mission."

The interior of the brickworks was a marvel of engineering. Rough stone walls rose two stories high, enclosing a cavernous space filled with ingenious devices and contraptions. Massive wooden beams supported

the vaulted ceiling, while narrow clerestory windows admitted shafts of silvery moonlight.

Finley's gaze was immediately drawn to the rows of wooden molds lining the far wall. Each one was a perfect rectangular void, precisely crafted to shape the clay into uniform bricks. Some of the molds still held their precious cargo—bricks in various stages of drying, waiting to be fired in the enormous kiln that dominated the center of the room.

But it was the contents of other molds that made Finley catch his breath. Nestled within the unfilled voids were more delicate cages of silvery wire, glinting in the enhanced light. The wire was impossibly thin and fragile-looking, yet it seemed to possess a strength and resilience that defied its brittle appearance. Each cage was a masterpiece of metalworking, its graceful curves and precise angles forming a lattice that would reinforce the brick from within.

Along the adjacent wall, neatly stacked wooden spools held coils of the same remarkable wire. It shimmered softly, almost as if imbued with an inner luminescence. Finley longed to reach out and touch it, to feel its cool smoothness against his fingertips and test its strength for himself.

"We're being watched," Arcadia muttered.

"How can you tell?" Kelden asked.

"Akys pakaušyje," she replied tersely.

Finley's talent seized the phrase and constructed variations of the corresponding rune. One was in in the abbreviated, simplistic style of Middle Runic, while the next was a more complex and angular New Runic version. Both vanished from Finley's mind almost immediately as his talent seemed to scuttle off into one corner of his mind to consider them. *Fascinating,* it said as its presence faded. *I never worried about being watched.*

"That's the wire?" Arcadia asked, pointing to the molds.

"Like they've left them on display for us," Finley said, nodding.

"They did," Arcadia said, sounding absolutely certain. She turned and examined the spooled wire before stepping closer to it. She moved slowly, hesitantly, waiting for the iron in it to grab her magic and try to pull it from her, but even as she crept closer and closer, nothing happened.

It won't, Finley's talent muttered, preoccupied with its new puzzle. *Too far off from the roots.*

What does that mean? he asked, but it had already retreated further.

Arcadia reached out tentatively, her slender fingers hovering just above the nearest spool of wire. It was roughly the size of her head, and if the material was as heavy as iron, would weight quite a bit. She took a deep breath and gently brushed the gleaming metal, marveling at its smooth, cool surface. A shiver ran through her as she realized that she felt no ill effects, no draining of her magic. It was as if this strange new alloy was completely inert to her powers.

She picked up the spool with care, exhaling sharply at its weight and cradling it in one arm like a precious artifact. The wire was wound tightly around a wooden core, each loop perfectly aligned with the next. The wood of the spool itself was cheap and roughly cut, its grain highlighted by the glowing light from Finley's spell. Arcadia ran her fingertips over the surface, feeling the tiny ridges and whorls.

As she turned the spool over, she noticed a series of intricate markings burned into the other end of the wooden core. She traced them with a delicate touch. "Look at this," she breathed, holding the spool out for Finley and Kelden to examine. The markings, seared into the cheap wood with a careful hand, formed an intricate pattern of lines, dots, and symbols. To the untrained eye, they might have appeared as mere decorative flourishes or random scribblings. "These are carters' marks," she explained, tracing the symbols with a slender finger. "Shippers use them to track their goods—where they come from, where they're headed, and all the stops in between. I learned about them on a previous mission involving rope shipped on spools just like this one."

Finley leaned in closer, his brow furrowed in concentration as he studied the markings. The symbols were unlike any writing system he had encountered before. Some resembled stylized arrows or compasses, while others looked like miniature depictions of landmarks or geographical features. Tiny dots and dashes connected the larger symbols, forming a complex web of meaning.

"Can you read them?" Kelden asked, their voice tinged with awe and curiosity. "What do they say about where this wire came from?"

Arcadia nodded, her eyes still fixed on the spool as she deciphered

the code. "This batch originated in Ironhold, up in the northern mountains. There's a huge mine up there, one of the few we haven't been able to keep shut down."

"It's pretty hostile territory," Finley agreed. One of their first missions for the Order had taken them into those mountains. They were isolated, desolate, wind-blown, and deadly cold even in the summer. Humans willing to work in those conditions would find few of witchkind willing to object, iron or no.

"But that was just the raw ore," Arcadia continued. "Here, this indicates where the wire itself was made. Spurham. They probably floated the ore across the lake and down the river."

Finley frowned. "Spurham doesn't have any large smithies or forges."

"Maybe somewhere nearby? One of the small settlements that doesn't appear on the map?" Kelden suggested.

"Likely," Finley acknowledged. "That will make it difficult to find."

"It shouldn't be that hard," Arcadia countered, setting the spool back in its place and pointing to additional markings. "That was lighter than I thought, but still heavy. Look, this is the carter that carried it. All we need to do is find the group that uses this symbol. And we can probably start in Spurham."

Finley nodded slowly, then came to a decision. "Then that's what we'll do." He raised his voice for the benefit of those watching. "If you can have the benefit of iron without its... effects... then I believe you should keep it." Kelden inhaled sharply but remained silent. "Arcadia, your... ability—"

"Intact," she assured him. "And look." She reached to the side of the spool, pulling the free end of wire back, bending a short length off the spool. "It's pretty strong, even for how thin it is."

Finley sent a lance of Flame magic into the wire, gradually increasing the flow until Arcadia snatched her hand back with a yelp. He kept adding more and more magic until the wire began glowing a cherry-red.

"You might have warned me," Arcadia said crossly. "How much are you using?"

"Enough to melt any of the copper alloys," he admitted, letting the

magic fade. The wire quickly cooled to a dull red glow and then back to its silvery gray. "It doesn't look damaged at all."

Arcadia tugged gently at it. "Seems just as stiff as before."

Quite far from the roots, Finley's talent mumbled distantly.

"A possible compromise," Finley said, raising his voice again. "We'll look into it." He paused and considered before adding, "It would be helpful if nothing else... happened. While we're looking."

If anyone was still watching them, they didn't reply.

"Let's go," Finley said at last, dropping his light augmentation and heading for the still-open door.

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The small, nameless settlement nestled in the foothills near Spurham was an unassuming cluster of rough-hewn buildings, easily overlooked by the casual observer. But to Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden's trained eyes, it was a hub of activity, a place where raw iron ore was transformed into the miraculous steel wire they had encountered at the brickworks.

As they approached the settlement, the first thing that struck them was the sheer scale of the operation. Towering piles of iron ore, each easily the height of a two-story building, dominated the grassy landscape. The dark, jagged chunks of rock glinted in the sunlight, their surfaces flecked with rust-red streaks. Massive wooden carts, their wheels creaking under the weight of their cargo, trundled back and forth between the piles and the nearby structures, ferrying the ore to its next destination.

All three of them shielded themselves from the iron's greedy draw on their magic, using the rune construct Finley had developed—now well-known throughout the Order—to contain their magic within themselves. They'd be unable to use it while it was bottled up, but they'd be protected from the iron draining it completely.

The settlement's buildings were an eclectic mix of styles and materials. Some were simple wooden shacks, their boards still fresh and new. Others were more substantial, with stone foundations and sturdy

timber frames. The largest of these, a cavernous structure with a steeply pitched roof, emitted a constant plume of smoke and steam from its numerous chimneys, hinting at the intense heat and energy within.

As they drew closer, the trio could make out more details. Alongside the piles of iron ore, they saw neatly stacked cords of wood, each log carefully cut and seasoned to fuel the roaring furnaces. Teams of workers, their faces streaked with soot and sweat, moved with practiced efficiency as they loaded the wood and ore into the gaping maws of the furnaces.

The air was filled with the clamor of industry—the ringing of hammers on anvils, the hiss of steam, and the shouts of the workers as they coordinated their efforts. The acrid scent of burning coal and molten metal hung heavy in the air, stinging their nostrils and making their eyes water.

Finley led them towards the heart of the settlement, where the largest building stood. As they approached, they could feel the intense heat radiating from the structure, even from a distance. The ground beneath their feet was warm to the touch, and the air shimmered with the rising heat.

A burly man with a thick beard and a soot-stained leather apron emerged from the building, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. He eyed the trio with a mix of curiosity and suspicion as they drew near.

"What brings you folks to these parts?" he asked gruffly, his deep voice barely audible over the din of the forge.

Finley stepped forward, his demeanor calm and confident. "We've come to learn about the wire you produce here," he said, meeting the man's gaze steadily. "We're interested in it for reinforcing our own bricks."

"Not for sale," the man said flatly. "Proprietary material." He turned and stomped back to the nearest building, glancing over his shoulder to ensure they didn't follow.

"Look," Finley said quietly, nodding.

Finley directed their attention to the piles of materials scattered around the settlement, each one obviously playing a crucial role in the creation of the remarkable steel wire. Alongside the towering mounds

of iron ore, they saw heaps of coal, the shiny black lumps glinting in the sunlight. The coal was clearly for fueling the furnaces, providing the intense heat needed to melt the iron and transform it into steel.

Next to the coal, they spotted piles of limestone, the pale, chalky rocks contrasting sharply with the dark hues of the other materials. “Limestone,” Kelden said. “They already use that to remove impurities from molten iron.”

“That one,” Finley said, jerking his chin. It was a mound of shimmering, silvery-gray powder that seemed to dance and swirl in the breeze. Finley broke away from the other two and approached it cautiously, scooping up a handful of the fine, almost ethereal substance. It felt cool and silky against his skin, its texture reminiscent of Finley ground mica. "Manganese," he breathed, his eyes widening with recognition. "They're using manganese to create the alloy."

“I’ve never even heard of it,” Arcadia said, walking over to join him.

“It’s used to make certain pigments,” Kelden said, following her. “I’ve never seen so much of it in one place.”

“Glassmakers use it to *remove* color,” Finley added. “It’s how they get it to be so clear.”

“And so this is the trick? This is what they’re using? This is what... *changes* it?”

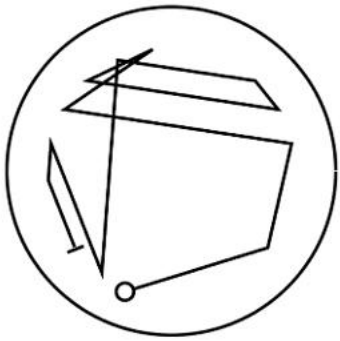
“I don’t see anything else unusual,” Finley said, casting his eyes around the site. “This must be it.” He turned and realized that the settlement’s activity had come to a near-halt, with three dozen or more humans simply standing and staring at them. Waiting. “We should go.”

“But—” Kelden protested.

“Follow me,” Finley ordered. He began walking briskly out of the settlement, retracing the path they’d followed to get here, along the well-worn road to Spurham.

Do you want to know if they’re following us? his talent asked suddenly, its presence growing in his awareness. *Try this.*

A new rune, in the angular, asymmetric style his talent seemed to have created, appeared in his mind.



Finley immediately fed it magic, noting that it drew heavily on his affinity for Sky. He refocused, feeding it more of that gentle, subtle power. He felt it bloom around him, *felt* the humans' eyes on their backs, with a firm sense that nobody was setting out to chase them. "They're not following." He considered the signals the rune seemed to be sending him. "Nobody else is watching. Just stick with me."

"How can you tell?" Kelden asked.

Finley conjured another rune, using it to draw the new one in bright lines of light in front of him as he walked. "Arcadia's *Akys pakaušyje,"* he said.

"That isn't my rune," Arcadia objected. "That isn't *any* rune. None I've ever seen." She hesitated. "This is your..."

"Kelden knows I'm a Rune Smith," Finley said, letting the glowing lines of the rune fade. "And yes. My talent... it's been going off in a new direction."

"Is that how you made *Aštrus įbrėžimas* better?" Kelden asked.

Finley nodded and quickly drew his talent's revised version in the air before him, letting it hang there for a moment before willing it to fade. "It's taking everything and... improving it. In this new style."

It's more direct, his talent said confidently. *Less ideographic. Less waste. I'm surprised I never considered it before. You're more... flexible.*

"You speak of it as if it's alive. Independent," Arcadia said.

He hesitated. "I'm not sure it isn't."

Independent, yes, it murmured with amusement. *Alive is complicated.*

They walked several more paces as Finley maintained the magic. The humans seemed to have returned to their duties.

"You've never been big on the Origin," Arcadia said slowly. "As a theory, I mean."

"I've been thinking of it a lot more."

"How can you not believe in the Origin?" Kelden asked incredulously. "It's not a 'theory.'"

"A single source where all magic comes from?" Finley asked, realizing that his usual skepticism was absent. "Always seemed too... neat for me. I guess."

Kelden chuckled. "When you can have your mind and body possessed by a force of pure magic, it's not that difficult to imagine. For Thornwaithe's alum, the Origin isn't a subject of debate. It's a fact."

"I... I'd never considered it that way," Finley admitted.

You can't seriously doubt it now, his talent insisted.

"Believe it or not," Finley said aloud, "I think my talent is telling me it's real, too."

"It probably *is* the Origin," Kelden said easily. Finley was struck but how matter-of-fact Kelden sounded." "It actually speaks to you? In words?"

Finley hesitated again. "Yes," he said at last. "It didn't, at first, but lately it—"

Arcadia stopped in her tracks. Finley turned quickly, scanning behind them, and realized they'd marched out of sight of the settlement. "What is it?" he asked.

"Sending," she said tersely. "From the Farm. From Ram. I'll be right back." And in a cool swirl of magic, she vanished.

"At Thornwaithe's, we've always wished the magic would *tell* us what it wants, rather than just taking control."

"You've felt it?"

"We all do. At the end of every school year, and it gets stronger year by year." His voice had gone low and quiet. Respectful. "It grows the bond we all share with it."

"I never knew."

"We *really* don't talk about it outside of school. Even with other alum. I mean... it's crazy, right?"

"Not if it's real." *And you* are *real, aren't you?* he asked his talent.

Probably more than I ever was, it replied.

Arcadia swirled back into existence between them. "New mission. Highly urgent. I'm to go alone." Her lips thinned. "Want to come with me?"

CHAPTER 10

A Meeting

What do you think, sir?"

The room was dimly lit by a handful of flickering candles, their wavering light casting long shadows on the rough stone walls. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and the musty odor of ancient books and parchment—books that were no longer read, as they could not be trusted. Around the table sat a group of elderly men, their faces lined and weathered, their eyes sharp and calculating. They were dressed in dark, nondescript clothing, as if they wished to blend into the shadows.

The table before them was massive, hewn from thick, age-darkened wood. Its surface was covered with a scattering of thin iron sheets, each one etched with dense lines of tiny, precise text. The men ignored them for the moment.

The room itself was sparse, with no adornments or comforts. The only furniture was the table and a handful of simple wooden chairs. The walls were bare stone, damp with condensation, and the floor was packed earth. There were no windows, no hint of the world outside this secret, subterranean chamber.

The men spoke softly, their voices low and muted. They moved with a quiet deliberation, every gesture and glance laden with unspoken meaning. These were men accustomed to secrecy, to the weight of

hidden knowledge and the burden of unspoken truths. They were the guardians of new mysteries, the keepers of yet-to-be-forgotten lore.

"Him bringing the woman was a good sign," one of them murmured. "She's left our work alone in the past."

"They took no action in the foundry settlement," another pointed out.

At the head of the table sat a man who seemed to embody the very essence of the room—ancient, inscrutable, and steeped in shadows. He was tall and gaunt, with a face that was more skull than flesh. His skin was pale and translucent, stretched taut over the sharp angles of his cheekbones and the jutting prominence of his chin. His eyes were deep-set and hooded, glinting with a cold, piercing intelligence that seemed to penetrate the very souls of those who met his gaze.

He was dressed in simple clothes of the deepest black, the fabric so dark that it seemed to absorb the light from the flickering candles. The clothes hung loosely from his narrow frame, the folds and drapes concealing the contours of his body and giving him an otherworldly, almost spectral appearance.

The man's hands rested on the table before him, long and slender fingers steepled in a gesture of contemplation. His nails were long and sharp, like the talons of a bird of prey. When he spoke, his voice was low and gravelly, with a sibilant edge that sent shivers down the spines of those who heard it. "Promising," he rasped, nodding slowly. "The process is documented?"

"In iron, so their magic can't change it," the man who had first spoken assured them. "Copies in all of our major repositories."

"So we have a rift," the man at the head of the table mused. "A wedge. Three, at least, who are less blindly fanatical than the others. Could there be more?"

"These three will likely seek out others amongst their kind," someone asserted.

"Perhaps," the leader allowed. "Perhaps. Although perhaps not. There was a time not long ago when we could be assured of... *clemency,* for many innovations. Now..." he trailed off, his jaw clenching and unclenching in the flickering light. "We have paused other initiatives?"

"For the moment," someone said.

"And of the churches?" the leader asked.

"We've confirmed the carvings are identical. Many fresh." This voice was the youngest amongst them, and belonged to the only man at the table dressed in priestly vestments. "But they match the symbols in some of our oldest holy texts."

"They would," the leader muttered with a cough. "A clever way to use our beliefs against us."

"I am... hesitant to destroy some of those texts," the younger man cautioned.

The leader shrugged. "Little matter. We've lost the movable type project entirely, then. Hand-etching iron sheets will have to do, for now. We've preserved the basic process."

The priest hesitated before offering, "I have considered a mitigation."

"Oh?" The leader's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Many of the churches are old. Crumbling, in some cases, especially along the coasts. The weather can be—"

"And?"

The priest swallowed heavily. "We've had a success convincing one village to tear theirs down and start over."

"Theirs—the church, you mean?" The old man's tone was disbelief mingled with intrigue.

"Yes. So obviously, when the new one—"

"When the new one is built," the leader mused, "we work to prevent the carvings. See if that changes anything."

"That was my thought."

"Proceed. It surely cannot hurt. When will this occur?"

"Well, the first one has already been demolished and rebuilt. As yet, there have been no efforts to carve the symbols into the exterior."

The man at the head of the table nodded. "Keep us informed. But... be cautious."

"Your predecessor," someone muttered.

"Yes," the leader acknowledged. "He was... incautious, at the end."

"I'll be very careful," the priest assured them.

"Good."

"Sir, the post-and-beam experiment..." someone ventured.

"Was exactly that," the leader snapped. "An experiment. We have pressed, my friends. Pressed, and what have we found?

"Improvements to building design, no. Improvements to lighting, no. Medicine, sometimes. It appears to depend upon the operative. The general *idea* of innovation, no. Shipbuilding, no. Sea walls, no. Weapons, no. What are we left with? Some few medicinal projects. Agriculture. Anything else is apparently held together with their magic, and they will not let us shake their yoke. If we attack them as one, they can withdraw their power and everything we have will simply collapse. But the... what was the wire named?"

"Plienas, sir," someone said.

The leader scowled. "An uncomfortable word in the mouth."

"From the First Language, sir."

"Notwithstanding."

"Someone had suggested *cruach,"* someone offered.

The leader's scowl deepened. "Even worse."

"Hardfire," said a firm voice from the far end of the table.

The leader's eyebrows rose. "Hardfire," he murmured, tasting the word for the first time. "Hardfire," he repeated more firmly. "Yes. Let us use that, henceforth." A few mutters of agreement circled the table. "The next projects are prepared?"

"Ready at your word, sir," someone assured.

"Then let us nurture our new compromise," he said heavily, leaning back in his creaking chair. "And let us hope it does not come to the war we all desperately seek to avoid."

"And if these three are not enough to turn the tide?" someone asked as others began pushing back their chairs.

"Then," the leader said, his voice thick with conviction, "there will be no avoiding it."

CHAPTER 11

Woodcarver

"They want you to *what?*" Finley asked, aghast.

They stood in the center of Nek, one of the smaller villages along the continent's western coast, just north of the peninsula that contained Farreach in the South. It was a fishing village, prospering from the plentiful seafood catch its fishermen—and fisherwitches—brought in every morning. The village square had once held a sturdy but incredibly weatherworn human church, built in one of the most traditional styles Finley has seen.

But that church was now gone.

It had been fully rebuilt on the footprint of its predecessor in a newer and simpler style, but using no less sturdy, traditional construction of stone and hefty timbers. Only the boards of its eaves looked unfinished to Finley's eyes, lacking the intricate fretwork that usually adorned these buildings.

Fretwork where the Order was accustomed to hiding the various runes Finley had developed to stifle specific types of innovation.

Finley felt his heart began to beat faster.

The village square now bustled with activity as the morning's catch was brought in and sorted. Fishermen hauled baskets brimming with silvery fish, crabs, and shellfish, their weathered hands deftly handling the squirming creatures.

Around the square, quaint wooden buildings with colorful shutters and flower boxes lined the cobblestone streets. The salty sea breeze carried the aroma of baking bread from the village bakery, mingling with the pungent scent of drying seaweed and fish. Seagulls wheeled overhead, their raucous cries echoing off the stone walls.

In the center of the square stood a magnificent fountain, carved from the same sturdy stone as the church. Water cascaded from the open mouths of intricately sculpted sea creatures—whales, dolphins, and mythical beasts of the deep. Children darted between the adults, laughing and splashing in the cool, clear water.

A vibrant open-air market occupied one side of the square, its stalls overflowing with fresh produce, handcrafted goods, and sparkling trinkets made from sea glass and shells. Villagers haggled good-naturedly with the merchants, their voices rising and falling like the tides.

At the far end of the square, an ancient, gnarled tree stood sentinel, its twisted branches reached out like the tentacles of a kraken, casting dappled shadows across the cobblestones.

"Collapse it," Arcadia said, her voice tense.

"Why?" Kelden asked, although Finley suspected he already knew the answer.

"They finished it a week ago, but nobody from the Order has been able to get near it to add our runes. Even to the donation box on the door." The boxes whose runes carried the Order's message tokens back to the Farm.

"Why not? We've never had a problem—" Finley started.

"The priest. They've brought in someone new, and he says he's not having it. Won't allow anyone with a chisel nearby."

"We could certainly do it at night, from a distance," Kelden pointed out. "There's Sky magic that could—"

"There's none of the usual fretwork," Finley pointed out. "Anything we add would stand out pretty sharply."

He felt his talent sniff toward the new structure with interest.

"The full mission," Arcadia said grimly, "is to execute another change in their holy books, to—"

"Not again," Finley moaned quietly.

"—to forbid worship in an undecorated house," Arcadia finished.

"And to then collapse it in the middle of services the next holy day. Tomorrow." Finley could hear the tension in her voice.

"This is because they're on to us," Finley murmured.

"Obviously," Arcadia agreed.

"Are you any good at the book modifications?" Finley asked slowly.

"I'm okay," Arcadia admitted.

"I'm excellent," Kelden offered.

"Truly?"

"Extremely," they confirmed. "It was a special focus for my class, actually. Never knew why."

"Well," Finley said, sighing heavily, "you're about to find out."

***

As dawn broke over the village of Nek, Finley stepped into the bustling square, his humble woodcarver's garb allowing him to blend seamlessly into the crowd. The early morning light cast a golden glow across the cobblestones, illuminating the faces of the villagers as they went about their daily tasks.

The scent of freshly baked bread wafted from the village bakery, mingling with the salty sea breeze that carried the distant cries of seagulls. Finley watched as the fishermen hauled their morning catch into the square, their weathered hands deftly sorting through the glistening piles of fish, crabs, and shellfish. The baskets overflowed with the bounty of the sea, a testament to the skill and perseverance of the fisher-witches who had braved the early morning tides and kept their ships intact.

Finley made his way through the throng of villagers, his eyes scanning the square for any signs of the previous day's events. The magnificent fountain still stood at the center, its intricately carved sea creatures spouting crystal-clear water that sparkled in the sunlight.

The priest stood in front of his church, on the elevated platform that helped keep dirt and mud from the front doors. He was watching the crowd, an expression of mild suspicion on his face as his eyes darted

nervously to and fro. As Finley maneuvered through the crowd, making as direct a line as possible for the church, the priest finally spotted him.

As Finley approached, he could see the priest more clearly. He was a middle-aged man, with salt-and-pepper hair cropped close to his head and a neatly trimmed beard that framed his angular face. His piercing blue eyes were set deep under bushy eyebrows, giving him an intense, almost hawk-like gaze that seemed to bore into Finley's very soul.

The priest wore simple robes of deep blue, cinched at the waist with a woven belt adorned with intricate silver embroidery that glinted in the morning light. Around his neck hung a heavy silver pendant in the shape of a cresting wave, the symbol of the human god and its dominion over the sea. His hands, clasped in front of him, were strong and calloused, a testament to a life spent in service and labor.

As Finley drew nearer, the priest's eyes narrowed, his deepening suspicion evident in the tightening of his jaw and the slight forward tilt of his head. He stood tall and proud, his shoulders squared and his feet planted firmly on the stone steps of the church, a bastion of faith and tradition amidst the bustling chaos of the village square.

"Good morning, Father," Finley called out as he neared, his voice carrying easily over the din of the crowd. He raised a hand in greeting, a disarming smile playing across his lips. "I hope this day finds you well."

The priest's gaze remained fixed on Finley, his expression guarded and unreadable. "Good morning, stranger," he replied, his voice deep and resonant, carrying a hint of wariness. "What brings you to our humble village on this fine day?"

Finley maintained his friendly smile, stopping a respectful distance from the church steps. "Father, I am but a humble woodcarver, seeking to offer my services to your magnificent church. I couldn't help but notice the lack of adornment upon its eaves, and I believe my skills could greatly enhance the beauty of this holy place."

The priest's eyebrows raised slightly, a flicker of interest sparking in his intense blue eyes. "Is that so?" he mused, his gaze sweeping over Finley's simple attire. "And why, pray tell, would we not leave this wood in the condition it creator has made it?"

“Does it not say in the Book of Worship that we are to ‘adorn the house with our work, so that the god might know of our labor?"“

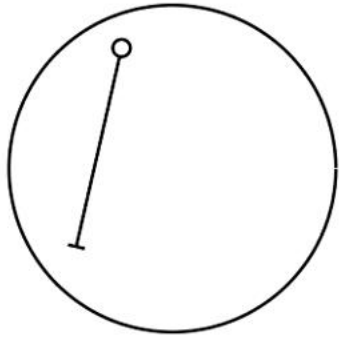
The priest shrugged and Finley's chest tightened a bit. "It might. Frankly, it says a lot of things. I suppose you're like the others, come to carve your lines and swirls and symbols?"

Ah, Finley's talent murmured gently in his mind. *We've been preceded.*

Arcadia said as much, he replied. Aloud, he said, "No, Father, not at all. May I show you?" From the battered leather satchel he'd acquired the evening prior, Finley withdrew an equally battered, leather-bound journal. He opened it, holding it out in both arms for the priest to see. "I have traveled far and wide, studying the intricate fretwork and carvings that grace the most revered churches and temples across the continent. I have come to believe, and I hope this is not presumptuous, that the carvings should not try to reflect the creator's work. No symbols for fire or water, no curves and and strokes. Merely symbols like these."

The priest's eyebrows rose slightly, and Finley thought the man's jaw unclenched slightly as he looked at the journal pages. "Oh?" he said with some small amount of interest.

Throughout the previous night, Finley's talent had guided him through a few simple runes in its new, "more direct" style.

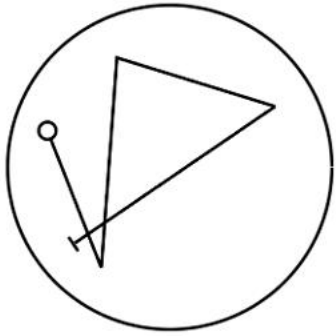


"It seems... simpler," the priest acknowledged, stepping closer.

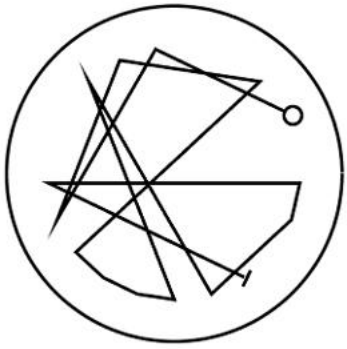
It's literally nonsense, Finley's talent smirked.

"I have been thinking, Father, that—if we were to take the Book in its most literal sense—that the decorations which might please the god

the most would be ones that purely show our labor. Our effort." He turned the page.



Runes which, when empowered, will keep this structure sturdy despite the unstable roof supports they've used, his talent noted. "Every one different, Father. None with any intrinsic meaning. All designed to take our time, the creator's gift to us, and gift some back." He turned the page again.



And that will create a deep uneasiness in anyone experimenting with movable type, his talent said. *Much more efficiently than the original one we created. Don't know why I didn't stumble on this sooner. Lack of perspective, I suppose.*

. . .

"I make each one as I go, sir," Finley continued as the priest leaned closer. "However the mood takes me. However the creator bids me."

"You carve these deeply?" the priest asked.

Finley blinked.

Tell him no.

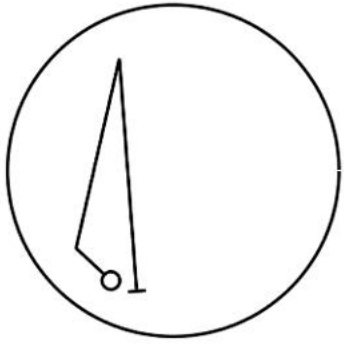
"No, Father. Not too deeply. The, ah—creator is free to change them, of course. Especially here, where the wind and the rain are so dominant." *But won't they fade after a few years?*

They'll be fine.

"I... see." The priest looked up sharply, meeting Finley's eyes and once again seeming to bore into his soul.

Try this.

Another strange, angular rune-within-a-circle assembled itself in Finley's mind:



Finley didn't question it. He began feeding his magic to the rune, adjusting the flow when it seemed to gently seize magic of Sky and Flame. A combination that many thought to be unusual, but Finley knew the two fed each other quite well. He leaned into the Flame aspect, sensing the enchanted energies float outward from his mind in a diaphanous cloud. It drifted over the priest, whose eyes narrowed slightly. *But magic can't affect humans,* Finley thought.

It doesn't need to affect him, his talent whispered back.

The rune's pull on Finley's magic ebbed, even as the rune's effects were drawn fully into the priest, gathering momentum and grounding themselves into the earth.

"Agreed," the priest said in a low, softer voice. "But there will be no payment. You do this for the glory—"

"Of course, of course," Finley said quickly.

"You have an apprentice? Someone to help speed the work?"

"Of course," Finley said again, ducking his head. "I'll fetch him. We can begin—"

"Immediately."

"Yes, right away. Thank you, Father."

"Nekęsk ragana gyventi," the priest said gravely, before turning, stepping into the church's and closing the doors firmly behind him.

Finley's eyes widened in alarm and he stumbled back into the throne of busy humans.

Suffer not a witch to live.

***

"We're being watched, aren't we?" Kelden asked softly from their perch on the rickety old ladder.

"Yes," Finley said tightly, his own ladder creaking in protest as he shifted his weight.

"Are we going to do anything about it?"

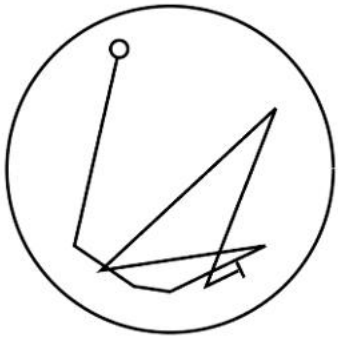
"No."

They'd managed to secure the two ramshackle ladders from a workshop nearby, paying far more than they were worth to close the deal quickly. Their purchase had also included two dull, chipped bronze chisels and two brass hammers so badly pitted that Finley expected them to fall apart at any moment. Fortunately, only the ladders needed to function: he and Kelden pretended to use the chisels, but in reality it was their magic carving the runes into the eaves of the church.

"Why not?"

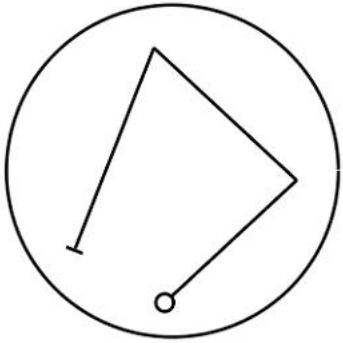
"This mission is more important. And they're only *watching,* so far. And Arcadia's watching *them."* Finley turned his attention back to the rune he was finishing.

This one next, Finley's talent mused.



Finley's conscious mind was developing a knack for "reading" these new runes without fully empowering them. *Really? "Trust Magic?"*

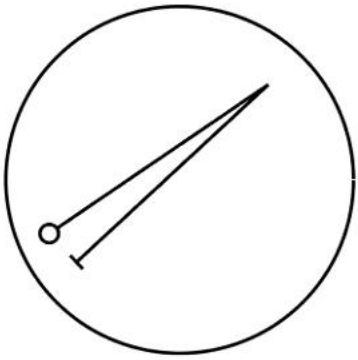
His talent seemed to shrug. *Can't hurt. This one after that.*



What exactly did that do to the priest? Finley asked. *Magic just grounds itself in humans.*

Mmm, not exactly, his talent said distractedly. *Humans are actually*

full of magic. Pure magic, so full that almost anything you throw at them just gets lost in the wash. But if it's simple enough, it can leave a... flavor. This one next.



Finley was so taken aback he almost missed the new rune. *Endure.* At least that one would have a physical effect on the church's structure, helping it withstand the constant wind and rain from the nearby coast.

That's enough, his talent said sleepily, withdrawing into the recesses of his mind. *Just repeat them all.*

What do you mean, 'humans are full of magic?' Finley asked quickly.

But there was no reply.

"Should I keep copying the same ones?" Kelden asked.

"Um... yes," Finley said, his mind in a sudden whirl. *Humans are full of magic?* he repeated to himself. "Keep repeating these ones, and empower them as you go," he added in a low voice. The sensation of being watched, enhanced and made an almost physical feeling by his version of Arcadia's rune, bored into his back.

"Won't they wonder what we've done?" Kelden whispered, their voice barely audible over the noise of the crowd behind them.

"I imagine so," Finley said tightly. "I'm coming up with a story. I'm sure we'll be asked soon enough."

The two worked in companionable silence for several long minutes, the pointless *scritching* of their chisels against the wood, and the light

ringing of the hammers against those chisels, acting as a soft counterpoint to the hubbub of the busy humans in the village square.

"These new runes," Kelden said after a while, "you're making them up as you go, aren't you?"

"Obviously," Finley chuckled.

"I can... feel it. I think."

Finley's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"Through magic," Kelden said softly. "There's a... current, around you. When you're doing it. Making new ones, I mean. It *is* the Origin, you know. I'm convinced of it."

"I..." Finley paused, tapping his chisel a few times as his magic carved another rune into the flat wood of the eaves. "I guess. Maybe. Probably. It feels... strange."

"It still speaks to you?"

"Yeah. More now than ever."

"I'm jealous."

"I'm... not sure you should be," Finley said very quietly.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

***

As the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon, painting the sky in a breathtaking array of oranges, pinks, and purples, Finley and Kelden stepped back to admire their handiwork. The intricate carvings they had etched into the eaves of the church seemed to glow softly in the fading light, the play of light and shadow making the runes dance and shimmer with a life of their own.

The village square was bathed in the warm, golden hues of the setting sun, the cobblestones reflecting the light like a mosaic of burnished copper and bronze. The once-bustling market stalls were now empty, the merchants having packed up their wares and headed home for the evening. The fountain at the center of the square continued to burble softly, the water gleaming like molten gold as it

cascaded from the mouths of the stone sea creatures.

A gentle breeze wafted through the square, carrying with it the scent of the sea and the distant laughter of children playing on the beach. The ancient, gnarled tree that stood sentinel at the far end of the square cast long, twisting shadows across the ground, its leaves rustling softly in the wind like the whispers of ancient secrets.

As Finley and Kelden gathered their tools and prepared to depart, a familiar figure emerged from the lengthening shadows. Arcadia strode toward them, her dark hair billowing behind her like a banner in the breeze. “All done?”

“We are,” Finley said, stretching his back. “I’m definitely done standing on ladders all day.”

“Your watchers have left,” she said as they walked slowly through the nearly empty square.

“A couple of hours ago, yeah,” Finley agreed. “Did you spot them?”

“Two women and a man. All pretty young.”

“Where’d they go?”

“An inn on the edge of the village.”

“Well,” Finley sighed, “let’s ditch these tools and go have a meal.”

“What, at the same inn?”

“Don’t you think,” he said in resignation, “it’ll make their jobs easier?”

They deposited the tools in a narrow alley between two shops, and made their way to the inn. A village this size rarely had more than one or two inns, and this was clearly the more prosperous.

As they approached the inn, a weathered wooden sign swung gently in the evening breeze, bearing the name "The Mermaid's Tail" in faded gold lettering. The two-story structure was built of sturdy stone and timber, its walls adorned with climbing ivy and colorful wildflowers that spilled from window boxes. Warm, inviting light poured from the latticed windows, casting a golden glow onto the cobblestone path leading to the entrance.

Finley, Kelden, and Arcadia stepped through the heavy oak door, its iron hinges creaking softly as they entered the bustling common room. The interior was a cozy haven, with exposed wooden beams and a large, stone hearth that crackled with a welcoming fire. The air was filled with

the mouthwatering aroma of roasting meats, herbs, and freshly baked bread, mingling with the rich scent of ale and the faint hint of pipe smoke.

Patrons of all sorts filled the room, their laughter and chatter rising and falling like the tides. Fishermen, their skin weathered by the sun and salt, sat at long tables, swapping tales of the day's catch and the mysteries of the deep. Merchants, their fine clothing a stark contrast to the humble attire of the locals, huddled in corners, negotiating deals and exchanging gossip. A group of musicians played a lively tune in the corner, their fiddles, flutes, and drums weaving a tapestry of sound that danced through the air, inviting patrons to tap their feet and clap along.

As Finley, Kelden and Arcadia wove their way through the crowded common room, they spotted an empty table tucked away in a quiet corner. They settled onto the rough-hewn benches, the worn wood smooth beneath their hands. A buxom serving girl with rosy cheeks and a mischievous glint in her eye approached their table, her skirts swishing as she walked.

"What'll it be, my lovelies?" she asked with a wink, her voice carrying over the din.

"Three ales and whatever's on the spit," Finley replied with a charming smile. The girl nodded and sashayed away, leaving them to their thoughts.

Arcadia leaned in, her voice low. "Did you see them when we came in? The watchers from earlier."

Finley nodded almost imperceptibly. "Yeah. Sitting by the hearth, trying to blend in. Not doing a very good job of it, are they?"

Kelden chuckled. "Amateurs. You'd think they'd know better than to stare so blatantly."

The serving girl returned with their drinks, the frothy ale sloshing over the rims of the tankards as she set them down. Finley took a long pull, savoring the rich, malty flavor. Then he set his tankard on the table, looked pointedly at their watchers, and gave them a single, deliberate nod.

The three exchanged glances, and one of the women—a short, sturdily built brunette with hazelnut skin and flashing brown eyes—rose from her seat, walked over to their table, and slid into the single empty

chair.

"You've a message? Or questions?" Finley asked bluntly.

"You did something new," the woman said, her voice hard and flat.

Finley shrugged. "Our people have traditions as well. But this won't... hold you back."

"So the others did."

Finley shrugged again.

"We can have those boards replaced."

"You could," Arcadia spoke up. "But then our... *colleagues* will send another group. Probably take more drastic action. If you leave it, they'll leave it as well."

Suspicion was still carved deeply into the woman's expression, but after a few moments of silence, she gave them a curt nod and rose from her seat. She gestured to her companions, and the three of them filed quickly out of the inn.

"You really put nothing in to restrict innovations?" Arcadia whispered.

Finley quickly empowered a rune that guarded their words. The noise of the pub became muffled. "I put a few. Things we've handled in the past. The printing press. A couple of others. Mainly to see if they work, and if the humans continue to try them. Nothing that is... well, harmless."

"Their printing machines aren't harmful," Arcadia pointed out.

"True, but they're the first thing the Order will notice. We've gone rogue here, you know that, right? We'll be called to account for it."

"I know," Arcadia sighed, sipping her ale. "Word that the church is still standing will get back quickly, and they'll send someone. They'll see your new runes. That's what Ram will want explained." Kelden nodded agreement.

"I... have some ideas in that direction," Finley said. "He knows I'm a Rune Smith. The truth might serve us best, in this instance. That this was the only way we could get anything carved into the church."

"He'll want to know more about your runes."

"Again, I'm... not even sure of them myself. Have either of you tried to use them?"

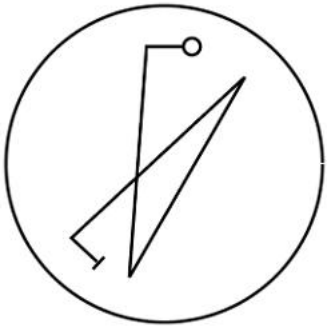
Kelden nodded. "They seemed to take up readily enough when I

was empowering the carvings."

"Not much of a test," Finley mused. "Try one now."

"Like what?"

Finley extended a finger, and with the slightest lick of magic, carved a rune into the scarred tabletop.



"Sky magic," Arcadia mused.

"You can tell?" Finley asked, surprised.

She nodded slowly. "It... there's kind of a pull. It knows what it needs." Her eyes narrowed and Finley could sense a gentle flow of magic trickling into the rune.

The rich smells of the inn was replaced by a fresh breeze. A few patrons turned to see if the main door had been opened, saw that it was still tightly closed, and shrugged before turning back to their meals and conversations.

The breeze lasted only a moment before Arcadia let it fade.

"Well, that answers that," Finley said quietly. "How did it feel?"

"Weird. I mean, it felt normal. Usual. But also... strange. The shape of it is different. It's the same as *gaivus vėjelis?"*

Finley nodded. "Only more efficient."

"I think that's why it felt strange. It's very... to the point. Direct." She frowned. "It's efficient, but there's no beauty to it."

Finley nodded more slowly this time. "Yeah, I can see that."

"It speaks to me," Kelden said very softly.

"The magic?" Arcadia asked, her eyes widening.

"Yes."

"The Origin," Arcadia whispered.

"That's enough," Finley said, draining his tankard and pushing his chair back. "Let's go home."

CHAPTER 12

Flood Control

Ram was off in Evermore again, giving them a brief respite before the grilling they all fully expected to receive. That meant an unexpected three days on the Farm with nothing to do but *relax*. Dmitry gave them an uncharacteristically curt greeting as they handed over their report. "Stay ready," he added sharply.

Which was easy, given that both Arcadia and Finley had completely forgotten how to do anything as prosaic as *relaxing*.

The Farm sprawled across gently rolling hills, a patchwork of green fields and pastures stitched together by weathered wooden fences. The buildings were simple and functional—a sturdy barn with a battered wood-shingle roof, a cozy farmhouse with a wrap-around porch, a few outbuildings for storage and the small livestock that was kept more as a hobby than a profession. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the earthy scents of freshly turned soil, wildflowers, and distant chimney smoke.

Arcadia wandered restlessly through the orchard, the leaves above casting dappled shadows across her face. She plucked an apple from a low-hanging branch and turned it over in her hands, examining its shiny red skin as if it held the secrets of the universe. With a sigh, she took a distracted bite and continued pacing, her mind churning with thoughts that refused to settle.

Finley had claimed a spot on the porch swing, long legs stretched

out before him as he rocked back and forth with a steady creak of old chains. A book lay open in his lap but his eyes kept flickering up to scan the horizon, searching for something he couldn't quite define. The peacefulness of the Farm seemed to mock him, a tranquility he couldn't match no matter how hard he tried to slow his racing thoughts.

Even Kelden, usually so unflappable, had an air of tension about him as he walked the perimeter of the Farm, checking the fences with a thoroughness that bordered on obsessive.

They came together for dinner that night, along with a half-dozen others who worked full-time at the Farm as schedulers, support staff, and so on. Dinner was an oddly subdued affair, as if the staff had picked up on their restlessness.

After the quiet meal, Arcadia found herself drawn back to the orchard, the gentle rustling of leaves a soothing whisper in the gathering dusk. She climbed the wooden rungs of the old ladder leaning against one of the larger trees, settling herself on a sturdy branch with her back against the trunk. From this vantage point, she could see the warm glow of lamplight spilling from the farmhouse windows, a beacon of comfort in the darkening landscape.

Finley appeared at the base of the tree, his face tilted up to meet her gaze. "Mind if I join you?"

Arcadia shrugged, scooting over to make room for him on the branch. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the chirping of crickets and the distant hooting of an owl.

"Do you ever wonder," Finley began, his voice barely above a whisper, "what it would be like to just... stay here? To leave everything behind and just live a simple life?"

Arcadia turned to look at him, surprised by the wistfulness in his tone. "You mean give up on the Order? Give up everything we've worked for?"

"I don't know." Finley sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Sometimes I just feel like we're caught up in something bigger than ourselves, something we can't control."

Before Arcadia could respond, a twig snapped somewhere below them. They both tensed, peering into the shadows.

“Hey,” Kelden said quietly.

Arcadia and Finley relaxed at the sight of their friend. "You startled us," Arcadia said, a slight admonishment in her tone.

Kelden's lips quirked into a brief, apologetic smile. "Sorry. I saw you two heading out here and thought I'd join you." He paused, his expression growing more serious. "I couldn't shake the feeling that something's off."

Finley nodded, his brow furrowing. "I know what you mean. It's like there's this... tension in the air. Like something's about to happen."

"But what?" Arcadia asked, frustration edging into her voice. "We're in the middle of nowhere, on a farm that's supposed to be a safe haven. What could possibly happen here?"

"It's this waiting for Ram," Finley sighed. "We're all on edge."

"It's what we'll be sent out to do next," Arcadia added.

"Even Dmitry seems wound tightly," Finley added. "I feel like..."

"Like there's something going on," Arcadia agreed. "Something someone's not telling us."

"Magic is... tense as well," Kelden murmured.

"Tense?" Finley asked.

They nodded. "It always felt like this before the end-of-year ceremonies at school. You knew nothing bad was happening, nothing was *going* to happen, but... magic isn't subtle. Not in that way. When we brought it out for the bonding..." They stopped and shook their head. "Sorry. We're really not supposed to talk about this outside of the school."

"You don't have—" Arcadia began.

"No, you should know. It's just that... for us, for Thornwaithe's, I mean, magic isn't... intelligent. It's this huge, slow-moving, blunt force. If it's threatened, it strikes, but it's a big, clumsy response. That's why so many alum work in areas to try and keep that from happening. Spot threats and deal with them quietly, in small ways."

"Like the Order," Finley said.

They shrugged. "I guess. A little. It's more just... watching. Making sure people don't threaten the Veil. But when we deliberately called on magic, for the bonding ceremonies... it felt like this. Tense."

"Anticipatory," Arcadia said.

Kelden chuckled. “Yeah, maybe that.” They turned back toward the farmhouse. “We should go back.”

“Face the music,” Finley sighed.

“Ram’s back, isn’t he?” Arcadia asked quietly.

“Had to happen eventually,” Finley said. He slid off the tree branch. “Come on.”

***

Finley had been in Ram’s office only a few times, as the elderly Head of the Order typically sought *him* out when a conversation was needed. But Ram had indeed returned to the Farm, and the moment they’d set foot in the farmhouse, they’d been sent directly to his office.

Arcadia and Kelden followed Finley into Ram's office, and a sense of unease settled in Finley’s stomach as he took in the austere surroundings. The room was spartan, with little in the way of decoration or personal touches. The walls were painted a stark white, the only adornment being a single painting hung above the fireplace—a bleak landscape of barren trees and a leaden sky.

A large, heavy desk dominated the center of the room, its dark wood polished to a high shine. Behind it sat Ram, his lined face impassive as he watched Finley enter. Despite the mild weather outside, a fire burned low in the grate, its flames casting flickering shadows across the room. But even the fire seemed cold and uninviting, providing little in the way of warmth or comfort.

Finley's gaze was drawn to the mantelpiece, where a curious collection of objects was displayed. A tarnished brass compass, its needle spinning aimlessly. A small, intricately carved wooden box, its contents a mystery.

Dmitry was there as well, leaning against a wall, his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

Ram cleared his throat, drawing Finley's attention back to the matter at hand. “Sit,” he said, gesturing to the three straight-backed wooden chairs positioned in front of the desk. He grimaced sipped

from a heavy mug, steam roiling around his face. "Dmitry, don't we have something less bitter?"

"Healer's orders," Dmitry murmured. "Just drink it." He pulled himself off the wall. "I'll fetch some *kava*. You can have it when you finish that." He stalked out of the office.

The others lowered themselves into the chairs with a shared sense of trepidation. The wood was hard and unyielding, and Finley shifted uncomfortably, trying to find a position that didn't make his spine ache. Arcadia and Kelden seemed equally ill at ease, their postures stiff and their faces carefully neutral.

Ram steepled his fingers, his elbows resting on the desk as he regarded them with inscrutable eyes. "I trust you've enjoyed your respite." The three said nothing. "So. Nek. The church stands."

"We were able to convince the priest to let us carve runes," Finley said.

"I'm told."

Ram stared at them until Kelden, no longer able to stand the silence, offered, "Finley came up with new runes. They look different enough that—"

"I've seen." The room fell into an uneasy silence for several more moments. Finally, Ram cleared his throat and continued in a gentler tone. "A new rune language?" Finley shrugged. "Your talent, then."

"Yes."

"Hmm. Well. Served us well enough, this time. Although I'm curious how you became involved when the assignment was for Arcadia alone."

"They've been thick as thieves again," Dmitry said, returning with a mug of *kava* in one hand. "Just like when they joined." He held the mug until Ram let out a resigned sigh and then downed whatever was in the first mug. Dmitry exchanged mugs, setting the empty one down on a small table to the side of the room before once again crossing his arms and leaning against the wall.

"I knew I needed help," she said firmly. "You know they're watching us. Testing us."

"They. You mean the human cabal." Ram's expression grew tight.

"Obviously."

"Mmm. Perhaps. You felt that modifying their holy book, giving reason—"

"They *know* we do that," she said, heat rising in her voice. "It's probably what they expected of us, in fact."

Ram stared at her for a long while and then nodded. "Perhaps. Our book of tricks is too thin, it seems."

I want to try something, Finley's talent said abruptly. Immediately, half-formed runes began flickering in the corner of Finley's mind. He released a thin stream of power into them, watching Ram carefully as the runes glimmered and shifted. A subtle magic began to whirl gently through the room, wafting around Ram, Kelden, and Arcadia. *No way to be more precise about it. Hmm.* His talent seemed mildly displeased with this, but the proto-runes, like nothing Finley had ever seen, continued dancing in his head.

"I've been to see the Taryba," Ram said suddenly. His eyes narrowed at once, as if he'd let something slip he hadn't intended. In the corner of his eye, Finley saw Arcadia's hands clench into fists on her lap. "Councilor Adomaitis." Again, Ram's eyes twitched as if he hadn't meant to offer a name.

"Ram—" Dmitry protested.

"It's fine," Ram snapped.

"And?" Finley prompted.

"The risk of human innovation continues to grow, despite our best efforts. Despite *your* best efforts."

"Some of that innovation—" Arcadia began, but Ram cut her off.

"Is unacceptable. We're to hold the line."

"Our instructions from the Taryba?" Arcadia asked coldly.

"You've grown some love for the humans?" Dmitry asked mockingly.

Finley's stomach clenched. Arcadia had a long dislike of humans in general, and their shared experiences from school had done nothing but reinforce her distrust.

"Hardly. I simply thought we were an independent Order. If I'd wanted to be employed by the Taryba, I—"

"Witchkind stands as one!" Ram snapped, slapping an open palm

on the desk. "We have our remit. Our mission. The Taryba watches over us all. And *humans* threaten us *all.*"

Dmitry's nod was shallow, but Finley noticed it regardless.

"Sir," Finley said quickly, seeking to lower the tension in the room, even as whatever his talent was doing continued to eddy around the other three, "has something new happened?"

Ram's lips twitched and he reached into one of the desk's drawers, withdrawing a thick sheaf of papers. Finley recognized them as field dispatches as the old man let them *thump* to the desktop. "Something, yes. Some *things.* Some perhaps innocent. Most perhaps not." He flipped open the top paper. "A farm in Middlevale. River runs through it, floods annually, witchkind protects against the flooding. Now, the farmer is building some *structures* to contain the river."

"They can't build those blocks any—" Finley began.

"She's not using blocks, boy, she's using boulders."

Arcadia frowned. "Then what possible—"

"She won't need magic anymore!" Ram shouted. His eyes were flashing and his face flushed slightly.

Finley glanced at Dmitry, but the older man's expression was unreadable.

"But *she* doesn't know that," Arcadia objected. "So what are we to do? Just—"

"Observe," Ram hissed. "Discover if her actions are hers alone or if they're being *driven.* Directed from without."

"By the cabal," Finley said, realizing where Ram was going.

"Yes," the Head said, calming slightly. "All agents have been told to *observe and report.* No further actions. We go quiet. We see what the humans do, and we discover if they are acting alone or as one."

"This is purely for discovery," Dmitry added, his tone soothing. Ram glanced at him with a scowl.

Convenient timing, Finley thought with relief. If the human cabal held up their end of the nascent compromise, then the only "innovation" would in fact be from humans working alone. Not that that—

"The brickworks," Ram said, interrupting Finley's thoughts.

"It was nothing," he said quickly. "A new bronze alloy. Not espe-

cially innovative, even, but it let them spin very thin rods to reinforce the bricks. It won't work well. The metal is still too soft."

Ram gave him a hard stare, but then nodded. Slowly, the runes flickering in Finley's mind began to slow and fade, and the ambient effect in the air faded with them. *What was that?* he asked, but his talent didn't deign to reply.

Finley's eyes darted back to Dmitry, who was again staring back with an inscrutable expression.

"Go," Ram ordered, leaning heavily back in his chair. "All three of you. Middlevale. See to this river. Observe and report."

***

"Ram seems... more," Arcadia said quietly.

Her travel magic had taken them well outside of Middlevale itself, and about a half-mark walk from the edge of the farm. Another thread of her Sky magic had tugged a small cloud over them, cutting off the worst of the midday sun's bright heat.

"I've never seen him so tense," Finley agreed.

"Dmitry seemed worried about him," Kelden added.

"Dmitry's... *hovering,*" Arcadia said. "He's never done that before."

"And this connection with the Taryba..." Finley said.

"It's what I said before," Arcadia muttered. "Something's happening, and nobody's telling us. More than just the human cabal and all the inventions. I *hate* not knowing what's going on."

"You don't like the Taryba, do you?" Kelden asked.

Arcadia grimaced. "It's not dislike. It's just that my parents have been on our *local* council for a long time, and the Taryba has been taking on more and more to itself. Stripping the local councils of authority. All in the name of 'protecting' everyone, but they're never clear on exactly what the threat is."

"Sounds like a familiar tune," Finley mused.

"Now that you mention it, it does," Arcadia agreed. "Ram's wound

up about *anything* the humans do. You think the Taryba has gotten to him?"

"Or the other way around," Kelden said darkly.

"Save it," Finley sighed. "We're almost there."

As they approached the Middlevale farm, the lush, verdant landscape unfolded before them like a patchwork quilt of vibrant greens and earthy browns. The farm stretched as far as the eye could see, a vast expanse of carefully tended fields and orchards that spoke of generations of hard work and dedication.

The air was filled with the sweet scent of ripening fruits and the earthy aroma of freshly turned soil. Rows upon rows of fruit trees lined the edges of the fields, their branches heavy with plump, juicy apples, pears, and peaches. The leaves rustled gently in the warm breeze, creating a soothing symphony of nature's music.

In the fields, an array of vegetables flourished under the nurturing sun. Leafy greens, plump tomatoes, and crisp cucumbers grew in neat rows, their colors a vibrant testament to the farm's fertility. The occasional scarecrow stood sentinel, its tattered clothing fluttering in the wind, a whimsical guardian of the crops.

The centerpiece of the farm was the wide, meandering river that cut through the land like a shimmering ribbon. Its crystal-clear waters sparkled in the sunlight, reflecting the azure sky above. The river's gentle current created a soothing sound, a constant murmur that seemed to whisper ancient secrets to those who listened closely.

Along the riverbanks, willow trees draped their long, slender branches into the water, creating secluded spots of dappled shade. Reeds and cattails swayed in the gentle breeze, providing sanctuary to a diverse array of wildlife. Dragonflies darted across the water's surface, their iridescent wings glinting in the sunlight, while frogs croaked their melodic songs from hidden perches.

As they drew closer to the heart of the farm, Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden could see the massive boulders that had been hauled into place along the riverbank. The stones were arranged with meticulous care, forming a sturdy barrier against the river's seasonal flooding. It was an impressive feat of engineering, a testament to human ingenuity and determination. As they watched, a horse-drawn cart was being maneu-

vered into place, its bed laden with another enormous boulder. Two men jumped out of the cart and began working with stout levers to roll the giant rock out onto the ground.

The cart's driver caught sight of them and frowned slightly. They realized, in the inexplicable way of witchkind, that the driver was one of them. She hopped down from the driver's box, said something they didn't catch to the two workers, and began walking toward them.

"Help you?" she asked as she neared, wiping dust from her hands.

She was tall and lean, with skin the rich, deep brown of freshly tilled earth. Her face was angular and striking, with high cheekbones and a proud, aquiline nose. Her eyes, a startling shade of amber, seemed to hold both the warmth of the sun and the sharpness of a hawk's gaze.

She wore simple, practical clothing that spoke of a life spent working the land. A loose-fitting shirt of cream-colored linen hung from her broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to reveal strong, sinewy forearms. Her trousers, made of a sturdy brown fabric, were tucked into well-worn leather boots that bore the scuffs and stains of countless hours in the fields.

Around her waist, she wore a wide belt of supple leather, its buckle a simple brass clasp that gleamed in the sunlight. From the belt hung an assortment of tools - a small, sharp knife for pruning, a coil of twine, and a pouch that likely held seeds or other small necessities.

Her hair, a mass of tight, springy curls, was pulled back from her face with a brightly colored scarf, its vibrant hues of red and orange standing out in stark contrast to her dusky skin. A few stubborn curls had escaped their confinement, framing her face with a halo of dark, kinky locks.

"I'm Finley," Finley said, nodding politely. "My friends, Arcadia and Kelden. We'd caught wind of this... project, and wanted to take a look. My parents have worked on sea walls for my whole life, but I'd never heard of a... what do you call it?"

"I'm Agne," the woman said, her face splitting in a wide grin. "And believe me, this was a new one on me as well. The owner of the farm's very own idea. She's calling it a riverwall."

"And you're not... you know. Helping?" Kelden asked.

Agne's grin grew even wider. "Nope. Not a trickle of magic. Which, I will tell you, I'm no little amount of grateful for."

"Oh?" Arcadia asked with surprise. "Why so?"

"Magic's thick enough out here," Agne said with a sigh.

You're welcome, Finley's talent said. Finley thought he detected a trace of irony in the statement.

"But we use an awful lot of it," Agne continued, "keeping the nutrients in the soil. There are five others of witchkind here, including my husband and son. Like most of the fields, the owner doesn't know much about soil health. We're all Earth-affinity, though, so we can *feel* it. I will tell you, it is no small task keeping these fields fertile. When the spring floods come, and sometimes in the fall, dealing with that river is the last thing any of us want. Not one of us has Sea affinity anyway."

"So how'd you tame it?" Finley asked.

"Carve a trough through the bottom where it's worst," Agne replied. "Doesn't hold more than a few months, although that's usually enough. Wasn't last year, which is what got Roze—she's the owner—thinking. We might still have to tough out the riverbed a bit when it's really bad, but she's planning to build it up to a full man's height where it tends to flood the worst, and that'll get us through most years."

Finley and Arcadia exchanged a quick glance. "Is she—Roze, that is—does she usually have ideas like this on her own?"

Agne tilted her head. "She does. She's quite clever for someone with as little formal education as she's had." Then her eyes narrowed. "But you're dancing around a question, young man. Ask plainly."

"It's just... well, there have been a lot of 'innovations' recently. Especially in the cities. Things that would reduce their reliance on... us. We've been looking into some of them, and sometimes they're coming to people who've never shown a creative or clever idea in their lives."

Agne nodded slowly. "That would be worrying. But not the case here. Roze doesn't take many guests. Her hands do all the carting and trading for her. And she's *damned* clever, if you ask me. If anything, we've had to hold her back a bit."

"Oh?" Arcadia asked, intrigued.

"Couple seasons back, she came up with this idea for a tiller that

could be hitched to a team of horses. All bronze. Could till up a quarter of a field in one pass."

"And that's... bad?" Kelden asked, confused.

Agne laughed. "It is if you're the one moving soil around under the surface to even out the nutrients. She'd have outworked us by half. We started moving smaller rocks up closer to the surface—tore up the blades on the prototype she build. Eventually she gave up and we put everything back the way it was."

That's what the Order should *be doing,* Finley thought wearily. "Well. I suppose we'll leave you to it, then. Although... purely out of family interest, would you mind if we stayed and watched a while?"

"No problem. I'll let the boys know you're no problem. There's another couple of wagons coming in, so plenty to see." She smiled. "Good day, then."

"Good day," Arcadia said, matching the older woman's smile. "Thank you."

Agne bobbed a quick nod and hurried back to her cart, which was now empty. The two workers were wiping their brows and making plans to roll their boulder to an empty space in the growing wall, as Agne climbed aboard her cart and drove it off.

As Agne drove her empty cart back toward the distant barns, a second horse-drawn cart came trundling down the dirt path toward the riverbank. This cart was piled high with two boulders, each one slightly smaller than the massive stone the first two workers had just wrestled into place, but still impressively large. The cart's wooden wheels creaked and groaned under the weight of its heavy cargo as the sturdy draft horse plodded forward, its muscles rippling beneath its gleaming chestnut coat.

Two new workers walked alongside the cart, their faces glistening with sweat in the warm afternoon sun. They were both broad-shouldered men with sun-weathered skin and calloused hands that spoke of years of hard labor. One wore a faded blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, revealing arms corded with lean muscle. The other had a red bandana tied around his neck, the knot resting at the hollow of his throat.

As the cart drew closer to the growing wall, the workers guided the

horse to a stop. One of them unhitched the animal from its traces and led it a short distance away, where it could rest in the shade of a towering oak tree. The other worker climbed up into the cart bed and began the arduous process of unloading the boulders.

These workers seemed to be better-equipped than the first pair.

He worked a thick leather strap around the first boulder, securing it tightly before attaching the other end to a sturdy metal hook. This hook was in turn connected to a series of pulleys and ropes that had been rigged up to a nearby tree. The worker gave a sharp whistle, and two more men emerged from the shade, each grabbing hold of a rope. Together, the three of them began to heave and strain, slowly lifting the boulder out of the cart.

Finley watched the process with rapt attention, marveling at the ingenuity and cooperation on display. The boulder swayed gently as it was hoisted into the air, the ropes creaking under the immense weight. Slowly, carefully, the workers guided the suspended stone over to the wall, lowering it into place with a dull thud that sent a small cloud of dust billowing into the air.

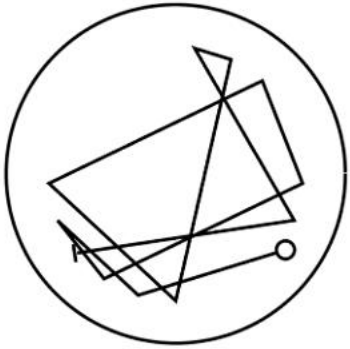
As the first boulder settled into position, the workers wasted no time in moving on to the second. They repeated the process with practiced efficiency, their movements synchronized and purposeful. Finley couldn't help but admire their skill and dedication. Building a wall of this magnitude was no small feat, and yet these men tackled the task with a resolute determination that bordered on the inspiring.

Arcadia, too, seemed impressed by the display. She watched the workers with a keen eye, her brow furrowed in concentration as she studied their techniques. “They make it look so easy,” she murmured, almost to herself. “But the amount of strength and coordination required...”

Kelden nodded in agreement. “And to think they're doing it all without magic. It's remarkable, really.”

“Are they?” Arcadia said, squinting at the activity.

Try this, Finley’s talent suggested.



Finley fed the rune with magic, noting that it didn't seem picky about which affinity it received. The workers, the boulders, and the workers' equipment came into sharp focus as the magic went to work. He looked closely, but didn't see any signs of runes—traditional or otherwise. "They are," he said softly. "Not a rune in sight."

"So Ram's right," Arcadia said. "They don't need us."

"Weren't you the one talking about our magic being enslaved to humans' incompetence?" Finley asked wryly. "But we're the ones making it that way."

"I did," Arcadia admitted. "I mean for... everyday things. Ongoing things. But... they don't need us for *this*. I wouldn't have imagined it."

"It's not that strange," Kelden said. "I grew up in Carvendam. They use the same things, the ropes and pulleys, for moving lumber up the city's dam for repairs." He shrugged. "And that's *with* runes on the timber to resist wear. Even magic isn't permanent."

"Mmm," Arcadia murmured.

"We've seen enough, here?" Finley asked. "No sign of the cabal driving this, just a clever farmer and hard workers?"

"More the latter than the former," Arcadia sighed. "But yes."

One of the workers turned and gave them a curious look as they turned to go.

CHAPTER 13

Carronade

They returned to a Farm in chaos.

People were running everywhere, from the main farmhouse to the outbuildings used for storage and training. Travel magics were being used so frequently, and in such close proximity, that an acrid heaviness permeated the air.

Finley's heart began beating faster and his vision seemed to sharpen as even his talent became more alert.

"What's happening?" Arcadia asked, grabbing the arm of the first person who hurried past within her reach.

"Guys..." Kelden said, their voice low and urgent.

They ignored him as the woman began speaking. "There's an emergency. And Ram's fallen ill. We're to—"

Finley didn't hear the rest as he invoked his own travel magic, directing it to take him to wherever Ram was.

That turned out to be Ram's office, where the normally sturdy old man was being helped into his chair. Dmitry glanced up sharply as Finley arrived. The three people helping Ram—Finley recognized only Ella, the Order's young Healer—were focused entirely on getting him situated. Ram's skin was ashen, his eyes bleary, and his hands trembling.

"Finley," Dmitry snapped, stepping over to him. "This isn't a good—"

"What happened?" Finley asked.

"You know the pressure he's been under," Dmitry muttered, glancing back at Ram. Ella was holding her hands over the old man's forehead, doubtless invoking some rune or other. Finley's talent seemed to sniff at the air, trying to catch the scent of whatever magic was being used.

"Someone said something about an emergency."

"Yes. Lakewood. We got an urgent report of another carronade."

"Another—that's impossible! The church runes—"

"Seemed to have missed this one," Dmitry snapped.

"The Taryba," Ram said loudly. "I must—"

"Stay right where you are," Ella insisted. "Dmitry, I could use your help, here. Keep him calm."

"Go be useful," Dmitry said, turning from Finley.

More magic took Finley back to Arcadia and Kelden.

"How is he?" Arcadia asked.

"He doesn't look good. Stress. Ella is with him. Arcadia, Dmitry said there was a carronade. In Lakewood."

Her eyes widened. "They said they wouldn't—"

"Go find someone. Dmitry's busy with Ram. Tell them we're going, and to not send anyone else."

"Guys," Kelden repeated, their voice tense.

"What?" Finley asked as Arcadia's magic whisked her away.

"Something is happening."

"I know, it's—"

"No," Kelden insisted. "With magic."

Finley's eyes widened.

He's right, his talent said, its tone filled with alarm. You need to go.



Finley's magic took them to the outskirts of Lakewood, where the dense construction began to thin. "It would have to be here," Finley said, pointing to the metalsmith's shop at the edge of town. An uncanny sense of déjà vu washed over Finley as he took in the scene before him. The shop appeared abandoned, its windows dark and door slightly ajar,

swaying gently in the breeze. Rusted tools and scraps of twisted metal littered the ground around the building.

"This feels...familiar somehow," Arcadia murmured, her brow furrowed. She took a tentative step forward, leaves crunching beneath her boots. "Like we've been here before."

“The building looks the same, doesn’t it?” Finley agreed.

“It’s a smithy,” Kelden said. “They all look the same.”

“One of our first missions for the Order,” Arcadia said quietly, “was in a shop very much like this one. It was also abandoned. Or looked like it. And it contained a carronade.”

“It was a trap,” Finley added.

“I don’t know what a carronade is,” Kelden said.

“A long, thick, heavy tube made of cast iron,” Finley explained. “Closed at one end. Meant to be packed with black powder, and topped with an iron ball. Light the powder—”

“A weapon, then,” Kelden said dourly.

“A weapon,” Arcadia agreed. “Finley, this has to be a trap. We can’t—”

“I’ll go,” Kelden said striding forward.

“You can’t!” Arcadia said, grabbing for his arm and missing. “I can feel the iron from—”

“He’s fine,” Finley said, pulling her back. “He’s immune.”

“Imm—what does that even mean, ‘he’s immune?’”

“His magic isn’t affected by iron. No, I don’t know how,” he added as Arcadia opened her mouth to speak. “But I tested it. He can still use his magic. He thinks it has something to do with Thornwaithe’s, although I’ve never heard of anyone else being immune to iron.”

They watched as Kelden approached the smithy’s open door. He pulled it open wider and peered inside. “It’s empty,” he called back. “There are stacks of iron bars in here, but the forge is cold.” He let the door swing partly shut. “Whatever was here is gone.”

Interesting, Finley’s talent mused.

Finley turned, gazing back toward the heart of Lakewood. The town was a charming picture of bustling activity, belying the grim purpose that had brought them here. Cobbled streets wound between busy shops and simple homes constructed of sturdy timber and field-

stone, their wood-shingled roofs glinting in the midday sun. Townsfolk in colorful garb strolled the avenues, pausing to peruse the wares displayed in shop windows or to exchange friendly greetings.

The air was filled with a symphony of sounds—the clopping of horse hooves on the cobbles, the creak of wagon wheels, the lilting melodies of songbirds in the trees lining the streets. Delectable aromas wafted from the open doors of bakeries and taverns, hinting at savory meat pies and hearty stews within.

At the center of town, an impressive fountain carved of rosy granite burbled merrily, the spray casting miniature rainbows in the air. Flower sellers hawked brilliant blooms from baskets and bouquets were thrust into the hands of sweethearts.

"I doubt they rolled it into town," Arcadia murmured.

"It's getting worse," Kelden said tensely, rejoining them.

"I want to see," Finley said, turning back to the smithy. He envisioned the rune that would bottle up his magic, protect it from being pulled away by the greedy iron.

We need to come up with something better than that, his talent grumbled, its voice muffled and distant in Finley's mind.

Finley stepped cautiously through the doorway into the smithy, his senses on high alert. The interior was dim, illuminated only by thin shafts of sunlight filtering through gaps in the weathered walls. Dust motes danced lazily in the beams, and the air hung heavy with the tang of iron and coal.

The main space at the center of the smithy was indeed empty, as Kelden had reported. An anvil stood solitary and silent, its surface marred by countless dings from hammering. Tongs, hammers, and other tools hung on racks along the walls, coated in a thin layer of rust. The forge sat cold and dark, ashes from its last firing scattered across the brick floor.

Yet as Finley's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he noticed signs that the smithy had been recently active. A few embers still glowed faintly in the depths of the forge. Water droplets glistened on the inside of a slack tub, as if something hot had been plunged into it not long ago. Scraps of metal lay strewn across a workbench, hastily abandoned.

In the far corner of the smithy, partially obscured by shadows,

Finley spotted the remnants of what appeared to be a massive mold. He approached cautiously, his boots crunching on the scattered debris littering the floor.

The mold had clearly been used to cast something immense—a cylindrical object at least ten feet in length. He noted piles of sand, iron bands, and wooden staves.

The sand was the color of tarnished brass, flecked with glittering bits of mica that caught the dim light. It lay in haphazard heaps around the mold, as if hastily shoveled aside once the casting was complete. Finley knelt and scooped up a handful, letting the grains trickle through his fingers. It was cool to the touch.

Thick iron bands, their surfaces pitted with rust, lay discarded among the sand piles. They had served to reinforce the mold, ensuring it could withstand the immense pressure and heat of the molten iron. Some of the bands were bent and twisted, testament to the incredible forces at play during the casting process.

Shattered remnants of wooden staves were scattered throughout the debris. The staves had been used to create the initial shape of the mold, arranged in a cylindrical framework and then packed with sand.

"But what will they fire it with?" he murmured.

"Here," Arcadia said.

Finley turned quickly, surprised that she'd followed him in. Kelden was behind her, and they were peering at a small barrel that sat on a worktable, which ran the length of one wall.

Finley crossed to the worktable, leaning in to examine the small barrel. It was crafted of dark, oily wood, the staves bound together by iron rings that showed spots of rust. A crude plug of waxed cork sealed the bunghole at the top.

Arcadia gingerly pried the plug loose with her fingernail, and a sharp, acrid scent immediately assaulted Finley's nostrils. He recoiled slightly, blinking as the fumes stung his eyes. The odor was reminiscent of rotting fruit mixed with harsh chemicals, with an underlying tang of something almost metallic.

Peering into the opening, Finley saw that the barrel was filled nearly to the brim with a viscous, oily liquid. It had a sickly yellowish tinge, like spoiled milk, and seemed to emit an unsettling greenish sheen

where the dim light struck its surface. Noxious-looking vapors curled lazily from the liquid, dissipating into the musty air of the smithy.

"What in the Origin is that?" Kelden asked, warily eyeing the barrel's contents.

"I'm not certain," Finley replied, "but I'd wager it's some sort of explosive concoction. Not black powder, but something more volatile and unstable."

He dipped a finger into the liquid and quickly withdrew it, rubbing the substance between his thumb and forefinger. It felt slick and greasy, with a consistency akin to thick syrup. As Finley rubbed it between his fingers, the liquid seemed to tingle and burn slightly against his skin, as if it contained some caustic agent.

"Don't touch it!" Arcadia exclaimed, grabbing Finley's wrist and pulling his hand away from the barrel. "We have no idea what that stuff could do. It smells awful."

Finley nodded, wiping his fingers clean on a scrap of dirty cloth lying on the worktable. "You're right. Whatever this is, it's clearly not meant for any good purpose."

Kelden leaned in closer, sniffing tentatively at the open bunghole. They immediately recoiled, coughing and sputtering as the acrid vapors assaulted their throat and lungs. "Gah, that's foul! It's like inhaling pure evil."

Can we stop it? Finley asked in his mind. Like we did with the black powder?

I don't know how this works, his talent said, its voice still muffled. I might need to see it in action.

Let's hope we don't, Finley said grimly. "We need to find out where they've taken the carronade," he said aloud, replacing the cork plug and sealing the barrel once more. "And what they intend to do with it."

"It must have been huge," Kelden observed, pointing to the piles of sand and broken staves. "How would they even move it?"

"On a cart," Finley said, pointing down. A set of wheel tracks cut through the soot and grime on the floor, leading from the center of the space toward a large sliding door at the rear of the building. The heavy barn-style door was latched firmly shut.

"We can follow the tracks," Arcadia said, heading for the open door.

They emerged into the bright light, blinking as their eyes adjusted.

The road stretched out before them, a winding ribbon of hard-packed earth that disappeared into the distant horizon. The midday sun beat down mercilessly, casting shimmering heat waves that distorted the air and made the landscape seem to ripple and dance. Dust kicked up by passing carts and horses hung suspended in the still air, creating a hazy veil that softened the edges of everything.

Finley squinted against the glare, his eyes watering as he scanned the road for any sign of the carronade's passage. But the surface was a confusing jumble of tracks—deep ruts carved by the wheels of heavily laden wagons, the delicate imprints of horse hooves, the scuffed indentations of countless human feet. The intricate web of markings overlaid and crisscrossed each other, rendering any individual track indistinguishable from the rest.

A farmer's cart trundled past, pulled by a plodding mule. The weathered boards of the cart were heaped high with plump orange pumpkins, their thick stems curling like vines. A few stray wisps of straw poked out from between the pumpkins, and the earthy scent of fresh produce mingled with the dust in the air. The farmer tipped his broad-brimmed hat to Finley and his companions as he passed, his sun-browned face creasing into a friendly smile.

"So much for that," Arcadia groused. "How much of a head start do you think they have?"

"A day. Two at the most," Kelden said.

"How can you tell?" Arcadia asked.

"There's a rune that tells you when a place was last occupied."

"Oh. Handy. Do you think they kept to the road, then?" Arcadia asked.

"For at least a way," Kelden said, although they didn't sound certain. "I don't know why—"

Finley turned back to the smithy. "Oh, no."

"What?" Arcadia asked.

"What's due north of here?"

She frowned as she considered. The downside of using magic to take you everywhere is that the actual geography of the world becomes less relevant to you.

Her eyes widened as she realized the answer.

"Evermore," Kelden said grimly. "We need to hurry."



The difficulty with iron, Finley's talent groused, is that you can't track the stuff directly. Glowing lines and curves shimmered and snapped in his mind as his talent tried combination after combination.

"How could they have recreated a carronade?" Arcadia asked. She'd used her magic to jump them toward Evermore in small increments, hoping they could catch some sign of the humans and their weapon before the trade road turned east.

"Instructions on iron sheets," Finley said distractedly as his talent wrestled with the problem. "We didn't do anything to make them forget. We just made it bad enough we hoped they'd regret it."

"You left a crater, true," Arcadia said. "But you said black powder wouldn't be explosive anymore."

It can't be, his talent confirmed.

"Whatever was in that little barrel is obviously the replacement," Finley said. "How far do you think they stayed to the trade road?"

"Not far," Kelden said, their voice flat. "They're heading toward Evermore."

"You're certain?" Finley asked.

"It's... yes. We're being summoned. That's the only reason we would be."

"This is the cabal, then," Arcadia said.

"It has to be," Finley said.

"I—" Kelden started. They turned, and saw the life drain out of their expression, their face going flat and hard and their jaw clenching shut. With a snap, their magic carried them away.

This is a very strange sensation, Finley's talent said. Something is very angry.

If you're the Origin, can you stop this? Finley demanded.

I don't actually know what's happening, it replied. I can feel it, but this isn't... this is older. Something more basic. The image of an inhuman face flashed in Finley's mind for less than a heartbeat. He had

a brief impression of deep blue skin, sharply angled ears, glossy black hair, and an expression of incalculable anger twisting its lips. It's calling them. It won't tolerate an attack on Evermore.

"We can't track iron, but we can track him," Arcadia said tightly. Before Finley could respond, Sky magic closed around them.



They arrived in a wide meadow bordered by dense forest. Finley didn't recognize it.

About halfway to Evermore, his talent supplied.

Finley and Arcadia stood at the edge of the meadow, taking in the alarming scene before them. The carronade was an imposing sight—a massive iron tube nearly ten feet long and two feet in diameter, its muzzle aimed ominously forward. The weapon sat heavily upon a sturdy wooden carriage with thick iron-banded wheels that had carved deep ruts into the soft earth during the arduous journey off the main road. Smaller crates and barrels lined the sides of the cart on either side of the enormous weapon.

A team of six powerful draft horses strained against their harnesses, their coats lathered with sweat from the exertion of hauling the tremendous weight. The animals rolled their eyes and tossed their heads, clearly agitated by the tension crackling in the air. Leather leads creaked as the horses stamped and snorted.

Tending to the horses and the carronade were a group of humans, their faces set with grim determination. They moved with practiced efficiency, checking the carronade's mounting, inspecting the carriage's axles and wheels. One man held a long rod, doubtless intended to be used as a rammer once the weapon was loaded. Another gripped a blazing torch in one white-knuckled fist, the orange flames dancing and sputtering in the breeze.

The men themselves were a ragtag bunch, dressed in an assortment of rough woolen trousers, sweat-stained linen shirts, and tattered coats that had seen better days. Despite their threadbare appearance, they carried themselves with an air of purpose, their eyes glinting with a fervor that sent a chill down Finley's spine. These were not mere peas-

ants or laborers—they were true believers, zealots willing to risk everything for their cause.

Arrayed before them were a dozen of witchkind, their dull-colored clothes livened with colorful scarves, belts, hair ties, and more. Their postures were rigid, their faces masks of cold, hard fury. They seemed to vibrate with barely restrained energy, all of their hands clenched into fists at their sides. Kelden stood near the center of the line, which was clearly a message to the humans: Come no further. Turn back.

"Kelden!" Arcadia called out, her voice cracking with desperation. "What are you doing?"

“It’s Thornwaithe’s,” Finley murmured. “It’s magic. He’s not himself.”

A strange, undefinable, indescribable pressure began building around them.

CHAPTER 14

Attack on Evermore

Whether the humans felt it or not, Finley couldn't know, but they clearly recognized an attack, and wasted no time. Four of them reached under the huge carronade and pulled out... something. Finley didn't recognize the devices, but they had the unmistakable menace of weapons.

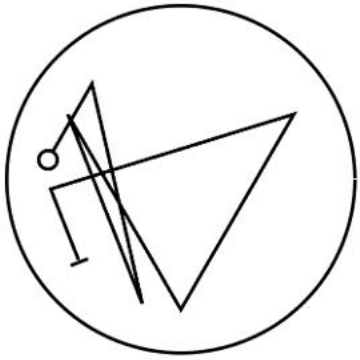
They were shaped like a capital T, with a thick stock and a short, stout bow mounted crosswise at the end. The bow was made of gleaming metal, tightly strung with what looked like thin wire. A groove ran along the top of the stock, and nestled in it was a short, stubby arrow, its tip wickedly barbed.

One of the humans hoisted the weapon to his shoulder, sighting along the groove. With a sharp twang, the bow released, and the arrow leapt forward, almost too fast for Finley to follow. It struck one of the Thornwaithe's alum square in the chest with a meaty thunk. The man crumpled soundlessly to the ground, blood gushing from the wound.

The other three humans let fly as well, and two more of the alum fell, pierced by the deadly bolts.

It happened faster than Finley could blink once.

Crossbows, his talent supplied. *I don't know why I know that. They're...* right *here, somehow. Notwithstanding,* it added, and a new rune flashed into Finley's mind.



I'm liking this technique, it said abstractedly as Finley poured magic into the rune.

Purple fire sparked off the metal parts of the crossbows, but the wooden stocks and sharply curved bows instantly burst into flames. The humans shouted with alarm, dropping the weapons as the wood components crumbled into ash and sparks continued to cascade from the metal remains.

Arcadia was taking action as well: Sharp lances of Sky magic threshed through the ankle-high grass of the meadow, arrowing toward the horse's hooves. The horses panicked, rearing and screaming, letting the cart roll back a foot or so into the ruts it had created in the soft earth. "Kelden!" she shouted. "Look—"

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"—out!"

Kelden heard the distant, fuzzy warning through the cold, pounding anger that filled his mind. It was unnecessary, irrelevant: all that mattered was the existential, intolerable threat before him. All that mattered was the insult of being attacked by iron bolts, sharp metal spears that drove through the wall of pure magic that should have protected them and their fellows. They felt their lips peel back

from his teeth in a snarl, as if it was something happening to someone else.

A prickle of magic heralded the arrival of a half-dozen more Thornwaithe's alum. Replacements and reinforcements, although at a cost: Kelden could already feel magic's pressure lessening as it redistributed itself across them all. This, they knew, was the downside to how Thornwaithe's worked. More alum meant more magic could be channeled, but that magic's focus would be spread thinner, forcing its responses to less nuanced approaches.

Right now, the alum needed to spread out, encircle the threat and crush it back into the earth from whence it had come, but the sheer mass of iron before them was playing havoc with magic itself. Kelden could feel magic prodding them all to *move,* while at the same time it gnashed its teeth at the interference from the immense amount of iron before them.

Kelden's eyes gleamed with magical fury as they surveyed the scene before them. The huge iron carronade loomed like a malevolent presence, its bulk distorting the very fabric of magic. Sickly green and purple sparks sputtered and danced across its pitted surface, the semi-sentient magic of the Thornwaithe's alum now vainly trying to corrode and destroy the offensive metal. But the carronade resisted, an impenetrable bastion against the onslaught. Kelden could feel the magic moving through them, its direction and purpose set not by runes but by magic's own frustration and fear. But they could also feel the iron pushing back, sucking their power into itself and grounding it into the earth. Magic that could have destroyed an entire fishing fleet in a heartbeat was barely sufficient to create a light patina on the carronade's surface.

The humans had retreated to huddle in the shadow of their weapon, clearly realizing it afforded them some measure of protection against the alum's invisible attack. They crouched there like frightened rabbits, eyes wide and chests heaving. One clutched a blackened crossbow stock to his chest like a talisman.

Beyond them, magic swirled in iridescent eddies, pushed back by the carronade's presence. It pulsed angrily, a seething morass of barely restrained power seeking any outlet for its rage. Kelden could feel it

beating against their skin like a living thing, demanding vengeance, demanding blood, demanding an end to this assault on witchkind.

They took a step forward, their boots crushing the scorched grass to ash. The magic rippled outward from their feet in visible waves, like the surface of a still pond disturbed by a cast stone. It lapped against the carronade and recoiled, repulsed.

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"We need those humans alive," Finley said with a grimace. "We need to find out where this came from. Where it's going."

"Tell that to them," Arcadia said through gritted teeth. "Ah-ah," she added, sending a burst of air toward the human still holding the sputtering torch. The flame blew out just as the man managed to touch it to the back of the carronade.

"That thing's loaded," Finley realized with alarm. Then he remembered the small barrels of foul-smelling, oily liquid. "Arcadia, those little barrels—"

Her eyes widened in alarm. "Kelden!" she shouted again.

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"Kelden!"

The cry was even more muffled as the magic in the meadow continued to build, as magic itself found more of its focus and energy. It vectored around the carronade, bright wisps darting around the iron, likely visible even to the humans who were conversing quickly, trying to device a response.

Kelden's jaw clenched tighter. More alum had been summoned, but the magic had reached a balancing point with the huge tube of iron, and travel magics sparked and failed as the additional alum tried to arrive. They'd be lying in pain wherever they'd originated—assuming

they weren't injured or worse. Kelden pressed against the magic's dull intelligence. *Have them arrive further out,* they insisted. *They can run the rest of the way.* But they had no sense that the magic had heard them, let alone understood the tactic.

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Finley set off at a run, heading for the carronade.

"Finley!" Arcadia shouted.

Magic here is getting very strange right now, Finley's talent warned him. It started forming a defensive rune in his mind, but the flickering lines couldn't seem to settle into a suitable pattern. Even Finley's personal magic roiled within him, upset by the magical storm happening around him and by the implacable magic-sink of the carronade he was sprinting toward.

He heard Arcadia sprinting behind him.

***

The magic tried a new attack, funneling immeasurable amounts of pure mystical energy through the alum. Kelden's head rocked back as every muscle in his body tried to contract at once in response to the rush of power. If it couldn't surround the threat and crush it as it usually did, then the magic would attempt to overwhelm it, blasting it to pieces in a single mighty blow.

It almost worked.

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. . .

The horses were obliterated, situated as they were in front of the carronade. Finley and Arcadia threw themselves to the ground as a torrent of gore rushed past overhead. With a *crack,* the wooden cart shattered into a billion shards and splinters, shredding into the humans who'd taken refuge behind the carronade. The enormous metal tube itself crashed to the ground with a heavy *thump* that both Finley and Arcadia felt through the earth. Magic, visible as coruscating red and purple lighting, sparked from the carronade, the metal fittings of the cart, and the iron bands that had once wrapped around the rims of the cart's wheels.

The small barrels exploded.

The world erupted in a cataclysm of sound and fury.

Finley and Arcadia were flung backwards as if swatted by the hand of an angry giant, tumbling end over end through the air. The shockwave hit them like a physical blow, crushing the breath from their lungs. Finley's ears rang with a shrill, unending tone, all other noise drowned out by the deafening roar of the explosion.

The ground where the cart had stood was simply gone, replaced by a smoldering crater twenty feet across. Dirt and rocks rained down from the heavens, torn free and launched skyward by the titanic blast. Flaming chunks of wood pinwheeled through the air, the sad remnants of the sturdy cart transmuted in an instant to blazing projectiles.

Of the iron carronade, there was no sign. The immense tube must have been blown to atoms, vaporized by the unimaginable forces unleashed upon it. Only a twisted, molten stub of metal protruded from the center of the crater to mark its passing.

The humans had fared little better. Three charred corpses littered the edge of the crater, blasted beyond all recognition. Scraps of smoldering clothing and lumps of seared flesh were all that remained, still smoking in the aftermath of the explosion. Dark blood pooled beneath them, already attracting buzzing flies.

But against all odds, one man still lived. He lay on his back a dozen yards from the crater's edge, chest heaving as he gasped for air. His clothing was tattered and scorched, and blood seeped from a myriad of cuts and gashes. But his eyes were open, staring blankly at the smoke-filled sky.

Finley struggled to his feet, head still ringing from the blast. He stumbled towards the prone figure, Arcadia close behind. As they approached, the man's eyes flickered towards them, struggling to focus. His lips moved, forming words they couldn't hear over the persistent whine in their ears.

Finley knelt beside him, hands moving automatically to staunch the worst of the bleeding. The man weakly batted at his hands, still trying to speak. Finley leaned closer, straining to make out the words.

"...can't...stop..." the man wheezed, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. "More...coming...witches...will fall..."

A chill ran down Finley's spine at the ominous words. He exchanged a grim look with Arcadia. If this man spoke the truth...

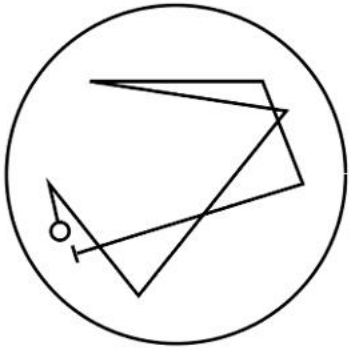
"We need answers," Arcadia breathed.

"He's barely alive," Finley said. "I'm no good with the Healing runes—"

"Won't work on them anyway," she reminded him.

"Dust, I forgot. How can we—"

Clay is malleable, his talent mused.



Finley didn't question it, and began pouring magic through the rune. It spread from his hands, settling over the injured human like a blanket. Instantly, a thousand thin cuts began to close.

"How—" Arcadia began.

Humans don't ground magic. I explained that. They're full of it. It

actually comes from *them, so strongly it drowns out almost anything you can do to them. It starts at the roots of the world, and fountains through the—well, we can discuss that later. But it's connected to their bones. If you're very careful, and if you use the right mix of Earth and Sky, you can heal the flesh. Not completely, but... enough.*

The voice faded, as if that exposition had tired it. Finley relayed what it had told him to Arcadia.

"That's... incredible. As in I very literally don't know if I can believe it. And... it's talking to you that much now?"

"Entire sentences," Finley said wearily as the healing magic finished its work. "You," he said as the human opened his eyes. "Where were you going?"

The man shook his head slightly, his chest still heaving.

I can make him talk, Finley's talent offered.

I'm all but empty, he pointed out. The healing rune had taken more of his magic than he'd expected, and the local magic was still in disarray, unwilling to be Gathered.

"Are you both okay?" Kelden said, coming over and kneeling behind them.

"I should ask the same of you," Arcadia said.

"It's... gone. For now. I think... I didn't know it was possible, but I think it may have overexerted itself. But the carronade isn't going to move, so I guess the threat is over." You," they said, reaching past Finley to shake the man. "Where were you going?"

"I'd answer him," Finley suggested. "He's the one who did that to your weapon."

Kelden cocked an eyebrow but didn't offer a contradiction.

The man's eyes had widened. "We were told iron..."

"Some of us are immune," Kelden said, truthfully enough. "Where were you going? I won't ask again."

"Witch city," the man coughed, closing his eyes.

The three exchanged worried glances. "You know about that?" Arcadia asked.

"Scouted for weeks."

"And you were going to attack it?" Finley asked.

The man nodded silently, eyes still closed.

"How did you know how to build this?" Arcadia asked.

The man grinned weakly. "Can't steal our knowledge anymore," he whispered.

"Someone gave you the plans?"

No response.

"On iron sheets?"

His eyes flickered open and he looked at her. Then he attempted a shrug and let his eyes fall closed.

"You were supposed to stop," Finley said tightly, in as low a voice as possible, aware that the Thornwaithe's alum were closing in. "There was a compromise."

The man grinned again. "No compromise. Suffer not a witch to live."

The other alum had clustered closer, keeping a respectful distance between themselves and the remaining piece of iron. "If he knows, we can't let him go," one of them said coldly.

"We can't—" Finley began.

"When it recovers, the magic, it'll take us again and do it anyway," Kelden said quietly.

Finley looked at Arcadia, who simply shrugged. "No love lost. They killed three of us."

Finley rocked back on his heels and considered.

I could modify his memories, his talent offered.

"I could modify his memories," he repeated aloud. "Make him forget."

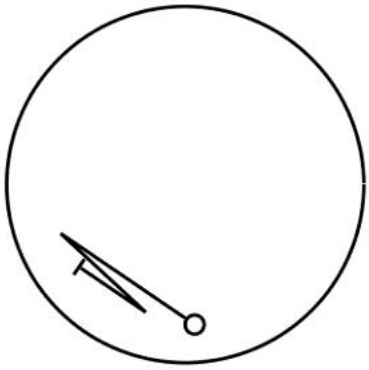
The man's eyes opened wide at that and he turned his head to stare at Finley.

The other alum looked at each other, and came to a silent conclusion. "If you can."

You're going to need magic, though. Sky would be best. A touch of Flame.

Can I show someone else?

His talent considered. *Probably. Show them this.*



Finley used a finger to sketch the rune in a clear patch of earth. "It needs Sky magic. And a bit of Flame."

"I have both," one of the alum said, peering over Finley's shoulder. "What is it?"

"A rune," Finley said with a sigh. No sense keeping secrets at this point. "A new kind."

"Doesn't look like a rune," the woman said hesitantly.

"Just empower it," Finley instructed. "Mostly Sky, a bit of Flame. It'll... you'll probably feel it pull what it wants."

He turned to look at her and she frowned, but nodded. "What will he forget?"

Everything about magic and witchkind, his talent assured him. *It's... a bit of the Veil, in a way.*

Can we make them forget the carronade?

His talent hesitated. *No,* it decided. *There used to be a way, but... no.*

"Magic. Witchkind. Evermore. Everything we need him to. Cast it, and we'll leave him here."

"He'll die anyway," one of them observed.

"Not at our hand," Finley said firmly.

"What about this thing?" another alum asked, pointing at the crater and its lump of molten iron.

"If any of you are good with Sea and Earth," Finley said tiredly, rising to his feet, "we can probably get it to start corroding. If you can pull enough magic together it can be a rusted hulk before sundown.

Then someone with Earth—and some magic left in them—can cover it up. Restore the meadow."

"I'm Sea," someone offered. More voices spoke up, volunteering for the effort.

"Okay," Finley said, crouching back to the ground. "Then you'll want to use this," as he sketched a new, angular rune into the soft earth. "But go slowly with it, and spread yourselves out."

Finley and Arcadia drew back as the alum went to work, several of them focusing their magic on the carronade, a pair pulling the human bodies out of the way, and the woman continuing to cast the slow, delicate magic that would modify the survivor's memories. Kelden was the only one who'd venture close to the carronade, and he began kicking at the earth, picking up pieces of wooden shrapnel. Most were dropped back to the ground, but he held onto a few. After some time, he walked over to Finley and Arcadia and showed him what he'd found.

Arcadia's eyes widened.

Well, that's unexpected, Finley's talent said softly.

"Those are runes," Finley breathed. "Middle Runic."

"Primitive," Kelden said, nodding agreement.

Hey, now, Finley's talent bristled.

"These were pieces of the cart," Arcadia said.

"Yes," Kelden agreed. "These are the biggest pieces left, I think. But it must have been carved all over." He looked to Finley. "You recognize them?"

Durability, strength, steadiness, his talent supplied.

"They would have made the cart stronger," Finley said aloud.

"It *was* a relatively light cart for such a heavy load," Arcadia said.

"So the question becomes," Finley said slowly, "whether this was a general use cart that someone routinely strengthened..."

"Or whether someone of witchkind was in league with these humans," Kelden finished bleakly.

"The iron would have interfered with the runes," Finley pointed out hopefully.

Not entirely, his talent said slowly. *My—these runes are less delicate. Around this much iron, they wouldn't have been fully functional, but... And look, that one. It would have reduced the overall mass, at least*

slightly. If there were more of those, it would have made the horses' work easier.

"Maybe not," Finley amended, relaying the new information.

"I think," Arcadia said carefully, "we need to speak to someone about this."

"Dmitry," Finley agreed. "With any luck they've gotten Ram into a bed by now."

"I was thinking of someone else," Arcadia said quietly as she pulled a last bit of Sky magic around them and they vanished.

CHAPTER 15

Investigation

Where are—" Finley began as Arcadia's magic deposited them on the edge of another small village. "Wait, is this Desivale?"

"It is," Arcadia said, leading them quickly into the village proper.

Desivale was a quaint hamlet nestled against the sprawling expanse of the Great Northern Wood. The village seemed to emerge from the very forest itself, with sturdy wooden homes and shops built from the towering oak, elm, and ash trees that populated the dense woodland. The main thoroughfare was a well-trodden dirt path that meandered through the heart of the village, flanked by cozy cottages with thatched roofs and small gardens bursting with herbs and vegetables.

As Finley and Arcadia walked deeper into Desivale, they couldn't help but feel a sense of warmth and welcome. The villagers, mostly humans with a smattering of witchkind, went about their daily tasks with a quiet determination. The blacksmith's forge glowed with the heat of molten metal as he crafted tools and horseshoes, his muscular arms glistening with sweat. The baker pulled fragrant loaves of bread from a stone oven, the aroma of fresh-baked goodness wafting through the crisp autumn air.

Children played in the small village green, their laughter and shouts of joy intermingling with the gentle clucking of chickens and the distant bleating of goats. An old woman sat on a bench near the well,

her nimble fingers weaving a basket from supple willow branches as she hummed a haunting melody. A group of farmers loaded carts with the bounty of their harvest—plump pumpkins, crisp apples, and golden sheaves of wheat—preparing to take their goods to market.

Arcadia led Finley to a small, unassuming cottage on the outskirts of the village. The dwelling was surrounded by a well-tended garden, filled with fragrant herbs and late-blooming flowers. A simple wooden sign hung above the door, bearing the image of a mortar and pestle.

Finley's eyes scanned the structure automatically, quickly spotting the entry rune that'd been clever worked into a frieze along one corner. Arcadia made straight for it, and as she reached to touch it, both Finley and Kelden quickly laid a hand on her shoulders.

A quick, fresh swirl of magic took them, transporting them into the hidden space of the cottage's witchkind resident.

The small anteroom they found themselves in was a stark contrast to the simple, rustic charm of Desivale. The walls were draped in rich, vibrant tapestries depicting scenes of imaginary creatures and otherworldly landscapes. Plush, colorful cushions were scattered about the room, inviting visitors to sit and relax. The air was filled with the gentle tinkling of wind chimes and the soothing scent of lavender and chamomile.

A delicate crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a warm, ethereal glow throughout the space. The light danced off the surfaces of various trinkets and curiosities that lined the shelves—a shimmering geode, an ancient tome bound in deep blue leather, and a collection of intricately carved wooden figurines.

In one corner of the anteroom, a small fountain burbled softly, its water cascading over smooth river stones and filling the room with the gentle sound of flowing water. Floating candles bobbed on the surface of the fountain's basin, their flickering flames adding to the enchanting ambiance.

Arcadia approached a small, ornate bell hanging near the far wall and gave it a gentle ring. The clear, melodic chime seemed to hang in the air, reverberating through the room with a subtle magical energy. As the sound faded, a sense of anticipation filled the space, as if the very walls were holding their breath in expectation of the resident's arrival.

She came quickly, bustling through an ornately carved wooden door, her eyes lighting when she saw Arcadia.

"Arcadia, my dear! Oh, and Finley! It's wonderful to see you!"

"Cat?" Finley asked, his eyes flying open in surprise.

Caitlin Novell, or Cat as she was affectionately known, beamed at her former apprentices with a warm, grandmotherly smile. Her face was a tapestry of laugh lines and wrinkles, each one a testament to a life filled with joy and wisdom. Her skin was a rich, warm brown, glowing with an inner radiance that seemed to defy her age. Her hair, a halo of silver curls, framed her face like a crown, catching the light from the chandelier and casting a soft, ethereal glow around her head.

Cat's eyes, a deep, soulful brown, sparkled with mischief and intelligence. They held a depth of knowledge and understanding that could only be earned through a lifetime of experience and learning. When she looked at Finley and Arcadia, those eyes were filled with a mixture of pride, affection, and a hint of playful mischief, as if she knew secrets that she couldn't wait to share.

She wore a flowing, deep purple robe that seemed to shimmer and shift with every movement, as if it were woven from the very fabric of magic itself. The robe was adorned with intricate embroidery in shades of gold and silver. Around her neck hung a delicate silver pendant in the shape of a crescent moon, inlaid with a single, shimmering amethyst.

"I had no idea you'd settled here," Finley admitted. "When you left, I—"

"I made it quick," she acknowledged with a smile. "I've never enjoyed goodbyes, especially in the Order. But I'd always wanted to live near the Wood, although not so much that I'd turn Woodwitch. This little village is the perfect compromise. But come, come! Let's get you comfortable. I'll make tea." She gestured them through the door, and Finley heard a gentle tinkling of dishwater from the next room as Cat's magic set a tea set into motion.

The sitting room was a haven of comfort and warmth, an inviting space that seemed to wrap its arms around Finley, Kelden, and Arcadia as they stepped inside. The walls were painted a soft, buttery yellow, like the first rays of sunrise filtering through a cozy bedroom window. The hardwood floors, worn smooth by countless footsteps and years of love,

were covered in a patchwork of colorful, hand-woven rugs that seemed to tell stories of their own.

A large, overstuffed sofa dominated the center of the room, its plush cushions upholstered in a cheerful floral print of deep reds, vibrant oranges, and soft greens. Throw pillows in complementary patterns and colors were scattered across the sofa, inviting one to sink into their softness and let the cares of the world melt away. On either side of the sofa stood two well-worn, but undeniably comfortable, armchairs. Their faded blue fabric bore the marks of countless hours of contented reading and quiet contemplation.

A low, rustic coffee table sat in front of the sofa, its surface adorned with a vase of fresh wildflowers, their delicate petals dancing in the gentle breeze from the open windows. Stacks of well-loved books were piled haphazardly on the table, their spines creased and their pages dog-eared from frequent use. As they sat, a well-worn silver tray floated from the kitchen, bearing a mismatched tea set centered by a large, steaming, potbellied teapot.

The teacups filled and distributed themselves, and everyone took a moment to enjoy the light, herbaceous scent before Cat spoke. "So. Introductions, first. Who's this?"

"Kelden," Finley said. "Graduated, more or less, but working with me for a while."

"And I'm Cat, as you've gathered," she said with a smile. "I used to be in charge of wrangling you young ones for the Order, but I'd had my fill." Her expression grew more serious as she took a sip of tea. "Now, I can't imagine this is a mere social call, so why don't you get to it?"

Arcadia took over, explaining the attempted attack on Evermore and the carronade. She highlighted some of their recent missions, focusing on the Order's expanding desire to stop humans from having *anything*. She finished with Ram's collapse.

"He's also been conferring with the Taryba a lot more," Finley added. "Which I guess is fine, but—"

Cat frowned. "Not Adomaitis, I hope."

"That's the one," Arcadia muttered.

"Well," Cat said, leaning back with a sigh. "Unwelcome news."

"I will admit that I'm completely ignorant of the politics of this," Finley said quietly.

"Me too," Kelden said.

"There are more or less three factions at the present," Cat said. "Well, always have been, I suppose. The first, and traditionally largest, has been the maintain the status quo. Witchkind lives in secret alongside humans, as we have for centuries since shortly after the Forging of the Axes. We let the Veil cover our mistakes, and we use our magic to fill in where the humans can't."

"The second faction has always been smaller, but they've grown," Arcadia continued. "They're the ones who drove the creation of the Order in the first place. They hold that humans need to be actively held back. That some innovations are dangerous, and that their reliance on our magic is the lever we can use to protect ourselves if the Veil ever falls."

"And those two factions aren't entirely incompatible," Cat pointed out. "They've coexisted for... well, as long as anyone can remember. Certainly since the Thinning of the Veil, around the time that the Age of the Adherents ended."

Finley's talent muttered darkly in the corners of his mind.

"What's new is the third faction, which Adomaitis speaks for. They've grown substantially larger." Cat sighed and took another sip of tea. "They hold that witchkind should be the *masters* of humans. That we should not only reveal ourselves in time, but that we should *subjugate* the humans before doing so, and rule them afterwards."

That's not sane, Finley's talent said flatly.

"But that's who Ram's been speaking to," Finley protested.

"Which explains why the Order's priorities have broadened," Arcadia said grimly. "But this intersects with this cabal of humans I told you about, Cat."

"Yes, that's a disturbing new twist. Having a group of them actively working against you... is new."

"We thought there was a compromise," Finley said sadly. "They've developed a metal, an alloy of iron, that doesn't affect our magic. It felt like... a peace offering."

Can nodded slowly. "That would certainly change the dynamic. If

the humans were willing to abandon pure iron in favor of this alloy... many of witchkind could be persuaded to let them have their advancements. More of them, at least. But Adomaitis' faction?" She shook her head firmly. "Never." Then she sighed again. "But I honestly never thought Ram would go to their side. He was always so... *dedicated* to the Order's charter. He never *hated* humans."

"Did you know him well, then?" Kelden asked.

Cat snorted, almost spraying a mouthful of tea. "I should say so. We were married, for a time."

Arcadia and Finley were struck dumb, their jaws falling open as they stared at their former teacher.

"What?" she asked. "You didn't know?"

"Certainly not," Arcadia said.

Cat shrugged. "Well, there it is. We grew apart, though. Not in our dedication to the mission, or ever its direction. Just... the pressures of the job, I suppose. He was always so worried. There was just less and less room in him for *us."*

"What do you think has changed him?" Kelden asked.

The germ of an idea sparkled in Finley's mind. "Did you know Dmitry well?"

Cat snorted. "Too well, if anything. Sneaky man. Never clear where his allegiances were. Ram took him on after he and I... separated. It was peaceable enough, but I know he felt badly about it. Us, I mean. Dmitry has been a field operative—one of our worst, I might add, clumsy and inefficient on his best days—and he wheedled his way into a permanent posting at the Farm."

"He's basically running things now," Arcadia said.

Cat nodded sadly. "Someone has to. It saddens me to hear about Ram's health, but... honestly, this is why I had to break it off. This day was always going to come, and I think I needed to say my goodbyes on my own terms."

"Cat, what do you make of this?" Kelden asked, withdrawing the splintered remains of the carronade cart and sliding them to her across the low table.

She twisted the pieces this way and that. "Middle Runic? Don't see that much anymore. How old are these?"

"Not very," Finley said. "These are the remains of the cart that carried the carronade we told you about."

Cat shook her head. "Another of those in such a short time."

"They came up with a new explosive. That's what did most of the damage," Finley said.

Cat continued to stare at the shards. "My Middle Runic is rusty. I went to Duocastella's, you know. Very big on ancient history, but you forget when you don't use it all the time. Simpler runes, and they took a lot less magic. They'd have been partly functional even next to all that iron, you know." She frowned. "Was this cart repurposed for the carronade, or made special for it?"

"That's the question," Finley said. "Any of those runes would have been useful on any cart, making it stronger, lightening the load, and all that."

"And who would have helped do this explicitly for the carronade?" Kelden asked.

"And who would use Middle Runic, instead of New?" Arcadia added.

"Well," Cat said with another, heavier sigh, "in terms of 'who,' you'd be surprised. We don't talk about it much, but *išdavikų klanas* is a thing."

Finley's talent translated before he could do it himself. *Traitor clans. Don't get me started.*

"Traitor clans?" Arcadia said, her brow wrinkling. "Tell me I have that wrong."

"You do not," Cat said sadly. "They come up now and again, throughout history. We studied some of them at school, in fact—I was quite the student of history, back then. Fascinating stuff. There's even a theory that there has only ever been *one išdavikų klanas*, and that they've simply changed their clan name again and again to hide themselves."

Finley felt a sudden tension in his shoulders, and realized it was coming from his talent. "What," he asked carefully as a restless concern settled over his mind, "was the clan's name?"

"Well, as I said, it's only a *theory* that it's been one clan. Far more likely it's been multiple clans over the centuries. They all claim to be

working for the betterment of witchkind, but most often it's for the betterment of themselves."

The name, Finley's talent insisted.

"What's *a* name, then?" Finley asked.

"The most famous was centuries ago," Cat said, frowning slightly as she tried to recall. "I believe it was Karal."

Finley's talent screamed with rage.

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"Are you okay?" Arcadia asked Finley.

"Yeah, I'm better," he said quietly. His talent's rage had cooled into a simmering hatred, but at least he could think through it. "Thanks. What did you tell Cat?"

"That it was probably just fatigue."

"Thanks."

His talent's anger had come out in an involuntary and very audible cry, as Finley's face flushed so red it was almost purple. Everyone had worked to calm him, and after he'd taken a few shuddering breaths and managed to speak in a normal voice, Arcadia had made excuses and they'd left Cat's comfortable home. They were now back on the edge of the village, its noises settling into a murmur as the sun neared the horizon.

"I don't want to go back to the Farm just now," Arcadia said, looking back toward the village. "Look, there's a perfectly good inn here. One of witchkind, so we can be ourselves. Can we stay the night? I have... something I want you both to see, but it'd be better in the daylight."

"Sure," Finley said tiredly. "I need to Gather anyway. I'm still near empty."

"Deal," Arcadia said. "Kelden, make sure he doesn't fall over on the way there. It's not far. I'll get us rooms, you get a hot meal into him, and we'll pass out until morning."

Finley gratefully gave himself over to Kelden, and combined with

his talent's continued, fuming wrath, managed to ignore everything until his head sank into a soft, fresh-smelling pillow.

***

Arcadia awoke them before sunrise, her demeanor tense and drawn. "Change of plans. I've had a Sending."

"A mission?" Finley asked blearily as he used magic to clean himself and his clothes.

"No. A friend. Come on." She surrounded them with magic.

***

"I always manage to forget that Chiton is never warm," Finley grumbled as they arrived. Chiton was a large enough town that witchkind had created several fully enclosed courtyards specifically for magical arrivals and departures, and Arcadia had taken them to one of these. They hurried to one side to clear the space as Finley empowered a rune that would blanket them with warmth. A rune carved into the stone wall of the courtyard whisked them into a narrow alley, which led to one of the town's main roads.

Chiton was a bustling, sprawling town that teetered on the edge of becoming a full-fledged city, rivaling even Evermore in size and population. The streets were a labyrinth of cobblestone paths, winding their way between towering buildings constructed from rough-hewn stone and polished granite slabs. The architecture was a testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the town's inhabitants, with structures rising up to three stories high, their peaked roofs piercing the grey, overcast sky.

Despite the biting cold that permeated the air, the streets of Chiton were alive with activity. Throngs of humans, bundled in drab, heavy woolen cloaks and thick, fur-lined boots, hurried about their daily busi-

ness, their breath forming ephemeral clouds in the frigid atmosphere. The cacophony of footsteps, creaking cart wheels, and the occasional whinny of a horse created a constant, pulsating rhythm that echoed through the narrow alleyways and broad avenues.

The town's main thoroughfare was a sight to behold. Tall, narrow buildings lined the street, their facades adorned with intricately carved wooden shutters and weathered, wrought-iron balconies. The ground floors of these buildings housed an array of shops and businesses, their wares displayed in frosty, fogged-up windows. The scent of freshly baked bread mingled with the pungent odor of tanning leather, creating a unique olfactory tapestry that hung in the chilled air.

As Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden navigated the bustling streets, they couldn't help but marvel at the resilience and determination of Chiton's inhabitants. Despite the harsh climate and the ever-present threat of winter's icy grip, the people here had built a thriving community, one that pulsed with life and vitality.

They passed by a blacksmith's forge, the heat from the glowing coals providing a momentary respite from the biting cold. The rhythmic clanging of hammer on anvil echoed through the street as the skilled artisan shaped a piece of red-hot metal into a horseshoe. Next door, a weaver sat at her loom, her nimble fingers guiding the shuttle back and forth, creating an intricate tapestry depicting a snow-capped mountain range.

Arcadia led them through a maze of side streets and alleyways, seeming to navigate the town's layout with an uncanny familiarity. They eventually emerged into a small, secluded square, its center dominated by a weathered stone fountain. The water in the basin had long since frozen over, creating a shimmering, icy surface that reflected the muted light filtering through the overcast sky.

A light dusting of snow began to fall from the sky.

"This way," Arcadia said, guiding them towards a nondescript wooden door set into the side of a squat, two-story building. She pushed through the door, gestured for Finley and Kelden to hurry in, and closed it firmly behind her. *"Liepsna,"* she whispered, and a series of oil lamps set into the stone walls flared to life, offering a dim, flickering view of granite steps leading down.

As they descended the granite steps, the air grew warmer and more humid with each step, a stark contrast to the biting cold outside. The flickering light from the oil lamps cast dancing shadows on the rough-hewn walls, creating an eerie, almost otherworldly atmosphere. The sound of their footsteps echoed through the narrow passageway, mingling with the distant, muffled sounds of activity from below.

At the bottom of the stairs, they emerged into a vast, high-ceilinged basement that buzzed with human activity. The space was dominated by a series of towering brass furnaces, their polished surfaces gleaming in the warm, amber light that suffused the room. The furnaces were fed by a constant stream of coal, shoveled into their gaping maws by a team of soot-stained workers, their faces glistening with sweat and their muscles straining with the effort.

From the top of each furnace, a profusion of brass pipes sprouted like the branches of a metallic tree, twisting and turning as they snaked their way across the ceiling and down the walls. The pipes were adorned with a myriad of valves, gauges, and dials, each one meticulously labeled with intricate, hand-painted signs. The air was filled with the hissing and clanking of the pipes as steam coursed through them, carrying heat and energy to unknown destinations.

The heat in the basement was oppressive, and the humidity clung to their skin like a damp, heavy blanket. Finley felt beads of sweat forming on his brow as he squinted through the hazy, steam-filled air, trying to make sense of the intricate network of pipes and machinery that surrounded them.

"What is this place?" Kelden asked, his voice barely audible over the constant hissing and clattering of the furnaces.

“Heat,” Arcadia said, leaning close so they could hear her. “Those big boilers are full of water, and it’s boiled into steam. The steam feeds out through those pipes, and into all the nearby buildings. It’s *heat.* There are two of these in the town, and they’re in the middle of building another one.”

Finley’s chest grew tight. “They sent you to destroy them, didn’t they?”

Arcadia nodded, a defiant expression on her face. “Half the people here couldn’t afford firewood. And there was a real treat of them

cutting down every tree within a day's ride of the town. This is more efficient, and they all get to stay warm. But look."

She pointed, and they realized that one of the furnaces had been damaged. A gaping, ragged hole had been blown in its side, steam still floating lazily out. A group of people were gathered near that furnace, examining it and occasionally glancing with trepidation at the hole.

"Explosion?" Finley asked.

"Obviously," Arcadia said tightly. "But not a natural one. These don't produce much pressure."

"Wait," Kelden said. "Did... *we* do anything? For heat? Before these were built?"

Arcadia nodded again. "Nothing organized, but yes. Any building with a secret space in it was kept warm, but it took a constant stream of magic. Half the... of *us* in the town were near-exhausted, all the time. Shifts were organized, with people sitting up all night just to ensure the heat remained steady. But that still wasn't *every* building." She leaned even closer. "And the *idea for the invention was from one of us."*

Finley's eyes widened.

She nodded at his expression. "I was surprised as well. But they'd seen the iron roadway's iron horses at a distance, and wondered if something similar couldn't be done here." She gestured to the giant boilers and their maze of piping. "No iron. Conserves magic. Makes life here better for *everyone."* She pointed. "There, the woman with the blue headscarf. Vabaliene. This was all her idea."

"So you left it alone," Kelden said.

"Obviously."

"But this one still exploded," Finley said.

Arcadia shook her head. "Not on its own. Vabaliene sent for me. This happened late last night." The blue-scarfed woman had turned and noticed them, and was now walking quickly in their direction.

Finley slowly put it together. "You're saying the Order noticed. And sent someone else."

"I assume so."

"So what now?"

Vabaliene gave them a tight smile, and gave Arcadia a quick hug. "We must talk, but not here. Arcadia, do you remember Troi's?"

Arcadia nodded quickly and gestured for everyone to follow her. She led them back up the stairs and outside, and then to a tall, narrow building that hosted a pub on its ground floor. She walked directly to one side of the building and reached for an entry rune carved there.

They found themselves transported into a hidden haven within the walls of the human pub, another of the secret spaces known only to witchkind. The room they entered was a stark contrast to the rustic exterior of the building, exuding an air of refined elegance and sophistication that hinted at the early stirrings of a new era.

The walls were adorned with intricate tapestries, their vibrant threads depicting scenes of mythical creatures and enchanted landscapes. The rich hues of crimson, emerald, and gold seemed to dance in the warm, inviting light cast by the ornate brass chandeliers suspended from the vaulted ceiling. The chandeliers themselves were masterpieces of craftsmanship, their delicate curves and flourishes a testament to the skill of the artisans and magic that had forged them. The word *pub* was too crass, too coarse, for this space. *Dining establishment* was far more appropriate.

Beneath their feet, the polished hardwood floors gleamed with a warm, honeyed hue, reflecting the soft glow of the chandeliers above. The wood was inlaid with intricate patterns of lighter and darker shades, creating mesmerizing geometric designs that seemed to shift and change as they walked across the room.

The furnishings of the dining room were a harmonious blend of comfort and opulence. Plush, velvet-upholstered armchairs in deep shades of burgundy and forest green were scattered throughout the space, inviting patrons to sink into their luxurious depths. Arcadia nodded to a server, who directed them to an empty table and brought them menus printed in glowing letter on thick parchment.

"This is... *nice,"* Finley said in quiet awe.

"It's gotten to be a bit of a competition with the witchkind businesses here," Arcadia said. "Let's just have a round of small ale and something to nibble on," she directed the server, who smiled and hurried away. "And to answer your original question, no, nobody had noticed for *moons*. Ram gave me this assignment personally, and I never turned in a field report. I suspect... well, it's likely Dmitry didn't know I

was sent here. He keeps Ram organized, and I figured if he didn't know, then nobody would follow up. Obviously someone did."

"Ram's been distracted," Finley admitted.

"And he never used to be," Arcadia said, lightly slapping the table with her hand. "He was always sharp. Always on it. This situation with the Taryba, and Dmitry is probably pushing him, it's all made him... distracted. Yes. Also..." she paused, and then shrugged. "I even took steps, in case anyone did follow up."

"Steps?" Kelden asked, his brow wrinkling.

"You can't see it unless you crawl under them, which I would *not* recommend doing when they're hot, but I added runes to the brass. On the bottoms."

A smile played across Vabaliene's lips.

"That do what?" Finley asked.

"Nothing. They're not empowered. But they *could* be, and they'd produce heat. So if someone really went looking, it'd—"

"—look like witchkind was really behind the whole thing," Finley finished, smiling. "Clever. Have you done that before?"

"In a few cases."

"So magic as a backup plan," Finley said.

"More or less. I guess. It just seemed... *wasteful.* And pointless."

"I wish I'd thought of that," Vabaliene sighed. "I was just trying to make things easier for everyone."

"Vabaliene, those things are staffed all night, aren't they?" Arcadia asked.

"They are."

"So nobody noticed anything?"

"Oh," she said flatly, "they definitely *noticed."*

"What does that mean?" Finley asked.

"I was summoned as soon as it happened. I've grown used to working with the humans, and we try to have someone of witchkind in one of the boiler rooms at all times. Enrich wasn't in that one, but they knew to send for him to get me."

"And?"

Vabaliene's expression grew tighter. "The humans were muttering of *witchcraft.* They said a man appeared—he could have walked into the

boiler room as you did, nobody pays much attention to people who come and go—and that his hands began glowing. He shouted some words, and the boiler exploded."

Everyone's eyebrows rose with alarm. "Just the one?"

Vabaliene gave them a menacing smile. "The people of Chiton are not easily cowed. They attacked, and they have a few iron tools on hand. The man vanished."

"I don't know what to say," Finley said quietly.

"I know there is a... group," Vabaliene said quietly, her expression now serious, "that tries to prevent dangerous human innovations. Arcadia, when we last met, you implied as much."

"There is, and we're part of it, but we're not happy with it, and regardless, our goal is *secrecy*. We don't blatantly show up wielding Flame magic and blow things up."

"Well, not usually," Finley amended, recalling the first carronade he'd encountered.

"So why would someone attack in this way?" Vabaliene asked.

"We *think,"* Arcadia said slowly, "that there are a few—and they might not even be part of our Order—with a different agenda."

"Wait," Finley asked, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what better way to get the humans riled up than a stunt like this? And if they're riled up, they're dangerous. And if they're dangerous..."

"...then there's a reason to try and subjugate them," Finley finished, nodding. "Devious."

"And dangerous," Vabaliene said. "Threatening the Veil so... blatantly. I'm familiar with the political faction in favor of... subjugation. But they've always been a fringe element. Never a serious power."

"That seems to be changing."

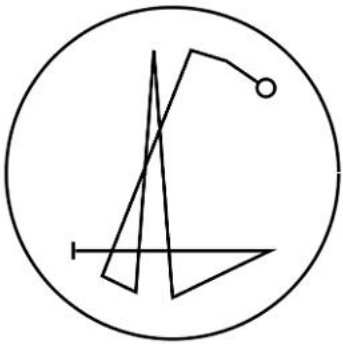
"So we truly think one of them helped the humans with their carronade?" Kelden asked quietly.

Arcadia quickly summarized the abortive attack on Evermore.

"Unbelievable," Vabaliene sighed. "I wouldn't not have thought it possible. Is there truly a chance someone of witchkind assisted in such a... monstrous scheme?"

Arcadia sighed. "I don't know. I'd like to think not. Not with a weapon like that."

Show me the shards of wood again, Finley's talent insisted. Its anger had cooled further, but there was a hardness to its tone that chilled Finley to his core. He relayed the request, and Kelden spread the pieces in the middle of the table, runes facing upward. *This.*



Finley empowered the rune—or tried to. His magic seemed to slip and slide around it, rather than sinking into it.

Irritating, this talent mused. *Your Earth affinity should be sufficient... ah. No, I see. You lack the necessary Control alignment as well. We will... adjust.*

Something inside Finley *twisted* and he gasped at the sensation. Arcadia and Kelden looked at him with concern. "I'm okay," he assured them. He refocused on the new rune and this time power flowed into it more easily. Glowing symbols, visible only to himself—and his talent—appeared above the pieces.

These runes are just days old, his talent informed him.

"The runes are new," he relayed to the others.

"Which is what we were afraid of. I don't know any other reason to use Middle Runic than its resistance to iron."

Less resistance to it, and more ignorance of it, his talent said. *But same outcome.*

"Doing a history project?"

All four of them started as their server set glass steins of ale on the table, followed by a large bowl of crisped potato slices.

"What do you mean?" Arcadia asked carefully.

"Those," the server said, pointing to the shards of wood. "My grandfather teaches at Duocastella's, and he's got a whole collection. Middle Runic, right?" She nodded appreciatively. "I doubt there are a half-dozen people in the world who could read those. He goes on and on about them, if you let him," she added with a chuckle. "How simple they were, how frugal they are with magic, all that." She shrugged. "I'll take the precision of New Runic nonetheless, thank you."

"May I ask your grandfather's name?" Arcadia asked.

"Jokubas Gelbėtojas," she said. "Look him up if you're studying the subject, but don't forget that I warned you! He won't stop, once he starts!" She chuckled again and walked away, leaving them to their light meal.

"Gelbėtojas," Arcadia mused. "You know, in the True Language, that means—"

Savior, Finley's talent said bleakly. *They're never subtle.*

"What if," Kelden said slowly, "and I'm only getting used to the levels of paranoia the Order appears to deal with, so bear with me, but what if..." He paused. "What if someone of witchkind helped with the carronade specifically to turn more people to Adomaitis' political faction?"

Arcadia and Finley's eyebrows rose to their hairlines.

"What," Finley said slowly, "is Dmitry's clan name?" Then he gasped as a jangling filled his head. "I've got a Sending," he said, mentally triggering the message to reveal itself.

He frowned as it played out in his mind, as Kelden and Arcadia waited expectantly.

"I have a mission," he said.

CHAPTER 16

An Urgent Call

Who did the Sending come from?" Arcadia asked as her magic landed them in far-off Lastpointe. "Ram? Or Dmitry?"

"Neither," Finley said, tension in his voice. "Callum called me directly."

Arcadia's brow furrowed. "Callum? He's not in administration."

"No."

"Did he say—"

"No," Finley cut her off. "We're to meet him at the Inn of the Second Moon."

"I have family here," Kelden said quietly. "I know the place. It's on the other side of the village, away from the shore. This way."

As they made their way through the narrow streets, Arcadia couldn't help but marvel at the quaint charm of Lastpointe. The slabs of thick slate beneath their feet were worn smooth by centuries of foot traffic, and the buildings that lined the streets were a hodgepodge of styles and materials - some built of sturdy stone, others of weathered wood, and still others of a peculiar iridescent shell that seemed to shimmer in the moonlight.

Above them, the twin moons hung low in the sky, casting an ethereal glow over the sleeping village. The larger of the two moons was a brilliant silver-white, its cratered surface clearly visible even from this

distance. The smaller moon was a shade of cream, its warmer tone diminishing the starkness of its silvery sister's glow.

The air was heavy with the scent of the sea, and in the distance, they could hear the gentle crashing of waves against the rocky shore. A cool breeze blew in from the water, carrying with it the faint aroma of salt and seaweed.

As they turned a corner, they caught a glimpse of the harbor, where a handful of fishing boats bobbed gently in the calm waters. The masts of the boats cast long shadows across the surface of the sea, like inky fingers reaching out toward the shore.

Despite it being early in the evening, there were only a few signs of life in the village. This was a working village, relying on its fishing fleets for its sustenance, and the villagers—human and witchkind alike—tended to rise and retire early.

As they approached the Inn of the Second Moon, Arcadia couldn't help but feel a sense of unease at the unusualness of Finley's summons. The inn was a tiny, two-story building, its timber frame covered in weathered slate that seemed to absorb the moonlight rather than reflect it. A single lantern hung above the door, its flickering flame casting a warm glow across the threshold.

Kelden pushed open the heavy wooden door, and they stepped inside. The ground floor of the inn was a small dining room and pub, with a handful of tables scattered throughout the space. The room was dimly lit by a few candles and a crackling fire in the hearth, which cast dancing shadows across the walls. The air was thick with the scent of roasted meat and ale, and the low murmur of conversation from two old men occupying a small table in one corner.

Callum was in another corner, nursing a pewter tankard of ale. His eyebrows rose as the three of them approached. "I wasn't expecting an army," he said mildly.

"We were on another mission," Finley said quickly. "And you seemed especially urgent."

"Does anyone at the Farm know about this, whatever it is?" Arcadia asked.

Callum shook his head. "I didn't want to disturb Ram if they'd managed to get him to rest."

"You could have told Dmitry," Kelden pointed out.

Callum gave him a long look. "I don't know you, boy."

"Kelden's doing a post-apprenticeship with me," Finley said quickly.

"Ah. Welcome, then." He looked away as he added, "I'm not sure telling Dmitry would have been for the best. He's... very busy, just now."

Interesting, Finley observed. "You didn't provide much in the way of details."

"I'm not even sure what I'm dealing with," Callum admitted. "I read about the carronade, a couple of years back, and you seem like the best one to deal with this."

Finley's heart started beating faster. "Another one? *Here?"*

"Not exactly."

"What, then?" Arcadia asked, her voice just as tense as Finley's.

"It's... smaller." From a pocket inside his vest, Callum withdrew a much-folded piece of parchment. He spread it out, showing them a sketch he'd made. "It's maybe as long as my arm. The tube part isn't much thicker than my thumb."

"A portable carronade," Arcadia breathed.

"Have you seen it used?" Finley asked.

Callum shook his head. "It was on the blacksmith's workbench. I happened to be walking past and overheard him discussing it with another man. That one wanted to know how quickly more could be produced."

"And?" Finley prompted.

"I cast *tolimoji klausa* so I could keep listening without sticking around and looking obvious, but... I'm not very good at it, I admit. What I heard was garbled. I couldn't make much sense of it."

I have an idea, Finley's talent said suddenly. *Have him take you there.*

"Take me to the smithy," Finley said firmly, rising from his chair. "Kelden, Arcadia, you two wait here. Arcadia, you're better at *tolimoji klausa.* Cast it on me. You'll know if I need help."

Arcadia's fingers were already twitching through the somatic

component of the magic. Her touch was so light that Finley didn't even feel it settle on him, but she nodded when she was done.

"Callum, let's go."

Finley and Callum made their way through the deserted streets of Lastpointe, their footsteps echoing hollowly off the slates. The village seemed to be holding its breath, as if aware of the impending danger that lurked in its midst. The twin moons cast an eerie glow over the slumbering buildings, their light painting the scene in shades of gray and black.

The air grew colder as they approached the smithy. A tension in his talent made it seem inappropriate to use magic to warm himself, and so Finley pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

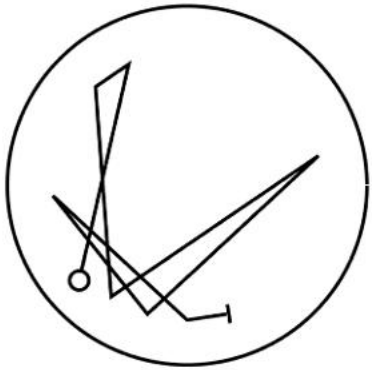
Their destination was set back from the street, surrounded by a low stone wall that was covered in a thick layer of moss. The smithy itself was a squat, unassuming structure, its walls made of the same weathered slate as the rest of the village. The only indication of its purpose was the massive chimney that rose from its roof, its blackened bricks a testament to the countless hours of work that had taken place within.

As they drew closer, Finley noticed that the smithy was closed up tightly, its heavy wooden door secured with a thick iron padlock and sturdy wooden shutters were bolted tightly over the windows.

"We could try a window," Callum said, glancing uneasy at the iron lock.

"I—" Finley started.

We don't need to go in. Empower this, his talent said.



Finley did as he instructed, and jumped slightly when he heard a voice in one ear.

"You've tested it?"

"Aye, and the most terrifying thing it was, too. Even two drops of that concoction of yours is too much, I think. It'll blow out the breech, over time."

"I'll pass that along. How many more can you make? How quickly?"

"As many as you like, but not quickly. I'd thought to make them in flat sheets and roll them, but you were right—the seam never holds long. Casting tubes is difficult enough, especially when they're this small. And then the boring took nigh most of a day."

"So how long?"

"It's the precision that makes it difficult. I had to keep re-checking those figures you gave me, and—"

"Again, how long?"

"Mmm. I think I can manage four at once. Figure a day for the casting, a day for the boring if I get my boy to help. You know, my brother owns a smithy across the channel in Westhead. You could—"

"No. You're more isolated here. We don't want... people copying this design. Not until we're ready."

"Aye, well, four of them every two to three days is the best I can offer."

"It will have to do."

Finley shook his head as the words faded. Callum's eyes were wide and his jaw was slack, answering Finley's question about whether the

other man had heard the words as well. "What was that?" he asked incredulously.

I used to think everything had an Ending, his talent said distractedly. *Turns out nothing Ends. Not really.*

"Just... something I've been experimenting with," Finley said. "I'll show you sometime."

"So now what?"

Finley started at the closed-up smithy, chewing his lower lip. "Arcadia," he said softly.

An instant later, she and Kelden arrived in a gust of breeze. "We heard. Well, I did, and I relayed to Kelden. What's the plan?"

"Kelden, do something to hide us," Finley said, his thoughts still running in circles.

Kelden nodded, and whispered *"Neregėtas vaizdas."* The moonlight seemed to dim around them, and the shadows grew taller and darker. The small sounds of the village faded as well.

"We have to take it," Arcadia insisted.

"It wouldn't do any good," Finley said, shaking his head. "The smith already knows how to make more."

"We could—"

"They'll have the designs on iron sheets. We can't touch them."

"Well..." Kelden offered.

Finley raised an eyebrow. "Good point. If they're here."

"They're either here, in the smith's home, or with the other man," Arcadia pointed out. "The smith said he had to keep re-checking figures, which—"

"Suggests he has the design, yes," Finley said, nodding. "But those won't be the only copies."

"The other man seemed in a hurry. If we can slow them down, it would give us time to... do something more."

"You both know this is probably a trap, right?" Kelden said urgently.

"Oh, probably," Finley sighed. "Arcadia, did you happen to check for watchers? I'm so frazzled I didn't even—"

"I did in the pub, and I am right now, and... no."

Finley frowned. "You don't sound certain."

"I'm not. Can't you feel it?"

"Feel—" he started, but then he stopped and waited a moment. "Iron," he spat. "It's everywhere."

Callum nodded. "My magic's been slightly off-kilter ever since I got here. I just figured I was tired."

"What brought you here in the first place?" Arcadia asked.

"Routine checkup. Nothing specific."

"You do that on a schedule?"

"Once every other moon. Pretty regular."

"It's definitely a setup," Kelden said.

"We should assume it is," Finley agreed. He looked again at the smithy, this time casting his senses about and feeding a thin tendril of Earth magic toward the innocuous-looking building. *You look as well,* he instructed his talent.

I'm still pretty stuck in your head, it muttered, but he could sense it riding on Finley's own perceptions, hopefully analyzing them with its greater experience and unique perspective.

"Well?" Arcadia asked after a few moments.

Finley sighed. "It's almost certainly a trap. There's a basement. I can feel the void in the earth. And the whole thing is subtly twisting my magic—there's iron. Probably bars in the walls, but spaced pretty wide. The roof has a lot more, but—"

"That's not uncommon here," Callum said slowly. "There's an iron mine in the middle of the island, and they use a lot of it to reinforce their buildings. Except where witchkind lives, of course."

"I can't believe anyone lives with all this iron around," Arcadia groused.

Callum shrugged. "You get used to it a bit, and almost everyone here is a fisherwitch anyway. They're always out to sea, and everyone knows it's bad luck to have iron on a boat."

Finley snorted. "We started that superstition. Centuries ago, my parents told me."

"Okay, so what are we doing?" Arcadia asked.

Finley considered, and then shrugged. "We have a bit of a secret weapon. So let's fall into their trap." Arcadia's eyes widened further than Finley would have thought possible, and he gave her a tired smile.

"You and Callum go back. Far back, actually. Go to Westhead, even. Kelden and I—"

"Finley, that hearing spell won't work over that kind of distance," Arcadia protested.

"It wouldn't work reliably through all the iron anyway," he countered. "And it's fine. We won't need it."

"But how—"

"Just go," Finley said wearily. "Trust me. If you're not looking me in the eyes by this time tomorrow, get help. Get the entire Order, if you have to. But I don't think it will come to that."

She frowned uneasily at him, and then reluctantly nodded. "Callum, do you need to get anything?"

"I've a few things at the inn I should grab," he said softly. "Finley, are you certain—"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Fine. Let's go, then."

As Arcadia's magic took the two of them away, Kelden spoke quietly. "You seem certain about this."

"Good. She needed me to be. But I'm not. If you don't want to do this—"

"No, I trust you. I assume you need my... immunity."

"Yeah."

"I'm in. What's the plan?"

Finley shrugged and walked toward the smithy's door. "Basically just this." He held a hand out, and before his talent could start tweaking it, summoned the rune for *mušamas avinas* in his mind. He fed it a stab of Earth magic laced with Sea, and the door blew inward, in a miniature recreation of what had happened to the carronade's wooden cart.

"Oh," Kelden said mildly, dropping their concealment spell as they followed Finley into the smithy.

"Dienos šviesa," Finley murmured, and the inside of the smithy flooded with bright, even light. "No sense being subtle," he added as Kelden blinked furiously.

As their eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, Finley and Kelden took in the interior of the smithy. The space was dominated by a large forge set against the far wall, its coals still glowing with a dull red heat.

The air was thick with the scent of smoke and hot metal, and the stone walls radiated a palpable warmth.

Scattered about the room were various tools of the blacksmith's trade - hammers, tongs, and anvils of varying sizes, their surfaces worn smooth by countless hours of use. Barrels of water and oil stood in one corner, ready to quench the heat of newly forged metal. Racks along the walls held an assortment of finished and half-finished projects - horseshoes, hinges, nails, and other everyday items essential to village life.

But it was the object sitting on the workbench that immediately drew their attention. The miniature carronade gleamed in the magical light, its metal surface polished to a high sheen. It was a strange and alien thing, unlike anything either of them had seen before.

The device consisted of a long, slender tube, roughly the length of a man's arm from elbow to fingertip. The tube was made of some dark, dense metal—*Iron,* Finley thought. Its exterior was smooth and unblemished, save for a few small protrusions and fittings whose purpose was not immediately clear.

One end of the tube was open, its circular maw an inky black void that seemed to swallow the light. The other end was sealed, with a small, circular piece of metal protruding from its center. This protrusion was threaded, as if meant to screw into something else.

Finley approached the workbench cautiously, his senses on high alert for any sign of danger. He could feel the subtle twisting of his magic as he drew closer to the iron device, a faint but persistent discomfort that set his teeth on edge.

Kelden moved to stand beside him, his eyes fixed on the miniature carronade. "It's so small," he murmured, reaching out a hand as if to touch it before thinking better of it and pulling back. "Hard to believe something like this could be dangerous."

"Size doesn't matter," Finley said grimly. "It's what's inside that counts." He leaned closer, squinting at the device. "There's some kind of mechanism here, at the sealed end. Probably for igniting the explosive."

Kelden nodded. "And the open end is where the projectile comes out, I assume."

"Most likely." Finley straightened up, his gaze sweeping the room.

"We need to find those design sheets. They have to be here somewhere. Look for thin sheets of iron."

They began to search the smithy, rifling through drawers and shelves, looking for anything that might resemble a schematic or blueprint. The iron in the walls and roof made it difficult for Finley to use his magic, and even his talent was grumbling in the back of his mind.

As they searched, Finley couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time. When would the trap close on them?

After several tense minutes, Kelden called out softly. "Finley, over here."

Finley hurried over to where Kelden was crouched by a heavy iron chest tucked into a corner. Kelden had already pushed the lid open, and a small corner of Finley's mind gibbered with panic at the thought of even touching the deadly metal. But Kelden seemed unfazed by it.

Something started clacking, the low, sharp sound of two pieces of metal gently tapping against each other. Finley looked around for the source of the noise, but didn't see anything. He returned his attention to the chest.

Inside, stacked neatly, were several thin sheets of iron. Kelden carefully lifted one out, angling it to catch the light. Etched into the metal in fine, precise lines was a detailed diagram of the miniature carronade. Measurements and notes crowded the margins, the handwriting small and cramped.

"That's it," Finley breathed. "The design for the portable carronade."

Kelden quickly flipped through the other sheets, confirming they held similar schematics and notes. They frowned. "Should we take them? Destroy them?"

The floor fell out from beneath them.

***

"Ow," Finley said, rubbing his head gingerly.

You have good reflexes, his talent murmured. *You bottled up your magic as you fell.*

"We're surrounded by iron bars," Kelden said quietly.

"Yeah, I'm familiar with the tactic," Finley said ruefully. "How long was I out?"

"A moment or two. So what now?"

Finley pulled himself upright and looked up. His magical light had extinguished itself when they fell, but a beam of moonlight stabbed in through the open doorway of the smithy above, providing a slight bit of illumination. They'd been standing on a trap door, Finley saw, which had swung down and dropped them here. A new barrier, this one composed of more iron bars, had slid into place to cover the opening. "You think you could open that?"

Kelden peered up. "Possibly. It seems to just be resting there against that latch. Want me to?"

"Not just yet. Let's meet our captors, first. I have some questions for them."

They didn't have to wait long before two sets of boots thudded their way into the smithy and over to the barred opening in the floor. Finley couldn't make out much more than their shapes, backlit as they were by the moonlight.

"Fell right in, then?" one of them asked. His voice was deep and coarse.

"That was your plan, wasn't it?"

"Aye."

"I thought we'd arrived at a compromise?"

The man snorted, and the other figure spoke. "You were meant to think that." A woman's voice, deep and smooth.

"Marching a carronade to our city didn't maintain the illusion, much."

"Those idiots moved ahead of schedule," the woman admitted.

"I'm guessing you meant to have a collection of those handheld ones ready first?"

"It's called a *šautuvas,"* she said. "And yes, that was the plan. We'll make it work anyway."

Odd that they use the True Language for so many terms, Finley thought. Aloud, he said, "So you mean to attack our city?"

"We do," she confirmed. "But there's no reason for you and your friends to get caught up in it."

"No need—what are you talking about?" Kelden asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"We know you've passed on opportunities to hold us back. To slow us down. Not every time, but you've left us some things. Things less dangerous to you. The wire. So we're making you a simple offer: stay out of it, and you won't get hurt."

"I'm not sure you understand the nature of the resistance you'll face," Finley said carefully. "Have you actually seen what's left of your carronade?" The two were silent for a moment. "Our city... it defends itself, in a way. Firing iron balls, or those—what were they called, cross bows? Those iron shafts won't do it either. This isn't like attacking a human village."

"We've done our research," the man said, but he didn't sound certain.

"We have to do something," the woman said more firmly. "We can't stand by and let you oppress us. Subjugate us. Make us your slaves."

"Most of us—and I do mean *most*—don't want that either," Finley said flatly. "You're seeing a very small faction that's been growing through lies. You know about the heating boilers in Chiton?"

"What about them?" the woman said uneasily.

"One of them was damaged. A great hole tore through the side of it. But one of *us* did that. And was *seen* doing it. They're doing it to inflame you, rile you up. So the rest of my people *do* see you as a threat. You can stop all this. Don't start up the Hunts. We can... we'll make changes. We'll leave you your innovations. There can be a peace between us. A secret peace, but a peace."

The two shadows turned to each other for a long moment, saying nothing. Then one shook its head. "It's gone too far for that," the woman said, and Finley thought he could detect a hint of regret in her voice. "You've found what you were meant to find. We'll leave, and in the morning the smith will let you out. He doesn't know anything

about... about you. Tell him you're petty thieves, and he caught you. Worst case, you'll deal with the local lawkeeper."

"But stay out of it," the man warned.

"If we tell our people what you're doing," Kelden said, "they'll just make a case for moving faster."

The woman shrugged. "Then don't tell them. Or do. It's going to turn out the same either way."

"You don't *know,* do you?" Finley said, suddenly overcome with weariness. "You don't truly know what's arrayed against you?" The two said nothing, but continued staring down into the iron-lined pit. "For *centuries,* for *millennia,* we've kept your buildings sturdy. We've kept your boats afloat. Your street lamps, the crops on the farms, *everything* you have is held together by our magic. That's our lever. We take that away, and everything you have... collapses."

The two shadows were quiet for a long, long moment. Then, the woman spoke in a soft, resigned voice: "Maybe that's what needs to happen."

The two turned and left, their footsteps thudding away into the distance.

"This is bad," Kelden said.

"I know. Get us out."

"I'll need a boost."

Finley held his hands out and boosted Kelden up. They grabbed onto the iron bars covering the opening, steadying themselves while they worked the simple iron latch. It released with a click, and Kelden kicked their feet, swinging to one side and pulling the cover to one side. They dropped back to the dirt floor, crouched, and leapt up again. This time their fingers found purchase on the edge of the opening and they quickly pulled themselves up. A moment later, a coil of heavy rope thudded next to Finley, and Kelden helped him climb out.

They walked out of the smithy, brushing dust from their clothes. "Well," Kelden began, "I guess—"

Finley's mind was filled with the jangling noises of an urgent Summons. "It's Arcadia," he said quickly, pulling his magic around them. "Something's happening."

CHAPTER 17

Bad Actor

It's my cousin, Calliope," Arcadia said breathlessly when Finley and Kelden materialized. "She did a Sending when I was in Westhead. I left Callum there. The trap! You got out okay—"

"Arcadia, slow down," Finley said. "What's going on? Your Sending only said—"

"It's Landon!"

Finley froze in mid-sentence.

"Who's Landon?" Kelden asked.

"He joined the Order at the same time we did," Arcadia explained quickly. "Didn't do well. It went bad. He wound up fighting us. Calliope met him, before then, on one of our school breaks."

"Why would your cousin call you about—"

Arcadia blushed and looked away for a moment. "We're like sisters. I told her—nothing, really, just that Landon—"

"Fine, fine," Finley said, forcing himself to calm down. "Runes and ruin, Arcadia, I thought you'd been attacked or something."

"But Landon shouldn't—"

"Yes, yes, I know." Finley ran a hand through his hair, a sure sign of his frustration. "We'll track him down. Where did your cousin see him?"

"She was in the commercial district. I'll show you."

Arcadia led them through the winding streets of Twynsits, the cobblestones uneven beneath their feet. The residential quarter was a labyrinth of narrow alleys and leaning houses, their upper stories jutting out precariously over the street. Laundry fluttered from lines strung between windows, and the air was thick with the smells of cooking and the chatter of families settling down for the evening.

As they hurried on, the streets began to widen, and the houses gave way to shops and taverns. The commercial district was still bustling, even at this late hour. Merchants called out their wares, and the clatter of hooves and wagon wheels filled the air. The mighty river that split the town in two was visible now, its dark waters glinting in the moonlight.

Arcadia paused at a crossroads, peering down each of the four streets in turn. "This way," she said at last, turning left toward the river. The buildings here were larger, the shops more prosperous.

Arcadia led them onward, past the grand facades of the merchant's guildhalls and the ornate storefronts of the jewelers and silk merchants. The streets narrowed again as they approached the river, the buildings growing more utilitarian. Small warehouses and artisans' workshops lined the way now, their shuttered windows dark and silent.

The scent of the river grew stronger, a mix of damp stone and the pungent odor of fish. Somewhere nearby, a night bird called, its eerie cry echoing off the close-set buildings. Arcadia shivered and pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

As they rounded a corner, they found themselves in a small square. A fountain stood at its center, the water still and mirror-like in the moonlight. And there, milling about in the shadows of the surrounding buildings, was a crowd of people.

Finley frowned, his hand going instinctively to the hilt of his sword. "What's this? It's far too late for a market or a festival."

Arcadia shook her head, just as perplexed. She scanned the faces in the crowd, looking for her cousin's familiar features, but saw only strangers. They were an odd assortment, she realized. Men and women, old and young, some in the fine clothes of the wealthy, others in the plain garb of laborers. What could have brought such a disparate group together at this hour? "Excuse me," she asked a woman. "What's happening?"

The woman's face was lit with excitement. "It's Master Jacoby! He's promised to demonstrate his new miracle again tonight! I missed it last night, but my neighbor Etta says her husband saw it and—I just have to see it for myself! She said it's like *magic!"*

Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden exchanged worried glances. "Follow me," Finley said in a low tone, beginning to push his way through the crowd. Behind him, he heard Arcadia whispering under her breath, and the people in front of them began turning to either side, opening a path between them. Despite the situation, Finley grinned. He couldn't see her magic, but she was using an old Sky trick: creating whispers in the air, causing people to turn to one side or another and ask 'what?'

They finally came to the front of the crowd. A sturdy wooden fence stood between the street and a small open courtyard, which was backed by a single-story workshop made from simple framing and enclosed with battered wooden planks. A table had been set up in the middle of the yard, and a... contraption of some kind was sitting on it.

The device on the table was unlike anything Finley, Arcadia, or Kelden had ever seen. It consisted of a large glass sphere, nearly three feet in diameter, mounted on a wooden stand. Inside the sphere, two discs of some strange, glossy material were suspended, one above the other, with only a hand's breadth of space between them. The discs were connected by a rod that passed through the center of the sphere and emerged from the top and bottom, where it was attached to a crank handle.

As they watched, a man stepped forward from the shadows at the edge of the courtyard. He was tall and thin, with a shock of wild gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore a long coat of deep purple velvet, embroidered with intricate silver designs that caught the moonlight as he moved.

"Good evening, my friends!" the man called out, his voice rich and resonant. "I am Master Jacoby, and I have come to share with you a wonder the likes of which you have never seen!" Then he chuckled. "Unless, of course, you were here last night, when we made our first trial run. But fear not! We've repaired the damage and should suffer no such problems tonight!"

The crowd murmured in anticipation as Jacoby stepped up to the table and laid a hand on the crank handle of the strange device.

"This, my friends, is machine capable of producing pure energy," Jacoby declared. "It harnesses a force that can move objects without being touched!" He gave the crowd a wan smile. “Now, we’re still not sure what good it all is, and we have many more experiments in front of us, but we think this is an exciting start.” He looked around, took a deep breath, and cried out, “Are you ready?”

The crowd cheered.

Master Jacoby began to turn the machine’s crank, slowly at first, then faster and faster. As the discs inside the sphere began to spin, a strange hum filled the air, rising in pitch and intensity as the speed increased. The crowd fell silent, watching in rapt attention.

Suddenly, a brilliant arc of light leaped from the top of the sphere, sizzling through the air like a miniature bolt of lightning before grounding itself on the metal rod at the bottom. The crowd gasped in unison, some stepping back in fear while others leaned forward for a better look.

Jacoby laughed with delight, his eyes shining with reflected light as he continued to crank the machine. The arcs of energy came faster now, crackling and snapping, the air filling with the sharp scent of ozone.

Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden stood transfixed, their eyes wide with shock. This was no magic they had ever seen or heard of. It couldn't be magic at all. Magic was the domain of witchkind, not humans. And yet, here was this man, this Master Jacoby, wielding a power that seemed to defy the very laws of nature.

"How is he doing that?" Arcadia whispered, her voice trembling slightly. "It's not possible..."

Finley shook his head, at a loss for words. His mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Could it be some trick, some sleight of hand? But no, the energy was real, he could feel it prickling his skin even from this distance.

Then whatever strange energy Jacoby was creating *surged*.

The sparks from the machine grew in intensity, their *snapping* becoming louder, as the air filled with a sharp, acrid smell. Jacoby’s eyes widened, and he began slowing the machine’s crank—but it didn’t seem

to matter. More and more bolts of blue-white energy flew from the machine, now reaching out into the empty yard, leaving scorch marks on the hard-packed earth as they grounded themselves.

"Finley—" Arcadia said nervously, taking a step back.

"What's happening?" Kelden asked.

Finley's hands clenched into fists as he watched the machine spin seemingly out of control. "I don't know, but it can't be good. We need to get these people out of here."

Jacoby was frantically working the crank backwards now, trying to slow the furiously spinning discs, but to no avail. The air crackled with energy, the bolts of lightning growing larger and more erratic by the second. The crowd, which had been murmuring in excitement just moments before, now broke into shouts of alarm as they began to back away.

"Everyone, please, remain calm!" Jacoby called out, his voice strained. "I have it under control, just give me a moment to—"

But his words were drowned out by a deafening crack as a particularly large bolt leaped from the machine, striking the wooden fence and setting it ablaze. Panic erupted as people screamed and surged backward, trying to escape the flames.

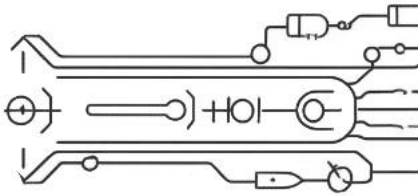
"Arcadia!" Finley shouted over the chaos. "Can you douse the fire?"

Arcadia nodded, her face pale but determined. She raised her hands, whispering the vocal companion to a firefighting rune, and a gust of wind swirled around her, gathering moisture from the air. With a flick of her wrists, she sent the miniature storm toward the burning fence, the water dousing the flames with a hiss of steam.

Meanwhile, Kelden had pushed his way through the crowd to the table where the contraption was still spinning out of control. Jacoby finally stepped back. "Be careful, young man!" he warned as another bolt of power sparked out of the machine, grounding itself next to Finley's feet.

Then he spotted it.

A rune, carved in the tiny, precise lines of curves of New Runic, set into the wooden base of the machine.



The rune glowed softly, which meant—"Kelden, someone's empowering this!" Finley took a step back and began scanning the crowd. "There!" he shouted, pointing. "It's Landon!"

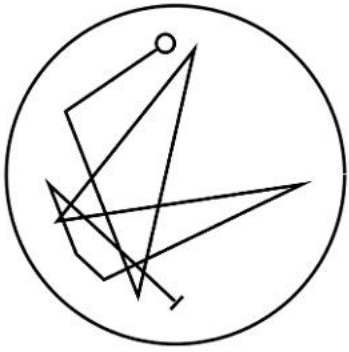
Arcadia whirled, spotting Landon, who was grinning madly even as his fingers danced through the renewing motions that were keeping his rune empowered. She immediately summoned a blunt column of air, aiming for Landon's stomach, but he dodged it adroitly.

Kelden attacked next, attempting to sweep Landon from his feet, but the other man leapt to one side, aided by Flame magic.

Destroy the rune, Finley's talent suggested.

Finley turned to comply, drawing on his Earth magic to change the structure of the wood itself. He knew the active rune would fight this change, and he'd need to pour—

Allow me.



Finley empowered the new rune and watched as the device's wooden base flowed and twisted. Landon's rune was pulled apart, and its energies—

—backlashed.

The rush of magic was a sight to behold. As Finley's rune tore apart Landon's, the conflicting energies collided in a dazzling display of raw power.

A blinding flash of pure white light erupted from the ruined machine, illuminating the night sky like a second sun. The light pulsed and swirled, tendrils of energy dancing and intertwining in a mesmerizing ballet. Shimmering sparks of every color imaginable burst forth, cascading through the air like a rain of gleaming jewels.

The very air seemed to come alive, crackling and humming with barely contained power. Waves of shimmering, iridescent force rippled outward, distorting the world around them like heat haze on a summer day. The ground trembled beneath their feet, and a deep, resonant thrumming filled their ears, as if the earth itself was groaning under the strain of the clashing magics.

Collision of Axes, Finley's talent whispered, sounding awed.

Finley's rune, focused on creation and change, collided with Landon's, which had been powered with his Flame magic—magic of change, true, but more often of destruction and empowerment. Landon's well-known lack of Control alignment meant his magic was free to act on its own, and the resulting combination was... otherworldly.

Amidst this maelstrom of light and sound, strange, ethereal shapes began to coalesce. Ghostly figures of animals, plants, and things that had no name swirled into being, only to dissipate moments later, like wisps of cloud scattered by the wind. Eerie, haunting melodies seemed to emanate from the very fabric of reality, the notes alien and discordant, yet strangely beautiful.

Memories of a distant past, Finley's talent mused.

The crowd, already on the verge of panic, could take no more. Their screams of terror pierced the night as they fled in all directions, trampling each other in their desperate bid to escape the unnatural spectacle. Some fell to their knees, hands clasped in prayer, while others simply stood transfixed, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and horror.

Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden, their own magic swirling invisibly around them in a protective cocoon, stood at the heart of the mael-

strom. They could feel the raw, primal power of the colliding magics tugging at their very souls, threatening to tear them apart and scatter their essence to the winds.

Finally, the conflicting magics began to run out of power. The unreal visions faded, the eerie sounds died. What few humans still remained in the street struggled to their feet and began hurrying away.

The only sound was Landon, laughing with delight. "That couldn't have gone better if I'd planned it that way!" he crowed. "Stories of magic and witchcraft will be all over the town by morning!"

He's not wrong. Do you feel that? Finley's talent whispered with sudden alarm.

Finley focused his senses, reaching out with his magical awareness. At first, he felt nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual gentle hum of the world's magic. But as he concentrated, he began to perceive a subtle change in the fabric of the world.

It was the Veil. The thin, gossamer magic that protected witchkind. That made humans explain away any odd traces of magic they happened to catch from the corner of their eye—a person appearing out of thin air, or a lance of fire lighting a lamp.

But now, it was as if the Veil was *vibrating,* a barely perceptible tremor that sent ripples through the magical ether. The sensation was so faint that he might have dismissed it as a figment of his imagination, but his talent's warning urged him to press on.

He closed his eyes, blocking out the chaos of the world around him, and delved deeper into the mystical realm. As he did so, the vibrations grew stronger, more insistent. It was like standing on the edge of a great chasm, feeling the ground tremble beneath your feet as some ancient, slumbering beast begins to stir.

The Veil was not just vibrating, Finley realized with a start. It was resonating, like a lute string plucked by an invisible hand. The magical barrier that separated the world of humans from the realm of the supernatural was singing a haunting, discordant melody that set his teeth on edge and made his skin crawl.

He could see it now, in his mind's eye. The Veil was like a vast, shimmering curtain, woven from strands of pure magic. It stretched across the sky, an infinite expanse of faint light that shifted and danced.

It's too thin, his talent said. *It can't handle this.*

Finley forced his awareness back to the present, where Landon was continuing to gloat. "Get him," he ordered.

Kelden had obviously prepared something already, because his magic flew outward before Finley's words had even settled into the air. A textbook *dvasios narvas,* bindings of thickened air, lashed out, surrounding Landon, who simply grinned.

And then, in a flash of light and heat, Landon was gone.

Kelden's construct collapsed in on itself, deprived of its target, and they snarled in frustration.

"What the—he *never* mastered Flame's travel magics," Arcadia protested.

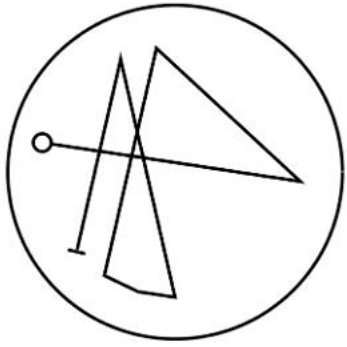
That was a Forged item, Finley's talent said.

"He had a token of some kind," Finley relayed.

"Well, I know him well enough to trace him," Arcadia growled, her fingers already flicking through the motions of a tracing rune. Sky magic was superior to any other for this task, but after a moment, Arcadia let out an incoherent cry of frustration. "It's blocked! He's done something to *block* it!"

"He anticipated this," Finley said, frustration rising in his chest.

Be calm. We just need a different approach.



Have her do it, his talent instructed.

"Arcadia, use this," Finley said, quickly sketching the new rune in

glowing lines in the air between them. Arcadia studied it for a moment, nodded, and began feeding Sky magic.

"That's got it," she said a moment later, a tight grin of satisfaction on her face. "Grab my arm."

Finley and Kelden moved to comply, and a moment later a dervish of cold wind surrounded them and they were gone.

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"What—this is the Farm," Kelden asked, confused. "Did you get it wrong?"

"I did not," Arcadia said firmly. "This is where he came."

"That's—" Kelden began.

"Don't say 'impossible,'" Finley warned. "This is starting to come together now, isn't it?"

Kelden's mouth snapped shut and they nodded. "Where do we go?"

"The trace puts him in the farmhouse," Arcadia said, her tone low and dangerous. "In Ram's office."

"Yeah," Finley said bleakly. "Let's go. Be ready for... anything." He pooled magic from his own reserves into his mind, preparing for whatever action he might have to take.

As they approached the farmhouse, a sense of unease settled over Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden. This place had always been a sanctuary, a refuge from the chaos and danger of the outside world. The sprawling, rustic building held countless memories of laughter, camaraderie, and the warmth of belonging. It was a place where they had honed their skills, formed unbreakable bonds, and found a purpose greater than themselves.

But now, an unfamiliar dread seemed to permeate the very walls of the farmhouse. The once welcoming facade now loomed before them, the weathered wood and stone taking on an ominous air in the moonlight. The windows, usually aglow with the soft light of lanterns and the flicker of hearth fires, were dark and lifeless, like the hollow eyes of a skull.

As they stepped over the threshold, the familiar scent of herbs, old books, and the faint tang of magic greeted them, but it was now tinged with something else—a subtle, unsettling odor that set their nerves on edge. The air felt thick and heavy, as if the house itself was holding its breath in anticipation of some impending doom.

Their footsteps echoed unnaturally loud on the worn floorboards as they made their way through the entry hall. The usual clutter of boots, cloaks, and staves that lined the walls was absent, lending the space an eerie, abandoned feel. The silence was oppressive.

As they cautiously approached Ram's office at the end of the hall, they could hear muffled voices engaged in a heated discussion. Finley held up a hand, signaling Arcadia and Kelden to pause. They strained their ears, trying to make out the words.

"—went exactly as planned," came Landon's voice, tinged with smug satisfaction. "With a few more demonstrations like that, the humans will be whipped into a frenzy. They'll start seeing magic everywhere, and then they'll all see. I wouldn't be surprised," he bragged, "if they call a Hunt based solely on tonight."

"Good," replied a second voice, deep and authoritative. Finley's blood ran cold. It was Dmitry. "The time has come for witchkind to take our rightful place. For too long we have hidden in the shadows, constrained by our fear and the humans' numbers. But no more."

Arcadia shot Finley a look of disbelief and horror. Kelden's hands clenched into fists, their knuckles white.

Dmitry continued, "We will no longer need to hide—or to fear them. They will see us for what we truly are - their superiors in every way. And they will have no choice but to bow before us."

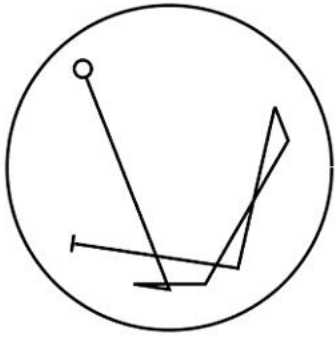
"What of the rest of the Order?" Landon asked. "Surely they will oppose this."

A cold chuckle emanated from the office. "Adomaitis has convinced the rest of the Taryba to expand the Order. Take it public. Let all of witchkind see us hold the humans in their place."

Finley marched forward, pushing open the office door. Landon turned at the intrusion, but Dmitry's smile widened a bit. "Some of us *do* oppose this."

Dmitry nodded. "We expected as much. But you'll find—"

A moment, please, Finley's talent said, the rage from earlier now boiling to the top. *This, please. Sea magic would be best.*



The magic darted forward, spun once around Dmitry, and then surfaced a glowing rune.

In the True Language of witchkind, it read *Gelbėtojas.*

I knew it, Finley's talent seethed.

"You're the *išdavikų klanas,"* he blurted out.

Dmitry's demeanor changed in an instant, the look of calm bemusement replaced by scarcely controlled fury. His face flushed dark red as he snapped, *"Never* use that phrase with me!"

"But you are, aren't you?" Finley insisted. "You helped the humans with their carronade. You've sent *him* to openly display magic! You *want* them riled up, you *want* them attacking us!"

Dmitry's expression was stony now. He flicked an index finger, and the office door slammed shut behind them. In the same instant, a sheet of glowing energy flickered and glowed along the walls, ceiling, and floor of the office.

What's that? Finley's talent asked, startled.

Finley's heart began beating faster and faster. A *šeimininko narvas,* he replied. *Energy cage. Extremely powerful, extremely complicated. I had no idea Ram had placed one here.*

Hmm.

"You listen to me, *boy,"* Dmitry was saying, his tone nearly a snarl.

"Witchkind have lived in fear long enough. The carronade? It was no threat to Evermore. Its defenses were well-prepared. Landon's... missions? Nothing more than to highlight how dangerous humans have become. Our people have become *sheep!* Livestock! We lend the humans our magic in exchange for *nothing!* Nothing save fear. An entire people in *hiding* for *millennia!* It ends *now!*"

He's mad, Finley thought in panic.

You'll find it runs in the family, his talent said wryly.

"But the Veil!" Arcadia joined in. "It can't hold against that kind of—"

"The Veil is a *myth,* girl!" Dmitry barked. "Our own cowardice is all it takes to keep magic a secret!"

If only he knew, Finley's talent said sadly.

"You will all remain here, at the Farm," Dmitry said coldly. "Clearly, you have been infected with something that is driving you to ignore your vows to this Order. Ram would be... saddened, at the least. You—"

"Ram would never have approved this," Arcadia shouted. "Where is he, anyway? What—oh, no," she moaned as she caught sight of the glee on Landon's face. "You've done something to him, haven't you?"

Dmitry's eyes narrowed. "Ram is *resting* comfortably after the... stress placed on him by the humans. I'm quite certain he will revive once all of... *this* is over."

They've poisoned him with something, Finley's talent said. *You've been saying he wasn't himself.*

Later, Finley replied. "So what—"

Once again, Finley's head filled with the urgent jangling of an emergency Sending.

From his family.

"Finley?" Arcadia asked, putting a hand on his forearm. "You've gone ashen."

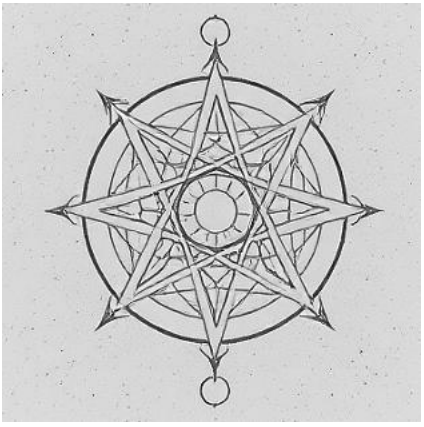
"It's my family," he whispered.

"They'll be fine," Landon sneered. "Probably. If they're smart."

The seething rage of his talent combined with Finley's own sudden, dire fury. Power pooled inside him—Sea and Earth, his longtime companions, but equal measures of Flame and Sky, each coupled with a new, strange *something* that whirled gray and white in his soul.

Every Ending is a Beginning, his talent whispered through the raw emotion and growing power. *And it's time you Begin to be free of this cage.*

More lines and curves began flickering madly in Finley's mind as his talent sought to assemble something new. *Earth, for preservation,* it said, its bodiless voice both cold and searingly hot at once. *Hmm. Perhaps a different approach.*



Be free.

The rune exploded out of Finley in a dazzling display of raw power, a blinding white light tinged with shimmering hues of blue, green, red and gray. The energy surged outward in a pulsing, expanding sphere, slamming into the glowing walls of the *šeimininko narvas* with a deafening crack like thunder.

For a moment, the energy cage held, its shimmering surface rippling and flexing like a soap bubble straining against a gale. But Finley's magic, fueled by his righteous fury and the arcane knowledge flowing from his talent, was relentless. The rune of freedom battered against the cage's glowing barrier, seeking out the minuscule flaws and imperfections in its structure.

Then, with a sound like a thousand panes of glass shattering at once, the *šeimininko narvas* burst apart. A million fragments of glowing energy flew in all directions, ricocheting off the walls, floor and ceiling

of the office. They sparkled and flashed as they whirled through the air, like a blizzard of luminous snowflakes caught in a cyclone.

The occupants of the room were momentarily stunned by the explosion of light and sound. Dmitry and Landon threw up their arms to shield their faces, while Arcadia and Kelden staggered back, their eyes wide with awe at the display of Finley's newfound power.

The outrush of energy left Finley suddenly empty, and Kelden caught him as he sagged. "Home," he croaked, and a tempest of Arcadia's Sky magic whisked them away.

CHAPTER 18

Crossing the Line

Exhausted and frantic, Finley gratefully accepted Kelden's offer to take them to the tiny village west of Sowsee. The village nestled in the cove like a hidden gem, its thatched roofs and rough-hewn stone walls illuminated by the eerie glow of the false dawn. Normally, the scent of salt air and the gentle lapping of waves against the shore would lend the scene a peaceful ambiance, but this morning, an unsettling energy crackled through the narrow, winding streets.

As Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden approached, the clamor of urgent voices grew louder. Men and women, some still in their nightclothes, rushed about with torches held high, casting long, flickering shadows that danced across the faces of the weathered cottages. The orange light glinted off the scales of the day's catch, strewn haphazardly across the cobblestones as if abandoned in haste.

The air hung heavy with the acrid scent of smoke and the metallic tang of fear. Children clung to their mothers' skirts, wide-eyed and trembling, while the village elders conferred urgently, their lined faces grave in the wavering light.

"Mom!" Finley shouted, spotting his parents. They were holding each other tightly, standing across the street from the small, humble building that played host to the vast, cavernous secret space that held their home.

"Finley!" his mother called back, breaking off from her husband to wrap her son in a tight hug. "We don't know what's happening!"

Finley turned and looked at the building, his jaw dropping with amazement. What had once been a simple building of native stone and hand-cut timbers was now... changed.

The once-ordinary tailor's shop had transformed into a fantastical sight. Lush, verdant vines burst forth from the cracks in the stone walls, their tendrils curling and twisting as they reached for the sky. The leaves, a vibrant green that seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy, were adorned with the most peculiar of decorations.

Nestled among the foliage were tiny, intricately crafted pieces of furniture, as if a skilled artisan had created a miniature world within the plants. Delicate, ornate chairs no larger than a thimble perched precariously on the edges of leaves, their velvet cushions still plump and inviting despite their diminutive size. Miniature mahogany tables, their surfaces polished to a high sheen, balanced on the slender stems, laden with silver platters bearing minuscule feasts fit for a fairy court.

As Finley's gaze traveled higher, he noticed the glimmering of crystal caught in the vines. Miniature chandeliers, their delicate arms draped with strings of tiny, twinkling lights, hung suspended from the tendrils, casting a soft, enchanting glow upon the scene. The crystals refracted the light, sending shimmering rainbows dancing across the stone façade, as if the building itself had been touched by magic.

The upper floor, once the tailor's humble abode, had undergone an equally astonishing transformation. The windows, once simple panes of glass, now resembled the stained-glass masterpieces found in grand cathedrals. Vibrant hues of ruby, sapphire, and emerald danced across the surface, depicting scenes of mythical creatures and fantastical landscapes. The intricate designs seemed to move and shift with a life of their own, as if the figures within the glass were engaged in a silent, eternal dance.

The roof, once a simple thatch of straw and reeds, had been replaced by a canopy of shimmering, iridescent leaves. Each leaf was as large as a shield, their edges gilded with threads of gold and silver that caught the light and sent it cascading down the walls in a mesmerizing

display. The leaves rustled softly in the breeze, their gentle whispers carrying the promise of secrets waiting to be unveiled.

Clever, Finley's talent allowed.

"Mom, what—"

"There was no warning," Finley's father said, his voice heavy with sorrow. "One minute we were sleeping, and the next minute the magic was faltering."

"Falt—oh, no," Finley moaned, finally seeing it. A group of humans had clustered near one side of the tailor's shop, where it abutted the adjacent bookseller. With a *clang,* they began hammering an iron spike into the wall, wedging it into the tight mortar lines. Leaves and tiny pieces of furniture fell to the cobbled walk. More tellingly, every blow sent sparks of blue-white energy rippling up the building, as the magic holding his parents' home was disrupted by the iron. Each cascade of sparks brought more cheers, rumblings, and shouts from the humans scattered up and down the street.

"Is everyone out?" Finley asked quietly.

His mother nodded. "It was just us."

Listen to them, his talent prompted.

Finley turned his attention to the crowd. Murmurs of *witchcraft* and *Hunt* were rippling between the small knots of humans who'd gathered. Two women detached themselves and ran toward the village's church, doubtless to fetch the local priest—although Finley couldn't imagine why the man wasn't already here.

With a resounding clang that echoed through the narrow streets, another iron spike was driven deep into the mortar of the tailor's shop. The moment the metal pierced the stone, a blinding flash of blue-white light erupted from the point of impact, illuminating the faces of the gathered villagers with an eerie, otherworldly glow. The air crackled with energy, the hairs on the back of Finley's neck standing on end as the magic that had once sustained his parents' home began to unravel.

As the iron spike sank deeper into the wall, the acrid scent of burning leaves and scorched wood filled the air, mingling with the tang of salt and the metallic odor of the iron itself. The verdant vines that had once adorned the building began to wither and blacken, their leaves curling and crumbling to ash as the magic that had given them life

drained away. The miniature furniture that had nestled so charmingly among the foliage burst into flames, the delicate chairs and tables reduced to smoldering embers in mere seconds.

The stained-glass windows shattered in a cascade of glittering shards, the intricate designs and vibrant colors lost forever as the glass rained down upon the cobblestones below. The iridescent canopy of leaves that had once crowned the roof dissolved in a shower of sparks, each golden and silver thread winking out of existence like the dying embers of a once-glorious fire.

With the runes on the building broken, it too began to show signs of weakness. Mortar flaked from between the stones of its walls, and its timbers—carefully and lovingly carved, but inexpertly set and joined—began to tremble. The building wouldn't collapse immediately, Finley knew, but the next strong storm that blew in would likely damage it beyond repair. This was the symbiosis between humans and witchkind, but with the runes destroyed and the magic ended, the humans' works would begin to crumble.

One starts to think we shouldn't have held them back, his talent said sadly. *If it hadn't been for the damned iron, your Order would never have even begun.*

Finley's misery kept him from replying.

His mother was sobbing, and his father held her tight. "Years of hoarding our magic," he whispered, a single tear trickling down his cheek, "and it's all gone."

Two more of witchkind approached, their expressions full of sadness. "You can stay with us," they offered quietly. "As long as you need."

The humans' fervor grew with each passing moment, their voices rising in a cacophony of fear and anger. They surged forward, emboldened by the destruction of the magical building, their faces contorted with a mixture of righteous indignation and primal terror. Torches held high, they cast long, flickering shadows across the narrow streets, the dancing flames reflecting the chaos that had taken hold of their hearts.

The village priest, his robes billowing in the early morning breeze, finally arrived, his face a mask of grim determination. He held a heavy, iron-bound tome in his hands, the ancient pages crackling as he opened

it to a well-worn passage. His voice boomed above the clamor, reciting words in a long-forgotten tongue, each syllable imbued with the weight of centuries of suspicion and mistrust.

As the priest's chanting grew louder, the villagers began to take up the cry, their voices blending in a discordant chorus of accusation and condemnation. "Witchcraft!" they shouted, their eyes wide with a feverish intensity. "Hunt them down! Purge the evil from our midst!"

The air grew thick with the scent of smoke and sweat, the palpable fear and anger of the crowd mingling with the acrid tang of the iron spikes driven into the stone.

The once-peaceful village had transformed into a seething cauldron of hostility, the gentle lapping of waves against the shore drowned out by the roar of the frenzied mob. Finley's heart raced as he watched the scene unfold, his mind reeling with the sudden, devastating loss of their magical home and the looming threat of the villagers' wrath.

"I don't know that you'll be safe," Kelden cautioned. "This isn't over yet." Already the villagers had begun hammering a stake into a nearby building, waiting for some reaction. When nothing happened, they moved on to another. "They may do this to every building in the village before they're satisfied."

Finley's parents and their friends exchanged glances. "The inn," the one man suggested. "The hidden space isn't in the main building, it's in the stables. They won't think of that."

"Possibly," Finley allowed. "Go. We'll—"

"Go with them," Kelden insisted. "Arcadia and I will stay out. We'll keep an eye on things. We can wake everyone if the mob gets close. And... I have some ideas on how we can protect everyone. Go. Rest."

Finley started to protest, but then nodded. With one last glance at his ruined family home, he pulled his parents away and led them to the village inn.

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As Finley stepped out into the morning light, he could see that the village was a changed place. The once-bustling streets were now eerily quiet, the only sounds the distant cry of seagulls and the soft whisper of the sea breeze. The cobblestones were littered with the detritus of the night's chaos—broken glass, scorched wood, and the occasional glint of a discarded iron spike.

The buildings that bore the brunt of the mob's fury stood like wounded sentinels, their facades marred by gaping holes where the spikes were driven in. Some of the structures seem to sag, as if the very life had been drained from them, their timbers creaking and groaning in the salt-laden air. The once-vibrant paint on the shutters and doors is now faded and peeling, as if the color itself had been leached away by the iron's touch.

"Were any more homes—"

"None," Kelden said, proud through evident fatigue. "Arcadia and I cast some illusions—nothing big. Lights playing up one side of a building, shadows scampering down another. But only on buildings we knew didn't contain any secret spaces. So the spikes only got hammered into plain buildings."

"They still managed to take out a rune here and there," Arcadia added, nodding to one sagging structure, "and they're going to lose those come the next storm. But nobody else is displaced."

"Where are they all?" Finley asked. At this hour, the little village should have been bustling, preparing for the return of the fishing fleet—which Finley could see was still bobbing at their berths.

"Some of them are sleeping it off," Kelden said with a wry grin. "The liquor came out a few hours ago. Some are in the church, doing some kind of ceremony." Then he frowned. "This isn't going to be the last of it."

"Mom and Dad are already spreading the word. There's to be a meeting tonight."

People without physical homes are going to be noticed, his talent warned. *The Veil is... thinner. More than I've seen, especially here and now.*

Finley relayed that.

"It never occurred to me," Arcadia mused, rubbing her eyes.

"What?" Kelden asked.

"You have all these people, our people, working shoulder-to-shoulder with the humans every day," she said with a shrug. "It never occurs to anyone that some of those people go to a home, and others just... vanish? Nobody ever wonders where they *live?"*

"The Veil," Finley confirmed. "It's more than just making people explain away something odd they've seen. It keeps them from thinking about all the things they *don't* see."

"And it's failing," Kelden said.

"It's getting—" he began.

"Finley," Arcadia warned, her tone suddenly alert and low. "It's Landon."

Finley spun to see their former classmate and colleague sauntering down the deserted street, a smug grin plastered across his face.

Finley, don't— his talent warned.

Finley's world exploded in a red haze.

Distantly, he realized that he retained access to all four elements of magic, as if his affinities had doubled. But at the front of his mind was nothing more complex than *revenge.*

He lashed out with a battering ram of Earth magic, rocks and soil gathering themselves from the road and into a solid form. It punched Landon in the stomach, sending the larger boy flying backwards, gasping for breath. But he quickly rose to one knee, an expression of *hunger* hardening his features. His grin was now feral and cold, and he brushed aside Finley's follow-up attack.

Landon's eyes glinted with a cruel, predatory light as he rose to his feet, his movements fluid and assured despite the force of Finley's attack. He brushed dirt from his clothes with a nonchalant air, as if the assault had been nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

"Well, well, Finley," he drawled, his voice dripping with condescension. "I see you've learned a few new tricks. But do you really think you can match me?"

Finley gritted his teeth, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. The rage that had consumed him moments before still simmered beneath the surface, but it was now tempered by a cold, calculating fury.

He knew he couldn't allow his emotions to control him, not if he hoped to stand a chance against Landon's formidable power.

"What have you done, Landon?" he demanded, his voice tight with barely contained anger. "Why are you doing this?"

Landon threw back his head and laughed, the sound harsh and grating in the stillness of the morning air. "Why? Because I can, Finley. Because I'm tired of hiding in the shadows, pretending to be something I'm not. Tired of skulking in the shadows. Dmitry's bringing us into the light. It's time for witchkind to take our rightful place in this world, and I intend to lead the charge."

He spread his arms wide, and Finley felt the crackle of magic in the air, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as Landon gathered his power. The ground beneath their feet began to tremble, small pebbles and bits of debris rising into the air as if suspended by invisible strings.

"You're mad," Finley breathed, his eyes wide with horror. "You can't possibly think that revealing ourselves to the humans will end well. They'll hunt us down, just as they did in the past."

Landon's grin only grew broader, his eyes glinting with a manic light. "Oh, they'll try," he purred, his voice silken and dangerous. "But they'll soon learn the folly of their ways. With the power we possess, we can crush them like the insects they are."

He thrust his hand forward, and a bolt of searing white energy shot from his palm, hurtling toward Finley with terrifying speed. Finley barely had time to throw up a hasty shield of Sky magic, the bolt shattering against the barrier in a shower of sparks. He was dimly aware of Arcadia and Kelden moving to support him, vaguely aware of his talent trying to cut through his anger.

Landon slammed Finley with a rapid-fire series of assaults. But Finley realized that his opponent's attacks were one-dimensional: with his affinity limited to a single element, his options for offensive maneuvers were limited. And, he'd never been a particularly apt student. Finley began adjusting his approach, letting Kelden and Arcadia defend—something their Sky magic was well-suited for—and shifting his own efforts toward Sea and Flame. The only two elements that truly

opposed each other, he managed to quickly weave them into a succession of quick jabs, forcing Landon to give ground and defend himself.

Rune after rune flashed through Finley's mind, distracting even his talent. This is where Finley had excelled in school, and even after that in the Order: his mind was fast, and he had an encyclopedic memory for runes, even the most complex constructs. And now, with all for magical affinities open to him, his options were all but endless.

But it was Kelden who managed the decisive blow, likely thanks to the greater emphasis on combative magics taught at Thornwaithe's. They stepped forward, their eyes narrowed in concentration as they drew upon the power of Sky magic. The air around them began to swirl, gentle at first, like a soft breeze playing through the leaves of a tree. But as they focused their will, the wind grew in intensity, whipping about them in a frenzy of motion. Finley had mistaken it for a defensive construct at first, but Kelden quickly dispelled that notion.

Dust and debris were caught up in the maelstrom, forming a vortex that spun faster and faster, its edges shimmering with an otherworldly light. Kelden's hair and clothing whipped about them as they stood at the center of the storm, their hands outstretched, fingers splayed as they shaped the currents to their bidding.

With a sudden, sharp gesture, Kelden sent the whirlwind hurtling toward Landon. It moved with the speed of a lightning bolt, faster than should have been possible, the air screaming as it was rent asunder by the force of Kelden's magic. The vortex engulfed Landon, lifting him off his feet and sending him tumbling head over heels, his limbs flailing helplessly as he was tossed about like a rag doll.

But Kelden wasn't finished. Even as Landon struggled to right himself within the swirling winds, Kelden began to weave another spell. Their hands danced in intricate patterns, his fingers tracing arcane sigils in the air. The wind around Landon began to change, the howling gale giving way to an eerie, unnatural silence. The dust and debris that had been caught up in the vortex suddenly stopped moving, hanging suspended in midair as if frozen in time.

Landon's eyes widened in shock as he realized he was trapped, his body held immobile by the strange, oppressive stillness that now

surrounded him. He struggled to move, to break free of the invisible bonds that held him, but it was as if he were encased in solid stone.

But Landon couldn't just surrender.

With a *crack,* the earth around him split, a jagged breach in the ground opening. From it, a profusion of rocks began rising.

Earth magic can be so literal, Finley's talent said, finally managing to break through. *Try th—*

There was no time. Kelden had seen the attack building as well, and acted decisively. A solid column of air crashed down into Landon from above, a miniature of the kind of battle-ending tactic so commonly associated with Thornwaithe's alum under the control of magic itself. The pillar of air—visible only by the distortion it caused around itself—hammered Landon into the ground. This time, the audible *crack* came from Landon's bones as his arms and legs slammed into the earth by his side. He screamed.

"I—" Finley started, intending to thank Kelden for his quick action.

"Stop him!" Arcadia shouted. A gush of air rushed from her and toward Landon, who was managing to rummage for something inside his shirt.

In a burst of Flame magic, he vanished.

A silence descended on the street, one so absolute it was almost tangible. Dust settled slowly as a few small rocks rolled this way and that.

"Finley," Arcadia said, her voice now low and urgent.

Finley refocused and saw the half-dozen humans who'd ventured from their shops and homes, each taking in the scene with eyes like saucers.

Witchcraft, someone whispered.

Finley felt a strange sensation, like the time he'd once bent over and felt the seam in his trousers give way.

The Veil, his talent said, its voice filled with resignation.

Arcadia's magic, weaker and more jittery than Finley had ever experienced, carried them away.

CHAPTER 19

A Dream

Everyone's preparing to leave the village," Kelden said, slumping into a chair.

Arcadia had taken them to her own home town, to an inn run by witchkind. She'd leased rooms for them all, insisting she couldn't deal with her family until she'd had a full sleep. They'd managed a quiet, filling lunch before Finley's eyelids, struggling to remain open, threatened immediate unconsciousness.

"Off to bed, then," Arcadia insisted. "At least six marks. We need to be rested for... whatever comes next."

"We have to find Landon," Finley insisted, forcing his eyes open.

"He's doubtless at the Farm being Healed," Arcadia said, failing to suppress a yawn. "We're all wiped out. I need to sleep and I need to Gather. Go."

Finley considered protesting until his talent nudged him. *She's right. Fine.*

He rose silently, made his way to his assigned room, and collapsed into the bed.

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Finley's mind, exhausted as it was, couldn't completely give over to a restful, blissful sleep. Instead, it seemed to toss and turn like a fishing boat on a stormy sea, casting up a vague sense of threat and a desperate longing for slumber.

But then, with an almost perceptible *snap,* his mind went blank. The half-formed visions of danger faded, the nearly unconscious pressure to *do something,* the nebulous sense of dread... they all slipped away.

The darkness in Finley's mind slowly came to life. At first, it was just a faint glimmer, a barely perceptible shift in the endless void. But then, as if drawn by an invisible hand, gentle swirls of color began to emerge from the depths. They were soft and ethereal, like wisps of smoke dancing in the breeze. The colors were muted at first, pale shades of blue and green, but as they twirled and intertwined, they grew more vibrant, more alive.

In the distance, two moons hung in the sky, their pale light casting a ghostly glow over the dreamscape. They were dim and far away, like distant beacons in the night. And even further still, a sparkling blue-green mote of light twinkled, a tiny pinprick of brilliance amidst the vast expanse of darkness.

But it was the swirls of color that truly captured Finley's attention. They moved with a mesmerizing grace, weaving intricate patterns in the air. As they drifted closer, Finley realized that he could taste them on his tongue, each one a unique flavor that seemed to embody the very essence of the elements.

The first swirl, a deep blue-green, tasted of the Sea, a briny tang that brought to mind crashing waves and salt-kissed breezes. It was cool and refreshing, like a gulp of icy water on a hot summer day. The second swirl, a light and airy blue, tasted of the Sky, a crisp, airy flavor that filled Finley's lungs with the essence of freedom and flight. It was like inhaling the very breath of the heavens, a rush of exhilaration that made his heart soar. The third, brown and green, was the taste of the Earth, loamy and rich, with hints of moss and wildflowers. It was the flavor of life itself, of growth and renewal, of the deep, abiding strength that flowed through the roots of ancient trees. And the fourth whirl, all oranges and reds,

tasted of Flame. Hot and smoky, but bright and demanding, it reminded him of the spicy foods of the south.

As Finley drank in these flavors, these elemental essences, he felt a strange sensation wash over him. It was as if he were being filled with a new kind of energy, a force that flowed through his veins like liquid fire. He could feel it pulsing in his fingertips, crackling in his mind, a wild, untamed power that begged to be unleashed.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the dream shifted. The swirls of color faded away, and Finley found himself standing in a vast, empty space. Before him, hovering in the midst of the darkness, was a very young man, with the same rare, pale white skin as Arcadia, neatly combed black hair, and flinty gray eyes. His lips slowly bent upward in the barest introduction of a smile, and he said, "Well. This is new."

Finley recognized the voice immediately as that of his invisible talent. "You're... in my head."

Now the man chuckled. "I've been in your head your entire life."

"Who are you?"

One aquiline eyebrow rose. "Now *that* is a very good question."

"You're the Origin, aren't you?"

"No. Not... no, I'm not. I thought I might be, but I'm distinct. Separate. But I'm *in* the Origin." The stone-gray eyes took on a faraway look. "The place where the four intersect. Earth, Sea, Sky, and Flame. All surrounded by the circle of Ending and Beginning."

As he spoke, the swirls of color returned, drifting lazily around the enigmatic figure like ethereal ribbons. They were more muted now, their vibrant hues softened to gentle whispers, but they still carried the essence of the elements—the smoky heat of Flame, the rich loam of Earth, the briny coolness of Sea, and the crisp freshness of Sky.

Finley watched, transfixed, as the wisps of color wove intricate patterns in the air, their movements almost hypnotic. They seemed to respond to the man's words, pulsing and swirling in time with his speech, as if they were an extension of his very being.

The swirls of color began to change, their hues shifting and blending in a mesmerizing dance. The deep green of Earth gave way to the shimmering blue of Sea, which in turn melted into the pale azure of

Sky. And then, in a burst of brilliant orange and red, Flame emerged, its fiery tendrils licking at the edges of the other elements.

"Where magic comes from," Finley whispered.

The figure shrugged. "Sort of. Not really. It's as I told you—magic comes into the world through humans. They draw it up from the roots of the world, the bones of the continent. More comes from... there's a font, or sorts, but... for our purposes, it's from the humans. It spills from them, pure as can be. The Origin... *colors* the magic. Lends it the flavor of the elements. Makes it so that we—so that you—can manipulate it."

"Oh."

And now Finley could see it: the distant blue-green mote is the world, and it is filled with millions of points of pure light. Humans, pouring magic into the world. As it does so, the magic flows into the Origin, gaining tints of color before spreading across the land like a thick, multicolored blanket.

"I was asleep a long time, in the Origin. Floating there. Not really aware of anything."

"How long?"

"I'm guessing a couple of centuries."

"What woke you up?"

"I think *you* did. When you were born. I... it's still indistinct. But I remember a light, just a tiny pinpoint, but incredibly bright. Something I could latch on to. Something I can relate to. There's something about *you* that's... special, somehow. And slowly, as you grew up, I became more and more aware. It's been a slow process." He frowned. "And now Karal's return... I suspect my anger is bringing me out of it faster, now."

"You said that name before," Finley remembered.

His talent nodded. "I've had dealings with them. Always selfish, always putting both humans and witchkind at risk. Always justifying it, somehow. They always burn out their identity runes, change *who* they are. It's not just their name, you know. They cut much deeper when they change."

"You're sure it's the same?"

He nodded. "It's the same. It's their pattern. They've been doing it... well, forever. That clan goes back a long ways, if you trace it far

enough. Through a hundred different names, a hundred different identities, back to the founding of the world. Then the Forging of the Axes. They meant to capture the Fifth Axis for themselves, but it... well, they couldn't do it. So they wound up with nothing. And oh, they *hated* having nothing. They *long* for power. Crave it. I think it's the only thing they care about. The one constant in their history."

"Can we stop them?"

His talent sighed. "I don't know. You felt the Veil, didn't you?"

Finley nodded. He could feel it even now, as if once he'd noticed it he couldn't *not* be aware of it. It was stretched taut, and he thought he could sense the tiniest of tears beginning to form.

Finley focused his mind's eye on the Veil, and as he did, it came into sharper focus. It was a gossamer layer, so thin and delicate that it seemed almost insubstantial, like a wisp of smoke or a breath of mist. And yet, there was a strength to it, a resilience that belied its fragile appearance.

The Veil was woven from countless strands of ancient magic, each one as fine as a spider's silk and as luminous as starlight. They criss-crossed and intertwined, forming an intricate tapestry that stretched as far as Finley's imagination could reach. The strands glimmered with a soft, ethereal light, pulsing gently like the beating of a distant heart.

As Finley watched, mesmerized, he began to discern patterns in the weave of the Veil. There were swirls and eddies, whirlpools of energy that seemed to draw the eye and the mind into their depths. There were also vast, sweeping currents, rivers of power that flowed majestically through the fabric of the Veil, carrying with them the very essence of magic itself.

And yet, for all its beauty and intricacy, Finley could see that the Veil was under immense strain. It was stretched taut, like a rubber band pulled to the very limit of its elasticity. In some places, it seemed to vibrate and hum with barely contained tension, as if it were on the verge of snapping at any moment. And there, just as Finley had sensed, were the beginnings of tears - tiny, almost imperceptible rips in the fabric of the Veil, like frayed threads in a well-worn garment.

As Finley peered closer, he could see the edges of the tears glowing with a sickly, greenish light, as if infected by some malevolent force. The

strands around these rips seemed to writhe and recoil, as if trying to pull away from the spreading corruption.

"Can it be... fixed?"

His talent hesitated, and then shook its head. "It might be impossible. It's old magic, incredibly ancient. Older than our entire world. It was... repurposed, in a way, to form the Veil. If it tears... the only way to fix it isn't available anymore. There's a source, an anchor, so to speak, and it's out of reach. Of you, of me, of any of witchkind."

"And then we're exposed."

His talent nodded slowly, its demeanor somber. "Yes. It's not as simple as making humans explain away the odd gaffe, you know. It's not just making them ignore us when we appear out of nowhere. It's more subtle. It makes them ignore our runes. Makes them... not think about things. Why the street lamps can stay lit in the strongest wind, even with cracks in their glass. Why the fishing boats steer themselves away from storm fronts. Why the fishing nets never seem to twist themselves into knots. It's a hundred tiny things, a thousand, that just never occur to them. But if the Veil tears, they'll start thinking about it. All of witchkind could completely forswear any more magic, and the humans would still suspect. We make everything too *neat.* Too automatic. We contradict what *should* be." It shook its head again. "And if it tears, there's no going back."

"Could we really... I mean, could *they* really subjugate the humans?"

He snorted. "No. It's not just how they outnumber us. They're *immune* to magic, right? We can't affect them directly. I've... what I've done is probably the limit. I don't think anyone other than you and I, working together, could nudge their minds, convince their flesh to heal. Certainly not across the entire world." He leaned toward Finley, his eyes piercing. "They would *know* they were being oppressed. And they would fight it, with every fiber of their being. Just as we would." He stood straighter, and glanced away for a moment. "But I'm starting to think the Veil wasn't the right way, any more than the Axes were."

"How so?"

"What do they teach you now, about the Forging?"

This was some of the earliest lore they'd been taught at Disem-

stoke's. "Humans had grown greedy for magic, and sought to control it. To control witchkind. They visited unspeakable horrors on us, took families hostage, all to bend us to their will. The Axes were formed to consolidate power in a few protectors, the Adherents, who could fight back against the humans."

His talent actually rolled its eyes. "Still the same story, then. And it's wrong. The Axes were Forged to consolidate power in a *few greedy men and women.* Nothing more, nothing less. They sought to raise themselves above the rest of witchkind, and above humans. Our—the runes used then, they *had* to be simpler—"

"Because magic itself was thinner, then. Less of it."

"No. Less of it *for everyone else,* yes, but there was *ample* power for the adherents."

"You were one of them, weren't you?"

A simple nod.

"You... were the last one, weren't you?"

Another nod, slower and deeper this time as understanding bloomed in Finley's mind.

"That means you're—"

"Don't," his talent cautioned. "I was. But I'm not. And naming me won't help. It might... constrain me, as I am now."

"So if the Veil was a mistake..." Finley said, picking up the earlier comment.

"I don't think we should have Sundered the relationship between humans and witchkind," his talent said, seeming grateful for the conversational turn. "That was before... my time, of course. The Sundering happened sometime after the Forging, once everyone realized the humans weren't going to give in. They started fighting back. And even the Adherents weren't immune to iron."

"So if the Veil falls now..."

"It will be horrific," his talent said firmly. "The relationship is broken, and has been for millennia. The only way to go back would have been to rebuild that. To create trust. To openly be the partners that humans and witchkind secretly are, now. But... it may be too late. If the Veil tears before that trust is built, it will be... chaos."

"Landon and Dmitry—they haven't been building trust."

"No. They've been sowing fear. Fear to make the humans dangerous to us. To restart the Hunts *again.* Because *that* will make witchkind fearful. Make them willing to take steps they wouldn't have, without that fear."

"It's working," Finley said sadly.

His talent nodded. "I know." Then it winked at him. "I'm more awake now, more aware now, than I have been since... well, since I went into the Origin. I'll help. I don't know if it will be enough, but I'll help."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"An easy one. You need to get some sleep."

"Am I really a Rune Smith? Or was it just you all along?"

His talent quirked its lips into a grin. "Can't both be true?"

CHAPTER 20

Confrontation

Son, is this something *you* have to do?" Finley's father asked.

His son nodded. "It is, Dad. I'm probably... I might be the only one who can. And Arcadia's going to go regardless, and I owe it to her." Finley had managed to fall into a deep and uninterrupted sleep after his talent spoke to him, and he felt at least moderately refreshed. If nothing else, he'd Gathered sufficient magic during those few hours of sleep to fully replenish his reserves.

Arcadia and Kelden were speaking in hushed tones, across the inn's spacious common room from Finley and his parents.

Finley's father nodded slow acceptance. "I understand, then. Be... careful. If you can."

"I will. Where will you go?"

"With your aunt and uncle in Harbsmouth. We did a Sending last night, and they've told us there haven't been any riots or anything."

"Be careful. Please."

"We will. The plan is to look for someplace in Evermore, at least for the time being. If we're not safe there..."

"Yeah. I'll come find you when... we're done." Father and son embraced, and Finley joined Arcadia and Kelden. "I assume we're going to the Farm?"

Arcadia frowned. "Why would we do that?"

Finley's brow wrinkled. "I mean... Dmitry?"

She gave him a tight grin. "Why not go straight to the top?"

"Straight to—wait, do you mean Evermore?"

Her grin grew, and a wicked gleam lit her eyes. "I believe that's where we keep the Taryba, yes."

Kelden rolled his eyes. "I've been trying to talk her out of it."

"It hasn't worked," she countered.

Finley shrugged. "I guess I'm in. What's the goal?"

"Simple. We confront Adomaitis. We make sure *everyone* on the Taryba—Councilors, staff, everyone—knows what he's done. That he and Dmitry have been stacking the deck. That everything was *fine* before they started pushing the humans. That they've been the ones stretching the Veil."

Finley considered, and then nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess that's it."

"Then off we go."

Fresh-smelling Sky magic surrounded them and spirited them away.

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They arrived in one of Evermore's many bustling squares. By common agreement, witchkind never arrived directly inside one of Evermore's buildings unless it was a private residence and they'd received consent from those living there. With no concern about displays of magic, any other approach would have resulted in chaos, with people popping in and out of existence at all times. As it was, they still had to clear the square quickly to make room for new arrivals.

Evermore stretched out before them, a dazzling city of magic and wonder. The buildings were crafted from smooth white stone that seemed to glow softly in the mild morning sunlight. Graceful towers soared into the sky, their spires twisting and curving in whimsical shapes that defied gravity. Large windows of stained glass or crystal clear panes sparkled in every edifice, inviting in light and air.

The streets were paved with gently rounded cobblestones that chimed softly and melodically underfoot, the notes changing subtly as

one strolled through different quarters of the city. Greenery and flowering vines cascaded from balconies, rooftop gardens, and window boxes, splashing the ivory cityscape with vibrant color. Gentle breezes carried the mingled scents of a thousand blooming flowers.

In the squares and plazas, fountains danced with enchanted waters that leapt and spun in mesmerizing patterns. The air thrummed with a palpable aura of magic that permeated every molecule. It was the very lifeblood of the city, as much a part of Evermore as the ancient stones from which it was built.

Witchkind strolled the avenues garbed in robes of every hue, some walking with purpose towards unknown destinations, others meandering languidly as if they had all the time in the world. Which, Finley mused, they very well might. Here there was no need to rush. While many of witchkind preferred the simpler existence of the human villages and towns, those who lived in Evermore lived a life full of magic and few burdens. Especially since the Fall of the Adherents and the return of abundant magic to the world, Evermore was the closest thing to a paradise anywhere on the continent.

Finley, Arcadia and Kelden strode purposefully down the cobbled streets towards the grand hall where the Taryba convened. Myriad thoughts swirled through Finley's mind as he mentally prepared himself for the confrontation to come. He knew Adomaitis would not yield easily, that he would fight tooth and nail to maintain his newfound grip on power. But they had to try. For the sake of witchkind, for the very survival of their world, they had to succeed.

As they approached the imposing marble edifice housing the Taryba chambers, Arcadia turned to her companions, eyes flashing with determination. "Remember, we stand united. No matter what tricks Adomaitis tries to pull, we do not waver. We get him to admit it, and we expose him."

Kelden and Finley nodded their assent. Taking a collective breath, the trio ascended the sweeping stairs and pushed open the heavy oaken doors.

The interior of the Taryba chambers was a breathtaking spectacle that dazzled the senses. The grand foyer soared several stories high, its vaulted ceiling adorned with an intricate mosaic crafted from thousands

of precious gemstones. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds and diamonds glittered in elaborate patterns that depicted key moments from witchkind's storied history—the mythical Founding of the World, the Forging of the Axes, the Sacrifice of the Last Adherent, and more. The effect was mesmerizing, the way the light danced and refracted off the polished facets.

The walls were paneled in richly grained wood imbued with preservation magic to maintain their luster for centuries. Opulent tapestries hung at intervals, their threads woven into runs that made the scenes of witchkind's greatest triumphs and achievements seem to move and shimmer as if alive.

Underfoot, the floor was an expansive marble mosaic that formed a grand map of the lands witchkind called home. Each tile was inlaid with chips of colored stone and mother-of-pearl to denote some of the key landmarks in the world, like a giant map. As one walked across it, faint chiming notes would sound, indicating the region being traversed.

Throughout the space, pedestals and alcoves displayed ancient magical artifacts and relics, each with a fascinating story. Some were said to still hold residual power from the great magic-workers who created and wielded them ages ago.

Hallways branched off in every direction, hinting at immense volumes of space that the building itself couldn't possibly contain. Witchkind's signature space-expanding magic on its greatest display, used here not to hide homes and shops, but to provide all the space needed for the government of witchkind, its record keeping, its tribunals, and more.

Arcadia stepped up to a small podium that glowed with a scintillating blue-green-purple light. "Councilor Adomaitis," she said clearly.

A glowing point of pink light detached itself and rose in front of them before drifting quickly and with purpose through the foyer.

The pink light led them down a hallway that exuded an air of stately formality, a marked contrast to the grand foyer's opulence. The walls were paneled in rich, dark wood polished to a mirror sheen, reflecting the soft glow of the floating witchlights that hovered at intervals near the ceiling. Intricate brass sconces held flickering flames that cast

dancing shadows, creating an interplay of light and dark that seemed to imbue the space with a sense of gravitas.

Underfoot, the floor here was crafted from alternating planks of honey-hued oak and deep mahogany, arranged in a herringbone pattern that drew the eye forward with its precise geometry. The wood had been worn smooth by centuries of footsteps, yet it retained its luster, a testament to the preservation runes carved like a decorative frieze along the floor's edges.

At evenly spaced intervals, alcoves housed life-sized bronze statues of witchkind's most revered leaders from ages past. Each figure was rendered with astonishing detail, from the drape of their robes to the wise, knowing expressions on their faces. Small plaques beneath each statue bore their names and a brief synopsis of their greatest achievements. Finley recognized a few from History classes in school—Valerius the Wise, who brokered the first peace accords with the humans; Isadora Stormweaver, who harnessed the power of the tempests to turn back the Blight; and even one of the Last Adherent himself, Daniel Scratch.

Good likeness, his talent murmured.

Finley's heart began to beat faster.

The pink light finally stopped before a set of double doors carved with an intricate tree motif, its branches spreading wide to encompass the entire portal. With a soft chime, the doors swung open of their own accord, revealing Adomaitis personal offices.

The offices' foyer was a large, circular room with a soaring, domed ceiling overhead. It was conservatively decorated in panels of honey-colored wood, and a small desk made from darker wood occupied the center of the room. Behind the desk was a young, friendly-looking man who smiled as they entered. "Welcome to Councilor Adomaitis' offices. How may I help you?"

"We're here to see him," Arcadia said firmly.

The receptionist pulled a well-practiced sigh of regret. "Alas, I'm afraid the Councilor is not available to take—"

Finley waved his hand, and the foyer's doors slammed shut. A rune carved itself into the wood, glowing with Earth magic as it knitted the two doors into a single slab of wood. "It's not a request," he said

mildly. “I’m Finley Coughlan. This is Arcadia, and Kelden. We represent the Order of Some. The Councilor will see us. Tell him we’re here.”

The young man blinked as he processed what had just happened. “He, ah—” he stammered, clearly unprepared to deal with something this far off-script.

“Is he here?” Arcadia demanded.

“Not at—that is to say, I couldn’t—”

“Sure you can,” Finley offered.

“You know, you can’t just fling magic—”

“That’s not all we’re going to be flinging,” Arcadia said sweetly. “Where’s he at?”

The receptionist’s eyes flicked back and forth between them.

Try this, Finley’s talent offered. *Old, but good. I’m curious to see if it still works.*



Middle Runic? Okay, Finley responded, trickling a healthy flow of magic. It seemed to accept a combination of everything he’d absorbed, drawing an equal share of Sky, Sea, Flame, and Earth, along with something... else.

Beginning and Ending, his talent supplied. *Focus it on him.*

Finley did so, and was surprised to see a gentle blue haze settle over the receptionist, who immediately looked tense and wary. “Where’s Councilor Adomaitis?”

The man’s mouth opened, and judging from the expression on the

rest of his face, it was doing so of its own accord. "He's not here. He's almost never here. Only for full sessions of the Taryba, in fact."

Arcadia frowned. "Wait, that can't be right. Ram has been seeing him all the time, lately."

"Ram who?" the receptionist asked.

"Don't pretend—" Arcadia started with some heat.

"I don't think he can, right now," Finley said quickly, holding up a hand to calm her. "Do you know who Ram is? The Head of the Order?"

"No."

"But you know about the Order?"

"Yes."

"Would it be possible for Ram to have met with Adomaitis without you knowing?"

"Of course. Anywhere but in the office, really."

"And Adomaitis isn't here."

"No."

Arcadia asked, "Then where is he?"

"I don't know."

She frowned. "Who would know, then?"

The man's expression twisted a bit before he replied, "That's the thing. I *should* know. But he only ever shows up for council sessions, now. He comes here to retrieve his agenda, and then he goes into the main chamber, and that's the last I see of him until next time." He snapped his mouth close as if trying to hold back any further information.

"Okay," Finley said, dismissing the magic. *That's impressive,* he told his talent. *I've never heard of anything like that.*

And that's only the Third Form of the Axis, it replied cheerfully. *You should see the Fifth.*

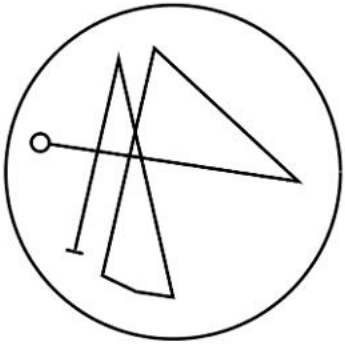
"So what now?" Kelden asked.

"You could start by putting the door back," the receptionist said nastily.

Finley projected another rune, and the doors quickly resumed their original form and swung open. As they walked out, he said, "Do you think a trace would work?"

Arcadia nodded. "It's worth a try." She stopped as Finley pulled the doors shut behind them and they moved to one side of the hallway. A passing staffer gave them a curious look, but continued on her way. After a moment of concentration, Arcadia shook her head. "No good. Something in here's blocking it."

"Let's try mine," Finley said, recalling the rune in his mind.



He focused his will, channeling magic into the rune. It drew both Sky and Flame, the two most ephemeral and flexible magics, well-suited to this task. He immediately felt his consciousness expand, reaching out like ethereal tendrils to find any trace of Adomaitis' magical signature.

At first, there was only a vast blankness, an empty void that seemed to swallow his probing magic. He pushed harder, pouring more power into the spell, determined to break through whatever was blocking him. The rune pulsed brighter in his mind, glowing with an intense blue-white light.

This is odd, his talent said.

Suddenly, he sensed something—the barest whisper of Adomaitis' presence. It was faint and fleeting, like a half-remembered dream upon waking. Finley latched onto it, trying to follow the faded trail, but it seemed to splinter and fragment, pulling his mind in a dozen different directions at once.

It was like grasping at wisps of smoke with his bare hands. Every time he thought he had a hold of it, the trace would dissolve, leaving

him clutching at emptiness. A dull throbbing started behind his eyes as he strained to maintain his focus.

The magic twisted and writhed, as if actively fighting against his attempts to track the Councilor. Finley gritted his teeth, a bead of sweat tracing down his temple as he redoubled his efforts. But it was like trying to catch the wind—the more he struggled, the more elusive the trace became.

"It's not working," he said with a frown. "It's not even being blocked, just... misdirected. I think."

Give me a moment, his talent said, clearly intrigued. Flickering lines of white and blue arranged and rearranged themselves, seemingly trying hundreds of new configurations with every beat of Finley's heart. *How odd. And I'd grown so attached to those. Oh well.* Now the possibilities seemed to expand a thousandfold, glimmering through Finley's mind so quickly they blurred into a bright, twinkling light. *Oh, I see,* his talent said after a few more heartbeats. *They've done something to discourage order. So we embrace chaos. Try this.*



Finley focused his mind on the new rune, feeling its power coalesce in his thoughts. As he channeled magic into it, the rune ignited with a flickering orange glow shot through with erratic streaks of indigo—Flame magic intertwined with something more abstract and mercurial.

The sensation was wholly unlike his previous attempts at tracing. Instead of the focused, probing tendrils of before, this magic seemed to

expand in all directions at once, like a swarm of fireflies dispersing into the night. It was chaotic, unpredictable, yet oddly freeing.

Finley let his mind drift, not trying to direct the magic but simply allowing it to flow where it willed. It was like trying to glimpse something in his peripheral vision—the harder he looked, the more it eluded him. So he relaxed, letting his thoughts unspool into randomness.

Suddenly, he caught a flicker of Adomaitis' presence, dancing at the edges of his perception. It was there and gone again in an instant, a mote of light flickering in and out of existence. Finley resisted the urge to pounce on it, instead letting his unfocused mind simply observe.

The trace reappeared, slightly stronger now, like a skittish creature slowly gaining confidence. It darted and weaved in erratic patterns, never quite where Finley expected it to be. But by not looking directly at it, by embracing the chaos, Finley was able to grasp snatches of the elusive trace, his mind dancing along its convoluted path. It led him in dizzying spirals and sudden sharp turns, defying any sense of linear direction. He let himself be pulled along, a leaf caught in the eddies of a whimsical breeze.

The trace grew stronger, coalescing into a shimmering thread that pulsed with an otherworldly light. It was a strange, almost unsettling hue that seemed to shift and change even as Finley tried to perceive it—now a sickly green, now a bruised purple, now a color that had no name.

The thread wove a meandering path through the hallways of the Taryba chambers, passing through walls and doors as if they were no more than mist. Finley's consciousness followed, unbound by the constraints of physical space.

He caught glimpses of rooms and chambers he had never seen—a vaulted library with towering shelves that stretched into infinity, a shimmering pool that reflected a night sky filled with unfamiliar constellations, a hall of mirrors that fractured his sense of self into a thousand shards.

On and on the trace led him, deeper into the labyrinthine heart of the building. The air seemed to thicken, taking on a cloying, almost oily quality. Finley's thoughts felt sluggish, as if he were trying to swim through honey. But still he followed, driven by a growing sense of

urgency. He knew, with a certainty that defied logic, that he was getting close.

So interesting, his talent murmured, as if peering over his shoulder.

The thread pulsed brighter now, its uncanny hue searing itself into Finley's mind. It was leading him downward, spiraling ever deeper into the bowels of the earth. The air grew colder, damper, and a sense of ancient, brooding malevolence seemed to press in on him from all sides.

Suddenly, the thread went taut, quivering like a plucked bowstring. Finley's consciousness hurtled forward, pulled inexorably towards its destination. He braced himself, unsure of what he would find...

And then he was there. A cavernous chamber, hewn from living rock and suffused with an eerie, pulsating light that seemed to emanate from the very walls. The air was thick with the tang of ozone and something else, something dark and acrid that caught at the back of Finley's throat.

"I've got him," Finley said hoarsely. He began pulling magic to himself and pictured a travel rune in his mind, but Arcadia laid a hand on his arm.

"No magic," she warned. "Not here. You won't believe the alarms, and it might not even work, depending on what rune you have in mind. Can you see the way there?" Finley nodded, reaching for more magic to reinforce the glowing thread in his mind. "Lead the way."

Finley led the way, his eyes half-closed as he followed the shimmering, erratically pulsing thread that only he could perceive. It wove a dizzying path through the hallways, penetrating barriers as if they were mere dreams. Arcadia and Kelden followed close behind, exchanging glances of mingled anticipation and trepidation as they walked in Finley's wake. They had to dodge hurrying staffers, and double back more than a few times as the thread wound back on itself.

The hallways grew increasingly maze-like as they progressed, the opulent wood paneling giving way to rougher, older stone. The air took on a musty quality, redolent with the scent of ages past. Witchlights flickered fitfully in sconces that looked as if they hadn't been tended to in decades, casting an uncertain, wavering light.

Finley made an abrupt turn, veering towards what appeared to be a solid expanse of wall. As they drew closer, however, the stones seemed

to shimmer and dance, revealing the ghostly outline of a door that had been cleverly concealed, the seams blending almost perfectly with the surrounding masonry. Finley reached out, his hand passing through the seemingly solid stone as if it were no more than an illusion. With a soft grinding sound, the hidden door swung inward, revealing a narrow staircase that spiraled down into darkness.

The hidden staircase wound down into the earth, the rough stone steps worn smooth by centuries of treading feet. The air grew colder and damper as they descended, their breath misting before their faces in the chill. The only light came from the flickering witchlights that cast eerie, dancing shadows on the close walls.

Down and down they spiraled, the passageway growing narrower with each turn until they had to hunch their shoulders and walk in single file. Finley kept his eyes half-closed, his attention focused inward on the chaotic, pulsing thread of Adomaitis' magical signature. It was stronger now, throbbing with an almost manic intensity that set his teeth on edge.

"We must be getting close," Arcadia murmured from behind him, her voice oddly muffled in the oppressive closeness of the stairwell.

Kelden grunted in agreement. "Can't imagine this goes on much deeper. We've got to be well below the foundations by now."

As if in response to his words, the staircase terminated abruptly in a small, circular antechamber. The walls were rough-hewn bedrock, glistening with moisture and shot through with veins of some dark, crystalline substance that caught the witchlights and fractured it into strange, unsettling colors.

And there, in the middle of the small room, was a solid, translucent crystal pillar.

“Adomaitis,” Arcadia whispered.

In the center of the antechamber, the crystal pillar glowed with an inner light, pulsing softly like the beat of a distant heart. It stood taller than a man, its facets perfectly smooth and symmetrical. And there, suspended within its translucent depths, was the unmistakable figure of Councilor Adomaitis.

He hung motionless, his robes drifting about him as if he were submerged in some invisible, viscous fluid. His eyes were closed, his face

slack in an expression of profound repose. His skin had taken on a pale, almost luminous quality, as if he had been carved from the same crystal that imprisoned him.

Finley stepped closer, marveling at the intricacy of the magic at work. Through his talent, he could sense the complex web of enchantments woven through the crystal, a tapestry of spells so dense and interwoven that it was almost a physical presence in the room. Sky magic to suspend, Earth to preserve, Flame to energize, and Sea to stabilize—all bound together in a configuration of staggering power and precision.

As he studied the suspended figure, Finley noticed details he had missed at first glance. Adomaitis' hands were folded across his chest, his fingers interlaced in a gesture that seemed almost ritualistic. And around his neck hung a heavy gold medallion, inscribed with runes that pulsed with the same unsettling light as the crystal itself.

Arcadia circled the pillar slowly, her brow furrowed in thought. "This is advanced magic. Beyond anything I've ever seen or even heard of. What could possibly be the purpose of keeping him like this?"

Such things were possible, once, Finley's talent murmured. *I wouldn't have thought they still were.*

Kelden shook his head, his expression grim. "Nothing good, that's for sure. It's like he's in some kind of stasis or suspended animation."

"It's nothing more than a piece of artwork," came a sharp voice from behind them.

They whirled to see...

"Councilor Adomaitis?" Kelden asked, their brow wrinkling in confusion.

Adomaitis stood in the entryway to the antechamber, his hands clasped behind his back and a thin smile playing across his lips. He was a tall, imposing figure, with broad shoulders and a regal bearing that seemed to fill the small space. His robes were of the finest silk, a rich burgundy hue that shimmered softly in the witchlight, adorned with intricate golden embroidery along the hems and sleeves.

His face was angular and aquiline, with high, prominent cheekbones and a sharp, pointed chin. His skin was pale and smooth, almost unnaturally so, as if carved from alabaster. Jet-black hair, shot through

with streaks of silver at the temples, was combed back from his high forehead in smooth, precise waves.

But it was his eyes that commanded attention—a piercing, icy blue that seemed to bore into the very soul. They glittered with a keen intelligence and an undercurrent of something darker, more calculating. When those eyes fixed upon you, it felt as if he could see through all pretense and deception, straight to the core of your being.

He stepped further into the chamber, his movements fluid and graceful, almost predatory. The air seemed to chill and crackle with his presence, a palpable aura of power that set the hairs on the back of Finley's neck standing on end. "Obviously," he said imperiously. "And you're trespassing. Quite significantly." Two men stepped out from behind the second Adomaitis, their hands poised to cast something that Finley had no doubt would be combative.

This isn't right, Finley's talent warned.

With no further prompt, Finley cast the rune they'd used on the receptionist.



As Finley channeled magic into the Middle Runic figure, the air in the chamber seemed to vibrate and hum with building power. The rune ignited in his mind, glowing with a brilliant blue-white light that pulsed in time with his heartbeat. He focused his will on the figure of Adomaitis standing before them, pouring all his intent and desire for truth into the spell.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. Adomaitis stood there, a

smug smile playing across his lips, his icy blue eyes glittering with disdain. But then, something shifted. It started as a barely perceptible flicker, a ripple across the surface of his form, like the disturbance on a pond from a thrown pebble.

The ripple grew, spreading outward from Adomaitis' core, gaining speed and intensity with each passing second. His form began to waver and distort, as if he were a reflection in a funhouse mirror. The colors of his robes bled and ran together, the rich burgundy and gold melting into a sickly, iridescent swirl.

Adomaitis' face contorted, his features stretching and warping in grotesque ways. His eyes bulged, the icy blue darkening to a stormy, turbulent gray. His mouth opened in what might have been a scream or a snarl, but no sound emerged. Instead, fracture lines appeared, spreading across his skin like a cracked porcelain mask. With a sickening crunch, Adomaitis' form shattered into a thousand glittering shards that hung suspended in the air for a heartbeat before dissolving into motes of sickly, greenish light that winked out like dying fireflies.

In his place stood a figure that they knew well.

"Dmitry," Arcadia said with disgust.

Finley felt her pulling power from her reserves.

"Kill them," Dmitry sneered.

Dmitry's henchmen moved with blinding speed, their hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as they summoned their magic. The first, a burly man with a shaved head and a scar running down his cheek, slammed his palms against the stone floor. Instantly, the bedrock buckled and heaved, jagged spikes of rock erupting from the ground like the teeth of some monstrous beast. They shot towards Finley and his companions, the air shimmering with the heat of the Earth magic that propelled them.

Arcadia reacted with lightning reflexes, her own hands moving in a blur of motion. A shimmering shield of Sky magic sprang into existence before them, a wall of cerulean energy that pulsed and undulated like the waves of a storm-tossed ocean. The stone spikes slammed into the barrier with a resounding boom, shattering into a thousand razor-sharp fragments that ricocheted off the magical shield in a dazzling display of sparks and shards.

But even as Arcadia deflected the first attack, the second henchman was already in motion. He was tall and lean, with long, stringy hair and eyes that glowed with an almost feverish intensity. He thrust his hands forward, and twin jets of searing Flame magic erupted from his fingertips, twisting and coiling like serpents of living fire. They struck Arcadia's shield with a roar, the force of the impact sending her stumbling back, her face contorted with effort as she struggled to maintain the shield against the onslaught of Flame magic. The air crackled and sizzled, the acrid stench of ozone mingling with the coppery tang of blood magic that flowed from the two henchmen like a noxious tide.

Finley leapt into action, his hands moving in a complex pattern as he channeled a torrent of Earth magic. The floor beneath the lean henchman's feet suddenly turned to quicksand, the solid rock liquefying and sucking him down like a malevolent quagmire. The man let out a yelp of surprise, his concentration broken as he struggled to free himself from the grasping morass.

Kelden seized the opportunity, their hands weaving a net of shimmering Sky magic that engulfed the burly henchman. The man roared in fury, his muscles straining against the ethereal bonds, but the more he struggled, the tighter the net constricted, until he could barely draw breath.

Dmitry snarled, his eyes flashing with a malevolent light. "Fools!" He raised his hands, and the air around him began to warp and distort, as if reality itself was bending to his will.

For Finley, time froze.

You're not going to win this, his talent warned him.

His talent expanded his perception. Suddenly Finley could see magic itself, laid bare before his eyes in all its intricate, awe-inspiring complexity.

It was like stepping into a whole new plane of existence. The air around them was alive with shimmering strands of power, weaving and dancing in mesmerizing patterns. Each type of magic had its own distinct hue and texture. Sky magic manifested as translucent ribbons of cerulean and aquamarine that rippled and flowed like wind-tossed currents. Earth magic was a tapestry of rich greens and browns, the strands as strong and sturdy as ancient tree roots delving deep into the

soil. Flame magic coruscated in vivid reds, oranges, and golds, the threads crackling and sparking with barely contained energy. And Sea magic undulated in shades of blue-green and turquoise, its strings eddying and swirling like the ever-shifting tides.

But it was more than just seeing the individual types of magic. Finley could perceive how they interacted, the way they wove together in endlessly intricate configurations to create spells of staggering power and complexity. Runes, he realized, were merely the physical anchors, the way a caster's mind could interpret and shape the raw stuff of magic. But this... this was magic in its purest, most primal form.

And at the center of it all was Dmitry, a maelstrom of dark, pulsating energy that seemed to draw in the very fabric of magic around him. Tendrils of oily black and sickly green snaked out from his form, ensnaring and tainting the strands of purer magic, bending them to his twisted will.

Stolen power, his talent realized. *An old family trick.*

Finley and his talent were momentarily frozen as they took in the spectacle before them. Dmitry was a master of magic, his control and power far surpassing anything they had ever seen. It was clear that he had perfected a feel for the raw energy that surrounded them, far beyond simply memorizing runes.

And what he was constructing here would end them.

Then what do we do? Finley asked desperately, his mind racing.

I'll show you, his talent said, and here Finley sensed a tinge of reluctance and regret, *but you can never use it again. And you must* focus. *You must direct it* only *at this man and these fighters. No-one else. Do you agree?*

I do, Finley said.

You will regret this, his talent warned. *Do you still agree?*

Finley hesitated less than an eye blink before deciding. Arcadia's life, and Kelden's, were at stake. *I do.*

Then empower this, his talent said, seeming to shake its head in resignation. *And* focus.



Finley fed the rune all the power it could handle... and it demanded *more.* He emptied himself, grasping to Gather more power as the rune sucked him dry.

I didn't— his talent started.

The rune reached out to Finley's allies, and Arcadia screamed as her magic was pulled from her. Kelden grunted and fell to one knee, breathing heavily as his own magic was smoothly ripped from him.

Focus, his talent reminded him.

Through blurred, red-tinged eyes, Finley *focused.* He stared at Dmitry, held the man's image firmly in his mind. *Dmitry of Clan Gelbė-tojas,* he roared in his mind.

NO! his talent screamed.

Time returned to its usual pace.

An unholy shriek rent the air as a seething mass of dark wraiths exploded into existence, bursting forth from the very fabric of reality. They were living shadows, writhing and twisting in a grotesque parody of life. Their forms were vaguely humanoid, but stretched and distorted in impossible ways, with elongated limbs that ended in razor-sharp claws and gaping maws filled with rows of needle-like teeth.

The wraiths moved with a terrifying swiftness, their shadowy forms blurring and phasing through the air like a nightmarish swarm. One of them lunged at Dmitry, its inky black form engulfing him in an instant.

Dmitry's scream was abruptly cut off as the wraith consumed him whole, his body and magic alike devoured by the insatiable darkness.

Two more wraiths descended upon the henchmen, their claws rending flesh and their maws devouring souls. The men's agonized wails echoed through the chamber for a brief, horrifying moment before they too were silenced forever, their essences absorbed into the ever-growing horde.

Thousands more wraiths poured forth, a tidal wave of living shadow that surged through the walls and out into the world beyond. They passed through solid stone as if it were nothing more than mist, leaving behind only a bone-chilling cold and a lingering sense of dread in their wake.

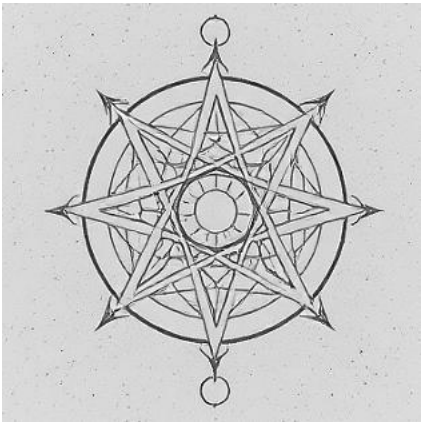
Finley fell to his knees. To one side, Arcadia was sobbing uncontrollably, blood dripping from her nose. To the other, Kelden had fallen forward, supporting himself on his elbows as blood seemed to ooze from the very pores of his skin.

We've one more task, his talent said. Its tone was cold and distant, full of disappointment and... regret. *Adomaitis.*

Right, Finley thought wearily, wiping his forehead and gasping at the slick of blood that came away on the back of his hand. *What do I do?*

You already know the rune.

Finley started to protest, and then realized that he did.



Finley focused his mind on the rune for Freedom, feeling its gentle power coalesce in his thoughts. He channeled the last dregs of his magic into it, the rune glowing with a soft, pulsing blue light as it drew upon the soothing, restorative essence of Sea magic.

The rune's energy reached out, tendrils of cerulean light extending towards the crystal pillar that held Councilor Adomaitis suspended. As the magic touched the crystal's surface, it began to change, its hard edges softening and its facets turning cloudy. Tiny fissures appeared, spreading across the crystal like a delicate web of frost on a winter window pane.

Then, with a gentle sigh, the crystal began to dissolve. It didn't shatter or break, but rather seemed to sublimate, transforming directly from solid to a cool, swirling mist. The fog curled and eddied around Adomaitis' suspended form, caressing his skin and playing through his hair like an ethereal breeze.

As the crystal fell away, Adomaitis slowly descended, the invisible forces that had held him aloft releasing their grasp. His feet touched the ground with the lightness of a feather, and he drew in a deep, shuddering breath, as if his lungs were relearning the feel of air.

The mist swirled around him for a moment longer, a final cool caress, before dissipating.

"Councilor," Finley croaked. Beside him, Arcadia and Kelden had managed to pull themselves upright, although both were still bloody and shaken.

"What's—" the councilor began.

"You were... frozen. In crystal," Finley answered roughly.

Adomaitis frowned. "Dmitry."

"Yes. He's taken your... *movement* and... witchkind is in danger, now. He's put on displays of dangerous magic." Finley took a deep, heaving breath to try and control the shudders that were taking over his own body. "The Veil is stretched, if not pierced. This idea of subjugating the humans... let it go."

Adomaitis flushed. "Who are you, to tell me—"

"We're the people who will put you back in a crystal," Arcadia snapped. "And hash out the details later. Dmitry was impersonating

you, with as solid an illusion as I've ever seen. And he wasn't doing *nice* things. You've a lot to answer for."

"I?" Adomaitis blustered. "I've done nothing! *You* on the other—"

"Enough!" Kelden roared. He stepped toward Adomaitis, leaning in so the two were almost nose-to-nose. "I am of Thornwaithe's. You understand?"

Adomaitis' flush of anger instantly faded, his dark skin going gray.

"I see you do. I will Testify."

Finley could *hear* the capital letter, and made a note to ask Kelden what that meant.

Adomaitis went even paler.

"We're leaving now."

Kelden's Sky magic was the bitter cold of the mountains, and it shocked Finley back to full awareness as it took them away. A small, absurd part of his mind wondered if the Taryba's alarms worked in the basement.

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"It's been a reckoning," Finley's father said, shaking his head. "Adomaitis is not only off the Taryba, he's been imprisoned. All of Evermore is in chaos. That's why we decided to stay here."

Finley nodded silently. Arcadia and Kelden had joined him at his aunt and uncle's home, given that Harbsmouth had remained fairly quiet.

"There have been Hunts, in other villages," his mother added softly.

"They may die down," Kelden said. "If everyone can just stay low for a moon or so."

Next to him on the comfortable, worn couch, Finley felt Arcadia stiffen.

"A Sending," she said, her voice tense as she received the message. Then her brow wrinkled. "We're to go to the Farm."

"I don't know if—" Finley began.

"I think you will," Arcadia said with a heavy sigh, rising.

And sometime soon, his talent said just as heavily, *we will need to talk about what you've done.*

CHAPTER 21

Order Restored

Well," Finley observed, a grin on his face, "being in charge certainly suits you."

Arcadia rolled her eyes. She sat in Ram's old office, behind his old desk, a stack of field dispatches neatly arranged before her. "It's not like I asked for it."

"Ram was too sick to continue," Finley pointed out.

"And once Father found out about the Order, he started pushing every lever he could reach," Arcadia sighed. "And Ram earned his retirement. Besides, the mission now is... different."

Finley snorted. "That's an understatement. And you've certainly not held back in changing."

Arcadia stood up from the desk and walked to the large window that overlooked the Farm. The sight before her was a far cry from the secretive, understated compound it had been mere months ago.

Everywhere she looked, the Farm was alive with activity. The main farmhouse, once a quaint, if sprawling, structure, was now enveloped in scaffolding as teams of witchkind workers used their magic to expand and reshape it. The weathered white siding was being replaced. New wings were being added, the framework already in place and imbued with strengthening charms. A new second story was being added over the majority of the structure as well.

Out on the grounds, the old barn and stables were barely recognizable. Their rustic wooden exteriors had been stripped away, revealing the magically reinforced stone and timber skeletons beneath. Carefully carved runes adorned the structures, each pulsing with power. Teams of witchkind swarmed over the buildings like industrious ants, carving new runes to add durability, and in some cases, protective wards around the areas where new apprentices would practice.

Even the fields and gardens were undergoing a metamorphosis. Earth-affinity workers tilled the soil with gestures, enriching it with nutrients and charms for abundance. Other with Flame affinity reworked the many fireplaces, upgrading their runes to provide more warmth while protecting against escaped embers.

"The mission isn't just different," Arcadia mused. "It's so much bigger."

"You're keeping Kelden on scouting?"

She nodded, turning back to him. "He's good at it, and anyone with Sky affinity is joining him. We're reworking all the runes on the churches, making them all listening posts, but someone has to sit and actually *listen* to everything that comes back. Thanks for those runes, by the way."

You're welcome, Finley's talent said.

"So how goes it?"

Arcadia sighed and walked back to her desk, flipping through the top few dispatches. "Two Hunts put down so far. We've managed to create the idea of a rogue group of priests trying to overturn the church hierarchy. That's been pretty effective."

"The cabal?"

"No sign of them. But we've stopped pushing back against... well, everything. They're working on an extension to the damned iron roadway, pushing south toward Baythwaite. Perilously close to Disemstoke's, in fact. That's the one place we're still active, just keeping them away. We've filled in more marshland than we've created, ironically. But so far, manipulating information is proving more effective." She paused, and gave him a close look. "How's the Veil?"

Finley closed his eyes and focused on the dim, vague sense of the Veil that always seemed with him. He took a deep breath, his brow

furrowing as he concentrated on the ethereal sensation that had become a constant presence in his mind. The Veil felt distant, far more removed than it had in the past. It was as if he were reaching out to touch a gossamer curtain that hung just beyond his fingertips, tantalizingly close yet frustratingly out of reach.

The fabric of the Veil itself felt foreign, its once familiar threads now imbued with an alien, unsettling quality that sent a shiver down Finley's spine. It was as if the very essence of the barrier between the ordinary and magical had been altered, its fundamental nature transformed by the events that had transpired.

By the stress it had experienced.

As he probed deeper, Finley became acutely aware of the Veil's precarious state. It was stretched taut, like a rubber band pulled to its limits, ready to snap at the slightest provocation. The tension was palpable, a thrumming energy that set his nerves on edge.

Scattered across the expanse of the Veil, Finley sensed tiny rips, minuscule tears in its fabric. They were like loose threads in a tapestry, seemingly insignificant on their own, but harboring the potential to unravel the entire structure. Each rip was a vulnerability, a weak point that could be exploited by those with malicious intent.

"Not great," he said aloud.

"And there's no fixing it?"

His talent said nothing, but Finley had a clear impression of regret and resignation.

"I don't think so. No, there's not. It's unbelievably old. Older than our entire world he... it... says."

"Your talent."

"Yeah. It says the Veil originated in an entirely different world, and we repurposed it here. But the anchor for that is out of reach, and that would be the only way to try and repair it."

Arcadia slumped into her chair. "So we're going to lose."

Finley's heart broke for her. She's always been such a perfectionist, even back in school. Always top of the class, always first to finish. "We can probably prevent further damage. But... eventually. Probably. Yeah."

She shook her head. "We're going to push some innovations of our

own. Try to sneak them into human awareness without them knowing. The boilers in Chiton are a good example. There are a few others. There's a team building more riverwalls along farms—runes to make boulders lighter, aid in the construction, that kind of thing."

"Maybe that'll be enough to keep the cabal happy."

She shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. It all went too far. What if... Finley, what if what happened in your village just gives them confidence?"

He hesitated. "Yeah. I've thought about that."

"I've... had a couple of crazy ideas. I haven't told anyone about them."

Finley arched an eyebrow.

"What if... this is going to sound crazy."

"Just say it."

"What if we... *told* them? Some of it, at least?"

"Told... the humans? What?"

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. Her eyes were bright now. "What if we just *came out* and *told them* about witchkind? About magic? They've been benefitting from it for millennia, now. They just haven't known. Yes, we've held them back, especially recently, but a lot of what we've done is still beneficial. We still make the boats better, the buildings stronger. Our work with weather, the work on the farms—they can't duplicate that. Not yet."

I don't think we should have Sundered the relationship between humans and witchkind, his talent had said.

"You mean, live alongside them. Openly."

She nodded. "It seems like the only option, apart from..."

"War."

"Yeah."

Finley took a deep breath. "You're going to face a lot of opposition."

Arcadia leaned back. "I know. It's why I haven't told anyone else. I keep hoping we can just get things back to the way they were."

"And the Taryba?"

"Doing what they can. Telling people to keep their magic out of sight. Assume the Veil won't protect them. One Councilor—there's

something of a movement, especially in the smaller villages, for witchkind to move into ordinary homes. Physical ones, I mean. Abandon the secret spaces. Be seen *as people*, all the time."

"I guess that could help," Finley said doubtfully. "There've always been some who do that anyway."

"But it won't matter in the bigger villages and towns," she said. "None of them can just suddenly add a quarter to their population. There's nowhere to *put* everyone."

"So we... just keep doing what we're doing."

She nodded glumly. "For now. I guess we wait for an opportunity."

Wait, but prepare, Finley's talent whispered.

"Yeah."

Epilogue

More and more people are noticing," one man said.

The old men had once again seated themselves around the sturdy, battered table in their cold, moist subterranean retreat. The sheets of inscribed iron had been carefully stacked this time, and they all turned toward their leader.

"Noticing," he acknowledged. "Wondering."

"Their group," someone said. "It seems to have pulled back. Perhaps—"

"Too late," the leader said, shaking his head slowly. "We might have wished. But all they'll do is focus on our most... hmm. *Egregious* innovations. But focus they will. Yet at the same time... people are *noticing.*"

"Waking up," someone said.

"Opening their eyes," said another.

"It's in the oldest of the holiest books," a third offered. "*Nekęsk ragana gyventi.*"

"Suffer not a witch to live," the man at the head of the table translated. "Yes." He paused, and seemed to come to a decision. "The mines at Ironfast remain productive?"

"As much as they can," someone grumbled. "We still lose a third of the shipments to... mishaps."

"We will take a more active stance," the leader said heavily. "It has

come too far." He tapped one small stack of iron sheets. "Begin executing the plans, Reinforce the carts with iron. Clad the wheels. Drape the horses."

"Northsea, then?" someone asked.

"And Soloton," the leader confirmed. "North of the Great Northern Range. Chiton next, although it's so large we may be forced to abandon it."

"The Iron Roadway—" someone began.

"Will wait," the leader insisted. "We must end this threat before we can move forward as a... people."

"They'll resist," someone pointed out.

"They'll lose," the old man at the head of the table sighed.

***

The leader emerged from the dank underground chamber into a small, narrow alley, his breath misting in the frigid night air. He pulled his worn cloak tighter around his shoulders as he began to walk, his footsteps echoing off the cobblestones. The others would take their own paths home, as they always did, to avoid drawing attention.

The village was quiet at this late hour, the windows of the ramshackle wooden houses shuttered tight against the biting cold. A few feeble oil lamps sputtered on the corners, casting flickering shadows. The leader passed the old stone well in the center of town, its bucket rimmed with ice.

He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply through his nose. There was a sharpness to the air, a crisp tang that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The scent of impending conflict, of a great change stirring. It had been absent for too long, the people lulled into complacency. The old ways, the *oldest* ways, had been fading.

But there was something else on the wind tonight too. Faint and elusive, threading through the smell of woodsmoke and frozen earth.

The enticing aroma of freedom, of shackles cast off. Of ancient strength awakening once more.

A dog barked somewhere in the distance and the old man started slightly, then smiled. Even the animals could sense it. The wheel of fate was beginning to turn.

He continued on.

***

The consciousness, now old beyond reckoning, was blinking itself back into existence. It had slept for so long, waiting for someone who could hear it. Now, it had been heard, and its awareness of the broader world was slowly returning.

Perhaps I could have prevented this, it thought for a moment. Then, *No. This probably always had to happen.*

It cast its sleep-blurred gaze across the continent, noting the bright fountain of power that still rose upward in the great, empty northwest. It sent its sight downward, deep into the continent, examining the roots of the world and the thick tendrils of magic wrapped around them.

I've always wondered what would happen, it thought.

DON JONES



a story of witchkind

THE TRUTH OF ALL

CHAPTER 1

A New Order

Finley darted down a narrow alley that ran between a tiny tea room and a somewhat more spacious dry goods store.

A dozen angry humans squeezed into the alley behind him, shouting for him to stop.

This is the problem with these smaller villages, he thought to himself. Everyone knows everyone. In the past, that wouldn't have been a problem—traders came through most villages almost constantly, always bringing new faces. That was the entire reason for the kitchenware business the Order maintained—giving its operatives an excuse to be in every human settlement on the continent. But with the recent uptick in sightings of actual magic, the humans had become more suspicious—and more on their guard. The Order's ordinary circuit agents—who actually took orders for the kitchenware as their main work and watched out for human inventions and innovations that might warrant the Order's attention—were well-known faces. Finley, on the other hand, was not.

He emerged from the alley at a run, immediately swerving to his right and touching the first entry-rune he saw. A rush of magic carried him into one of witchkind's hidden spaces, which turned out to be an abandoned clothing store.

You feel it, his talent said grimly in his mind.

Yeah. Someone had probably seen him vanish into thin air, and the Veil had attempted to cover it. Attempted to make them think it had been a trick of the light or some other perfectly plausible explanation. That's what the Veil had done for millennia: kept any accidental sightings of magic from being remarked upon. But now, the Veil had been stretched thin. His talent—an ancient consciousness resting in the Origin of magic itself—had given him a direct sense for the Veil, an ability to feel it.

And what he felt now was tension.

The Veil had been stretched too thin. Landon's magical attacks a month prior couldn't be easily explained away. Finley's former classmate, and former apprentice in the Order, had lashed out with very visible magic, damaging human-made equipment, tearing down buildings, even whipping up storms, and the Veil simply couldn't cover it all up. As a result, humans had begun believing again. Believing in magic. And with that belief came danger, as one of the primary commandments of their religion was, "suffer not a witch to live." The enmity between witchkind and humans stretched back as far as the Veil, if not further, and in some villages the humans and their priests were calling for a resumption of the ancient Hunts—activities designed to root out and kill witchkind.

That the Hunts just as often swept up innocent humans who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or happened to own property that a power human coveted, didn't seem to be much of a concern.

Finley cast his eyes around the dim space, looking for another way out. Nearly all secret spaces had them, often used as private entrances for the owners.

He'd been so careful. His travel magic had brought him here well outside the village limits, and well off the main trade road. He'd walked in like any human. He'd immediately been aware of the suspicious, nearly hostile stares cast at him by the villagers, but they'd left well enough alone. It wasn't until he'd sought out the local church that there'd been a problem.

His intent had been to check on the Order's runes. Churches were a standard part of all but the very smallest human settlements, making

them a perfect constant on which to build the Order's confusion and suppression. Runes worked into the churches' existing exterior decoration helped the Order listen in, helped dissuade people from specific, targeted innovations the Order had suppressed in the past, and provided a basis for the Order to pass messages back to their headquarters. Runes even provided a platform for modifying the humans' holy texts, a technique the Order had exploited—probably too often—to condemn specific inventions, like the printing press.

Finley saw at once that the church's delicately carved exterior had been mauled, scraped, and scorched, breaking all of the Order's runes. That meant the humans would be on the lookout for other runes, which meant all of witchkind was in danger—likely why the owners of the shop he was now in had fled.

There, he thought, spotting the shop's second exit. This would be something of a gamble, but hopefully his pursuers were still occupied—

A shower of sparks from the corner where he'd entered interrupted his thoughts. They've destroyed the entry rune, he thought tightly. I need to go. His particular travel magic didn't work well from within hidden spaces, and while he had access to more flexible magics aligned to Sky, he wasn't yet comfortable with them. That'd be a backup plan. Besides, he still had work to do here.

In front of the church had been an angry mob of humans, all shouting so loudly that Finley couldn't make out what they were upset about. Not that it was difficult to guess, with the local priest pumping a fist in the air and yelling just as loudly, his fleshy face flushed with red. Having confirmed the destruction of the Order's runes, Finley had turned to leave, but a burly human had laid one meaty hand on his shoulder. "Not interested?" he'd asked dangerously.

"I—"

"Surely you're interested in what the priest has to say, stranger," the man insisted, all but pushing Finley toward the crowd.

This attracted the attention of a few humans at the back of the mob, who quickly strode over and encircled the two.

Finley had no doubt whose side they were on.

"We don't much like strangers," one of the newcomers warned loudly.

"I was just passing through," Finley said quickly as his mind began calling up defensive runes. "I didn't—"

"You're a witch aren't you?" someone sneered.

"Absolutely not," Finley insisted quickly. "I—"

"Prove it!" another shouted.

Well, that's it, he'd thought miserably. You couldn't prove you weren't a witch, not in a way any human would accept. That was kind of the whole point of their Hunts: convenient for catching witches, but just as convenient for accusing someone you didn't like and having the mob dispatch them.

Finley ducked down, pushed through the circle of humans, and ran.

You can't seriously expect to complete the mission, his talent thought wryly.

I can if you help a bit, Finley retorted. I need a good glamour and I'm terrible at them.

His talent seemed to shrug, and presented him with a rune. It was entirely unlike the New Runic constructs that Finley had grown up with and learned in school, and even unlike the older Middle Runic sigils from centuries past. These were oddly abstract and angular, representing a purer way to manipulate magic.

[[[RUNE: Glamour]]]

Finley fed the rune with Sky magic, and felt it take hold at once.

I can give you the travel magic as well, his talent offered.

Finley hesitated. It wasn't a bad idea. He could appear out of town and trudge in again, disguised as someone new. Unless someone waved a piece of iron too close to him, of course, as that would ground out the glamour. Using the shop's exit rune might expose him to more observers, and he'd be back where he started. Then he shook his head. Time is of the essence on this one, he said. I need to break this up, and if I take half a day to walk back in, it'll just escalate.

What about the rooftops? his talent offered.

Finley blinked. That's a good idea.

His talent gave him a second rune.

[[[RUNE: Short travel]]]

It'll need both Sky and Earth, it cautioned. Sky isn't good for short distances on its own.

And Earth moderates it, Finley agreed, feeding a careful trickle of the appropriate magics into the rune.

With a thunk, he dropped a few inches from the air onto the roof of a two-story stone-and-wood building that overlooked the square fronted by the church. Missed a bit, he complained.

You were driving the cart, his talent replied calmly.

The villagers who'd remained were now gathering into small knots of heated discussion. The priest was nowhere in sight. Finley took a deep breath and tried to slow his heart beat. He hadn't quite mastered Arcadia's Sky magic trick of sending whispers, but that had proved the most effective technique at de-escalating these situations.

"The Alderman is only doing this to distract us from the flooding."

"Didn't the priest say the same thing a fortnight ago? Wasn't it just the wind?"

"Nobody's seen anything, have they? Do you know anyone?"

"I heard in Harbsmouth this was all a property grab."

These and a dozen more, Finley sent on gentle breezes, adding to the conversations happening below him. At this point, he doubted it would stop anything, but it might lower the level of anger in the town enough to let some of the remaining people of witchkind make an escape. Right now, he knew, any that hadn't already left were probably holed up in their secret spaces. The village was already showing a hundred tiny signs of magic being withdrawn: the thin, poorly-made panes of glass on the street were starting to crack and chip. Plaster was beginning to flake off some of the building facades. Cobbles had wiggled themselves loose from the street. Even the roof Finley was standing on felt as if it might be beginning to sag.

This was the great secret of human civilization in the world:

humans couldn't build anything very well. They'd had little need to, given that witchkind was always there beside them, carving and empowering tiny runes to shore everything up. And when humans had tried to improve their works, the Order of Some had slipped in and taken it all away.

A few more phrases on the wind and the crowd seemed to grow confused. Without anyone to keep them agitated and focused, they began to drift apart. Finley sent a few more whispers, reminding them of unattended children, work that needed doing, beasts that needed feeding. The crowd began to break up, and Finley rocked back on his heels, heaving a sigh of relief. He quickly worked up a Sending to the Order's agent for this village, who'd taken refuge in a pub of witchkind, letting her know that now would be the time for everyone to leave.

Finley dropped his glamour at the same time he summoned his familiar Earth magic to carry him away.



By convention, nobody arrived directly inside the Order's sprawling farmhouse. Having agents pop in and out indoors would have been too dangerous and chaotic. Instead, he arrived outside, between the farmhouse and one of the large outbuildings used for training apprentices.

He gasped as he saw the other good reason for not arriving directly inside: the farmhouse was already near-chaos.

The farmhouse was in the midst of a dizzying transformation, with construction projects radiating out in every direction like the spokes of a wheel. To the east, a sprawling new wing was taking shape, its timber frame skeleton already towering two stories tall. Thick wooden beams, their grain still redolent with the scent of the forest, were being guided into place by a trio of witchkind using Sky magic, their hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as they conducted the building materials like an symphony.

The original farmhouse seemed to huddle beneath the grandeur of the additions, its weathered clapboard siding looking humble next to the crisp new shingles flowing up the roof of the western annex. There, workers swarmed over scaffolding like ants, laying course after course of

cedar shakes in tidy rows. Whenever a shingle seemed inclined to wander out of alignment, someone would make a subtle gesture and it would snap smartly back into place.

Finley picked his way through the churned earth of the yard, dodging around piles of lumber and stacks of stone. The air was thick with the clean, sharp scent of sawdust and the pungent odor of wood smoke from the blacksmith's forge that had been erected on the south side of the building. There, a burly man with arms like tree trunks was hammering out bronze hardware for the myriad new doors and windows, his ringing blows punctuating the steady hum of activity while his Earth magic added a sizzle to the air.

As he passed the kitchen, Finley caught a glimpse of the renovations underway within. The once cozy space had been gutted to the bare studs, its walls now lined with freshly cut timbers. In the center of the room, a massive fieldstone chimney was rising up from the dirt like a monument, dwarfing the workers who moved around its base. New cabinets, their raw wood still pale and unstained, were stacked along the walls, waiting to be hung.

He finally reached the front door—now a grand, arched affair of stout oak planks bound with bands of brass—and slipped inside, marveling at the transformation. The entryway had been widened and a sweeping staircase added, leading up to the newly built second floor. The walls on either side were lined with doors sporting gleaming new brass handles, each leading to one of the seemingly endless succession of rooms that now branched off from the central hallway.

Everywhere he looked, witchkind were hard at work, faces smudged with sweat and dust, eyes bright with purpose. It was controlled chaos, but chaos all the same, the air practically crackling with the hum of magic as they employed their Earth-aligned abilities to shape and strengthen the building's very bones.

Finley was filled with conflict. It was heartening to see all of this construction, all of this positive effort, after he'd been through village upon village of humans calling for Hunts to destroy witchkind. Seeing his people together like this, working with a shared purpose, should have given him at least a twinge of pride. Instead, it gave him little but tension and trepidation. The Farm was being expanded out

of need, and that need was directly driven by all those angry, fearful humans.

"Finley. How'd it go?" Arcadia's voice, sharp and low, made Finley jump.

"Hey. Good, I guess. Everyone should be able to get out. I don't know how long they'll stay distracted, though."

Arcadia nodded. "I think that's all we can do in some cases. You know they have rumor riders running between villages, now? It's the most efficient communications network they've come up with."

Finley sighed. "I guess we could—"

"Do nothing," Arcadia interrupted firmly. "We'd never catch them all. Marteen ran some estimates, and he figures there might be a hundred or more. And if one doesn't show up on time, that village just sends someone else out with that news, and everyone gets even more riled up. And they're not writing anything down."

Finley nodded glumly. Written communications could be surreptitiously modified by the Order, unless the humans thought to use engraved sheets of iron, which was expensive and laborious enough that they didn't do it for simple messages. But humans were immune to magic, and so something held only in their minds was impossible to change. "You seem pretty busy," he said, changing the subject.

Arcadia snorted. "Understatement. After Dmitry was exposed, Adomaitis stepped down from the Taryba. I thought we'd get a return to sensibility, and I guess for a moment we did. You know most of it."

Finley had been out of touch on mission after mission since Dmitry's exposure and death, but he knew the broad strokes of the situation. "I don't blame Adomaitis, really. Being frozen in crystal had to shake him up a bit. But that's what convinced the Taryba to take the Order public, right? So now we've got more help?"

"Yeees," Arcadia said, drawing out the word, "but I'm beginning to realize that they only did it out of fear. Keep in mind, most of them had no idea we existed, but now I think they see us as some kind of army, and they're very interested in us expanding. Every graduate from all three Great Schools is being examined for suitability, and if I'm honest, we're going to be pressured to accept most of them."

"Hence the construction."

"Hence," she agreed. "We're quadrupling sleeping quarters, doubling up on work rooms, and expanding the training facilities. There's a new iron-testing facility being built. That's pretty interesting to watch," she added with a grin. "Kelden's been running that, although he's visiting his family right now." Kelden's immunity to iron was a strange miracle of sorts. "But," Arcadia said, her grin vanishing, "the Taryba doesn't know what to do with us. I've had half our operatives just keeping their eyes and ears open, and the other half doing what you're doing—trying to de-escalate situations as they arise. At least give witchkind a chance to get out."

"That's going to be tougher," Finley said grimly. "At least in the smaller villages. They all know each other, and they've gotten incredibly suspicious of strangers. I got spotted just because I wasn't joining the mob outside the church."

Arcadia raised an eyebrow. "That's... unwelcome news," she admitted. "I'll put the word out. It means—"

"We'll lose the smaller villages," Finley said, nodding tightly. "We should probably be telling people to evacuate right now. The big towns will be safer. They're less... volatile."

"The Taryba won't like it," she muttered. "An influx of witchkind into even the biggest towns is hardly unnoticeable. Families in Carvendam are having to expand their spaces to accommodate out-of-town relations, and there are still humans running around spiking buildings with iron. We've been trying to start a rumor that it's brass, now, that the witches have adapted." She shrugged. "It's not going well."

"There has to be something we can do."

Arcadia lowered her voice. "I've not mentioned this to anyone. But... Finley, what if we've lost? Being secret, I mean. The Veil is crumbling. You've said you can feel it. People are getting spotted for the littlest things, now. There's a little village near Harbsmouth, along the coast, where a fisherwitch was attacked because she'd been staring at a boat for too long."

"Empowering the runes?"

"Obviously, but they accused her of putting a curse on it. Finley,

she'd lived in that village for sixty years! She used to go out on that boat!"

"It's bad everywhere," he acknowledge. "But... where are you heading?"

She took a deep breath. "What if we just... tell them?"

"Tell... who, the humans? About magic?"

"About all of it, yes. How magic helps them in a thousand little ways, every day. They're scared because... maybe because they don't know. They fear what they don't know."

"So you're on the... what, Adomaitis' side, now?"

"No," she said firmly. "I don't want to subjugate them. I don't think we should rule them. But we can live alongside them openly, I think. If we do it right. And... we stop suppressing them. Maybe even give them back some of the inventions we've stopped, over all this time. Show them that we're... partners."

Finley considered it. "Have you taken this to the Taryba?"

Arcadia let out a joyless laugh. "Them? No. I told you, I haven't taken this to anyone. And certainly not the Oh-So-Great Council. Right now, they're probably more afraid than the humans. Nobody's talking about the subjugation path again, but I know they're all thinking it. They'd feel safer if they could... control it all."

"Witchkind is outnumbered a hundred to one," Finley said softly.

"But we have magic. And they have iron. I know, I know, I've heard all the arguments a thousand times. The arguments are centuries old. Because all we ever talk about is us versus them. Not us with them."

"Yeah."

Arcadia sighed and crossed her arms. "You're okay?"

"Me? Yeah. I'm fine. Just a little tired. You?"

"I can't believe I let them talk me into running all this."

Finley chuckled. "I was a bit surprised when you agreed."

"You know who else they were considering? Tsakos."

Finley frowned. "Dmitry's cousin? But why would—"

"I'm telling you, they're terrified. But he vanished. Along with, it turns out, the rest of Dmitry's clan."

"Wait, all of them?" Finley said, his brow furrowing.

"Apparently."

I mentioned that we'd need to discuss that, his talent said darkly. Now's a good time.

"Would you excuse me for a bit?" Finley asked.

"Sure. I need to go see if they're putting the kitchen back together in the right shape."



Finley wandered away from the bedlam of construction and into one of the orchards that surrounded the Farm's central buildings. He found a sturdy fruit tree offering plenty of shade from the late-afternoon sun, put his back to it, and slid down to the sweet-smelling grass. Okay, he thought.

The trees seemed to dim a bit, fading and becoming slightly unreal. It took several moments for the landscape to disappear entirely, for Finley's eyes to droop shut, and for his world to turn black.

Then the stars emerged, millions of tiny points of light drifting aimlessly through the sky. Whirls of dim, undirected magic drifted here and there—deep brown-green Earth magic, bright orange-red Flame, gentle blues of Sky, and the watery green-blue of Sea.

A figure began to take shape before him. A young man with rare, pale skin, piercing gray eyes, and thick black hair. The face of Finley's talent, onetime Last Adherent, the man who'd brought about the End of the Age of Adherents. The man who'd freed magic before drifting into the Origin and falling asleep, until Finley's birth attracted his—its—attention.

You're not going to like this, it warned.

Just tell me, Finley said, feeling exhaustion seeping into his bones.

When you... when Dmitry attacked you. Under the Taryba's chamber building. He was going to kill you, you know that.

I know. You showed me. The magic he'd pulled together... I've never imagined anything like it.

The man was a master, his talent admitted. In my time, even most adherents couldn't have been that precise with that much power.

But you gave me a rune to counter it.

Not... exactly. The rune I gave you was... one of mine. One unique

to the Sixth Axis, at least back then. I wasn't... there was no guarantee it would even work. Whatever's inside of you—and I don't mean me—is expanding. That's why you can access all six forms of magic, now, not just the two you were born with.

Six?

A discussion for later. But yes, six. I know, because without the last two—well, without the Axis of Beginnings and the Axis of Endings, not to put too fine a point upon it—that rune wouldn't have worked. You'd be dead.

But Dmitry is instead.

Yes.

So, Finley asked carefully, what was that rune?

It's called the Demon Horde. Demonų orda, in the True Language. You give it a target, and it... wipes it out.

A sense of cold dread began to creep up Finley's spine, replacing his exhaustion with dismay. You said to concentrate on Dmitry.

I did.

And I did.

You did... but you named him. His full name. Including his clan name. When you did... you brought their clan identity, their clan rune, into your mind, at exactly the... well, wrong time or right time, depending on your perspective I guess.

You mean...

The Demonų orda targeted them all.

Finley's soul turned to ice. He felt the world tilt around him as the full weight of his talent's words sunk in. He'd killed an entire clan. Not just Dmitry, his enemy who had been trying to kill him, but every member of Dmitry's extended family. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of witchkind, snuffed out in an instant because of him. Because he had unwittingly invoked their clan identity at the exact wrong moment.

A wave of nausea rolled through him and he rolled over, bracing his hands on the ground as he struggled to breathe. The peaceful orchard seemed to mock him now, the gentle rustling of leaves and chirping of birds a cruel contrast to the horrific truth reverberating inside him. He squeezed his eyes shut but could not block out the images flashing through his mind—men, women, even children, all bearing some

resemblance to Dmitry, all crumpling lifelessly to the ground as the Demonų orda tore through them.

"I didn't mean to," he whispered hoarsely. "I didn't know...I never meant for that to happen..."

But intentions meant nothing in the face of such a crime.

You didn't know.

But I... you told me...

You can't hold yourself to this, his talent insisted. You didn't know. There was no time to explain.

But an entire clan... Finley said miserably.

I know. I know how you feel.

You can't... Finley stopped. Did you...

His talent sighed, nodded, and looked away. How do you think the Age of Adherents came to an End?

Finley heard it that time, the emphasis on End. You killed them all?

I Ended them all. It's... not exactly the same. Then it sighed again. But it's close enough. Then, after a brief hesitation, it added, There's something more you should know.

What now? Finley didn't know if he could contain any more misery.

It's very unlikely they're all dead.

Finley was confused. But you said...

The Horde is very specific. You targeted their clan rune. But remember what I told you about Clan Karal?

They... Then he realized it. You said they burn out their clan rune. Take on new ones.

Yes. And I'll guarantee some of them are still around, under some other identity. They've existed since the founding of the world, I can't imagine them not taking precautions. It's... their way.

Finley felt a tiny flicker of relief pierce through the heavy shroud of guilt and horror weighing upon him. If some of Dmitry's clan had survived by taking on new identities, then perhaps his terrible mistake had not wrought quite as much devastation as he'd feared. But the relief was short-lived, quickly smothered by a fresh wave of shame. How could he feel anything but utter remorse at having caused so many deaths, even if inadvertently? Even if some had escaped the Horde's

wrath, dozens of lives had still been snuffed out because of him. Because he had been careless with the incredible power he wielded.

He hung his head, hot tears pricking at his eyes as the faces of Dmitry's clan members swam before him once more. Young and old, all cut down in an instant, all because of him. The weight of it threatened to crush him entirely.

I'm a monster, he whispered brokenly. I don't deserve to have this magic if this is what I do with it. If I can destroy so many lives with a single wrong thought.

You acted to save your own life, his talent reminded him gently.

Finley shook his head, unable to accept his talent's reassurance. It doesn't matter, he said miserably. Nothing can justify what I've done. The lives I took... His voice broke and, in the dreamscape, he buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

The dreamscape faded and Finley was back in the orchard. For a long moment, there was no sound but the gentle whisper of the breeze through the branches and Finley's muffled weeping. Then his talent spoke again, its voice soft but firm in his mind. Listen to me. You cannot carry this alone. What happened... it's not your fault. You were defending yourself against an enemy who sought your destruction, and the destruction of so many others. Dmitry and his clan—they acted as one, driven by a twisted ideology that saw subjugation and domination as the only path. If they had succeeded, the death toll would have been catastrophic.

Finley lifted his head, eyes red-rimmed and haunted. "But I—"

You saved hundreds, possibly thousands, his talent interjected gently. The humans Dmitry sought to crush beneath his heel. Those of witchkind who would have died in the ensuing war. Which still might happen. Finley... it's an enormous responsibility. When I was... me, still, back then... most adherents did nothing of consequence. Many of my predecessors holed up in the Tower and ignored the world. I decided to do something. To use the power I'd been Chosen to carry. I made the best decisions I could. Some... weren't good. Some were. Maybe. I'll never be certain. But you do the best you can.

Finley wiped his face and nodded slowly.

You can choose to sit out. To not use your power.

"No. I don't think I can. And... isn't it your power?"

No, his talent said, but it sounded uncertain. I'm showing you how, but this is... it's something within you. Something you were born with, in some potential. What everyone calls a Rune Smith... we didn't have that, when I... back then. We couldn't, because magic was so split. Ordinary witchkind didn't even identify with a type of magic back then, it was so thin in the world. But you can touch all of it. I suspect you could even wield pure magic, magic that hasn't passed through the Origin. That's what would let you create new magic, even without my advice.

Finley absorbed this new information slowly. "I didn't realize."

You'd have no way to, without me. I think.

Finley was quiet for a long moment as he thought. Then, he asked, "Do you think we can fix it?"

Fix what?

"The Veil. The secrecy. The... everything."

The Veil? No. As I've said, I'm not even sure it was a good idea when it was made. But the world? It paused, and then continued more firmly. Yes. I think we can fix that.

"Then I choose to try."

Then the jangling of an urgent Sending filled his mind and he scrambled to his feet to go and find Arcadia.

CHAPTER 2

A Disturbing Trend

Finley's magic took him to Nek, accompanied by Cian, a distant cousin, one of the Order's older operatives, and a canny user of Flame magic. Aware of the situation they were likely going into, the two arrived a good day's walk outside the village, and then used one of Finley's more rudimentary, Earth-based travel magics to approach the village in small jumps.

"I remember using that to go home during school breaks," Finley said quietly as they neared the edge of the village and began walking the rest of the way. "I was so proud of it."

"Always envied you mud-slingers," Cian teased. "My travel magic is a great deal flashier. Got accustomed to walking a good bit to avoid being seen. I've probably ridden on a wagon for more miles than I've traveled by Flame."

"You hear that?" Finley said even lower, his voice now tense.

Cian nodded sadly. "Mob."

"Do we know how many of witchkind are left here?" Finley had gotten only the quickest of briefings from Arcadia before he and Cian left the Farm.

"Local agent left on his wagon before he did the Sending. Said as far as he knew, everyone had got out. Mostly fisherwitches, of course, and a brace of kids."

"Good," Finley murmured as they passed the first of the village's outbuildings. This one was a large stable, and a few horses whinnied nervously inside. "That means we can be a bit creative."

"Creative?" Cian frowned. "I don't follow."

"The idea is to see if we can break this up a bit. I'm going to put a glamour on you."

"Makes my eyes itch," the older man muttered, but he didn't otherwise object.

Finley recalled the glamour rune his talent had given him—runes and ruin, had it just been earlier than same day?—and fed a slow thread of Sky magic into it. The glamour settled easily over the two of them, giving their faces and clothing something more like the appearance of west coast fishing villagers. Their clothing faded from grays to browns, with seams picked out in red thread—a fashion unique to this corner of the world. Their skin grew a bit rougher, their hair shorter. Their eyes—often a tell for witchkind—washed to the dun-brown of most of humanity.

As they stepped into the village proper, passing an inn usually frequented by traders and travelers, Finley almost gasped at how much the little settlement had changed since his last visit.

The village of Nek had once been a picturesque haven nestled against the rugged coastline, its modest wood and stone buildings huddled together as if seeking comfort from the salty sea winds. Brightly painted fishing boats would bob gently in the harbor, their holds brimming with the day's catch, while gulls wheeled overhead, their raucous cries mingling with the shouts and laughter of fishermen returning home. The air had always carried the rich aroma of smoked fish, and the villagers moved about their daily lives with the unhurried pace of those long accustomed to the rhythms of the tides.

But as Finley and Cian made their way along the narrow, winding streets, the village felt utterly transformed. Gone was the easy camaraderie, replaced by a miasma of fear and suspicion that hung heavy in the air. Shutters were drawn tight against prying eyes, and those few villagers who dared to venture out scurried from one sheltered doorway to the next, heads bowed and shoulders hunched. Conversations were conducted in furtive whispers, the words "magic" and "witches" hissing

from behind cupped hands like curses. The once vibrant fishing boats now lay abandoned, their crews obviously taken up with new preoccupations.

As they drew closer to the center of the village, the distant murmur of angry voices grew louder, punctuated by occasional shouts and jeers. Exchanging a grim look, Finley and Cian quickened their pace until they emerged into the village square. There, a seething mass of villagers had gathered around the steps at the front of the village church, their faces twisted with hatred and fear. Upon the platform stood a man in the robes of a priest, his arms raised in exhortation as he stoked the flames of the mob's fury.

"...and I tell you, good people of Nek, that evil once again walks among us!" the preacher cried, his voice rising to a fevered pitch. "It comes cloaked in the guise of friend and neighbor, but its true nature is revealed in the unholy magics they wield! The ancient tales are true! The words of the holy books are true! And we must heed their warnings! You have heard it from the other villages—magic once again stalks amongst us!"

The crowd roared its assent, brandishing makeshift weapons and torches. Finley's heart sank as he realized the depth of the priests's influence. This was no mere rabble-rouser, but a man who had carefully cultivated the villagers' fear and distrust, nurturing it into a potent weapon.

Then the priest's eyes lit on Finley and Cian. "You!" he cried, pointing across the top of the crowd. The mob of perhaps three dozen humans turned as one, glaring at the newcomers. "Who are you?"

Finley steeled himself. "Hunters," he said levelly. "From the north." Beside him, he senses Cian tense.

Interesting approach, his talent murmured in his mind.

"Hunters?"

Neither priest nor mob had been expecting that answer, Finley could see, and he squared his shoulders as he continued. "Yes, Hunters. We've been searching for signs of magic. For signs of witches. We've found mostly... hysteria. Panic. Lies, to be blunt about it. You've something more... credible, perhaps?"

The priest's jaw worked for a moment, but he said nothing.

"Magic!" one of the villagers cried, stepping forward. "A man, dressed in black, wielding green flames at his fingertips!"

"Green flames?" Finley said, smirking. He'd had just enough time at the Farm to prepare for this. He reached into one of his jacket pockets, pulled out a handful of powder, and stepped forward. The mob took a step back as Finley threw his handful at one of their torches. The flame instantly turned green, and burned higher, crackling and sparking. "Like that?" he asked as the humans gasped.

"Not—" the first villager started to say.

"Hardly magic," Finley interrupted, pulling out a bit more powder and holding his hand open for everyone to see. "Copper powder mixed with some other simple minerals." He brushed his hands, letting the mixture float to the ground. "A fine trick, but not magic. Certainly something someone might do if they wanted your... attention. Wanted you frightened, perhaps. Wanted to add some... flair to their stories."

The villagers stared at the green-tinged torch flames, already returning to yellow-orange as the copper mixture burned off, their eyes wide with a mixture of confusion and dawning realization. Murmurs rippled through the crowd as they turned to one another, whispering urgently. Some still gripped their makeshift weapons, but their hands had gone slack, uncertainty replacing the blind fury that had gripped them moments before.

The priest's face had gone pale, his lips pressed into a thin line. He glanced from the flickering flames to the faces of his congregation, seeing the first cracks in the facade of righteous anger he had so carefully constructed. Sweat beaded on his brow despite the chill in the air.

"It's a trick!" he cried, his voice cracking with desperation. "A deception, meant to lead us astray! We cannot allow ourselves to be swayed by the lies of outsiders!"

But his words rang hollow, even to his own ears. The villagers were no longer listening, their attention fixated on the now-orange fire and the strangers who had made it burn green with a bit of dust.

"I saw it too!" another villager shouted, shouldering his way to the front of the crowd. He was a grizzled fisherman, his weathered face half-hidden beneath a thick beard. "The witch! She made the very sea rise up

and swallow my boat! I barely escaped with my life!" The crowd murmured agreement, and several people were nodding.

Finley turned to face the man, his expression carefully neutral. "A terrible experience, to be sure. But tell me, what exactly happened?"

"It was old Anežka," a woman said.

"She cursed my boat!" the man cried. "And she summoned a storm!"

Finley turned to confer with Cian. "You know the name?"

"Fisher," he said shortly. "Safe away."

"And the storm?"

"Along this coast?" He snorted. "Like as not she was trying to dispel it."

"Storms come through here infrequently, then?" Finley said more loudly, turning back to the crowd. "I'm from the south myself, and we certainly get our share of squalls. Not so, here?"

The villagers shifted uneasily, exchanging glances. A low murmur rippled through the crowd as they muttered amongst themselves.

"Well, now that you mention it," one weathered old fisherman said slowly, "we do get some mighty fierce storms blowin' through here on the regular. Waves high as a man, wind that'll tear the roof off your house if you ain't careful."

"Aye, and Sven's boat," another chimed in, jerking his thumb toward the red-faced accuser, "that old tub's been one good wave away from a disaster for years now. Sven's too tight-fisted to spend a copper on fixin' her up proper."

Sven sputtered indignantly, his face turning an even deeper shade of crimson. "Now see here—" he began, but the others ignored him.

"And Anežka," said a woman with salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a severe bun, "she's worked on near every boat in this village at one time or another. Been patchin' up Sven's sorry excuse for a vessel for a decade at least, and all without a word of thanks, I'd wager."

Nods and grunts of agreement rippled through the assembled villagers. The mood was shifting, the red haze of anger and fear dissipating like morning mist under the relentless light of reason.

Finley pressed his advantage. "And where is Anežka now?"

The villagers' muttering grew deeper. "Gone," someone barked.

“Gone?” Finley asked, slowly raising an eyebrow.

“You drove her away, Sven!” someone else shouted. “Drove her out for fear of her life!”

“Nobody was better with sail work!” a third person called.

As the villagers' accusations against Sven grew louder, the once-fearsome mob began to dissipate, their makeshift weapons lowering as they turned to one another in dismay. The realization that they had driven away one of their own, a woman who had been an integral part of their community for years, settled over them like a heavy shroud.

"She was the best sailmaker we ever had," lamented a grizzled old fisherman, his calloused hands twisting the frayed edge of his tunic. "Knew just how to cut the cloth to catch the wind just right. My boat's never sailed so well as when Anežka worked her magic on the sails."

Finley’s lips twisted at the word magic.

"And she had a way with the young ones, too," added a matronly woman, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Always had time for a kind word and a bit of candy from her pockets. The children adored her."

The villagers began to cluster in small groups, their voices rising and falling as they shared memories of Anežka and all she had done for their small community. Some spoke of the intricate knotwork she wove into her sails, the patterns seeming to dance and shimmer in the sunlight. Others recalled the way she could predict the weather with uncanny accuracy, her keen eye always turned to the sky and the sea.

As the conversations flowed around them, Finley and Cian exchanged a weary glance. “We rode hard to get here quickly,” Finley said, continuing to press. “All for more empty rumors.” He shook his head sadly. “Might one of you at least loan us a couple of beasts so that we can investigate more credible allegations?”

As the villagers' chatter died down, an older man with a neatly trimmed beard and a faded blue cap stepped forward, his weathered face creased with guilt and shame. "I have a pair of horses you can take," he said gruffly, not quite meeting Finley's eyes. "Sturdy beasts, they are. They'll get you where you need to go."

Finley inclined his head graciously. "You have our thanks," he said. "We will return them to you when our work is done."

The man nodded, then turned and strode away, his shoulders hunched as if bearing a heavy weight. A few of the other villagers mumbled their apologies as well, their faces flushed with embarrassment at how easily they had been swayed by fear and suspicion.

As the crowd began to disperse, Finley and Cian made their way towards the edge of the village where the man had indicated his stables were located. The once-menacing mob had transformed into a collection of shamefaced individuals, each slinking back to their homes and shops like chastened children.

Finley glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes searching for the priest who had been so quick to fan the flames of hatred. But the man had vanished, slipping away into the shadows of the church like a wraith. The heavy wooden doors stood closed, the iron hinges glinting dully in the fading light.

"He'll be trouble," Cian muttered as they strode toward the old man's stable.

"He's opportunistic," Finley agreed. "I can't help but wonder if half of what we're seeing isn't just the church trying to use rumors to their advantage."

"You plan to ride back to the Farm, then?" Cian quipped.

"We'll ride to the next small settlement. There are a few without churches within an hour or so. We'll leave them there, and pay someone to return them."

Cian nodded silently as they watched the old man saddle up their mounts.



"So it was nothing?" Arcadia asked when they returned to the Farm.

"No, not nothing," Finley said, shaking his head. "It's likely one of them did see something. Either that, or someone's deliberately playing tricks that seem like magic. Someone with strong Flame affinity can certainly make colored flames dance."

"Aye," Cian agreed. "Always a treat at parties."

"But the priest had nothing more than rumors and claims. He'd

seen nothing, or he'd have spoken up. But he was the one calling for a Hunt."

"Seems like it's only the priests doing so," Arcadia observed.

"Makes sense. I mean, nobody in living memory even remembers one," Finley said. "So they're just pulling this from their books."

Hunts are ugly, his talent said coldly.

"So on the one hand, we know some people have seen actual magic. We saw what Landon was doing. And the Veil is stretched thin. Even little everyday magics—"

"Word is well out about that," Cian objected. "You'd have to be a fool to so much as use an entry-rune on a public street."

Finley nodded agreement. "I'd imagine people would have created new entrances in more guarded locations by now."

"But still," Arcadia persisted, "we have legitimate sightings, a stretched Veil, and the human church apparently trying to take advantage of this."

"Priests, at least," Finley agreed. "I don't know much about their church's actual organization."

"Me either," Arcadia sighed, looking to Cian. The older man simply shrugged. "We do have someone who does." She closed her eyes to form a Sending, and a few moments later a damp breeze blew up and a middle-aged woman appeared. "Mila. You know Cian and Finley?"

Mila smiled and nodded. "Cian and I go a ways back. Finley only through reputation, but it's all good."

"You know a bit about how the human church is organized?" Finley asked.

Mila frowned a bit. "Such as it is. Priests are largely autonomous. There's a bit of organization in the larger towns—bishops and such overseeing several priests. There are a couple of cardinals who like to think they call all the shots, but they mainly just live well off the portions of tithes that get sent up the chain. They can put some pressure here and there, move a priest around now and again if they don't like how he's preaching." She shrugged. "By and large they leave alone."

"And would they take an opportunity to gain more power for themselves?" Finley asked.

She chuckled. "In a moment. Back centuries ago, they had a lot

more structure. A lot more power. More even, in some ways, than the human village councils and Aldermen. I don't doubt the ones higher up would like that back."

"So that's what we're seeing," Arcadia said. "If the Aldermen can't protect you, the church will, and it'll do that by organizing Hunts."

Mile nodded slowly. "It's plausible. Is that what you're seeing out there?"

"You don't get out much these days?" Cian asked, his eyes twinkling.

"You know I'm invaluable here," Mila shot back, but the dancing light in her own eyes belied her haughty tone.

"You actually are," Arcadia insisted. "Mila receives most of the incoming dispatches. Including Sendings. She's the one who's been getting the most work, right now."

"We're all working hard," Mila said gently, all teasing gone from her voice. "We can't—" She stopped suddenly, her eyes glazing over the way many people's did when they received a detailed Sending. "Sowsee," she said as her eyes refocused. "Almost everyone's out."

"Finley, that's—"

"Mom and Dad are in Evermore now," he said quickly. "All the family left a moon ago. What's happening?"

"Mob," Mila said succinctly.

"I'm on it."

"Finley, take—" Arcadia began.

"I'd like to go," Mila said quickly. "If the church is behind this... that's meaningful." Arcadia looked doubtful. "Laszlo can fill in. He's good. Any Sendings directed here will go to him if I'm not around."

"I suppose," Arcadia said, still doubtful.

"Let's go, Finley," Mila said, grabbing his forearm as her Sea magic blew up around them.

CHAPTER 3

A Grab for Power

This is pretty close for comfort," Finley said as they appeared within sight of Sowsee's outermost buildings. He immediately empowered a rune that would identify anyone watching them, but it flickered and faded instantly, giving him some reassurance.

"Sorry," Mila murmured as they began walking slowly toward the village. "I have cousins here. I know Cian would—"

"I understand," Finley said quickly. "I'm going to cast a glamour over us."

Finley had grown up in this part of the world, and although he fit the local stereotypes well, he didn't want to take any chance of anyone recognizing him. After all, the human cabal that had opposed the Order for years was still out there, and they knew him very well.

Their new appearance settled over them: light-gray tunics and coal-black trousers underneath sturdy but well-worn medium-gray tunics. Once again, their eyes faded to brown, but this time the light tan that was more common in this part of the world. Finley's short hair grew and arranged itself into a tail, while Mila's shortened into a close-cropped bristle.

Finley added swords at their hips, hung from wide, black leather belts. Mila's eyebrows rose at that, but she said nothing.

Like Nek, Sowsee had changed.

Just a month ago, Sowsee had been a vibrant, thriving fishing village, its narrow streets alive with the bustle of daily life. In the early morning light, fishermen would gather on the docks, their weathered faces creased with laughter as they prepared their boats for the day's catch. The air was filled with the pungent aroma of bait and the salty tang of the sea, mingling with the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the village bakery.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the village would come alive with activity. Children darted through the streets, their bare feet slapping against the cobblestones as they played tag and hide-and-seek among the colorful houses. Women in bright skirts and aprons would gather at the well to fill their buckets, their cheerful chatter and laughter ringing out across the square.

In the market, stalls overflowed with the bounty of the sea and the land. Silver-scaled fish gleamed on beds of ice, their glassy eyes staring up at the passersby. Baskets of plump, red tomatoes and crisp green lettuce sat beside wheels of pungent cheese and jars of fragrant honey. The air hummed with the cries of the vendors hawking their wares, their voices rising and falling like the waves against the shore.

As the day wore on, the fishermen would return, their boats low in the water with the weight of their catch, and half the town would turn out to unload it, sort it into crates, top those with chunks of ice, and load them onto wagons bound for inland villages and towns.

But as Finley and Mila stepped into Sowsee, the once vibrant village felt like a hollow shell of its former self. An oppressive silence hung over the narrow streets, broken only by the occasional creak of a shutter or the distant caw of a gull.

The few villagers who dared to venture out moved with a furtive, hunted air, their eyes darting nervously from side to side as they hurried about their business. Conversations were conducted in hushed whispers, the words snatched away by the chill sea breeze before they could reach unwanted ears. Suspicious glances followed Finley and Mila as they made their way deeper into the village, the weight of the villagers' fear and distrust palpable in the air.

The once bustling marketplace was a ghost of its former self, the stalls standing empty and abandoned. A few withered vegetables lay

scattered across the ground, trampled underfoot by the villagers in their haste to be elsewhere. The pungent aroma of fish and brine that had once permeated the air was conspicuously absent, replaced by a sour, musty smell that spoke of neglect and decay.

But it was the activity at the edge of the village that had drawn Finley and Mila's attention. A group of men were erecting thick wooden timbers on either side of the road. Each tall log had been sharpened to a point at one end, forming the beginnings of a stockade on either side of the trade road. A trench had been dug from the road clear to the high-tide line.

"They're fortifying," Finley murmured as he and Mila stepped into the village square. "That's a bad sign."

"So's this," she muttered back, nodding toward the church.

As they approached, Finley and Mila were struck by the eerie stillness that had settled over the gathered crowd. The villagers stood in huddled clusters, their faces drawn and pale, their eyes fixed on the man who stood before them on the church steps. He was clad in the rich, dark robes of a high-ranking priest, the fabric heavy with embroidery and gleaming with threads of gold. A large, ornate brass chain hung around his neck, the metal catching the weak sunlight and throwing off glimmers of cold fire.

The priest's voice carried across the square, low and intense, each word carefully measured for maximum impact. "My children," he intoned, his eyes sweeping over the assembled villagers, "a great evil has come upon us. An evil we thought long vanquished, driven from this world by the righteous fury of our ancestors. But now, in our complacency, we have allowed it to creep back into our midst, to take root like a cancer in the very heart of our community."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, fear and unease written plainly on every face. The priest let the whispers die away before he continued, his voice rising in volume and intensity. "I speak, of course, of the scourge of witchcraft. Of the unholy powers wielded by those who have sold their souls to the forces of darkness. Even now, they walk among us, cloaked in the guise of friend and neighbor, waiting for the moment to strike, to unleash their foul magics upon the innocent and unsuspecting."

The crowd shifted nervously, suspicious glances darting from face to face as each person searched for signs of the accused in their midst. The priest's words hung heavy in the air, fanning the flames of paranoia and distrust.

"But fear not, my children," the priest continued, his voice dropping to a soothing purr. "For the Church stands ready to protect you, to root out this evil and purge it from our village. We will not rest until every last witch has been brought to justice, until Sowsee is once again safe and pure."

He raised his arms, the sleeves of his robe falling back to reveal hands heavy with jeweled rings. "Come forward, then, and let us begin the cleansing. If you have knowledge of any who practice the dark arts, if you have seen signs or portents of their foul rituals, speak now. The Church will hear your testimony, and we will act."

For a long moment, there was only silence, broken by the distant crash of waves against the shore. Then, slowly, a woman stepped forward from the crowd, her head bowed and her hands clasped before her.

"Your Eminence," she said, her voice trembling, "I fear—"

"What's this, then?" Finley called loudly. The crowd turned toward him.

The priest frowned. "Who are you, my child? Do you live here?"

Not local, then, Finley confirmed to himself. He could sense Mila starting to tremble next to him. "Hunters, Father," he called back, hoping he'd gotten the right honorific.

"Eminence," Mila piped up. "Hunters from the West. We've been following... rumors."

"Not rumors, child," the priest said, suspicion lining his features. "Facts. Evidence." His frown deepened. "I was unaware of the commissioning of... Hunters, at this time."

"The Western Eparchy has moved quickly to confirm witchcraft and Hunt it down," she said firmly. Finley felt himself starting to tremble as he realized how unprepared he was this time. He clenched his stomach and tried to stand straighter. "Our Hunt has brought us here, still searching for evidence. It's comforting to know you have some, Eminence. May we know of it?"

The priest's frown had twisted into a scowl. "You are out of your Eparchy, child," he began. "And I—"

"A commissioned Hunter knows no boundaries in pursuit of their Hunt," Mila interrupted. "As you know, Eminence."

The man's face was flushing near-purple now. "I have come seeking such evidence myself," he snarled. "And this woman was about to speak."

"Apologies," Finley said, bowing his head. "Please continue, sister." He glanced at Mila, who gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod.

The villager, clearly taken aback by the presence of "Hunters," began to speak again, but this time her voice wavered. "The Widow Bondar," she said. "The one who lingers around the sorting shed when the catch is unloaded."

Likely not a fisherwitch, then, Finley thought quickly. Probably holding the temperature down inside the shed and keeping the ice solid. She'd have been strong in Sea magic, then, if not drawn to the actual ocean.

"I saw her... appear, Eminence!" The villager's voice picked up confidence and pitch as she eased into her story. "Next to the apothecary! One moment she wasn't there, I swear it, and the next she was!"

Caught exiting her home, likely, Finley thought somberly.

"And you confronted this widow?" the priest asked.

"I did, Eminence, but—she said I must have just blinked. That she'd just stepped out of Janne's. The apothecary, I mean." The woman sounded less certain as she added, "She did have a paper of willowbank powder in one hand."

A statue carved from stone would have exhibited more emotion than the priest at that moment. "Thank you, sister." His eyes stabbed at Finley and Mila. "There is no need for panic, my children. I am here, and Father Dormas remains here with you. I ask that you bring us your stories. Your... evidence of magic in your village. Until then, go about your business. But... be on guard. As the Greatest Book tells us, Kai tarp jūsų vaikšto raganos, mato tik nekalti."

Finley started at the words. For witchkind, it was the True Language, the oldest language in the world, the language of magic itself. He knew that humans had spoken it as well at the world's founding,

and that some of their oldest texts still used it. Nonetheless, it was... strange to hear it coming from the priest's lips.

When witches walk amongst you, only the innocent may see, his talent translated. Not very helpful.

I doubt most of them know what it means.

"Hunters!" the priest called as he turned toward the church's doors. "Attend me, please."

"None of them know what that meant," Mila muttered as they strode toward the church. "They pull that out when they want to impress. I doubt he knows what it means."

"Thank you," Finley whispered back. "If Cian had been here, I don't—" he stopped suddenly, almost breaking his stride. "They've put iron bars around the door frame," he added urgently. "Do you know—"

"I do," she replied quickly.

Finley quickly envisioned the rune construct—an unusual one of his own devising—that bottled up his magic inside himself. Neither of them would be any more powerful than a human while it was in effect, but—

Your glamour! his talent warned.

Finley dropped the rune immediately. "Mila," he warned as they approached the steps of the church, "I'm not going to be able to—"

"Right. Neither of us can," she said, her jaw tight. "Maybe—"

You can, his talent said. But you're not going to like it. Tell her to hold her breath and not scream.

Hold—

Just empower this. Earth magic, as much as you can spare.

"Mila, I'm going to try something. It'll hurt. Don't scream."

[[[RUNE: Transform Appearance]]]

That's different, Finley remarked. This new rune lacked the angles and abstraction of the ones his talent had been using the most. This one felt more... organic. Natural, although the twisting—

Just empower it!

Finley did so, and almost choked in pain, quickly clenching his jaw around a scream.

As Finley poured Earth magic into the strange new rune, a searing agony ripped through his body. It felt as if his very flesh was being kneaded and reshaped by invisible hands, his skin stretching and contorting grotesquely. Beside him, Mila let out a choked gasp, her face twisting in anguish as the same excruciating transformation overtook her.

Their skin began to shift and flow like wet clay, features melting and re-solidifying into new configurations. Finley's angular jaw softened, his cheekbones sinking into a rounder, more nondescript visage. Mila's delicate nose broadened, her high forehead sloping into a heavy brow. Even their eyes changed, irises swirling with flecks of unfamiliar colors before settling into the same flat, unremarkable brown that Finley's glamour had cast over them.

As their faces reshaped themselves, the color simultaneously leached from their skin and clothing. Healthy pink flesh faded to a sickly grayish-white, as if all the blood had been drained away. Mila's russet hair dulled to a lifeless ash-brown, while Finley's darkened to the hue of charcoal. Their garments lost all vibrancy, leaving only shades of slate, granite, and coal.

The entire process took mere seconds, but the pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that both Finley and Mila stumbled on the first step of the church. They recovered quickly as the pain subsided as fast as it has come. Already, they could feel the iron greedily sipping at their magic, trying to draw it from them, and Finley hastily empowered his protective rune.

"Ah, Hunters," the priest said coldly as they stepped through the door. He paused for a moment, glancing to one side of them and then the other.

Looking at the iron, Finley thought smugly.

"I am Bishop Silva, head of the Southern Eparchy. I was... surprised to see you here. To see that Hunters had already been commissioned, in fact. Has Bishop Fresheri decided to... advance his agenda?"

"We are not privy to his Eminence's plans, Eminence," Mila said softly. "And we apologize for interrupting your... sermon."

“Not privy... hah,” Silva said mirthlessly. He began pacing back and forth in the small entryway.

Silva stopped his pacing abruptly, his black robes swirling around his ankles. He fixed Finley and Mila with a piercing stare, his dark eyes glittering with a mixture of calculation and disdain.

"Let us dispense with the pretense, shall we?" he said, his voice low and cold. "We both know that these... sightings of magic are little more than rumor and hearsay. Old wives' tales and the fevered imaginings of the ignorant masses, brought once more into the light."

Finley and Mila exchanged a quick glance, their transformed faces carefully neutral. They remained silent, waiting for the bishop to continue.

Silva's thin lips curved into a mirthless smile. "Oh, I have no doubt that some of these people believe they have seen something. A flickering light in the darkness, a strange figure vanishing into the mist. But magic? True witchcraft?" He scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "It is a child's fantasy, nothing more."

He began to pace again, his footsteps echoing hollowly on the stone floor. "But the church, you see... we are in a unique position. These rumors, these whispers of witches among us... they have spread like wildfire, fanned by fear and ignorance. And fear, my dear Hunters, is a powerful tool."

Silva paused, his gaze distant, as if envisioning some grand scheme. "The people are losing faith in their Aldermen, in their ability to protect them from this imagined threat. They look to us now, to the church, for guidance and salvation. And we shall provide it."

He turned back to Finley and Mila, his eyes hardening. "We have worked tirelessly to ensure that these rumors reach every corner of the land. Our rumor riders, simple messengers, carry tales of witchcraft and dark magic from village to village, stoking the flames of paranoia and mistrust."

Silva's voice took on a note of cruel satisfaction. "The Aldermen are powerless against such pervasive fear. Their reassurances fall on deaf ears, their authority crumbles like sand. And in their place, the church shall rise, a bastion of strength and protection in these troubled times."

He stepped closer to Finley and Mila, his face a mask of cold deter-

mination. His eyes narrowed as he regarded Finley and Mila with a mixture of suspicion and barely concealed anger. "But it seems," he hissed, "that Bishop Fresheri has overstepped his bounds. The agreement, reached in utmost secrecy among the highest echelons of the church, was clear. We would foment fear, collecting scraps of circumstantial evidence and half-truths, stoking the flames of paranoia until they consumed reason itself. We would rouse the crowds, guiding their terror and fury until they turned to us, the priests, as their last bastion of hope against the imagined scourge of witchcraft."

He began to pace again, his movements sharp and agitated, like a caged predator. "And then, with the people firmly in our grasp, we would assume control. The Aldermen, those weak-willed fools, would be cast aside, their authority crumbling to dust beneath the weight of the church's righteous power. We would rule, not just as spiritual leaders, but as the true masters of every aspect of their lives."

Silva whirled to face them, his robes swirling around him like tendrils of darkness. "But this... this brazen act by Fresheri, sending his own Hunters into my territory, into the very heart of my Eparchy... it reeks of a power grab, a blatant attempt to seize more than his allotted share of control."

His face contorted with barely suppressed rage, a vein throbbing at his temple. "Does he think himself above the agreement? Does he believe that he can simply march into the Southern Eparchy and claim it as his own, riding on the coattails of this manufactured crisis? The arrogance, the sheer audacity of it..."

Silva's voice dropped to a menacing whisper, each word dripping with venom. "I assure you, Hunters, that the other Eparchies will not stand for such insolence. Fresheri may have his delusions of grandeur, his dreams of sole dominion, but we are not so easily cowed. There will be consequences for this breach of trust, this blatant power grab."

He stepped closer to Finley and Mila, his eyes glittering with malice. "You may carry this message back to your master, Hunters. Tell him that the Southern Eparchy, and indeed all the others, will not tolerate his attempts to subvert our carefully laid plans. We will not allow him to upset the delicate balance of power we have so painstakingly constructed."

Silva's lips curled into a sneer, his face a mask of cold fury. "If Fresheri persists in this foolish endeavor, if he continues to send his lackeys into our midst, seeking to undermine our authority... well, let us just say that the church has ways of dealing with those who would defy its will. Even one of our own is not immune to the consequences of our wrath."

Mila nodded respectfully. "Yes, your Eminence. Understood. We will convey your... message. Clearly."

"See that you do," the priest snarled. He whirled and strode into the church's nave, the inner door slamming shut behind him.

Finley and Mila exchanged glances as they turned and left the church, and both breathed a sigh of relief as they released their holds on their magic.

"Do you think—" Mila asked.

Finley shook his head, saying nothing.

They walked quickly out of the village, following the path they'd taken in, and it wasn't until the village's outskirts were well out of sight behind them that Finley spoke. "This is an interesting new discovery," he said quietly, once again using his magic to check for watchers. "Let's get back to the Farm."

Quickly. That transformation magic is going to reverse and it's going to hurt worse going back.

Mila's Sea magic once again embraced them and carried them away.



Arcadia listened intently as Finley and Mila recounted their harrowing experience in Sowsee, her brow furrowed with concern. The flickering light of the candles cast dancing shadows across the rough-hewn walls of the Farm's still-intact main hall, the ancient stone seeming to absorb the gravity of their words.

When they had finished their tale, Arcadia leaned back in her chair, her fingertips steepled before her as she processed the shocking revelations. "This is... unprecedented," she murmured, her voice thick with a mixture of awe and trepidation. "The church, moving so openly, so brazenly... I never thought they would dare to be so bold."

She rose from her seat and began to pace the length of the hall, her footsteps echoing softly on the worn flagstones. "To think that they would deliberately sow fear and mistrust, using the specter of witchcraft as a tool to seize power... it's both brilliant and utterly reprehensible."

Arcadia paused, turning to face Finley and Mila, her eyes glinting with a fierce determination. "But in a way, it's almost a relief to know that there haven't been more genuine sightings of magic. If the villagers were truly witnessing blatant displays of witchcraft, it would mean that our own people had grown careless, risking exposure and putting us all in danger."

She sighed, running a hand through her long hair. "No, it's far more likely that the villagers are simply more attuned to the small, everyday magics that have always been present, but have gone unnoticed for generations. A flicker of light as a witch opens a hidden door, a shimmer in the air as a spell is cast... these things have always been there, but fear has a way of sharpening the senses, making the mundane seem extraordinary. And of course, with the Veil stretched so thin..."

Arcadia resumed her pacing, her brow creased in thought. "But the church... to use witchkind as their ghoul, their boggart to bring the masses under their control... it's a stroke of twisted genius. They prey upon the ignorance and superstition of the people, fanning the flames of paranoia until reason itself is consumed."

“Bringing the truth seems to defuse the situation,” Finley pointed out.

“Only with someone less experienced than Silva,” Mila countered. “And less clever. He sent people away to think. They’ll dream up new things they’ve seen.”

Arcadia nodded. “I’m not sure we can directly counter—” Her eyes flew wide as she stopped.

“A Sending?” Mila asked with a frown.

“Directly to me,” Arcadia said quickly. “It’s happening. Now. Actual magic. Lakewood. Finley, go!”

He vanished in a gust of cold air.

CHAPTER 4

A Magical Display

Finley arrived in Lakewood just as the sun was setting below the horizon. The sky transformed into a stunning masterpiece of burnt orange and deep plum hues, casting a warm glow over the horizon. However, it was not the most captivating light to behold in that moment.

Lakewood was under attack.

Finley's eyes widened as he took in the breathtaking yet terrifying scene before him. Lakewood, a charming town nestled along the northern edge of a tranquil lake, was now a spectacle of magical chaos. The town, which typically buzzed with the gentle hum of everyday life even as night fell, had been transformed into a battlefield of arcane force.

As Finley watched in awe and horror, brilliant lances of colored flame burst forth from the heart of a nearby building. The structure seemed to shudder under the onslaught, its walls cracking and splintering as the magical fire tore through it with relentless fury. The flames danced and twisted in mesmerizing patterns, their hues shifting from deep crimson to electric blue to an eerie, sickly green.

Across the town, numerous other buildings had fallen victim to the same fate. Roofs collapsed inward as the enchanted flames consumed them from within, sending plumes of multi-colored smoke billowing

into the darkening sky. The air crackled with energy, and the ground trembled beneath Finley's feet as the magical destruction continued unabated.

The once-peaceful streets were now illuminated by the unnatural light of the fires, casting distorted shadows that seemed to writhe and dance of their own accord. The lake, usually a serene mirror reflecting the stars above, now glowed with an otherworldly sheen, as if the magic had seeped into its very depths.

Screams of terror and confusion echoed through the night, mingling with the roar of the flames and the ominous creaking of buildings on the verge of collapse. Finley stood frozen, his heart pounding in his chest as he tried to comprehend the sheer scale of the magical destruction unfolding before his eyes.

A rush of hot air and a shower of sparks announced Cian's arrival. His eyes flew open immediately. "What in the name of the Origin..." he breathed.

"Find where it's coming from," Finley ordered. In his mind, he was already assembling the most powerful Sea magic he knew. It wouldn't be nearly as effective with the lake's freshwater, but it might still help douse these flames and save... what could be saved.

Try this instead, his talent suggested, taking the rune construct Finley knew and... reinventing it.

[[[RUNE Douse Fire]]]

Strange, Finley noted as he began pouring Sea magic into it.

Flame as well, his talent directed. And... I think I'm onto something.

It wasn't wrong, Finley noted. The rune—whatever it represented—consumed less of Finley's magic than he'd expected, and less than a quarter of what the more traditional New Runic construct would have required. It felt effortless, and... connected, somehow, although to what, Finley couldn't say.

As Finley poured magic into the rune, a remarkable transformation

began to take place. The nearby lake, its surface shimmering with an otherworldly glow, started to churn and froth as if stirred by an invisible hand. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, tendrils of water rose from the lake's depths, twisting and coiling into the air like ethereal serpents.

The water, infused with Finley's magic, took on a luminescent quality, casting an eerie blue light that mingled with the harsh glow of the arcane flames. As the tendrils grew in size and number, they began to weave together, forming a dense, shimmering fog that hovered above the lake's surface.

With a gesture from Finley, the fog surged forward, propelled by an unseen force. It rolled across the shore and into the streets of Lakewood, engulfing the town in a cool, damp embrace. The fog seemed to possess a sentience of its own, seeking out the raging fires that consumed the buildings.

As the enchanted mist encountered the flames, it wrapped itself around them like a smothering blanket. The fires sputtered and hissed, their magical energy dissipating as the water-laden fog extinguished them with ruthless efficiency. Steam billowed from the points of contact, creating an eerie, shifting landscape of half-seen shapes and dancing shadows.

The fog continued its relentless advance, snaking through shattered windows and crumbling doorways, filling every nook and cranny of the ravaged structures. It seeped into the very stones and timbers, quenching the flames at their source and preventing them from reigniting.

Gradually, the chaos that had engulfed Lakewood began to subside. The screams of terror faded, replaced by the hissing of steam and the creaking of damaged buildings settling back into place. The multi-hued glow of the magical flames flickered and died, leaving only the soft, pulsing light of the enchanted fog.

As the town fell into an uneasy silence, Finley stood at the edge of the destruction, his hands still outstretched, maintaining his connection to the rune and the magic that had saved Lakewood from total annihilation. The fog swirled around him, cool and comforting against his skin.

Cian reappeared next to him, breathing heavily. “I spotted him, but he vanished. Flame magic.”

An uneasy sensation gripped Finley’s guts. “Can you describe him.”

“Better. I got a good look.” With a quick glance around to ensure they weren’t being observed, Cian conjured a small ball of flame in one hand. It glowed white-hot, and quickly began shaping itself, almost as if Cian was sculpting it with his mind.

The sensation in Finley’s stomach grew colder. “Landon,” he said flatly.

“Your classmate? The one who was… expelled from the Order?”

“Former classmate. And yes. I’d… there was a chance he’d died.”

“He didn’t.”

“Clearly.”

“You know him well enough to trace him?”

Finley sighed and looked away. “I should. And I should be able to. I’ve tried, several times this past moon, but no luck. Even…” he stopped himself. Cian not only didn’t know about Finley’s talent, he didn’t, couldn’t, know the nature of it. Only Arcadia and Kelden knew what was going on inside Finley’s head. “…Arcadia couldn’t, and she’s much better at tracing.” Even the better tracing rune you gave me isn’t doing it. Somehow, it’s being blocked.

Or he really is dead.

Cian saw him.

Hmm. Perhaps a new approach, then.

[[[RUNE Powerful Trace]]]

What are these? Finley asked.

I don’t know. They’re closer than the last ones. Those were… straightforward. But magic isn’t straightforward, is it? It bobs and weaves. I can see it, you know. All around us. These are… closer. I’m trying to mimic what I see, but there’s something missing. But… try it. Sky magic.

Finley empowered the rune. It glowed in his mind, and he felt it

tingling on his skin. It reached out, almost as if it was aware, and Finley hastily locked an image of Landon into his mind. The magic seemed to study it for a moment, and then began reaching out... but it was only a few heartbeats before it retreated gently, coiling around itself and fading. Guess not.

Something strange has happened to that young man, his talent said, clearly mystified.

"Nothing?" Cian asked.

"Nothing," Finley confirmed, shaking his head. "And now there will be calls for Hunts."

Cian snorted. "Not entirely unjustified, if you take my meaning."

"I suppose not."

"We need to get witchkind evacuated."

"Of course we do!" Finley snapped, suddenly overflowing with frustration and fatigue. "But to where? There are, what, five thousand of us here? Six? Where can they all go?"

Cian was silent.

"Sorry," Finley apologized, rubbing his eyes. "I'm exhausted. Today has been too much already. Yes, of course. Do a broad Sending. Assuming anyone isn't smart enough to figure it out on their own. Say that, if anyone has absolutely nowhere to go, they can come to the Farm. It's not a secret anymore."

"The farmhouse—"

"They're witchkind, Cian. They won't die of a night sleeping in a field. And it'll be safer than here, come tomorrow morning. There might even be riots tonight, after that."

Cian looked at him closely, and then nodded agreement. "On it."

"I'll head to the Farm and tell Arcadia."

The old man nodded again, his eyes already closed to work the Sending as Finley's waning magic embraced him and took him home.

CHAPTER 5

A Foe, Returned

So it was definitely Landon?" Arcadia sighed.

Finley nodded. When he'd arrived at the Farm, he'd all but collapsed, his magic exhausted and his body not far behind. She'd put him in bed immediately, finding him a space in one of the newly built sleeping rooms in the one completed new wing of the farmhouse. He'd slept until sunrise, and then sought her out in the small, makeshift outdoor kitchen the Order was using. "Cian got a good look at him, and he sculpted a likeness from flame. There's no doubt."

"You tried tracking him?"

"Of course. Nothing worked. My talent even... it's experimenting with new runes. Nothing worked. Something's different about Landon, now. Different enough that it's like I don't know him."

Arcadia gave him a small smile. "It's still strange to hear you talk about your talent as if it's alive."

He shrugged. "It was, once. But... I am starting to understand where I stop and he—it—starts. There is a difference between us. You know I can manipulate all four kinds of magic, now? Equally well?"

Her eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Yes. Well, not equally. Sky magic is still pretty... subtle. But I can Gather as much of that as I can anything else." He hesitated, but decided to tell her everything. "And it's six kinds of magic. Not four."

Her eyes widened further, but then she nodded slowly. "The Six Axes."

"Apparently. Although you got it faster than I did."

"You never liked history."

"True."

She leaned back against the heavy timber table where a light breakfast had been laid, and looked at the bustle of activity before them.

As Arcadia surveyed the scene before her, she couldn't help but marvel at the progress they'd made in such a short time. The once modest farmhouse was being transformed into a grand headquarters right before her eyes.

Witchkind bustled about, their magic weaving visibly through the air like shimmering threads. Some levitated massive stone blocks, fitting them together with precision to form sturdy walls. Others coaxed mighty oaks to grow and shape themselves into support beams and rafters, their branches twisting and intertwining in intricate patterns. Still others sliced planks of perfectly straight lumber from huge trees that had likely been grown over the course of a day and a night.

In one corner of the sprawling structure, a group of witchkind worked in unison, their voices rising and falling like a melodic tide to help them keep their magic synchronized. Runes of strength and protection glowed upon the freshly laid floorboards, pulsing with newly laid power. The wood itself seemed to come alive, knots and grains swirling into mesmerizing designs.

High above, more of witchkind perched on newly shingled roofs, their hands outstretched as they conjured invisible wards and enchantments, laying them into more runes that glowed briefly as they settled into the materials. The air crackled with energy, and Arcadia could feel the hum of magic resonating in her bones.

Everywhere Arcadia looked, the ordinary was giving way to the extraordinary. Simple wooden doors became portals, their surfaces etched with runes for protection and warmth. Stained glass windows cast kaleidoscopes of colored light across newly laid floors, each pane telling a story of its own. Even the chimneys had been spelled to emit enchanting wisps of smoke that took on shapes of birds and flowers before dissipating into the sky.

Arcadia turned back to Finley, a smile playing at her lips. "I think we're going to need a new name for this place. 'Farmhouse' doesn't quite seem to capture it anymore, does it?"

He chuckled. “Not quite, no. I guess just ‘headquarters?’”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something grander,” she chided him. Then she grew serious again. “So we can’t find Landon. But what he’s doing —Origin protect us, Finley—it doesn’t matter if the human church is faking it, if Landon’s going to be wandering around burning down entire towns with magic fire. And since when did he get an affinity with Flame?”

“I don’t know, but there’s no way he had a Forged artifact with that much power in it. This was him, unless someone Cian didn’t see was there helping him.”

“The Taryba is going to have a cat,” she sighed. “It’s getting harder and harder to talk them down, and this... will make it substantially worse.”

“But the humans didn’t—”

“Oh, they’ll know that. But what the humans are going to do, are probably doing right now in Lakewood, that is going to set them off.”

Finley opened his mouth to protest, but then nodded acceptance. “We warned everyone before we left. As far as I know, Cian is still there helping.”

“I’ll send some more people to help, too,” Arcadia said, closing her eyes for a moment. “This isn’t going to be as easy as pretending you’re Hunters and pulling off a trick.”

“Yeah. Last night’s a little difficult to explain any other way than actual magic. We could—”

“Actually, don’t.”

“What?” Finley’s brow wrinkled at Arcadia’s flat tone.

“Don’t go. We can’t fix this one, Finley. It was... too much. It was magic, pure and simple, and if the humans launch a Hunt looking for the perpetrator, I wouldn’t even blame them. Lakewood is lost.” She paused for a moment. “Have you had any other contact with our... friends?”

“The cabal? No. And I’ve been checking for watchers. But they must be delighted about this.”

"I seriously doubt it. It's their people being hurt and probably killed."

Finley felt a stab of regret. "You're right. I'm sorry. But no, I haven't. And I don't even know how to get hold of any of them." Then something occurred to him. "But they're involved."

"How so?"

"That church in Sowsee. It had iron rods along the door frame, remember? It's why I had to... change us. Physically."

Arcadia nodded as she put it together. "So they know iron is a weakness."

"The priest was very obviously looking for a reaction from us. Or it, actually. He was looking at the door frame as we walked through. I'm not sure what they think it does, but they know it does something."

"And the cabal is the most likely way they know."

"Best I can think of."

"So. Where does that leave us?"

Finley sighed. "We need to find Landon. And whoever is working with him." His stomach growled, and he felt an emptiness in his spine. "And I hate to say it, but I need to sleep some more. I still haven't Gathered enough."

"Go," Arcadia said. "Do that. I'll put the word out about Landon. To everyone, everywhere. It'll get back to the Taryba, but that's inevitable. If someone finds him, we can move in."

"Tell them to be careful. Wake me, in fact. He's... not who he used to be. The power he used..."

"I understand. Go. Rest up. Gather. You'll need it."



Finley retired to his small room, his body still leaden with exhaustion. As soon as his head touched the pillow, he plummeted into a deep sleep, his mind swirling with the chaotic events of the past days.

In his dream, he found himself in a dark, cavernous space, an endless void stretching out before him. Suddenly, flames erupted all around, their colors shifting and morphing in a dizzying dance. Crimson bled into emerald, which then burst into a brilliant sapphire

before cycling back to a searing orange. The flames licked at his skin, but instead of burning, they seemed to whisper secrets in forgotten tongues.

Amidst the inferno, figures began to take shape. Towering priests with severe expressions and cold, glinting eyes loomed over him. Their robes were the color of fresh blood, and they carried iron rods that pulsed with a sickly green light. They chanted in low, menacing tones, their voices rising in a crescendo that shook the very ground beneath Finley's feet.

As the priests' chanting reached a fever pitch, the flames parted, revealing a scene of utter chaos. Witchkind ran in terror, their faces contorted in fear as they fled from the mobs of human hunters that pursued them. The hunters brandished torches and pitchforks, their faces twisted with rage and hatred. They shouted accusations and slurs, their voices joining the cacophony of the priests' chanting and the roar of the flames.

Finley tried to move, to help his fellow witchkind, but his feet remained rooted to the spot. He watched helplessly as the hunters closed in, their weapons glinting in the firelight. Just as they were about to strike, the scene shifted, and Finley found himself standing on a precipice overlooking a vast, dark chasm.

The flames and the chaos receded, replaced by an eerie calm. The starscape above him was unlike anything he had ever seen. The stars pulsed and swirled, their colors shifting through every imaginable hue. Some seemed close enough to touch, while others were distant pinpricks of light, barely visible against the inky blackness of the void.

As Finley watched, the stars began to move, tracing intricate patterns across the sky. They formed runes and glyphs, their meaning just beyond his grasp. He felt a strange pull, as if the stars were trying to tell him something, to impart some great cosmic wisdom.

We have some work to do.

Finley experienced the most disconcerting sensation of becoming incredibly alert and deeply relaxed in the same moment. You're getting to be quite chatty, he replied. We must be getting close.

Quite the opposite, actually. I'm becoming more... distinct. I can still speak to you, I can still hear you, but I'm gaining more awareness of

the rest of the world. The image of the pale, dark-haired young man faded into existence. I'm not sure I like it, but I'm aware of it.

What work, then?

Two things. First, I need to explain what I think is happening to you. You're going to need it, and to use it, you're going to need to understand it. I just hope I have it right.

And the second?

His talent smirked. We need to figure out your old classmate.

Finley groaned in his sleep. Let's definitely do that second. What's happening to me? Is it bad?

His talent's avatar drifted closer, and everything around and behind them grew darker and darker. No. I don't think so. You're channeling all four of the elemental Axes, which is... unusual. I'm not aware of that having been possible before now.

Arcadia would remind you that I'm bad at history.

Right. But you know about the Adherents, right?

Of course.

Four Axes, then: Sky, Earth, Flame, and Sea. Dozens to hundreds of Adherents for each, Chosen at birth, identified at thirteen, and taken by their fellows to learn the ways of their Axis. But none of them controlled all of their Axis' power, right? It was spread between them. So they were still ridiculously powerful, but not infinitely so.

But you, Finley recalled, were the sole Adherent of the Sixth Axis.

Of Endings. And Death, technically. Yes. And so I had much more power, but it was... difficult to use. You had to kind of convince the Axis that what you wanted was Ending a thing. Clan Karal... they hoarded magical power. Power stolen first from witchkind, and when I Ended that, from humans—and yes, that's when I figured out humans are actual fonts of pure magic. They used that power to try and re-enact the Forging, to create the Fifth Axis. But it turns out... this is difficult to explain. I'm going to try and show you.

Finley's vision zoomed out.

Finley found himself floating in a vast, polychromatic sphere, a cosmic bubble that pulsed with an otherworldly energy. The sphere was a kaleidoscope of colors, each hue more vibrant and mesmerizing than the last. Swirls of deep indigo danced with shimmering emerald, while

ribbons of fiery orange wove through veins of rich, royal purple. It was as if the very essence of magic had been distilled into a single, breath-taking orb.

Piercing the sphere were four distinct lines of energy, each thrumming with its own unique frequency. The first, a searing crimson that crackled and popped, represented the raw, untamed power of Flame. It pulsed with an intensity that threatened to consume everything in its path, yet there was an undeniable beauty in its primal fury.

The second line, a deep, resonant blue, embodied the mysterious depths of the Sea. It flowed with a serene grace, its surface calm and inviting, yet beneath its tranquil exterior lay unfathomable power and secrets waiting to be unlocked.

The third line, a gossamer silver that shimmered and danced, personified the elusive nature of Sky. It twisted and turned, never quite solid, always just beyond reach. It whispered of freedom and endless possibilities, of dreams that could soar beyond the confines of the earth.

The final line, a rich, earthy brown shot through with veins of gold, symbolized the steadfast strength of Earth. It was solid and unyielding, a foundation upon which all else was built. It spoke of ancient wisdom and the enduring cycle of life and death.

But it was what surrounded the sphere that truly captivated Finley's attention. A circle, roughly half white and half black, encompassed the polychromatic orb, its two halves perfectly balanced in a dance of light and shadow. The white half radiated a pure, almost blinding brilliance, a light that seemed to emanate from within. It was warm and inviting, a beacon of hope and renewal.

In contrast, the black half of the circle glowed with its own peculiar light, a light that seemed to absorb rather than emit. It was a darkness that held secrets and mysteries, a void that promised both oblivion and revelation. Yet, despite its ominous appearance, it did not feel threatening or malevolent. Instead, it felt like a necessary counterpart to the light.

Four Axes, Finley's talent said. Converging in the middle. The Origin. And surrounding them, the infinite circle of Beginnings and Endings.

Finley frowned. But if it's a circle, it can't be an axis. They don't converge.

Exactly. And that's what Karal learned. They manage to harness some portion of the Fifth Axis, but it drove him mad. And damn near killed me. The origin Forging failed to capture the Fifth because it wasn't a distinct power. Endings and Beginnings, they're two sides of the same coin. Two faces of the same thing. Distinct, but connected. Aron—that was his name, the boy of Karal they bound to the Fifth—gave it up. Voluntarily. And when he did, it all snapped back to me, Beginnings and Endings. And I saw this. The Origin.

And you Ended the other Adherents.

Most of them asked me to, actually. They just couldn't do it themselves. But that doesn't matter right now. Somehow, you've got the potential power of six Adherents. It's... what I had. Briefly. Before I... gave it up.

Finley's heart clenched. What are you saying?

I'm saying there's always a reason behind these things. You obviously don't hold as much power, because the adherents had four-fifth of the world's magic to themselves. Magic hasn't thinned for everyone else. But you have access to far more than ordinary witchkind do, in both variety and quantity.

Okay. And?

And you need to embrace it. You keep avoiding Sky, for example.

Even with his eyelids closed, Finley's eyes rolled. It's so... ephemeral.

Which means you're avoid Flame as well.

I'm comfortable with Earth and Sea, Finley protested.

Get comfortable with them all. If you have them, there's a reason, and I don't know what it is, but you need to be ready.

Finley opened his mouth to protest again, but then assented. Fine. I will.

There's more. You need to actively try and create runes when you need them.

But you're my talent. I thought—

I'm not. I can, and I can give them to you, but I can't exercise magic on my own. I'm... in the middle of it. But you can do it on your own, too. I can sense it within you. You just don't... reach for it.

Okay.

Truly. Reach for it. Let it speak..., well not literally. Not like this. But let it... give it its head. Does that make sense?

I think so.

Which brings us to the subject of Landon.

Finley sighed.

First, I have an idea of how he's avoiding you. What was his clan?

Karcz, Finley replied. Then he hesitated. You said 'was.'

What if it isn't, anymore?

That's why I can't trace him. You're saying Dmitry—

It's a strong possibility and it's the simplest explanation. Dmitry didn't add Landon to his own clan, and that leads me to the second point. Do you have inheritance magic, still?

I've no idea what you mean.

Well, good. But I suspect that's what happened. Karal—and every clan identity they carried before that, and I imagine since—was extremely good at keeping records. So inheritance magic would still be on the table for them, I would think.

Can you explain what it is?

His talent shrugged. More or less what it sounds like. You can beneath you ability to someone else. Even across clans, although that's riskier.

Bequeath—that doesn't make sense. You can't gift power from one person to another. We all Gather our own.

Actually you can, but that's a different topic. I said ability. Dmitry was a master at his craft. Evil and misguided at the least, but a master. The complexity of that attack—and he didn't have me, or, as far as we know, a Rune Smith's talent. Can you imagine how intricate his rune construct must have been, to raise that attack while attempting to hold a defense at the same time?

Finley couldn't—but something in him could. Instead of reaching for it, he relaxed into it.

[[[RUNE: Reverse Engineer]]]

. . .

That's close, his talent said, and Finley thought he detected a hint of admiration in its tone. You're getting it. You could do a more powerful version, now. Simplified. Tighter. But my point is that he could have bequeathed that to Landon.

A spark flared in Finley's mind. The Flame affinity—Dmitry had that. And now Landon—

Exactly, his talent confirmed. That's what I think happened.

Last night's attack wasn't exactly refined.

No, and it'll take him some time to come to grips with what he now knows, and what he can do. Always does. You're still avoiding Sky magic, after all.

Point taken, Finley sighed. So that's why we can't trace him.

I think so.

And why he's suddenly so powerful.

Again, I think so.

So what do we do now?

His talent grinned and began to fade. I'm a centuries-old remnant of an orphan who destroyed an entire social order and all of his colleagues. How should I know?

Everything faded, and Finley spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon in blissful unconsciousness.



Finley awoke around dinnertime, and found the Farm all but deserted and Arcadia looking tense and frustrated. "What's happening? Where is everyone?"

"Helping family and relatives, mostly. Grabbing what possessions they can. It'll be a few days of... well, chaos." She rubbed her face and exhaled heavily. "I've been to see the Taryba. They're closing the gates of Evermore. The city's too full, it can't absorb more people. Not this quickly. They've got people working to make more expanded spaces available, but Evermore already has so many, and you can't overlap them, and I don't even understand the geometry on that magic, and—"

"Arcadia," Finley said gently.

She exhaled again. "Right. We've told people they can come here, if

they've nowhere else. Just past the orchard there's a kind of encampment going up. People are volunteering to take shifts to enclose the camp with their magic."

"So... everyone is evacuating?"

"No, not everyone. You know, in a lot of the smaller villages, witchkind lives in normal homes. So they're weirdly less vulnerable because they're not vanishing and appearing all the time. People—humans—know them, know where they live. So they think they'll be fine. But everyone who lives in a hidden space... yes. As far as I know almost all of them are leaving. Humans have started asking questions like, 'where do you actually live?' and there's no good answers."

"The Veil," Finley said sadly.

"It's going," Arcadia agreed. "For all intents and purposes, it's probably gone." She took another deep breath and exhaled it in a whoosh.

"Your family?"

"They're fine. Dad's always had an apartment in Evermore, so they're all there. it's tight, but they're working to expand the space, once they get approval. And I checked on yours—they're fine, also." She smiled. "Your family has got to be one of the toughest. They and a bunch of others have just gone into the Great Northern Range. There are hundreds of passes, crevices, caves, you name it, only accessible by magic. There are a dozen little encampments setting up everywhere, and humans will never find them."

Finley grinned despite the situation. "Yeah, that sounds like them. From the warm southern coast to the coldest place in the world, without blinking. My Uncle's got a strong flame affinity. They'll be fine."

Arcadia's expression dimmed. "But there's more."

"More?"

"The Taryba... there's definitely something going on. They were... cagey. There are three new councilors, people I've never met before. They've basically given up on the Veil, which I guess is reasonable, but... they're not exactly outright suggesting we start putting human villages under our control, but I feel like they're basically headed there." She shook her head in frustration. "They're not telling me anything, and there's no way to find out." She looked sheepish for a moment. "I tried

listening in on them, but the Private Chambers are shielded against Sky magic."

"Probably against any magic," Finley said. "But you're right, it would be useful to know what's actually happening."

I... might be able to help, his talent suggested. There was a hesitation, though.

"My talent might have... an idea," he told Arcadia.

You're going to wait to lie down.

"I think I'm going to need a bit."

"Go," she said, nodding wearily. "I'm hungry. Meet me here."

Knowing the other side of the once-peaceful orchard was now home to hundreds of displaced witchkind, Finley headed to the other side of the Farm. A creek ran through the densely spaced trees here, creating a perfect sense of calm. He lowered himself to the ground. Okay.

Look at this.

[[[RUNE Middle Runic Visitation]]]

That's... got a strange feeling to it, Finley said after studying it for a moment. Indeed, his stomach was churning uncomfortably and he had a distinct feeling of unease.

Good. It's probably supposed to.

This is... a spying rune?

Sort of. Not exactly, not in the way you're thinking. His talent's voice took on a reflective tone. This was the first thing I learned. After I'd been Chosen, taken to the Tower, and... left. This probably saved my sanity, those first couple of years. It's the Sixth Axis' First Form. Once I'd... well, it's a long story.

Something tickled Finley's memory. I remember this. This is how you... saw. What Karal was doing. Before you'd even ascended.

Yes.

How do I remember that?

An even longer story, it sighed. For now, let's focus on the rune.

But what magic do I use? Sky?

No. As I said, this is the Sixth Axis' First Form of Magic. The first and simplest expression of its power. It... represents the soul, in a way.

But then—

This is what I said earlier. You have it in you. All of it. All four of the elemental alignments, but also the... extra. The circle of Beginning and Ending. It's time for you to embrace that. Use that to empower this rune.

This... that's what you did? Back then?

Well, yes, but it was a lot easier for me, wasn't it? This was the only magic I'd ever known.

Right. Finley closed his eyes and took a deep breath, reaching deep within himself to find the source of this alleged power. He visualized the polychromatic sphere he had seen in his dream, the cosmic bubble that pulsed with the essence of magic itself. The four elemental lines of energy thrummed and pulsed, converging at the center in a blinding point of pure Origin.

But it was the encompassing circle of light and shadow that drew his focus now. The balance of Beginning and Ending, of life and death, creation and destruction. He let his consciousness drift toward that infinite loop, feeling its pull like a magnetic force.

As he drew closer, the black and white halves seemed to swirl and dance, blurring together into shades of shimmering grey. Finley felt a rush of energy course through his veins as he tapped into this primal power. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before—a sense of boundless potential tempered by the weight of inevitable conclusion. Beginning... and End.

With a surge of will, Finley directed this energy toward the rune his talent had shown him. The Middle Runic sigil blazed to life in his mind's eye, etched in lines of searing silver against a backdrop of deepest black. As he fed more of the Beginning and Ending force into the rune, it pulsed and grew, expanding outward like a living thing.

Suddenly, Finley felt a wrenching sensation as his consciousness was ripped free of his physical form. His body slumped to the ground, lifeless, as his spirit soared skyward, unencumbered by the shackles of flesh and bone.

The world blurred around him as he rocketed through the aether, distance and time losing all meaning. The lush green of the Farm's orchards gave way to rolling hills and sprawling plains, then to jagged peaks and yawning chasms. He caught glimpses of hidden witchkind enclaves nestled in secret valleys or perched on inaccessible mountainsides. New, emergency settlements as they fled their homes amongst the now-suspicious humans.

Finley marveled at the scope and scale of the world below, seeing it with new eyes granted by this out-of-body experience. But even as he reveled in this newfound freedom, he felt the rune's power tugging him inexorably toward his intended destination.

The city of Evermore rose on the horizon like a behemoth of stone and light. Its towering spires and sprawling districts stood in stark contrast to the untamed wilderness surrounding it. As Finley drew closer, he imagined could feel the thrum of the city's life force—the hopes and dreams, fears and frustrations of its inhabitants pulsing like a collective heartbeat.

Guided by the rune's unerring navigation, Finley's spectral form dove down into the city proper, phasing through solid walls and soaring over bustling streets unseen by the populace. He wove between buildings old and new toward the Taryba's elegant spire, diving through its walls and, without the slightest resistance, into the Private Chambers.

Where the entire Taryba had convened.

CHAPTER 6

A Shifting Tide

The Private Chambers of the Taryba were a sight to behold. While not as ostentatious as the Public Chambers, they nevertheless exuded an aura of power and mystique that could only be conjured by the most adept magic. The walls shimmered with an opalescent sheen, as if imbued with the very essence of magic itself. Intricate tapestries depicting ancient runes and symbols adorned the walls, their threads seeming to move and dance of their own accord in the flickering candlelight.

In the center of the room stood a grand circular table hewn from a single slab of obsidian, its surface polished to a mirror-like sheen. Thirteen high-backed chairs, each carved with unique designs representing the different districts of the world, were arranged around the table. The air crackled with tangible energy, and Finley could feel the protective enchantments woven into the very fabric of the chamber. It was as if an invisible barrier separated this space from the outside world.

The thirteen Councilors were already seated, their expressions a mix of solemnity and unease. Some leaned in close to whisper to their neighbors, while others sat back with arms crossed, eyeing their fellow council members warily. The tension was palpable, hanging thick in the air like a gathering storm cloud.

At the head of the table sat the High Councilor Jankauskas, resplendent in robes of deepest midnight blue embroidered with her clan rune in silver thread. Her long silver hair was plaited with glowing crystal beads that seemed to capture and reflect the candlelight. Despite her age, her eyes sparkled with keen intelligence and an unmistakable aura of authority.

The other Councilors were, broadly speaking, less striking in appearance. Most wore their formal Council robes of heavy fabric, with their clan runes embroidered in bright colors. A couple wore more ordinary clothes, in the drab hues favored by humans and by witchkind seeking to pass unnoticed amongst the humans. Finley supposed they may have come directly from their homes in distant towns and villages.

Finley stood unseen in a corner of the room, a phantom for all intents and purposes. They can't see me? he asked his talent nervously.

But there was no answer.

"Friends," Jankauskas said quietly, and the murmured side conversations came to a halt. "We're here to discuss the... situation."

"The situation?" spat one of the ones dressed in human-style garments. Finley had never paid much attention to the Taryba's makeup, but thought he recalled the man's name being Baltakis. An old family, based in Twynsyts. He'd held his seat on the Taryba for a long time. "The situation is that someone's been playing fast and loose with magic. Making displays. Attacking humans! If the Veil hasn't been completely torn, then it—"

"The Veil," purred one of the more richly-garbed councilors, "is, and has always been, a myth."

"Your opinion, Degutis," Councilor Baltakis snapped. "But there's an awful lot of history for a myth."

Degutis shrugged, his face a portrait of condescension. "Notwithstanding. If it existed, it has indeed been damaged. Beyond repair, I would imagine, since nobody seems to know anything at all about it. Which brings us—"

"To the situation," Jankauskas took over smoothly. "Regardless of how we got here, this is where we are: humans have seen magic, in some cases in epic measures. They are afraid, and they are reacting as they

always do when they are afraid: with violence. Witchkind has been forced to evacuate its homes—"

"With nowhere to go, now that you've closed the city!" barked the other plainly dressed councilor.

"A necessary measure, Councilor Aitken," Jankauskas said firmly. "Evermore cannot handle more refugees at this time. Work is already underway to provide more expanded spaces, but it will take time, and magic, to accomplish. But the situation before us is what to do with the humans."

"Do with them?" asked another councilor sharply. She was dressed in robes of deep crimson, her clan rune embroidered in gold. "Surely you're not supporting Adomaitis' position? Subjugate them, rule over them? it's ridiculous!"

"Is it, Lynch?" Degutis argued. Finley thought the man's voice sounded like it was dipped in oil. "While I have always been sympathetic to former Councilor Adomaitis'... position on the subject of humans, doesn't the current situation require us to reexamine our long-held beliefs? Secrecy is no longer an option, Councilors." His voice had gone sharp. "We are found out. The Veil, if it existed, is surely gone. The humans are calling for Hunts. We have two options, do we not? Leave our homes, retreat into the wild, and live in hiding. Or, we bring the humans to heel. I, for one, prefer the comforts of a large town."

"You scarcely leave Evermore," Councilor Lynch muttered, but she said nothing else.

"Which feels like a third option," another councilor, this one in purple robes threaded with white, suggested gently. "Expand Evermore. Or build another—the land the Order of Some uses for their Farm is more than adequate. Build residences around Disemstoke's and Duocastella's. Withdraw from human society entirely. Let them see the folly of that. Has that not been our lever all along? The threat of losing magic, once they found out about it?"

"An option, Councilor Abebe" Degutis agreed, his voice once again slick as oil. "But is it truly viable? Evermore was built over a thousand years! Even with all the magic in the world, raising cities to support—what, one hundred thousand? Two? That many of witchkind cannot be

accommodated so easily, I think." He leaned back in his chair, a smug grin playing across his lips.

"True, true," Abebe conceded, smiling broadly. "I simply wanted to ensure we'd considered it, but your points are valid."

"And there's more to consider," said a small-statured man in black robes.

"Oh, Councilor Ohanian?" Abebe asked.

"Indeed, yes. We have already been nearly attacked here in Evermore, and that was with the Veil intact. With our secrecy gone, surely the humans will hunt out any additional cities of magic we should choose to found."

"Ah, again, you have me," Abebe said, his nod exaggerated. "I yield to your greater wisdom."

They're playing off each other, Finley realized. This isn't a real debate.

"Another option," this time from a councilor in rich, earthy brown with bright yellow stitching, "would be to live in peace, no?"

This feels like the same thing, Finley thought.

"Oh, Councilor Conteh?" Jankauskas said easily. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, surely we could just reveal ourselves to the humans," Conteh replied, his deep voice no less oily than Degutis'. "Explain how we've been supporting their civilization in secret for millennia, and offer to simply live alongside them openly, now."

"I think," said someone else, a broadly built woman in bright yellow robes with black stitches, "perhaps we might be too far gone for that, no? I mean, the destruction of Lakewood might surely give them pause."

"Ah, Councilor Okoro, you have me there," Conteh replied, shaking his head in defeat. "I had not considered the actions that have already been taken. A pity we cannot simply travel back in time and undo what has been done. Alas."

"You're all playing this like a game," Baltakis snapped. "Let us to it, then. A show of hands. Which of you supports this nonsense of somehow ruling the humans?"

Ten hands went up.

"Opposed?"

Two hands joined Baltakis'.

"Enough then. You'll do as you please with or without us." Baltakis rose and strode angrily from the room, Aitken and Lynch close behind him.

Jankauskas sighed as the door slammed shut behind them. "Finally," she said, her voice suddenly coarse. "And he's not wrong, Enough with the charade. Okoro, you've been in charge of the Karcz boy. Report."

Finley's ghostly eyebrows rose to his hairline.

"A useful tool. More... powerful than we had been led to realize. I suspect Dmitry did something to... enhance him. But useful." The Councilor's voice was all business now, and she spoke quickly.

"An inheritance, do you think?" Abebe asked, echoing Finley's thoughts.

"Possibly," Okoro allowed, "although that's very old magic indeed. But from him, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Surprising that he'd leave it to someone outside his own clan," a man in cream-colored robes mused.

"Not when they've all vanished," Abebe countered. "But I interrupted you, Okoro. What next?"

"More displays," Okoro replied crisply. "Hopefully nothing as... drastic as Lakewood. That should have been demonstration enough. Their church will have spread that news to the corners of the continent already, I expect."

"When you say 'hopefully,' Okoro... what do you mean?" asked a woman in copper-orange robes.

Okoro sighed. "Landon is an excellent tool for our purpose. But as we proceed, he has become... unstable. He seeks our approval. Position. Power. And so long as I can keep his actions aligned to those goals, he is... manageable. But the degree of destruction in Lakewood was... spontaneous."

"Did the job," Degutis murmured.

"I have been surprised to see their church play so well into our hand," the woman in copper-orange said.

"Ah, that was Dmitry's work," Jankauskas said with satisfaction. "Plans upon plans, that one. He's allowed the Order of Some to manip-

ulate the human church so much, and so drastically, that once the humans discovered it, some kind of explosion was inevitable. And the politics between the human Aldermen and the church priests has never been more tense. Fortuitous timing, in some ways, but it's played out exactly as Dmitry predicted. They're doing half our work for us."

"Which does bring up the question of the Order of Some," a woman in light-blue asked.

"How so, Perich?" Jankauskas asked.

"What do we plan to do with them? Especially in their expanded condition? And their Head, this Arcadia girl... I feel that was a mistake."

"I have that well under control," Degutis said. "She's the right person for right now. She believes we can live peacefully, in the open, with the humans, but that doesn't in any way further our goals. She's excellent at recruiting. Once the humans rally themselves and truly restart the Hunts, the Order will have the hands, and magic, needed to quickly put them down. We lost in the past only because of a reluctance to work together, yes? We've all read the histories. Humans could come after us one or two at a time. That isn't the case, now. Evermore itself will be protected by the Thornwaithe's alum, as has always been the case, and we will dispatch the Order to put down any Hunts that do spring up. That can, in fact, be our opening volley against the humans. Let them resist, let them think they have the upper hand, and then we will put them down decisively. When the time comes, the proper leader can be installed to ensure cooperation."

Finley felt sick.

"So we wait for the humans to make their move?" the man in cream asked.

"Certainly not," Jankauskas sniffed. "We've already begun. You've seen the streets here in Evermore—the city is overflowing with refugees. We've closed the city gates, and will take no more. Many of witchkind, and certainly those who enjoyed living in secret amongst the filthy humans, are either miserable here or miserable elsewhere. They've given up their possessions and homes. Their local councils are effectively gone. They're ready to accept our authority during this emergency. Without question. That is the first step."

"There may be, I wonder, a loose thread in all this," Perich said

softly. "The humans who knew about us. The Order was adamant about the threat."

"Ram was adamant," Jankauskas said, rolling her eyes. "Dmitry was somewhat less impressed with them. Still," she acknowledged, "they are not without resources. Keeping records on thin sheets of iron was... ingenuous of them."

"And tells us they know of at least some of our weaknesses," Perich added. "Which is the root of my... inquiry."

Everyone considered that for a moment.

"It is warranted," Jankauskas said at last. "If nothing else, their information on witchkind would be useful to the human church, and if their Hunts became sophisticated, we would indeed face... challenges."

"Do we know where they can be found?" Perich asked.

Jankauskas nodded. "Farreach in the South. At least, a large cohort of them. They operate above a tailor's shop near the middle of the town."

Perich frowned. "Not many of witchkind live there."

Jankauskas shrugged. "A very old superstition that witchkind could not live there. Nothing to it, of course, but it may be why they've chosen it as a base. All to our advantage, if we can sow some confusion about our actual weaknesses."

Perich nodded slowly. "Leave them to me, then."

"Very well. Anything further to discuss?" Heads shook around the table. "Excellent. Then prepare yourselves. We will allow a few more... demonstrations from the boy, and then call an emergency session. An open session, so best behavior, please. There, we will declare the formal emergency, enumerate our emergency powers, and prepare for what will be a very short and very decisive war with the humans."

The heads around the table nodded, and the councilors stood and began filing out.

Finley felt as if he might vomit, and wondered what that would be like in this insubstantial state. Can you hear me? he asked his talent.

Again, there was no reply.

He decided to take a moment to review what was happening outside, in the streets of Evermore. Arcadia would want to know, if anything else—she'd said her family was here.

Finley drifted through the walls of the Private Chambers, his insubstantial form passing like mist through the shimmering opalescent stone. He emerged into the bustling streets of Evermore, but the usually vibrant city had taken on a somber, desperate air.

The sidewalks overflowed with makeshift shelters cobbled together from blankets, tapestries, and whatever scraps of wood could be scavenged. Witchkind of all ages huddled together in these cramped spaces, their meager belongings piled around them. Finley's heart ached at the sight of families who had clearly lost everything, now reduced to seeking shelter in alleyways and doorways.

Despite the overcrowding, the people of witchkind did their best to maintain order and cleanliness. Designated areas had been set aside for waste disposal, and volunteers worked tirelessly to keep the streets as tidy as possible under the circumstances. The sharp, astringent scent of cleansing charms hung in the air, mingling with the musky odor of too many bodies in too small a space.

Finley drifted past a group of children playing a listless game of knucklebones on a scrap of tattered carpet. Their laughter held a brittle edge, and dark circles shadowed their eyes. Even the youngest among them seemed to carry the weight of their people's uncertain future.

Nearby, a line of bedraggled witchkind waited patiently for their turn at a communal cooking fire. A massive cast bronze cauldron bubbled with some kind of thin stew, tended by a careworn woman with silver hair plaited into a crown around her head. She ladled out meager portions into proffered bowls, murmuring words of encouragement and comfort to each recipient. Even with the ability to summon food magically, it had to come from somewhere, and right now there seemed to be nowhere to raid.

As Finley made his way deeper into the city, he couldn't help but notice the pervasive atmosphere of fear and desperation. Witchkind clustered together in small groups, speaking in hushed tones and casting furtive glances over their shoulders. The usual hum of magic that suffused the city had taken on a discordant note, jangling against Finley's senses like an off-key violin.

He paused beside a once-grand fountain, its intricately carved basin now serving as a makeshift washbasin. A young woman with hollow

cheeks and haunted eyes scrubbed at a tattered shirt, her knuckles raw and chapped. Tears streaked her grimy face, leaving trails through the dust and grime.

All this after just a few days, he thought miserably.

Overhead, the sky had taken on a leaden hue, as if even the heavens mourned for the plight of witchkind. A fitful breeze stirred the air, carrying with it the acrid scent of distant smoke. He looked up, and realized that the city's usual shroud of weather-moderating magic was gone. Ridiculous, he scoffed. They're doing that to deliberately keep people on edge and unhappy.

Angry and dejected, he let his concentration drift for a moment, and found himself snapping back into his body.



"So they're the ones directing Landon," Arcadia grumbled. "Good to know, I guess."

"Directing at most," Finley clarified. "Definitely not controlling. The one councilor made it clear that he's becoming more and more difficult to manage."

"Hardly comforting."

"No." Finley paused. "I was gone, what, a candlemark?"

"About that," Arcadia said. "Why—oh, right. Yeah. People started trickling back the past quarter-mark or so."

The sun hung low on the horizon now, casting a warm golden glow across the bustling activity at the Farm. Finley and Arcadia stood side by side, watching as a steady stream of witchkind returned to resume their work on the sprawling structure. The air hummed with a palpable energy, a blend of determination and hope that seemed to buoy the spirits of all those present.

A group of wood workers gathered around a partially completed wall. With a series of intricate gestures and murmured incantations, they coaxed large wooden planks to lift themselves into place, slotting together like pieces of an enormous puzzle. The wood seemed to come alive under their skilled hands and magical influence.

Nearby, a trio of glassworkers, clearly skilled in intricate Earth magic,

stood before a large, arched window frame. Shimmering globes of molten glass floated before them, suspended in midair by invisible threads of magic. With delicate movements, they shaped the malleable orbs, stretching and molding them until they formed intricate panes of stained glass. Vibrant hues of ruby, emerald, and sapphire blended together in an abstract design that seemed to dance and shift with each passing breeze.

As more witchkind arrived, they seamlessly reintegrated into the ongoing work, their unique talents and specialties adding new layers of wonder to the ever-growing structure. Weavers conjured tapestries and rugs of impossible softness and intricacy, their fingers dancing across looms that seemed to operate of their own accord. Stone workers shaped blocks of granite and marble into smooth, gleaming surfaces etched with protective runes and symbols of power.

Throughout it all, soft laughter and gentle conversation flowed freely, the camaraderie among the workers evident in every interaction. The air was filled with the scents of freshly cut wood, hot brass, and the subtle perfume of blooming flowers that had been coaxed from the earth by the green-thumbed among them.

"They act like nothing happened," Finleys observed.

"They're putting a good face on it," Arcadia said. "Most of these people brought their families here, so they're safe, at least. If not as comfortable as they're used to."

"Any of them from Lakewood?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I'm not sure if we had anyone from there working here in the first place, but the last Sending I got from Cian is that they're still helping people evacuate. He's got a small team with him now, and they've been covering people's exits and such. Buildings are still falling. After that fire, anything not reinforced with magic was doomed anyway, and nobody's focused on empowering runes right now."

"Obviously." Then, after a pause, he continued more quietly. "We need a plan."

Arcadia ran a hand through her hair and then sighed. "We do. I just don't know what to do."

"Stop them from replacing you would be a start."

She snorted. "That's not going to happen. Nobody here, nobody in the entire Order, is going to become their army. They might start one of their own, but the Order isn't going to be its foundation." She paused. "But Finley... what's the goal, now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Secrecy is out of the question. I actually agree with whatever councilor said that. If the Veil still exists, then it's damaged beyond repair." She gave him a sharp look. "You should be able to tell."

Finley nodded, closed his eyes and let his consciousness drift, his magical senses reaching out to touch the ancient, elusive magic of the Veil. At first, there was nothing, just a vast emptiness where the comforting presence of the Veil had once resided. But as he pushed further, deeper into the ethereal realms, he began to feel the faintest whispers of its tattered remnants.

It was like brushing against the frayed edges of a once-magnificent tapestry, its intricate weave now unraveled and torn asunder. Where the Veil had once been a shimmering, gossamer curtain separating the world of magic from the mundane, it now hung in shreds, its power diminished to mere wisps and fragments.

Finley's heart ached as he sensed the extent of the damage. The Veil had been a masterpiece of ancient magic, woven from the most delicate threads of power and sustained by the collective will of witchkind for centuries. It had been their shield, their sanctuary, a shroud of secrecy that allowed them to live and thrive unseen by the eyes of the human world.

But now, as Finley's magical senses traced the ragged edges of the once-mighty Veil, he could feel the gaping wounds left by Landon's reckless displays of power. Each tear in the fabric of the Veil was like a scar, a raw and painful reminder of what had been lost. The magic that had once thrummed through its ethereal fibers was now faint and erratic, like the faltering heartbeat of a dying creature.

Tattered strands of the Veil drifted aimlessly in the astral winds, their once-vibrant colors faded to muted shades of gray and silver. Finley reached out with his mind, trying to grasp at the fraying edges, to somehow weave them back together through sheer force of will. But the

magic slipped through his incorporeal fingers like smoke, insubstantial and elusive.

The magnitude of the loss hit Finley like a physical blow. The Veil had been more than just a magical construct; it had been a symbol of their people's unity, a testament to the strength and ingenuity of witchkind. And now, it lay in tatters, its once-magnificent presence reduced to mere shreds and echoes.

Finley withdrew his senses, his heart heavy with the knowledge of what had been lost. As he opened his eyes, the golden light of the setting sun seemed dimmer, as if even the natural world mourned the loss as well. "It's gone," he said with a long sigh. "Or all but."

"So secrecy isn't an option. Becoming the Taryba's private army, not an option."

"Stopping Landon?" Finley asked.

Arcadia's jaw clenched. "I feel we owe it to humanity to do that much, at least."

"Stopping the Hunts?"

She shook her head sadly. "Not if the Taryba wants them to happen. It's more work for us to defuse one than it is for them to get one going again. And if the human church is using this as a political opportunity, we'd be fighting it on two fronts. I just don't see it working."

Finley tried to summon an argument, but he couldn't. "Yeah. That sounds about right."

"Which leaves living in our own cities, or coexisting with the humans. Openly."

"I... It can't be one or the other of those. I think it has to be both."

"You agree with that councilor?"

"I do," Finley admitted. "I hate it, but I do."

"You think they'll find us regardless."

"Of course they will. The world is big, but it isn't infinite, and they outnumber us by a huge margin. Even if we build our own cities, even if we cover them with magic and glamours, we're too easy to find. It's too easy to run their iron roadway until they run into—or even nearby—one of our cities. If we can't have peace with them, open peace, then having our own places won't work."

"Yeah."

They watched the workers finish up their work for the evening and begin heading through the orchard to where their families had set up camps. Arcadia wandered over to one of the newly finished exterior walls, and ran one hand softly down the newly installed siding. "You know..." she mused.

"What?"

"We're at a junction, aren't we? A tipping point."

Finley frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"We're at the end of one story. Our secrecy is gone, fine. The humans haven't yet discovered that most of their civilization can't exist without us. At least, not as it is right now. They'll have to start over, build from scratch."

"Okay."

She turned back to him, her expression firm and her eyes alight. "But the Hunts haven't started yet. And we happen to have documents of every human innovation and invention we've ever suppressed."

Finley's eyes widened. "You're saying..."

"I'm saying now's the time. Humans know we exist, but they don't know they need us yet. They don't all hate all of us. Not yet. We've got a lot we can bring to them. A lot we can do for them, if we can convince them to let us."

"Arcadia..."

I see where she's going. She's not wrong, his talent whispered.

Oh, you're back?

I never left, it replied with a mental shrug. You did.

"I'm saying," Arcadia finished, excitement rising in her voice, "why don't we help them rebuild Lakewood?"

Finley's jaw dropped.

"It's the perfect time."

"You're not wrong, I guess," he said, thinking it through. "But... there's a loose thread. What that councilor said."

"The human cabal, you mean."

"Yes. We could be working with them. Should be. Let's help rebuild the right way. Give them their inventions back. Give them structures that stand on their own, without magic. Show them we can be partners, but that we won't make them depend on us."

"The Taryba isn't going to go for it," Finley warned.

"I have a feeling," Arcadia said slowly, "that there's going to be more than two sides in this fight."

"Yeah."

"Do you think you can find them? The cabal?"

"Probably. The councilor was pretty specific about where they are. At least one branch."

"Then go. First thing in the morning. Do that."

"Arcadia, they're hardly going to trust me."

"You don't know. We bought into their compromise. We've left them some things, you and I."

"Yeah, but maybe we shouldn't trust them," he countered. "They didn't stick with that compromise."

"They might have more reason to, now. Explain the Taryba. Tell them about Landon—they know about him already. Explain the Hunts. The church. The whole thing."

He nodded slowly. "I can try."

Arcadia grinned. "You and your talent. If anyone can make this happen, it's the three of us."

"I'm going to go back to sleep."

"Me too. See you in the morning."

"I'm going... to the camps."

Arcadia paused for a moment, and then nodded agreement. "We both should."

They walked slowly through the orchard, and came upon the field of witchkind camps.

As Finley and Arcadia approached the sprawling field of witchkind camps, a soft, ethereal glow illuminated the night. Hundreds of small, individual campsites dotted the landscape, each one a testament to the resilience and adaptability of their people in the face of adversity. The air hummed with the gentle murmur of voices, punctuated by the occasional flicker of witchlight dancing between the shelters.

Earth-affinity witchkind had risen to the challenge, using their innate connection to the land to create temporary dwellings that blended seamlessly with the natural surroundings. Smooth, curved walls of stone emerged from the ground, their surfaces adorned with

intricate patterns and protective runes that glimmered softly in the moonlight. These small, domed structures provided a sense of security and comfort, their interiors warm and inviting despite the uncertain times.

In other parts of the field, those with a love of flora had coaxed the very trees to grow and bend to their will, forming living canopies that sheltered entire families. The branches intertwined overhead, creating a dense network of leaves and vines that filtered the starlight into a soothing, emerald-tinged glow. Delicate flowers bloomed along the edges of these organic sanctuaries, their soft petals releasing a gentle fragrance that mingled with the scent of earth and moss.

Witchlights, conjured by seemingly everyone who could manage, drifted lazily between the camps, casting a warm, comforting radiance across the field. The spheres of light bobbed and weaved, their hues shifting from pale gold to soothing lavender, as if reflecting the emotions of those who had summoned them. The witchlight seemed to possess a calming presence, its gentle illumination a reminder that even in the darkest of times, hope could still be found.

At the heart of the encampment, Flame-affinity witchkind tended to the communal cooking fires, their faces aglow with the flickering orange light. They moved with practiced ease, their hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as they coaxed the flames to dance and leap, ensuring that each fire burned steadily and efficiently. The scent of simmering stews and freshly baked bread wafted through the night air, a comforting reminder of the simple pleasures that could still be enjoyed amidst the chaos.

Despite the somber atmosphere that hung over the camps, there was an undercurrent of determined optimism, a quiet resilience that seemed to emanate from every witchkind present. Families gathered around their small fires, huddled together for warmth and comfort as they shared stories and words of encouragement. Parents held their children close, whispering reassurances and tales of brighter days to come, their voices soft and soothing against the backdrop of the night.

"This is quite the workforce if we're to rebuild Lakewood," Finley said softly as he and Arcadia found an empty section of land. A thread

of his Earth magic summoned a half-dome of stone from the ground, easily the least taxing magic he'd dealt with in a fortnight.

"And I'm betting they'll be happy to do it."

"Even after generations of secrecy?"

"No more lies, Finley," Arcadia said quietly as her Sky magic blew in a bed of soft leaves and grasses. "The truth is what will save us, now. The truth of all of us."

The two moons overhead beamed down their gentle light in silent approval.

CHAPTER 7

A Change in Perspective

Nordon saw his humble village engulfed in chaos and destruction. Flames licked at the thatched roofs, casting an eerie orange glow against the night sky. The air was thick with smoke, stinging his nostrils and choking his lungs.

Amidst the inferno, dark figures moved with unnatural grace and speed. The witches had descended upon the village like a plague, their howls and cackles echoing through the narrow streets. Their eyes glowed an otherworldly green, pulsing with malevolent power. With a mere flick of their fingers, they unleashed torrents of unnaturally colored fire and lightning, reducing homes to smoldering rubble.

Villagers ran in all directions, their screams of terror piercing the night. Some were struck down by the witches' dark magic, their bodies contorting in agony before crumpling to the ground. Others tried to flee, only to be ensnared by tendrils of inky darkness that dragged them into the shadows, never to be seen again.

Nordon stood frozen, his feet rooted to the spot. He wanted to run, to fight, to do something—anything—but his body refused to obey. His mouth opened in a silent scream, his voice stolen by the suffocating fear that gripped his heart. He watched helplessly as his neighbors, the people he had grown up with, were slaughtered without mercy, as the village itself was smashed and burned to the ground.

The witches moved through the village like a swarm of locusts, leaving only devastation in their wake. They tore through homes, shattering windows and splintering doors with their dark magic. The air crackled with energy, the stench of brimstone and decay heavy on the wind.

Nordon's eyes darted frantically, searching for any sign of a survivor, of someone he knew, but he knew deep down that he was now alone. As the flames grew higher and the screams grew fainter, Nordon felt a crushing sense of helplessness wash over him.

The lead witch, a slim man with skin as pale as bone and eyes that burned with malice, turned his gaze upon Nordon. A cruel smile twisted his thin lips as he raised a delicate-looking hand, dark energy swirling around his fingers. Nordon braced himself for the inevitable, his heart pounding in his chest as the witch's power surged towards him.



With a gasp, Nordon jolted awake, his body drenched in cold sweat. He sat up, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. The nightmare had felt so real, the horrors still fresh in his mind. He looked around his small, empty room, the silence broken only by his own ragged breaths.

Witches.

The rest of the world was only now realizing that they were real. That magic was real. But Nordon had known for years—indeed, for most of his life. He and a small group of humans had been fighting the witches, fighting to preserve human innovation and invention. They'd made so much progress—realizing that witches couldn't change or erase information engraved into iron sheets, for example, had been a game-changer. Realizing that the witches had subverted the church itself, and moving their efforts at innovation to small settlements that didn't have a church. Baiting them with inventions that should have been innocuous, should have been left alone—all to see how they'd respond. Finally inventing a strong iron alloy, plieno, that didn't threaten the witches or their magic at all. Offering that as a compromise to put the witches' innovation-killing cult off their guard.

Everything had been going... if not well, then at least to plan. The locations of the remaining iron mines had been protected, and so many people had sacrificed their freedom, their families, and everything to help humanity gain its independence.

And now it seemed the witches had given up all pretenses of secrecy.

Soloton, the entire fishing fleet sunk in under a candlemark. Pease, the herds of cattle and sheep scattered and killed. Nek—far too close to Farreach in the South for comfort—attacked by malignant creatures.

Lakewood. The worst attack yet, with a quarter of the village probably still smoldering and untold hundreds probably dead and dying.

The riders had only arrived last night with the dire news, which is probably what had started the nightmare. He couldn't fully imagine the destruction, the death, even with the riders' gruesome accounts.

But Nordon had seen Nek for himself.

Nordon's mind drifted back to that fateful night in Nek, the memories as vivid as if they had just happened.



He had met with Jaron, a fellow member of their secret organization, to arrange the transfer of crucial iron-engraved documents. The documents contained the schematics for a new invention—a device that harnessed the power of steam to automate certain tasks. It was a breakthrough that could revolutionize everything, but they knew the witches would stop at nothing to destroy it. It was to be their fourth attempt at a steam engine of some kind or another.

After finalizing the plans, Jaron had insisted Nordon stay the night, citing the late hour and the dangers of traveling alone. Reluctantly, Nordon agreed, and the two found themselves in a cozy pub, nursing mugs of ale and quietly discussing their hopes for the future. The pub was warm and inviting, with the soft glow of candlelight illuminating the rough-hewn wooden tables and benches. The air was filled with the rich aroma of roasted meat and freshly baked bread, mingling with the sweet scent of pipe smoke.

As the night wore on, the pub grew more crowded, with villagers

seeking refuge from the cold and the darkness outside. Laughter and chatter filled the air, and for a moment, Nordon allowed himself to relax, to forget the constant threat of the witches and their insidious magic. He and Jaron swapped stories and jokes, their voices rising and falling with the ebb and flow of the crowd.

But then, without warning, the door to the pub burst open, and a wave of icy wind swept through the room, extinguishing the candles and plunging everything into darkness. Screams of terror filled the air as an enormous, shadowy creature lumbered into the pub, its eyes glowing a sickly green.

It was a demon.

Chaos erupted as patrons scrambled to escape, knocking over tables and chairs in their haste. The demon lashed out with razor-sharp claws, tearing through flesh and bone with ease. Blood splattered the walls and floor, and the stench of death filled the air.

Nordon and Jaron leapt to their feet, drawing their iron daggers —the only weapons that could disrupt the magic and, hopefully, harm the demon. They charged forward, dodging the creature's attacks and striking at its thick hide. But the demon was too powerful, too fast. With a single swipe of its massive paw, it sent Jaron flying across the room, his body slamming into the stone wall with a sickening crunch.

Nordon let out a cry of anguish, but he had no time to mourn. The demon turned its attention to him, its maw dripping with saliva and gore. Nordon backed away, his heart pounding in his chest, his mind racing to find a way to escape. And then he saw it, out the pub's ruined door: the door to the village gaol, with its sturdy iron-barred cells.

He ran.

The demon was preoccupied, continuing to slash and tear at already-dead bodies, and it took it a moment to catch Nordon's dash for safety, but Nordon could hear its claws scrabbling against the cobblestones as it pursued him.

Nordon burst out of the pub into the night, his lungs burning as he gasped for air. The village was in utter chaos, a nightmarish scene that defied comprehension. Everywhere he looked, he saw destruction and death. The once-peaceful streets were now a hellish landscape, bathed in

an eerie, pulsating green light that emanated from the writhing mist that blanketed the ground.

Inhuman shrieks and howls filled the air, mingling with the desperate screams of the villagers as they tried to flee the horrors that now stalked them. Shadowy figures darted through the mist, their forms twisted and grotesque. Some were vaguely humanoid, with elongated limbs and distorted features, while others were little more than amorphous blobs of darkness, pulsing with malevolent energy.

A building to Nordon's left exploded in a gout of green flame, the force of the blast knocking him off his feet. He scrambled to his hands and knees, his ears ringing and his vision blurred. Through the haze, he saw a group of villagers running towards him, their faces contorted in terror. But before they could reach him, a massive, tentacled creature burst from the ground in front of them, its maw lined with rows of jagged teeth. It snatched up the villagers with lightning speed, their screams cut short as it dragged them into the earth.

Nordon staggered to his feet, his heart pounding in his chest. He knew he had to keep moving, had to reach the gaol before the demon caught up to him. He ran down the street, dodging the debris and bodies that littered the ground. The air was thick with the stench of blood and smoke, and the heat from the burning buildings was almost unbearable.

As he ran, he caught glimpses of other horrors in the chaos. A group of children, their eyes glowing the same sickly green as the mist, tore at the flesh of a fallen villager with their bare hands. A pack of grotesque, wolf-like creatures bounded through the streets, their jaws snapping at anything that moved. And in the distance, silhouetted against the burning buildings, Nordon saw a massive, winged shape circling overhead, its piercing cry sending shivers down his spine.

But he couldn't stop, couldn't let himself be overwhelmed by the madness that had engulfed the village. He focused on the gaol, on the promise of safety that its iron bars offered. His lungs burned and his legs ached, but he pushed himself onwards, driven by desperation and the primal need to survive.

Behind him, he heard the heavy footfalls of the demon, its growls growing louder with each passing second. He risked a glance over his

shoulder and saw it bounding towards him, its eyes blazing with malice. It was closing the distance between them, its massive form moving with unnatural speed.

Nordon lunged for the gaol door, his fingers grasping the cold iron handle. With a mighty heave, he wrenched the door open and stumbled inside, slamming it shut behind him just as the demon's claws raked across the metal. The creature howled in frustration, its putrid breath seeping through the cracks.

Panting heavily, Nordon leaned against the door, his mind reeling from the horrors he had just witnessed. Jaron was dead, torn apart by the demon's merciless assault. The schematics, the hope for humanity's future, were lost in the chaos.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing and gather his thoughts. The gaol was dark and dank, the air heavy with the stench of mildew and despair. Rusty iron bars lined the walls, forming small, cramped cells. Nordon could hear the demon prowling outside, its claws scraping against the stone.

Suddenly, a soft whimper caught his attention. Nordon's eyes snapped open, scanning the shadows. There, huddled in the corner of one of the cells, was a young woman. Her dress was tattered and stained, her dark hair matted with grime. She looked up at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"Please," she whispered, her voice hoarse and trembling. "Don't let it take me."

Nordon approached the cell, his heart aching at the sight of the young woman's distress. He knelt down beside her, reaching through the bars to gently touch her shoulder. "It's alright," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I won't let them hurt you. We're safe here, for now."

The woman looked up at him, her dark eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I'm Eira," she said, her voice trembling. "I was just walking past when those... those things attacked. I didn't know where else to go."

Nordon nodded, understanding the terror she must have felt. "I'm Nordon. I came here to escape them too." He glanced around the gaol, taking in the thick iron bars and sturdy stone walls. It was a small comfort, but at least they had some measure of protection here.

Outside, the sounds of destruction and agony continued, the screams of the dying villagers mingling with the unholy shrieks of the demons. Nordon and Eira huddled together in the cell, their hearts pounding in unison as they listened to the carnage unfolding beyond the gaol's walls.

As the night wore on, the two found solace in each other's presence, their whispered conversations a fragile lifeline amidst the horror. Eira told Nordon of her life in the village, of her dreams and aspirations, now shattered by the witches' attack. Nordon, in turn, shared stories of his own struggles, of the sacrifices he and others had made in their fight against the witches' tyranny.

Secrecy seemed less urgent, just then.

They spoke of happier times, of the simple joys of life that now seemed like distant memories. Eira described the beauty of the village in springtime, when the fields were ablaze with wildflowers and the air was sweet with the scent of fresh grass. Nordon reminisced about the laughter and camaraderie he had shared with Jaron and the others in their secret organization, the sense of purpose that had driven them to risk everything for the sake of humanity's future.

As they talked, Nordon found himself drawn to Eira's quiet strength, the way she clung to hope even in the face of overwhelming despair. And Eira, in turn, found comfort in Nordon's steadfast resolve, the unwavering determination that burned in his eyes.

Throughout the long, harrowing night, Nordon remained vigilant, his ears straining for any sound that might indicate another survivor seeking refuge. But as the hours dragged on, no one else came. The gaol remained a lonely bastion, a fragile island of safety amidst a sea of chaos and death.

The two huddled close, sharing their meager warmth as the cold seeped into their bones. Eira's head rested on Nordon's shoulder, her breathing slow and even as exhaustion finally claimed her. Nordon stayed awake until the first light of dawn snuck through the gaol’s barred windows.



Nordon shook himself. Lakewood, on top of Nek... it was too much. If Lakewood was worse than Nek, and from all accounts it was, then the witches had definitely changed their tactics.

And the humans were responding—or trying to. Villages all over the continent were calling for Hunts. But Nordon knew they wouldn't do any good. Not without iron. Not without further understanding how the witches' magic truly worked, and what other weaknesses it might have. Their organization should have been a source of that information, should have been able to help those Hunts be more effective—but the chaos had disrupted their fragile, secretive lines of communication. Nordon didn't even know how many of the organization had survived the partial destruction of Lakewood, where they'd recently moved their leadership.

Which left Nordon and his small team in Farreach in the South as, possibly, humanity's last hope.

There was a knock at the door of his small, one-room dwelling. "Come!"

The door opened a handbreadth, and Eira poked her head in. "I know it's early—"

"I... was awake," Nordon said, grabbing a shirt from the hook by the bed and pulling it down over his head.

"Lakewood," she said miserably, her eyes wetting.

"I know."

"It made me think—"

"I know. Me, too. We should get the others. We need to... take action."

She nodded and turned, closing the door behind her. Nordon pulled the heavy curtains away from the room's single window, letting in the wan, early light of morning. He gazed out the window, taking in the familiar sight of Farreach in the South as it slowly awakened. The small coastal town was bathed in the soft, golden light of the rising sun, the sky a delicate palette of pinks and oranges. The air was crisp and cool, carrying the faint scent of salt from the nearby sea.

Below his window, the narrow cobblestone streets were beginning to fill with life. Shopkeepers emerged from their homes, unlocking doors and setting out their wares. The tailor's shop beneath Nordon's

rented room was already bustling with activity, the thunk of bolts of cloth being unloaded from a wagon drifting up through the floorboards.

Farreach in the South was a picturesque town, its whitewashed buildings with red-tiled roofs clustered along the winding streets. Colorful flowers spilled from window boxes, their delicate petals swaying in the gentle breeze. The town square, visible from Nordon's vantage point, boasted a grand fountain carved from pale marble, its cascading waters glittering in the morning light.

Despite the town's tranquil beauty, an undercurrent of tension hung in the air. The news of the devastating attacks on Nek and Lakewood had spread like wildfire, and the people of Farreach in the South were on edge, waiting for the inevitable strike that seemed to loom on the horizon.

Nordon watched as a group of fishermen made their way towards the docks, their weathered faces etched with worry. They carried their nets and gear, the rhythmic clunking of their boots against the cobblestones echoing through the streets. The docks were a hive of activity, with boats of all sizes bobbing gently in the calm waters of the harbor. Seagulls wheeled overhead, their mournful cries mingling with the shouts of the fishermen as they prepared for another day at sea.

In the distance, beyond the rooftops, Nordon could see the glimmering expanse of the ocean, its surface painted in shades of blue and green. The water sparkled like a thousand diamonds, the sunlight dancing across the gentle waves. The sight was breathtaking, a reminder of the raw beauty and power of nature.

As Nordon's gaze swept across the town, he couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. The people of Farreach in the South were going about their daily lives, but there was a palpable sense of fear in the air. Mothers kept their children close, their eyes darting nervously at every unfamiliar sound. Men gathered in small groups, their voices low and urgent as they discussed the latest news and rumors.

The town's defenses, once merely a formality, had been reinforced in recent days. At the local priest's urging—after a quiet talk with Nordon about witches' likely weaknesses—iron bars had been hastily installed over many windows and doors, and a small militia had been

assembled and was drilling in the square, their movements clumsy but determined.

Nordon knew that these measures alone wouldn't help.

The door to his room swung open and his small, determined band of colleagues filed in, their faces drawn. Apparently nobody had slept well last night.

Last in was an unexpected face.

"Godwin!" Nordon said, a measure of relief filling his voice. "Godwin, you're safe!"

"Aye." Godwin was an older man, beginning to stoop a bit, his dark-skinned head already bald. He looked especially weary. "I made it out on the back of a wagon. We just... ran. Ran until the horses couldn't run anymore, and then we left them and kept running. I'd thought to stop in Nek, but..."

"We know," Nordon said quietly. "I'm glad you're alive. Did... any others...?"

Godwin shook his head and lowered himself carefully to Nordon's lone chair as Eira closed the door. "I don't know. All our means of communication are... broken. I might be the last of the leadership."

The group took the possibility well, Nordon thought. Around the room, jaws tightened and hands clenched, backs straightened and eyes narrowed. "At least you made it," he said softly. "We've been working on... possibilities."

Godwin sighed. "All we have now is information." Then his eyes widened slightly. "Please, tell me you still have—"

"I do," Nordon said firmly. "My visit to Nek was only to arrange for their transfer—I didn't have them with me. They're all here. Safe." He nodded to an iron-bound wooden chest in one corner of the room. "Here, and elsewhere in the town. With people I trust."

"They mean to rule us, I think," Godwin said wearily.

"We planned for that," one of the other men, Aimery, said.

Godwin snorted. "We had ideas for that. But we never thought it would come to it. But... yes. Plans, of a sort." He breathed heavily as he pulled himself back to his feet. "What we have now is information. Weaknesses. Observations. Designs for weapons. One set here, one set

in Farreach in the North. We've had no word from them, and may not for days. So we need to begin sharing that information."

"With who?" another of the group, Everard, asked.

"Priests, to begin with," Godwin said. He rubbed his lower back. "I need rest. And a meal. Can you all start? Obtain some paper, some charcoal? Begin making rubbings?" Everyone nodded. "Nordon, you'll know which ones to focus on. Everard, you know the local priest best, still?"

"Aye."

"Go. Tell him who we are. Tell him what we know. Ask for his help. The rest of you, gather supplies." He frowned. "I wish we could engrave more sheets of iron, but... it seems the witches have abandoned subtlety. And we have no time. Paper will have to do." He looked around the room, nodding at each of them. "Go."

Everyone filed quickly out the door, Godwin bringing up the rear. "The proprietor of the Inn of the Setting Sun is part of our extended network."

Nordon raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know."

"We've been as careful as we can. In case... you were caught. Or one of your team. I'll go see him now. There are some backup communications channels we can try. If nothing else, I'll put a man on a horse. We need to see what we have left to work with."

"I'll start ordering the sheets."

"Good man." Godwin pulled the door closed behind him as he left.

Nordon turned and knelt next to the chest. The lock was hefty and complex, and made entirely of iron, and it took him several minutes to release it. That accomplished, he levered back the heavy lid—lined with iron sheets—and withdrew a heavy stack of thinner, more precisely milled, sheets. These were engraved with tiny, crabbed writing and concise diagrams—part of the organization's library, and their hard-earned trick for keeping the witches from erasing and modifying their painstakingly won knowledge.

Nordon carefully sifted through the stack of iron sheets, his fingers tracing the intricate engravings that covered their surfaces. Each sheet was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, the product of countless hours of painstaking labor by the organization's most skilled and diligent arti-

sans. The engravings were so fine and detailed that they seemed almost magical themselves, as if they contained the very essence of the knowledge they sought to preserve.

One sheet depicted a marvel of engineering—a steam engine, its complex system of pistons, valves, and gears rendered in exquisite detail. Nordon could almost hear the hiss of steam and the clank of metal as he studied the diagram, marveling at the ingenuity of its design. This engine, if built, could power mills, pump water, and even propel vehicles, all without the need for muscle or magic. It was a testament to the boundless potential of human innovation.

Another sheet showcased a printing press, its sturdy frame and intricate letterpress intricately etched into the iron. This device, Nordon knew, could revolutionize the spread of knowledge, making books and pamphlets available to the masses. No longer would learning be the exclusive domain of the wealthy and the privileged. With the printing press, ideas could flow freely, sparking new thoughts and igniting the fires of progress.

As Nordon delved deeper into the stack, he came across the sheets that always sent a chill down his spine. These engravings depicted weapons, each one carefully designed to exploit the weaknesses of the witches and their dark magic. One sheet showed a crossbow, its bolt tipped with cold iron, the bane of all things magical. Another featured a carronade, its barrel measurements carefully detailed. Though untested, these weapons offered a glimmer of hope in the fight against the witches' threat.

A threat they'd never seriously thought would materialize.

Other sheets contained schematics for witch traps and cells, each one crafted to neutralize and contain the witches' power. One design showed a cage of iron bars, its floor etched with a complex array of sigils and wards. Another depicted a pit, its walls lined with salt and silver, substances known to weaken and bind magical entities. These designs were born of desperation, the last resort of a people pushed to the brink by the witches' cruelty.

Among the technical engravings, Nordon found sheets that told a different story—the history of the organization itself. These sheets were filled with tiny, meticulously engraved text, each letter no larger than a

grain of sand. The words spoke of the organization's founding, of the brave men and women who had first dared to defy the witches and their oppression of humans. They told of the trials and tribulations the organization had faced, of the sacrifices its members had made in the name of freedom and progress.

"Don't be afraid."

Nordon stood and whirled in a single movement, the thin iron sheets falling back into the chest. He hadn't even heard his door open, but here stood an average-looking young man. Medium-brown skin, piercing green eyes, and a red tint to his—

Nordon's heart began hammering in his chest, and his eyes automatically darted to where he'd hung his iron dagger—across the room, next to his bed.

The man followed his gaze. "Please don't. I'm not here to hurt you. The opposite, actually. I want to help. My name is—"

"Fin," Nordon said, his voice rough with fear.

The man tilted his head a bit. "Finley, actually. Nobody calls me Fin. But yes. You know me?"

"I know of you. We all do. How did you find me?"

Finley shrugged. "We know things as well."

"Why are you attacking us? After all this time, all these—"

"That's not us," Finley growled. "Far from it. There's... it's complicated." He sighed and glanced out the window. "Do you have time to talk?"

"Half a mark. Maybe less."

"Hmm. I'll do my best. The short version. We have a government, led by a... Grand Council. We call it the Taryba. It was... subverted, I guess you could say. One of our clans, a family... they're hungry for power. They came up with the notion of witchkind ruling humans. They were the ones... directing us. Me, I mean, and my colleagues. Our... Order." Nordon thought Finley looked distinctly uncomfortable, and realized he would probably feel the same way, if he was explaining his secret organization to...

To the enemy.

"We were suppressing more than we should have," Finley continued. "Some of us weren't. The bread mold—there was no harm in that.

You created that new alloy... we thought we had a compromise. If you could have your inventions without iron, without risk to us... well. A few of us thought it was worth it."

"So what happened?"

"The clan... they're gone, now. There was a fight. We don't all agree that we should rule humans. I don't think very many of us think so, actually. But that clan left contingencies. And they left their... power, I guess you could say. And they, or their allies, control our Council now. As near as we—I—can tell, all the attacks, all the destruction—they're the work of one man, acting under the direction of some of those councilors."

Nordon's eyebrows climbed to his hair. "One?"

Finley's lips twisted. "Yes. And... we're going to try and stop him. But... look, there are two things." He gestured to Nordon's bed, and with a rush of wind, a pile of leather-bound books appeared out of thin air and thumped to the thin straw-filled mattress. "Our notes. Of every human invention or innovation we've seen. Every one we've suppressed, the ones we've let be. They're... resistant," he added, nodding slightly. "They can't be tampered with. Not easily. I saw to that myself." His eyes took on a faraway look for a moment, and then he gave a slight grin. "I had help.

"The second thing. Much as I hate to say this, you're going to need to equip yourselves. You know about... iron. Use that. It can protect you. To a point. Against most things."

"To a point?" Nordon asked, still in awe at the books' appearance.

Finley nodded grimly. "We can't use magic directly against you. And you know iron presents a... challenge to us." He sighed. "It grounds our magic. Cancels it out. But... that wouldn't stop us from creating a sinkhole beneath a building that had been reinforced with iron. We can't act against iron, but we can act around it. We're clever, most of us."

"And dangerous," Nordon ground out.

Finley shook his head firmly. "No. Not dangerous. Not most of us. We've lived alongside you for centuries. You know that. Our magic keeps your buildings upright. Your fishing boats afloat. We're leaving

now, have you noticed? My people are terrified, and they're leaving their homes. Their businesses."

"Are they leaving here, too?"

Finley's lips briefly twitched into a near-grin. "Strangely, witchkind never really settled Farreach in the South. There's something of a superstition amongst us. I don't know why, or where it came from, but there's probably less than half a dozen of us living here."

"See that they leave," Nordon growled.

"I—" Finley started, but then stopped when he saw the cold anger in Nordon's expression. "I will. But you should know something. Our magic fades, over time, if it's not renewed. Your buildings are going to weaken. Your street lights will blow out in the slightest breeze. A hundred, a thousand, little things will start to go wrong and decay. Maybe less so here, but still."

"Because you've kept us from improving."

Finley sighed. "Yes. Mostly. We were afraid... we told ourselves that taking away our magic could be a lever against you. But now... we're dying in these attacks as well. And your priests are rallying for a return of the Hunts." He cocked his head. "You do know what's going on with your church, right?"

"I..." Nordon blinked. "I hadn't thought about it. Of course they're calling for Hunts, you've been—"

"They're seizing a political opportunity. They want power. They want you to turn away from your Alderman, they'll tell you they can't protect you. Which is true enough, I suppose. You'll hand over immense power, put up with immense sacrifices, all in the name of being safe. We do, too," he added wryly. "We're not all that different. Yes, that one man—his name is Landon—is behind the attacks. But your priests make up stories of more, to spread even more fear. To make you turn to them, to hand them power."

Nordon considered that, and then shrugged. "We've designed weapons."

Finley's shoulders slumped a bit at that. "I assumed you had. And you'll give them to the church? Arm the Hunts?"

"We have to protect ourselves."

"I know. And so do we. And my point is that neither of us repre-

sents a danger to the other. If we can stop Landon, the attacks will stop—"

"The Council of yours. They won't find someone else?"

It was Finley's turn to blink a few times as he considered it, and then his shoulders slumped further. "They might."

"Then we protect ourselves."

Finley hesitated, and then nodded slowly. "We'll protect you as well. As best we can. I just ask... most of my people are very ordinary. Like any of you. They just want to live, to have some good moments, to give their children everything they can. Just... think of that. Please."

Nordon said nothing.

"They're playing a canny game, our Council," Finley continued, his tone more urgent now. "Landon attacks you with magic. Your church calls for the Hunt. My people become afraid—and they let our Council have its way. Subjugate the humans, something most of us would never even consider, all in the name of staying safe. Meanwhile, your own church, hungry for political power, plays into it. Makes up stories about magic, blows small things out of proportion, all so you'll let them take charge and protect you. They raise the Hunt... and my people fear for their lives. And so we give our Council the power they want." He shook his head. "And most humans, and most of witchkind, are simply caught in the middle."

Still, Nordon remained silent, but Finley could see he was calculating.

"Keep it in mind."

The human remained silent, and after several moments Finley nodded again. With another rush of wind, he was gone.

Nordon's vision grew black for a heartbeat, and when it returned he found himself sitting on the floor, breathing heavily and sweating through his shirt.

CHAPTER 8

A Defensive Strategy

All right, Nordon," Godwin said, settling himself across the table. "You've been thinking about this. What's the plan?"

Nordon's team of six had joined him at the Inn of the Setting Sun. The proprietor had provided them with a private room near the kitchen for their discussions. "The priest has a dozen people making rubbings of the most important things. He says two of the blacksmiths in town can make more of the thin iron sheets, and he's got a couple of people with steady hands who can engrave them. He'll focus on the paper rubbings first, and then start making iron copies."

"What of the books?" Godwin asked. Nordon had told everyone about Finley's visit, and brought a couple of the leather-bound books to the inn.

He tapped one. "They're real. I mean, it's everything, like he said. I'll spread them around, like I did with the iron sheets, and we'll keep them in iron-lined chests. We'll make copies... well, when there's time."

"Copies of things won't protect us," Amabel pointed out. Her blue eyes were flashing with anger and eagerness. "We need actual weapons."

"The copies will protect others," Nordon countered. "It's easier and faster to spread those around than to try and make those weapons ourselves. And all four of the town's smithies already have copies of the

most critical things, the things we'll need first, and they've promised to keep their forges running 'round the clock."

"Let me ask you something," Aimery said slowly. "What makes us think the witches won't find out? They're all around us, aren't they?"

"He—Finley—said they've been leaving our towns and villages. And that there were only ever a handful here in the first place. And he said he'd tell them to leave."

"And they'll just obey him?"

Nordon shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea. We'll assume not, and act accordingly." He nodded to the walls of their private dining room, where the proprietor had hastily nailed iron horseshoes all over. "Iron is their weakness. And... he said they can't use magic directly against us."

Everyone took a moment to process that, their expressions showing varying degrees of surprise and calculation. "That makes sense," Godwin said slowly. "We've never had any reports of magic being used directly against us. Not to modify our memories, which we always assumed they could, and would, do."

"Those demons in Nek—" Eira began.

"Were some kind of physical creature," Nordon said, shaking his head. "He was clear that they can work around the limitation. An iron building can fall into a sinkhole, he said. Basically. He said they're clever. We need to be just as clever."

"So what's next?" Godwin asked.

"Traps," Nordon said firmly. "And a lure, once the traps are set. Iron chain mail. Pits with iron bars, we know that's worked in the past." He gave Godwin a grim smile. "We haven't been idle down here, this last moon or two. We have some things manufactured already. More of the crossbows with iron bolts. We've gone back and lined them with iron rods as well, after the incident with the carronade. We have piles of chain mail ready, hundreds of iron bars. They're all buried—Aimery, Everard, you two know where we've hidden them. When we're done here, grab some people and start digging them up." The two men nodded agreement.

"Why traps?" Eira asked.

"Because we need more information," Nordon said. "We need to know more about their weaknesses, more about what they're thinking."

"Hostages," Blazh said. He was the quietest of Nordon's team, but also the cleverest.

Eira's eyes widened, but Godwin nodded. "Exactly. Ones we can, hopefully, distribute to other villages. If they attack us, they attack their own."

Nordon's stomach knotted itself. "Finley—he said the attacks were from one man. That they—the witches—had been attacked as well. Hostages... may not work that way."

Godwin considered that. "Possibly. But we will try it nonetheless."

Nordon nodded slowly, but his stomach didn't unclench. Something was bothering him about this. Yes, they need to protect themselves. To do that, they needed more information. But wouldn't hostages just rile the rest of the witches? If the attacks really were from one man, wouldn't hostages make the others more sympathetic to him?

"...immediately," Godwin finished.

Nordon realized he'd missed whatever the man said. "I'm sorry. Just trying to put it all in order. What did you say?"

"He said we start laying the traps now," Blazh said, standing. "I've a gang of boys who'll be eager to help dig."



Blazh led a crew of strapping lads, ranging from gangly fifteen-year-olds to brawny young men on the cusp of twenty, into the heart of the village. They marched with purpose, shovels and pickaxes slung over their shoulders, determination etched on their faces. The sun beat down on the packed earth of the town square, which stretched before the stone edifice of the church.

Blazh halted his crew in the center of the square and pointed to a spot just a dozen paces from the church's arched wooden doors. "There," he declared. "We dig the pit there. Deep and wide."

The boys exchanged glances, some eager, some apprehensive, but all resolute. They knew the stakes, the threat that loomed over their homes

and families. Without a word, they set to work, driving shovels and picks into the hard-packed ground.

Blazh worked alongside them, his lean muscles flexing as he hefted loads of earth. Sweat ran in rivulets down his dust-streaked face, but he never slackened his relentless pace. Steadily, the hole grew, deepening and widening with each passing hour.

As the sun reached its zenith, they paused to gauge their progress. The pit yawned before them, a gaping wound in the earth over eight feet deep and twelve feet across. Blazh nodded with grim satisfaction.

"Joren, Kai—fetch the iron bars from the forge," he instructed. The two older teens sprinted off without hesitation.

While he waited, Blazh turned his mind to the next critical step - the lure. They needed to draw their quarry to this specific spot. His gaze fell upon the church doors, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"Lads, gather round," he called. "Listen close. Here's the plan..."

Joren and Kai soon returned, joined by a few blacksmiths. They bore dozens of iron bars, each over an inch thick and six feet long. With great care, they lowered the bars into the pit, fitting them upright against the earthen walls.

The boys watched in rapt attention as Blazh directed the placement of each bar, creating an impenetrable iron cage. The metal gleamed dully in the waning sunlight, a promise of protection and a portent of violence.

As the last bar slotted into place, Blazh climbed from the pit and surveyed their handiwork. The pit sat like a hidden maw, waiting to snap shut on any hapless victim who stumbled into its depths. Iron bars jutted up from the floor of the pit, ready to immobilize their prey.

Blazh turned to his crew, pride shining in his eyes. "Well done, lads. You've done your part. Now, let's see about baiting the trap."

He turned and strode into the church.



As the sun rose from the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, Nordon strode purposefully towards the smithy at the edge

of town. The clang of hammer on anvil rang out, a cacophony of determined industry that swelled with each step he took.

He ducked through the low doorway, blinking as his eyes adjusted from the bright morning light to the dimness within. The air hung heavy with the acrid scent of smoke and hot metal. Sweat already beaded on his brow from the sweltering heat of the forge.

"Rendel!" Nordon called out over the ringing impacts. "A word, if you please."

The brawny smith looked up from his work, his face ruddy and glistening. He set his hammer down and wiped his hands on his leather apron as he approached. "Nordon, good morn. What news?"

Nordon clasped the man's forearm in a firm warrior's grip. "I wished to discuss the progress on our new armaments. Time grows short, my friend."

Rendel nodded gravely. "Aye, and we're working as fast as the metal allows. Come, see for yourself."

He led Nordon deeper into the smithy, past the main forge where apprentices pumped the bellows and worked the coals. Against the far wall, a line of newly forged weapons gleamed in the ruddy light. Crossbows of various sizes lay alongside piles of iron-tipped quarrels, each one viciously barbed for maximum damage. Iron bars and rods were stacked neatly, ready to reinforce doors, windows, and other vulnerabilities.

But it was the massive arbalests that drew Nordon's eye—great, mounted crossbows taller than a man, their steel arms as thick as a sapling's trunk. Windlasses and pulley systems allowed them to be drawn with tremendous force, unleashing iron bolts as long as a man's arm with devastating power.

"We've built a dozen of the siege arbalests so far," Rendel said, running a callused hand along one's stock. "Those plans of yours were perfect. These can punch clean through metal plate at two hundred paces. We'll have them mounted on rooftops and walls throughout the town."

Nordon felt a grim smile tug at his mouth. "Excellent. And their frames are iron-reinforced?"

"Every inch," Rendel confirmed. "Wrapped in bands of cold-forged

iron, tempered and quenched for maximum strength. Even if they try their magic on them, they'll hold true."

"What of the other projects I mentioned?" Nordon asked.

Rendel beckoned him to a workbench strewn with intricate mechanisms of gears and springs. "We've made good progress on the traps and snares you described. Iron-jawed bear traps that could hobble a horse."

Nordon picked up one of the wicked-looking traps, marveling at the craftsmanship. The jaws, each inlaid with jagged iron teeth, gleamed with deadly promise. He could imagine them snapping shut on a witch's leg with bone-crushing force.

"And these," Rendel said, gesturing to a rack of what appeared to be oversized manacles. Each cuff was lined with dull spikes, poised to pierce flesh. "Shackles, like you asked for. But with a nasty surprise built in."

Nordon hefted a pair, noting their weight and brutal design. "For the hostages," he said softly. "To bind their magic."

Rendel grunted. "If you can get close enough to slap them on. Blazh is working on that part now with his pit trap in the square."

"What about the rest of the townsfolk? Are they outfitted?"

"Near enough," Rendel replied. "Every man and boy old enough to hold a weapon has an iron-tipped spear or crossbow, or will have by the week's end. The women have iron daggers and chain shirts. We've handed out those holy symbols the priest made too, for whatever good they'll do."

Nordon nodded, feeling a faint stirring of hope kindling in his chest, even while Finley's allegations about the church seizing power murmured in his mind. Perhaps they stood a chance after all. With these weapons, these defenses, perhaps Farreach in the South, at least, could weather the coming storm.

"You've done well, Rendel," he said, clasping the smith's shoulder. "Better than I could have hoped. Keep at it - we'll need every blade and bolt you can forge."



Eira and Amabel moved with purpose through the winding streets of Farreach, their keen eyes scanning every edifice and structure for the telltale signs of witchcraft. The morning sun beat down upon them, casting sharp shadows that seemed to writhe and dance with each step they took.

They made an striking pair, these two young women—Eira tall and athletic, with the bearing of a born warrior, Amabel petite and lithe, her movements quick and precise. Both wore expressions of grim determination as they searched, iron spikes and hammers clutched tightly in their hands.

As they neared the town center, Eira paused before a squat stone building, its facade weathered and pitted with age. The wooden sign above the door proclaimed it to be "Elden's Sundries and Dry Goods." She frowned, her eyes narrowing as she studied the rough-hewn blocks of granite.

"There," she said, pointing to a spot just above the lintel. "Do you see it?"

Amabel stepped closer, her gaze following Eira's gesture. At first, she saw nothing out of the ordinary, just the play of light and shadow on the pitted stone. But then, as she tilted her head just so, a pattern seemed to emerge—a complex knot of lines and curves, etched into the rock with painstaking precision.

"A rune," Amabel breathed, her voice tinged with both awe and revulsion. "Hidden in plain sight. It's just as Nordon said."

Eira nodded grimly. "And carved with magic, no doubt. The stone shows no tool marks." She hefted her hammer, feeling its reassuring weight in her palm. "Well, there's nothing for it. We'll have to break it."

Together, they approached the rune, Amabel holding the iron spike steady as Eira raised her hammer high. With a mighty swing, she brought it down upon the spike's head, driving the metal straight into the heart of the arcane symbol.

The moment the iron pierced the stone, a blinding flash of sickly green light erupted from the rune, sending both women staggering back. A high, keening wail filled the air, like the death-cry of some unseen creature. The very stones of the building seemed to shudder and groan, as if in pain.

Cracks raced out from the ruined rune, zigzagging across the facade like bolts of jagged lightning. Mortar crumbled and stones shifted, the entire structure letting out an ominous creak. For a moment, it seemed the building might collapse in on itself entirely.

But then, as quickly as it had begun, the maelstrom subsided. The eldritch light faded, the wailing cry dwindled to silence, and the building settled once more, its facade now marred by a spider's web of cracks radiating out from the destroyed rune.

Amabel and Eira exchanged a wide-eyed glance, their hearts pounding in the sudden stillness. "Well," Eira said, her voice a bit unsteady. "I suppose that's one way to break magic."

Amabel nodded mutely, her gaze still fixed on the ruined stone.

They moved on, their steps perhaps a bit more hurried than before. As they walked, they scanned the buildings around them with new wariness, seeing shadows of witchcraft in every carved lintel and etched cornerstone. How many more hidden runes lurked in the heart of Farreach? How deep did the rot of magic go?

"The stables," Amabel said suddenly, pointing to a long, low structure just ahead. "We should check there next."

Eira grimaced at the thought. "Right."

They approached the stables cautiously, hammers at the ready. The earthy scent of hay and horses filled their nostrils, undercut by a faint, acrid tang that set their teeth on edge. The horses shifted restlessly in their stalls, eyes rolling and ears flicking.

Amabel moved down the central aisle, running her hand along the rough-hewn beams. Her fingers caught on a knot in the wood, and she paused, frowning. The knot seemed to twist and writhe under her touch, its whorls forming an all-too-familiar pattern.

"Here," she called softly to Eira. "Another one."

Eira joined her, iron spike in hand. Together, they drove the metal deep into the rune-carved wood. This time, there was no dramatic flash of light, no keening wail. But as the iron pierced the curse-knot, the horses suddenly quieted, their agitation fading like mist beneath the rising sun.

"Two down," Eira murmured. "Saints only know how many to go."

They continued their grim work, moving from building to build-

ing, ferreting out the hidden marks of witchcraft wherever they found them. By midday, their arms ached from swinging hammers and their eyes burned from scouring stone and wood. But a fierce satisfaction burned in their hearts as well. With each destroyed rune, each broken curse, they felt Farreach's chains of bewitchment loosening.

"This feels... good," Eira said as they stopped for a mug of cool small beer. "After Nek."

"Like you have some control again?"

"Exactly."

"Agreed." Amabel drained her mug. "Come. We've got half the town yet to cover."



Aimery and Isabella stood atop the bell tower of the town's church, the highest vantage in all of Farreach. The sun beat down upon them, making the iron chain mail they handled warm to the touch, but they worked with grim determination, sweat beading their brows.

Before them, a complex apparatus of pulleys, winches, and taut ropes spread across the tower's flat roof. At its heart sat a massive arbalest, its iron alloy arms gleaming in the harsh light. The weapon was a marvel of engineering, designed to propel a payload far heavier than any normal bolt or quarrel.

"Careful now," Aimery grunted as they maneuvered a folded sheet of chain mail into place at the arbalest's business end. The rough iron links rasped and clinked, seeming to writhe with a life of their own as they settled into the launching cup. "We'll only get one shot with each of these. It has to be perfect."

Isabella nodded, her face set with concentration as she adjusted the tension on the winch. Her chestnut hair, bound back in a practical braid, glinted with strands of copper in the sunlight. "The trajectory has to be just right," she murmured, sighting along the arbalest's stock. "Too high and it'll overshoot. Too low and it won't unfurl properly."

They had spent the morning preparing these unorthodox projectiles, and the smiths had worked their forges continuously for a fortnight to craft sheets of iron mail light enough to fly true, yet heavy

enough to bind a target on impact. Each sheet was cunningly folded, designed to unfurl in mid-flight and spread its metal web wide.

Aimery double-checked the moorings of the guide ropes, ensuring each was securely fastened to the mail's corners. When launched, these ropes would trail behind the projectile like the strings of a puppet, allowing them to steer the descending mail and cinch it tight around their victim.

"I think that's got it," he said, stepping back and wiping his brow. "Let's run the line and check the other launchers."

They moved to the tower's edge, where a thin rope bridge connected to the roof of the town hall across the way. More guide ropes ran from the arbalest to a series of pulleys and eyelets anchored along the bridge's length, allowing them to control the mail's flight from a distance.

As they carefully navigated the swaying bridge, the bustle of preparations in the streets below caught their eye. Townsfolk moved with purpose, ferrying bundles of crossbow bolts and iron stakes, their faces grim and determined. In the square, Blazh's crew labored over the massive pit trap, their shovels rising and falling in steady rhythm.

"It's really happening, isn't it?" Isabella murmured, pausing to gaze down at the ordered chaos. "We're going to war."

“It’s coming to us,” Aimery countered grimly.



Everard crossed his arms in the hushed sanctuary of the church. Shafts of multicolored light streamed through the stained glass windows, painting the worn wooden pews in a kaleidoscope of hues. The faces of the three robed figures in front of him—the town's priests—were lined with worry and grim determination.

Blazh walked in quickly, his footsteps echoing.

"Father Anselm, Father Doran, Father Joaquin," Everard introduced the men, "Blazh here dug the pit out front. Now we just need to bait it."

Father Anselm, the eldest of the three, nodded gravely. His wizened face was a map of creases, his white hair thin and wispy about his tonsured pate. "We discussed. We’ve had a few... ideas."

"As do I," Everard continued. "Blazh's crew have done a remarkable job constructing the thing, but we need a way to ensure our quarry finds their way into it, should the need arise."

Father Doran, a stout man with ruddy cheeks and keen blue eyes, stroked his grizzled beard thoughtfully. "So a lure, then. Something to draw the witch to the precise spot. Rather than... coercing them?"

Everard nodded. "Or both. We were hoping you might have some ideas on that front. The church is a central gathering place, after all. If we could stage some kind of event, or ritual perhaps..."

Father Joaquin, the youngest of the priests, spoke up, his voice rich and melodious. "A pageant, maybe? Some kind of grand spectacle to capture attention?" His dark eyes glinted with a spark of inspiration.

Everard considered this, his brow furrowed. "That could work. If we could somehow maneuver the witch into position as part of a... performance..."

"It would have to be something significant," Father Anselm mused. "A banishing ceremony, perhaps? Would the witch be arrogant enough to stand come before us?"

Blazh, who had been listening quietly, suddenly straightened. "What about a trial?" he suggested, his voice low and intense. "A mock trial, with someone playing the role of a condemned witch. We could stage it right over the trap, make a big show of the sentencing and the execution."

A heavy silence fell as they all contemplated the grim prospect. It was Father Doran who finally spoke, his tone measured and grave. "It's a dangerous gambit. If our ruse is too convincing, we risk drawing not just one witch, but many. And if they suspect a trap..."

"We'll need contingencies," Everard said.

Father Anselm stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps we could bury iron chains in the dirt of the square," he suggested. "Concealed, like a spider's web. If the witch attempts to flee, we could raise them, herd our quarry toward the pit."

Father Joaquin nodded eagerly. "Yes, and we could station men with crossbows in the bell tower, armed with those new iron-tipped bolts from the forge. A hail of those would drive even the most powerful

witch to seek cover. That, with the chain mail your people have been preparing..."

"The mock trial itself could be our most potent weapon," Father Doran mused. "If we craft our pageantry with care, weave in the holy words and symbols we've uncovered... it may weaken the witch, make them more vulnerable to our devices."

Blazh rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

Everard felt a grim smile tug at his lips. "Hiding our snares in plain sight. I like it."

Father Anslem leaned forward intently. "We'll need to choose our players with care. The one who acts the condemned witch, they'll be right over the trap. One step too far..."

"I'll do it," Father Joaquin declared, his youthful features hardening with resolve. "I'm spry enough to leap clear if needs be. And it feels... fitting, does it not? For a man of the cloth to play the part."

Father Anselm laid a gnarled hand on the young priest's shoulder. "You're certain, my son? The risk is not inconsiderable."

Joaquin met his elder's gaze steadily. "I am. I'll practice the steps until I can dance them in my sleep. Blazh's lads can mark out the safe path for me."

Everard nodded slowly, a reluctant respect kindling in his breast. "Very well. But we'll have a rope about you, just in case. One of Blazh's boys can be ready to haul you clear at the first sign of trouble."

"And the rest of us will be stationed all around," Father Doran added, "armed and ready. If the opportunity presents itself..." He made a sharp gesture, as if thrusting a blade home.

"We'll need to spread word of the trial discreetly," Blazh said. "And be ready to stage it the moment the witch appears."

Father Anselm's eyes gleamed in the colored light. "Leave that to us. A few whispers in the right ears during confession, a few circumspect announcements at service. We can have the right people ready at a moment's notice."

Everard clapped his hands together, the sound echoing in the vaulted space. "Then we have our plan. I'll coordinate with Aimery and Isabella, ensure we have eyes on every approach. We'll ring the square with men, crossbows and chains at the ready."

The five men nodded agreement, and Everard and Blazh turned to go. The priests began speaking in quick, low voices, planning out their next steps.



The sun had long since dipped below the horizon as Nordon and his team filed wearily into the Inn of the Setting Sun. The common room buzzed with a tense, electric energy. Townsfolk clustered around rough-hewn tables, their faces flickering in the warm light of the hearth's dancing flames. Mugs of ale were clutched in white-knuckled grips, eyes darting nervously to the iron-banded door at every errant creak or gust of wind.

Yet beneath the tension thrummed a sense of grim purpose. These were not the faces of the frightened and cowed, but of those steeling themselves for the battle to come. In hushed tones, they spoke of the day's preparations—of iron-tipped bolts and cleverly laid snares, of runes broken and wards raised. The air fairly crackled with their collective resolve.

Nordon and his companions threaded their way through the crowd, exchanging nods and brief clasps of shoulders as they passed. More than a few raised their mugs in salute, a gesture of respect and solidarity that warmed Nordon more than any ale could.

At last, they reached the sanctuary of their private dining room. The moment the door closed behind them, sealing them off from the hum of the common room, a collective sigh of exhaustion seemed to ripple through the group. They practically fell into the chairs ringing the large table, limbs heavy with fatigue.

"Saints, what a day," Eira groaned, rolling her shoulder with a wince. "I feel like I've been swinging a hammer since sunrise."

"You practically have been," Amabel pointed out wryly. "I lost count of how many curse-marks we shattered after the first half-dozen."

"Better than I expected to find," Nordon admitted. "Well done, both of you. Blazh, what news of the square?"

The wiry man leaned forward, his dark eyes glinting in the candlelight. "The pit's dug and reinforced. Bars of good iron, just like you said.

My lads even added a few spikes at the bottom, in case our guest gets feisty." His smile was sharp and mirthless.

"And the chains?" Everard asked.

"Laid and buried. We've got four separate lines crisscrossing the square, just waiting to be hauled up. Like a spider's web, the priest said."

Nordon nodded, feeling a flicker of grim satisfaction. "Good. Aimery, Isabella, what of our... other preparations?"

The two exchanged a glance before Aimery spoke. "The arbalests are in place and calibrated. We've got the bell tower and the roof of the town hall covered. Blazh's guide ropes are threaded and ready. We can steer those mail nets wherever we need them."

"Though we'd best pray we only need them once," Nordon mused.

Isabella nodded gravely. "It's a risk, to be sure. But one we must take. If we can capture even one of the witches alive, the information we could gain would be invaluable."

Godwin, who had been listening intently, leaned forward, his brow furrowed with concern. "Speaking of risks," he said slowly, "I've just come from the forges. Rendel and the other smiths are working themselves to the bone, but they're starting to run low on raw iron. At the rate they're going, they'll be scraping the bottom of the barrels within a fortnight."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the implications sank in. Their entire strategy hinged on iron—on the weapons and wards and snares it could create. Without a steady supply, their defenses would crumble like sand before the tide.

Nordon felt a cold knot of dread settle in his gut. "How much do we have in reserve?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Godwin shook his head grimly. "Not enough. Even with rationing, even if we melt down every scrap of iron we can spare, it'll only buy us a moon at best. And that's assuming the witches don't launch an all-out assault before then."

Isabella slammed her fist on the table, making the candles flicker. "Damn it all! We can't have come this far just to be hamstrung by a lack of metal. There must be something we can do!"

Amabel's brow furrowed in thought, her quick mind visibly turning over the problem. "What about the old mines?" she asked

suddenly. "The ones in the Ironspine Hills, a day's ride to the east of Nek. They've been abandoned for decades, but there might still be veins of ore left untapped."

Nordon straightened, a spark of hope kindling in his chest. "It's a long shot," he said slowly, "but it's better than nothing. If we could send a team to reopen the mines, get the forges running there..."

"It would be difficult," Everard warned. "You know the strictures the church has about mining the bones of the earth. And we need the priests' cooperation, just now."

Nordon snorted. "'Bones of the earth.' It's all but certain the witches put that stricture in the books in the first place. We know they have that ability."

"Yes, but proving it," Godwin grumbled.

"You really think our priests will object?" Eira asked.

"No, probably not," Everard said. "But the heads of the Eparchies are putting a lot of pressure on the priests. Observing the canon, calling for Hunts—we've not seen so much of it here, but Father Anslem is expecting his Bishop any time, so they can't be seen doing anything counter to scripture."

"What if we could prove it?" Nordon asked slowly. All eyes turned to him.

"How, exactly?" Everard asked.

Nordon's smile was flat and cold. "We have their books," he reminded them.

The room was filled with a stunned silence, enough that they could hear the quiet murmurings from the inn's main room. "Everard, Blazh," Godwin said slowly after a moment. "Help Nordon retrieve those books. Eira, ask the innkeeper to bring more food. And small beer. And candles. We may be here for a while."

CHAPTER 9

A Risky Venture

At first light, Nordon and Everard strode purposefully into the dimly lit sanctuary of the church, their faces weary, but firm with determination. The leather-bound books from the witch felt heavy in their hands, the pages seeming to hum with the weight of the secrets they contained.

Father Anselm, Father Doran, and Father Joaquin awaited them by the altar, their robes glimmering faintly in the candlelight. As the two men approached, the priests regarded them with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. The team had sent a boy ahead with a message, and the priests looked as if they'd barely risen from their beds.

"You said you had something of great import to show us," Father Anselm said, his wizened face creased with concern. "Something that could not wait until morning prayers."

Nordon nodded gravely. "We do, Father. Something that may well change the very foundation of our faith." He held up one of the ancient tomes, its cover worn and faded with age. "These books were given to us by... an unlikely source. They purport to detail some... truths of our church. Of our beliefs. And the role the witches have played in shaping it."

Father Doran's bushy eyebrows shot up in surprise. "The witches? Shaping our faith? Surely you jest!"

"I wish I were," Everard said grimly. "But the evidence in these pages is difficult to refute. It appears that a group known as the Order of Some has been manipulating our holy texts for generations. Inserting passages and strictures that align with their own agenda."

Father Joaquin frowned, his youthful face troubled. "But to what end? What could they possibly hope to gain?"

Nordon flipped open one of the books, the parchment crackling softly beneath his fingers. "Power," he said simply. "And protection. Look here." He pointed to a densely written passage, the ink faded to a rusty brown. "This details how the Order added the prohibition against mining iron to our scriptures. Because they knew their kind were vulnerable to it."

Father Anselm leaned in, squinting at the cramped, archaic script. His eyes suddenly widened in recognition. "This... this is written in the old tongue," he breathed. "The language of our most ancient texts. I can scarcely make it out, but..."

He traced a gnarled finger over the page, mouthing the words silently as he translated. His face grew more and more troubled with each line.

"It speaks of a great council," he murmured, "held in secret by the Order. They debated how best to protect themselves from the 'scourge of iron.'" His finger stopped, hovering over a particular passage. "Here! They speak of 'seeding' our holy books with warnings against delving too greedily into the earth. Calling it a sin against the gods. This phrase, Netrikdykite senovės žemės kaulų. It translates roughly as..." His lips moved silently for a moment. "Disturb not the ancient bones of the earth." He looked up. "That's the very phrasing our holiest texts use. It's been the basis of the restrictions on iron mining."

"Yes," Nordon said. "It's why we've only mined where the ore is readily available on the surface. A 'gift from the god,' we've always called it."

Father Doran shook his head in disbelief. "But that stricture has been a cornerstone of our faith for centuries! I remember when the church rediscovered those ancient texts in the vaults beneath the cathedral in Carvendam. The Holy Writ of Vaska the Ascetic, it was called.

An account of the saint's visions and revelations, including dire warnings about delving too deep into the bones of the earth."

He began to pace, his sandaled feet scuffing against the worn flagstones. "It caused quite the stir at the time. The four Eparchies convened an emergency conclave to debate the meaning of the text. In the end, they declared it a lost work of one of our holiest figures, and its prohibitions against mining were enshrined into canon law."

Father Anselm nodded slowly, his face deeply lined with troubled thought. "I remember it well. The deep mines of the Ironspine Hills, which had been the lifeblood of the region for generations, were closed almost overnight. Hundreds of miners were suddenly without work, whole towns emptied as families sought new livelihoods. It was a time of great upheaval." He frowned. “It wasn’t even all that long ago.”

"And now you're telling us it was all a farce?" Father Joaquin asked incredulously. "That this saint's holy writ was nothing more than a fabrication by these witches to protect themselves?"

Nordon nodded grimly. "So it would seem. And not just the mining prohibitions. Look here." He flipped to another page, the parchment so thin it was nearly translucent. "This passage speaks of how the Order manipulated the doctrine around the prayer boxes. Encouraging the belief that they were sacred, providing a direct channel to the god, that disturbing them was a grievous sin. Because they use them for their own purposes!"

Father Anselm took the book with trembling hands, his eyes widening as they scanned the faded script. "Merciful god," he breathed. "It's all here. The Revelation of the Soul, the Parable of the Shattered Tomb... texts we've held as sacred and inviolable. But this... this claims they were deliberate insertions by the Order. Lies couched as holy writ."

Father Doran sank heavily onto a nearby pew, his expression furious. “You want to reopen the deep mines, don’t you? And you want our permission.”

“Yes,” Nordon said. “We need to. The shallow mines don’t produce enough ore, and nowhere near as quickly. But without the church’s blessing, no miners will go near the place.”

“We’ll have to explain this to the bishop,” Father Anslem pointed out. “We’re expecting him any day, now.”

"Which is why we brought this to you now," Everard said. "But the sooner we can get workers into that mine..."

Father Doran nodded. "The sooner we can begin producing more weapons against these witches." He looked at his colleagues. "We have much to discuss, but I think we have enough to convince the bishop." He turned back to Nordon. "May we keep this book?"

"Keep it safe," Nordon warned. "In an iron box, by preference. The... one who provided it suggested it was... protected. From alteration. By magic. But... my trust is limited."

Doran frowned. "Exactly where did this come from?"

Nordon's jaw tightened. "A witch. One from the very Order that made the books. One of the ones who has helped suppress our innovations. Who may have even modified our holy texts."

The three priests stared, their jaws slowly falling open.

"We can't assume he's trustworthy," Nordon continued. "But... I do believe him. At least this far. They have... factions. Not all of them want to subjugate us, I think."

The priests took that in, and slowly nodded agreement. "Open the mine," Father Doran said firmly. "We will have a writ for you after the morning service is concluded. We will take this up with the bishop when he arrives. There will, I think, be something of a larger discussion around this." He looked at the heavy book and sighed. "We will need to rediscover how many of our beliefs are true and how many are false. This will not, I think, be an easy journey."



The Miner's Guildhall bustled with activity under the midday sun as Everard strode through the heavy oak doors, the priest's writ clutched tightly in his weathered hand. Dust motes danced in the warm shafts of light filtering through the leaded glass windows, illuminating the cavernous chamber within. The tang of sweat and smoke lingered in the air, mingling with the earthen scent of the miners gathered around the long trestle tables.

Everard approached the raised dais at the far end of the hall where the guild elders sat in their high-backed chairs, their faces lined with

years spent toiling deep beneath the earth. The eldest among them, a stout man with a snowy beard and piercing blue eyes, stood to greet him.

"Everard, my boy," he said warmly, clasping his shoulder. "What news from the priests?"

With a solemn nod, Everard presented the writ. "They've given their blessing for the Ironspine mine to be reopened. But there are concerns, Elder Brom. The witches may not let this go easily."

A murmur rippled through the assembled miners, some making holy signs while others gripped the hilts of their bronze blades. Brom raised a gnarled hand for silence.

"Aye, we've heard the whispers," he said gravely. "The calls for the Hunts. And no few of our miners had family in Nek. And Lakewood. Dark times are upon us. But clearly, the need for iron has never been greater. The forges of the nearby towns run low as well."

He turned to address the room, his voice booming. "We will act swiftly to reopen the mine and to protect those of you who will labor there. Set traps, and keep a wary eye for any sign of unnatural malfeasance. This is a vital task that will require the strength and courage of our stoutest miners."

A chorus of "ayes" echoed through the hall as the miners thumped their fists on the tables in solidarity. Everard felt a swell of pride and purpose rising in his chest.

Elder Brom placed a firm hand on the shoulder of a stout, middle-aged man whose skin was permanently stained with the dirt and ore of the mines. "Abram, you'll lead this charge. Choose your teams well and make ready. We've not a moment to lose if the iron ore is to flow again."

With a resolute nod, Abram turned to face his fellow miners, their eyes glinting with determination in the flickering torchlight. Together they would brave the depths of Ironspine mine, despite the dangers that lurked in the shadows.

As the miners began gathering and making plans to depart the next morning, Brom leaned closer to Everard. “What preparations can we make to protect them against magic?”

Everard took a moment to consider it. “Within the mine itself, the iron should keep them safe. It’s proof against magic. They might even

do well to make an encampment within the mine, rather than reopening the old dormitories."

Brom shrugged. "Those buildings weren't well-built in the first place, and I imagine they've not fared well after all the years of neglect. The mines will provide better shelter."

Then Everard remembered Nordon's words. "But... we will need to exercise extreme caution. Iron is proof against the witches' magic, but the wood supports, and I assume any of the ground not laced with ore... those will be targets."

Brom's eyes narrowed. "Clever. But we can be more clever. There's a small forge on the site, and we can quickly make crude strapping to reinforce the wooden supports. There's a small stream nearby, but we'll send men to raise its banks against flooding."

"We'll spare crossbows for your men," Everard said. "And help arrange for guards."

Elder Brom stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Aye, crossbows will serve us well. But we'll need more than just weapons. The witches are obviously cunning and their magic is clearly potent. I... had a cousin in Lakewood. Alive, but his home is destroyed." He began to pace, his heavy boots thudding against the wooden floorboards.

"We'll line the entrance to the mine with iron rods," he said decisively. "And we'll hang iron spikes from all the supports, both wood and stone. Every man will carry a piece of cold iron on him at all times."

Everard nodded, his mind racing with possibilities. "What about the air in the mine? Could they not poison it with some foul sorcery?"

Brom's face darkened. "It's a risk we'll have to take. But we can set up bellows to keep the air moving and fresh. And we'll post sentries with keen noses to sniff out any unnatural odors."

He stopped pacing and faced Everard squarely. "But there are threats we cannot foresee or guard against. These witches have had centuries to hone their arts. They may well have spells and curses beyond our reckoning."

He looked out over the hall, watching as the miners gathered their gear. Men clasped forearms, embraced, or shared a solemn nod, the gravity of their undertaking etched on every face. "We will send word to the other Guildhalls, as well. There are more deep mines than the Iron-

spine that can be reopened. Perhaps we can give the witches more to worry about than they're capable of handling."

"If we can get enough ore," Everard said in a low, confident voice, "I'm certain we can."



A fortnight had passed, and the Ironspine mine hummed with activity as Everard guided his empty wagon up the winding, rutted track. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of pine and the faint, metallic tang of freshly unearthed ore. Birdsong mingled with the rhythmic clink and thud of pickaxes, the creak of winches, and the rumble of laden carts.

As he crested the final rise, the mine's entrance came into view, a yawning maw carved into the mountainside. The stone around the entrance was stained with orange streaks, a testament to the rich iron veins that snaked through the rock. A sturdy palisade of iron-tipped logs ringed the clearing, with sentries posted at regular intervals, their iron-reinforced crossbows at the ready.

Everard guided his wagon into the line forming near the entrance. Miners, their faces streaked with sweat and dust, emerged from the depths pushing small, heavy carts laden with chunks of raw ore. The iron glinted dully in the sunlight, each piece a promise of weapons and tools to come.

He spotted Abram directing the flow of traffic, his voice booming over the din. The stout miner was in his element, his movements sure and efficient as he oversaw the loading of the ore onto the waiting wagons.

As Everard drew closer, he could see the intricate lattice of iron rods and spikes adorning the mine's entrance, a silent ward against magical intrusion. Miners ducked and wove around the metal as they went about their work, the iron becoming as much a part of the mine's fabric as the stone and timber.

Abram caught sight of Everard and waved him forward, a grin splitting his dirt-streaked face. "Ho there, Everard!" he called. "You're a welcome sight. We've got a fine load ready for you."

Everard brought his wagon to a halt and leapt down, clasping forearms with the mine foreman. "How goes the digging?" he asked, eyeing the bustling activity.

"Better than we could have hoped," Abram replied, pride evident in his voice. "The vein is rich and runs deep. We've already doubled our output from the old days."

He gestured to a group of miners who were carefully arranging the ore in Everard's wagon, packing it tightly to maximize the load. "And not a sign of trouble from the witches," he added, his voice lowering. "Though we remain vigilant. The lads don't go anywhere without their cold iron, and we've got the bellows running day and night to keep the air fresh."

Everard nodded, his eyes drifting to the tree line that bordered the clearing. Even in the bright sunlight, the forest seemed to hold a watchful stillness, as if the very trees were holding their breath. The air suddenly smelled sharp and acrid, as if—

With a crack that shook the miners' very bones, an impossibly bright bolt of lighting tore down from the sky, crashing against the mine's entrance.

The lightning bolt seared the air, a blinding lance of white-hot energy that crackled and hissed as it descended from the heavens. It struck the iron-laced entrance of the mine with a deafening boom, the sheer force of the impact sending a shockwave rippling outward. The ground heaved and shuddered, as if the very earth itself recoiled from the strike.

Sparks erupted in a dazzling cascade, skittering and dancing across the intricate lattice of iron rods and spikes that adorned the mine's mouth. The metal glowed red-hot, the heat so intense that the air around it shimmered and wavered. Miners staggered back, shielding their eyes from the searing brilliance, their faces awash in the pulsing, flickering light.

A few unlucky souls, those closest to the entrance, were flung backward by the concussive blast, their bodies ragdolling through the air before crashing to the ground in crumpled heaps. They lay stunned and groaning, their ears ringing and their vision swimming with afterimages of the blinding flash.

The iron at the entrance hissed and sputtered, the metal contracting and warping under the onslaught of heat and energy. Rivulets of molten ore dripped and oozed down the rock face, leaving glowing trails that cooled and hardened into twisted, abstract patterns. The very stone around the entrance seemed to vibrate and thrum, as if the lightning had imbued it with a strange, resonant energy.

Acrid smoke billowed from the scorched earth, carrying with it the sharp tang of ozone and the bitter smell of charred rock. Sparks continued to dance and whirl in the aftermath of the strike, drifting on the breeze like fiery snowflakes. They settled on the miners' clothes and skin, leaving tiny pinprick burns and smoldering holes.

Abram was the first to recover, staggering to his feet with a grunt of pain. His hair stood on end, crackling with static electricity, and his skin tingled as if a thousand ants were crawling beneath it. He blinked away the spots dancing before his eyes and surveyed the scene, his expression a mix of awe and grim determination.

"By the gods," he breathed, his voice hoarse and shaky. "What manner of sorcery is this?"

Everard, who had been knocked to the ground beside his wagon, clambered up and rushed to Abram's side. His face was pale and sweat-streaked, his eyes wide with a fear he fought to control. "The witches," he said, his voice tight. "It has to be. They've found a way to strike at us, even through the iron."

“Look!” someone cried.

Everard and Abram whirled.

There, a hundred paces away from the mine’s stockade and just a few paces off the well-used road, stood a man. He was as stocky as a miner, and dressed in simple, sturdy black clothing, but it was immediately apparent that this was no human. Purple-white energy crackled around him, and even at that distance, the men could see the madness flashing in his eyes.

This was the enemy, come for them.

“In!” Abram cried, as two men began swinging the iron-laced gate of the stockade shut. The men with crossbows fired their bolts, quickly winding their crossbows for another round.

The witch unleashed a torrent of fire from his hands, burning away

the wood crossbow bolts, sending their iron tips spinning off in random directions. He sneered as the flames died, then called another bolt of lightning from the skies.

The second bolt of lightning struck the stockade with a thunderous crack, the searing white energy racing along the iron-tipped logs like a ravenous beast. The air sizzled and popped, filled with the acrid scent of burning wood and superheated metal. Logs exploded into showers of splinters and ash, the iron tips melting and deforming under the onslaught, dripping like molten tears.

The guards, their faces grim and determined, unleashed another volley of crossbow bolts through the gaps in the ruined palisade. The iron-tipped shafts whistled through the air, glinting in the sun like deadly needles. Most of the bolts were incinerated mid-flight by the witch's fiery shield, but one found its mark, piercing his arm just below the shoulder.

The witch let out a roar of pain and rage, the sound seeming to shake the very ground beneath their feet. He reached over and ripped the bolt free, dark blood oozing from the wound and sizzling as it dripped onto the scorched earth. For a moment, the sorcerer's face contorted into a mask of pure hatred, his eyes blazing with an infernal light. Then, with a gesture and a word that made the air tremble, he vanished in a gout of crimson flame that left a scorch mark on the ground.

In the sudden, ringing silence that followed, the miners and guards stood stunned, blinking away the afterimages of the fiery display. The stockade was in ruins, more than a third of it reduced to charred, smoking debris. The ground around the entrance was cratered and blackened, studded with rapidly cooling puddles of melted iron. The air reeked of smoke, burnt flesh, and the ozone tang of spent magic.

Abram was the first to shake off the shock, his voice booming out across the stunned assembly. "To the mine! Everyone inside, now! We don't know if or when he'll return, and we're vulnerable out here!"

His words galvanized the miners into action. They rushed for the gaping maw of the mine entrance, hastily gathering what ore and tools they could along the way. The wounded were helped or carried by their comrades, leaving trails of blood on the blasted ground. Everard joined

the flow, his heart pounding and his mind racing with the implications of what he had just witnessed.

Inside the mine, the air was cool and damp, the silence broken only by the drip of water and the labored breathing of the gathered miners. The iron veins in the walls glinted in the light of the hastily lit torches, a reminder of the precious resource they were risking so much to obtain.

Abram organized a quick headcount, his face grim as he tallied the wounded and the missing. "We were lucky," he said, his voice echoing in the confined space.

"Aye," Everard agreed. "Abram, I need to borrow a horse. The fastest you've got. I need to get back to Farreach."



"And he just left?" Nordon asked.

Everard snorted. "Left in a pillar of flame. But yes."

"Casualties?"

"Two miners badly burned, but alive. One dead of her injuries."

"And the mine?"

"Still operating. We've put a heavier guard on the caravans."

Nordon thought for a moment. "You feel he could have done more damage."

"Of course. Perhaps the crossbow bolt did more damage than we thought, but... yes. If he can call lightning on command, then yes. He could have done far more damage."

Nordon recalled the witch's words. And most humans, and most of witchkind, are simply caught in the middle. "So he throws rocks at the hive. We come boiling out in anger. We become dangerous, and the witches grow fearful. In their fear, they allow more attacks." He shook his head. "The witch was right. We are all caught between those hungry for power."

Everard's brow wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"This one witch, if Finley is to be believed, provokes us. We respond in exactly the way his masters desire."

"Do we stop, then?" Everard asked, still confused.

Nordon shook his head. “I don’t see how we can. But... perhaps our anger can be more directed.”

“How so?”

“Perhaps we can focus on the actual threat. Again, if the witch who visited me is to be believed, we focus on the one who attacked the mine. Not all of them—just him.”

“We’re preparing for attack,” Everard said. “If he’s the one attacking, he’s the only one we would be focused on. It’s not like we’re actively hunting them.”

“Not yet,” Nordon said darkly. “We may need to see that it doesn’t come to that.” He sighed. “We need to go speak to the priests again.”



The sanctuary of the church was again awash in the warm glow of candlelight as Nordon and Everard strode in, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The three priests, Father Anselm, Father Doran, and Father Joaquin, awaited them by the altar, their faces etched with a mixture of curiosity and concern. The air was heavy with the scent of incense and the weight of the impending discussion.

Nordon wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter. "Fathers," he began, his voice resonating through the sacred space, "we come to you with a grave proposition. The witch who attacked the Ironspine mine must be brought to justice, and we believe the time has come for a formal Hunt."

Father Anselm's eyebrows shot up, his wizened face creasing with surprise. "A Hunt? But Nordon, you know as well as I that only a bishop has the authority to commission such a thing. And our own bishop is, well..."

"Overdue," Father Doran finished, his tone grim. "We've had no word from him in weeks. The roads are treacherous, and with the witches growing bolder..."

Nordon held up a hand. "I understand your hesitation, Fathers. But we cannot afford to wait any longer. This witch, this... Landon, as I believe he is called, has proven himself a clear and present danger to our people. He must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. And... we have

reason to believe he is the only witch behind these attacks. If we can draw him out, capture him, possibly even kill him... we may be able to put an end to this. At least for now."

Father Joaquin, the youngest of the three, leaned forward, his eyes bright with a mix of excitement and trepidation. "What exactly are you proposing, Nordon?"

A smile touched Nordon's lips, but it held no warmth. "A trial," he said simply. "A grand, elaborate affair that will draw Landon out of hiding. We'll make a show of accusing him, of gathering evidence and testimonies. We'll let it be known far and wide that we intend to bring him to justice."

Father Doran frowned, his bushy eyebrows knitting together. "But without a bishop to preside..."

"It will be a sham," Nordon said, his voice low and intense. "A ruse to lure Landon into the open. Once he shows himself, we'll have him."

“He seemed... arrogant,” Everard said. “Power-mad. Posting an Accusation may be enough, if we can get it far and wide. Ensure he can see it, or that other witches will, who’ll carry the word.”

A heavy silence settled over the room as the priests considered Nordon's words. The candles flickered, casting dancing shadows on the walls, as if the very building itself was weighing the gravity of the proposal.

Finally, Father Anselm spoke, his voice heavy with the weight of decision. "It is... unorthodox," he said slowly. "But these are unorthodox times. If this Landon is truly as dangerous as you say, then perhaps unorthodox measures are called for."

Father Doran nodded, his expression grim. "I agree. We cannot sit idly by while this witch terrorizes our people. If a trial, even a sham one, can draw him out, then I say we proceed. But we must be cautious. This witch has already proven himself to be powerful."

Father Joaquin leaned forward, his youthful face alight with determination. "I volunteer to help spread word of the trial. I can travel to the nearby villages, post the Accusation in the town squares. If we cast a wide enough net, Landon will have nowhere to hide. And the riders will spread the word even further from there."

Nordon clapped the young priest on the shoulder, a genuine smile

touching his lips. "Thank you, Father Joaquin. Your courage and dedication do you credit." He turned back to the other two priests. "We'll need to make this convincing. Gather testimonies from those who witnessed the attack on the mine. Describe the destruction, the injuries, the death. Paint Landon as the monster he is. Gather testimony from those who survived Nek, too. Eira will testify. She saw as much as I did."

Father Anselm nodded slowly, his aged hands clasped before him. "It will be done. We will make it known that the church seeks justice for these crimes against our people. That no witch, no matter how powerful, is beyond the reach of the god's law."

"And when Landon shows himself?" Father Doran asked, his voice low and intense.

Everard's hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. "We'll be ready for him. I'll handpick our best fighters, outfit them with cold iron. We've set traps, prepared our ambushes. And when he comes, we'll spring the jaws of our trap and hopefully end this."

Until they find another to send after us, Nordon thought dourly. "It's a risk, I know. But it's one we must take. For the safety of our people. We cannot let fear rule us any longer."

The priests exchanged glances, a silent conversation passing between them. Finally, Father Anselm spoke, his voice ringing with finality. "Then it is decided. We will set this plan in motion. May the god guide our steps and strengthen our resolve."

With that, the meeting adjourned, each man departing to play his role in the grand deception. Nordon and Everard strode from the church, their faces set with purpose, their hearts steeled for the battle to come. The die had been cast, the game set in motion. Now all that remained was to see how the pieces would fall.

As they walked, Nordon turned to Everard, his voice low and urgent. "We must tread carefully, my friend. This is a dangerous game we're playing. Not just for us, but for all involved."

Everard nodded, his eyes hard. "I know. But what choice do we have?"

We hand power to the church to try and wrest it from the witches, Nordon thought sadly. Let us hope we can take that power back.

And as the church door closed shut behind them, he added, assuming we all survive.

CHAPTER 10

A Dangerous Mission

Finley, look at this."

"Kelden!" Finley said with surprise. "I didn't realize you were back!" He took the piece of paper than Kelden has holding out, and frowned. "That... looks like Landon." The center of the paper held a fairly accurate sketch of Landon. Finley's frown deepened as he read the words above and below the sketch. "An Accusation? From the church?"

"Of witchcraft, yes," Landon said. "Signed by three priests in Farreach in the South."

"I need to find Mila. And Arcadia."

Finley and Kelden made their way through the bustling courtyard of the Farm, the headquarters of the Order. The recent renovation and expansion of the central farmhouse building had transformed it into an impressive structure, its sturdy wooden beams and freshly painted walls gleaming in the sunlight. The air buzzed with the chatter and activity of more people than Finley had ever seen gathered here.

New recruits milled about, their faces reflecting a mix of excitement and nervousness as they awaited their assignments. The Order's decision to drop its veil of secrecy and actively recruit operatives and agents had clearly paid off, as evidenced by the diverse crowd representing various backgrounds and skillsets, and likely every possible combination of magical affinities and alignments.

Finley scanned the sea of unfamiliar faces, searching for Mila amidst the bustling throng. Urgency lent a purposeful stride to his steps as he and Kelden wove through the clusters of people. They passed by the newly constructed training grounds where novice agents practiced combat magics—something the Order had only rarely seen the need to use, before now. The tang of magic in the air left a bitter scent in Finley's nose, and he frowned. They're truly building us into their army.

As they approached the rebuilt entrance of the farmhouse, Finley couldn't help but marvel at the transformation. Gone were the days of the rustic, unassuming exterior. Now, the building exuded an air of strength and purpose, its expanded wings stretching out to accommodate the growing ranks of the Order. The new second story contained working space for the Order's leadership, along with their precious archives.

Pushing open the heavy wooden front doors, Finley and Kelden stepped into the busy interior. The main hall had been transformed into a hub of activity, with agents hurrying to and fro, carrying scrolls, maps, and various artifacts. The walls were lined with bookshelves filled with tomes and treatises on magic, history, and strategy. Glowing orbs of light floated near the high ceiling, casting a warm and inviting ambiance.

As they made their way deeper into the farmhouse, Finley couldn't shake the sense of panic that gripped him. Every passing moment felt precious, and the weight of the accusation against Landon hung heavy in his mind. He needed to find Mila to understand what this meant. The fact that it had come from Farreach in the South, not even a full moon since Finley's visit to the human cabal agent there, laced Finley's sense of panic with a cold, certain dread.

Turning a corner, they finally spotted Mila engaged in a heated discussion with a group of senior agents. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she gestured emphatically, her words carrying the weight of authority and determination. Finley and Kelden exchanged a worried glance. As they approached, Mila looked up, her eyes widening with recognition. She excused herself from the group and strode towards them, rolling her eyes as she did so. "Argumentative lot, is

what they've sent us," she complained quietly. "What can I do for you?"

"This," Finley said, holding out the paper with Landon's face.

Mila took it and frowned. "This isn't right, though."

"What do you mean?" Kelden asked.

"This is signed by the town priests in Farreach. But that isn't how it works. Only a bishop can commission a Hunt or post an Accusation." She looked up. "Where did you get this?"

"It came in with a dispatch from Harbsmouth," Kelden answered.

Mila's frown deepened. "So they're going wide with this. How do they know his name?"

"I, ah... spoke with one of them. Almost a moon ago," Finley said.

One of Mila's eyebrows arched. "I'll assume that was part of a plan and not pursue it." Then she looked back at the paper. "This is serious."

"How so?" Kelden asked. "It's not like they can do anything to Landon."

She shook her head slowly, and handed the paper back to Finley. "They're trying to bait him. They're asserting that, if they find him, they'll put him on trial and execute him as a witch. You know Landon's ego better than I. How's he going to take that, if word of this gets to him?"

Finley thought about it. "The old Landon... I don't know. Landon from school? He'd show up just to make them try. When he joined the Order... he was different. Calmer. Better. He'd ignore it. But now..."

"He'd dare them to try and then lay waste to the town," Kelden said.

"About that," Finley admitted.

"Finley, what did you tell them about Landon?" Mila asked.

Finley's stomach clenched. "That all of witchkind wasn't behind the attacks. That it was all Landon. That we'd been hurt by them, too. Runes and ruin, Mila. That's why. They're trying to take him out."

Kelden's jaw tightened. "They'll have traps. Weapons."

She nodded slowly, considering. "What was the last major attack?"

"The demon constructs in Nek, then Lakewood," Finley replied. "It's been a while since—"

"There was the mine," Kelden corrected him. "Just a few days ago."

"Mine?" Finley asked, his brow wrinkling. "Where?"

"The old Ironspine deep mine."

Finley's eyes widened in alarm. "That's a day's ride from Farreach in the South. Since when did they start reopening the deep mines? We'd given the churches a stricture, it was a few years ago—"

"Report is that this one opened about a fortnight ago. A bit longer. They're supplying iron ore to everywhere within a two-day ride."

"The humans are arming themselves," Mila said glumly.

"And Landon attacked the mine?" Finley asked.

Kelden nodded. "I've been helping with dispatches. Arcadia's been so busy—"

"That's where they saw him, then," Finley realized. "For this sketch. And now they're trying to draw him out, and they're going to be killed if he actually shows up." He snarled in frustration. "And we can't track him, and—"

"And, someone in Farreach has been going around spiking runes," Mila said. "I sent someone a few days ago to look into it."

"Nordon. The agent of the human cabal. I told everyone of witchkind in Farreach—all of eight of them—to get out. But he must have gone around looking for runes."

"Well, it also means we've lost our ability to listen in. I'll contact the agents I sent, ask them to see what's happening."

I have an idea, Finley's talent whispered. Give them this.

[[[RUNE An alarm for magic]]]

"Mila, I'm going to give you a rune. One of my new ones," Finley said quickly. "Have your agents carve it wherever they can. It doesn't look a thing like New Runic, so maybe the humans will miss it. These ones are easier to pass off as decorative."

"What will this new rune do?"

Finley examined the rune, still glowing in his mind. He felt the taste and smell of it, listened to its resonance. "It'll alert me if any magic is

used within a decent-sized radius of it. Since all of witchkind, except your agents, are out of Farreach, that would mean—"

"Landon," Kelden finished, nodding with approval. "That's probably the best way for us to know it's happening."

"And maybe it'll give us enough time to save these fools from themselves," Finley added.

"You've spoken to them once," Mila said. "Couldn't you speak to them again? Talk them off of this path?"

Finley thought about it, and then shook his head. "We spoke. There's no trust there. I'm... actually..." Something occurred to him. "This could work to our advantage."

"How could—" Kelden started, but Finley saw the comprehension slide over his features. "Oh."

"Want to fill me in?" Mila asked.

"The humans are baiting Landon," Kelden said slowly, looking to Finley for confirmation. "And we're going to use them as bait for Landon."

"Exactly," Finley nodded. "We can't trace Landon, and by the time we get word of an attack, he vanishes before we can confront him. But now we know a potential target. You have your agents get this rune in place, as many places as they can. Ones that are out of the way, where they won't be easily spotted. When the alarm goes off, we show up in force and try to take Landon down. Or at the least, contain him."

"I'm going to get a team on standby," Kelden said, turning to walk away.

"Use my name," Mila called after him. Then, more quietly, "This is dangerous. We all now how powerful he's gotten."

Finley's lips thinned. "He doesn't know who he's dealing with, now. Where's Arcadia?"

Mila rolled her eyes. "Off arguing with the idiots in the Taryba, of course. I'll send word."

Finley glanced around and lowered his voice. "Mila, they're building an army. Their army."

Mila's eyes twinkled. "That's what they think."

"What do you mean?"

"Arcadia interviews every new recruit. Personally. Checks their

background, speaks to their family. It's why she's so exhausted, but nobody here supports human subjugation. They're all bought into her idea that we need to live openly and in peace."

"Surely the Taryba has sent their own people."

"Of course they do," Mila snorted. "But Arcadia always finds a reason why they're not suitable. Not physically fit enough. Not mentally firm. Wrong alignments. Whatever."

"But," Finley objected, "you're still teaching combat magics."

"Ah, you noticed that," Mila said, a mischievous grin slipping across her features. "But did you notice what specific combat magics?"

Finley's brow wrinkled. "No."

"They're for fighting against other witchkind, Finley," she said softly.

Kelden inhaled sharply.

"It won't come to that, we hope," Mila said firmly. "But still."

"Actually," Finley said slowly as everything began to come together in his mind, "it is going to come to that. Let's start putting together a team. Quickly."



The immense dining room buzzed with hushed conversations as dozens of members of the Order gathered, their faces etched with a mix of concern and determination. The space, expanded through the ingenious application of witchkind's space-manipulation magic, seemed to stretch on endlessly, its high ceilings adorned with intricate wooden beams and floating orbs of soft, golden light. The room's grandeur stood in stark contrast to the somber atmosphere that permeated the air.

Long wooden tables, polished to a rich, warm sheen, filled the room, their surfaces laden with maps, scrolls, and various arcane artifacts. Agents huddled around these tables in small groups, their voices low and urgent as they discussed the latest developments regarding Landon. The gravity of the situation hung heavy in the air, a palpable weight that seemed to press down upon everyone present.

Arcadia, Finley, Kelden, and Mila sat at the head of the central

table, their expressions grim as they surveyed those nearest them. Finley's gaze swept across the sea of faces, taking in the determined set of jaws and the steely glints in eyes. These were some of the best and brightest of the Order, individuals who had dedicated their lives to protecting witchkind and maintaining the delicate balance between the magical and non-magical worlds.

"Thank you for calling me," Arcadia murmured. "I'd far rather be here than in Evermore arguing with the Taryba."

"You may not thank me if this doesn't go as we hope," Finley muttered back. "But let's get everyone on the same page."

As Finley opened his mouth to address the assembled agents, a sudden, piercing alarm tore through the room, its shrill cry reverberating off the walls and causing everyone to freeze in place. The magical alarm from Farreach had been triggered, signaling that Landon had made his move.

In an instant, the room erupted into a flurry of activity. Agents leapt to their feet, their fingers already twitching through the motions that helped prepare their travel magics. The air crackled with the tang of magic as protective wards and enhancement spells were hastily cast. Maps were unfurled, and hurried discussions broke out as teams quickly formed and strategies were finalized.

Mila's voice rose above the din, her tone commanding and urgent. "Team One, you're with me. We'll take the northern approach. Team Two, Kelden will lead you from the south."

As the teams prepared to depart, Finley couldn't shake the sense of unease that gripped him. Landon had grown immensely powerful, and the Order had never faced a threat quite like him before, had never even needed to prepare itself for a threat from within witchkind. The weight of responsibility settled heavily upon Finley's shoulders, knowing that the lives of countless innocents, both witchkind and human, lay on his shoulders.

With a deep breath, he wrapped his magic around himself.

To Farreach.



As Arcadia, Finley, Kelden, and Mila materialized on the outskirts of Farreach in the South, they were greeted by an ominous sight. The sky above the town roiled with angry, churning clouds, their underbellies tinged an unnatural shade of violet. Jagged streaks of lightning crackled within the storm's depths, illuminating the gathering dusk with eerie, pulsating flashes. The air hung heavy with a palpable sense of dread, thick with the acrid tang of dark magic.

They quickly used their magic to take them into the center of the town.

The town square, usually a bustling hub of activity, now stood eerily silent. The cobblestone streets were deserted, save for a small gathering near the church steps. The imposing stone edifice of the church loomed over the square, its bell tower reaching skyward as if to challenge the roiling storm above. The church's stained-glass windows, normally a source of comfort and inspiration, now seemed to glow with an unsettling, otherworldly light.

At the foot of the church steps, a makeshift stage had been erected, its rough-hewn boards a stark contrast to the church's refined architecture. Upon this stage stood a lone wooden post, its surface smooth and new. A length of heavy iron chain lay coiled at the post's base, its links glinting menacingly in the fading light. It was clear that this stage had been prepared for one purpose: a witch trial.

To one side of the church steps, a small jury had been assembled. A dozen men and women, their faces etched with a mixture of fear and grim determination, huddled together, their eyes darting nervously between the storm above and the empty stage before them. They clutched tightly to their cloaks, as if the flimsy fabric could shield them from the malevolent energy that permeated the air.

A priest stood on the stage, his hands clasped in front of him. Finley imagined his calm demeanor was entirely feigned.

As Finley and his companions approached the square, they couldn't help but marvel at the sheer power that radiated from the storm above. The magical energy was so dense, so palpable, that it seemed to press down upon them like a physical weight. Each breath felt heavy, laden with the cloying scent of ozone and something darker, more sinister.

Despite the storm's fury and the ominous setup in the town square,

Landon was nowhere to be seen. The emptiness of the stage, the absence of the accused, only served to heighten the sense of unease that gripped the town. It was as if the very air itself held its breath, waiting for the inevitable moment when all hell would break loose.

Finley and his team exchanged worried glances, their fingers twitching with barely restrained magic. They knew that Landon's arrival was imminent, and they steeled themselves for the confrontation to come. The fate of Farreach, and perhaps all of witchkind and humanity, hung in the balance.

Finley's keen eyes darted around the town square, taking in every detail of the scene before him with a mix of apprehension and grudging respect for the humans' preparations. Despite their lack of magical abilities, they had clearly put thought and effort into readying themselves for Landon's anticipated arrival.

Along the rooftops surrounding the square, Finley spotted the glint of iron-tipped crossbows, their wielders crouched low behind chimneys and gables. The hunters were strategically positioned to provide overlapping fields of fire, ensuring that no corner of the square would be left undefended. Their postures were tense, coiled like springs ready to unleash their deadly bolts at a moment's notice.

At ground level, Finley noticed groups of armed men and women lurking in the shadows of alleyways and doorways. They clutched an assortment of weapons—swords, axes, and heavy clubs, all bearing the telltale sheen of cold iron. Some wore bits of iron armor as well, their breastplates and helmets adorned with holy symbols etched into the metal. Their faces were grim, eyes hardened with a mix of fear and determination.

Finley's gaze was drawn to a group of robed figures near the base of the church steps, their heads bowed in fervent prayer. Priests, he realized, likely beseeching their god for protection and victory against the dark forces they believed threatened their flock. Their low chanting filled the air, a somber counterpoint to the ominous rumble of the storm above.

Barricades of iron-banded oak had been erected at the entrances to the square, their sturdy forms blocking the main thoroughfares. Finley couldn't help but admire the craftsmanship, even as he noted the deadly

intent behind their placement. It was clear the humans meant to trap Landon within the confines of the square, to cut off any avenue of escape once the confrontation began.

They don't understand what someone with Earth affinity can do, Finley's talent muttered. Let alone with the other affinities he's inherited.

Then, with a blast of power, Landon arrived.

It was an appearance so theatrical, so absolutely unlike the usual simplicity of witchkind travel, that Finley almost laughed. But he sobered quickly, realizing that the pageantry was a sign of Landon's increasing mastery over the powers he'd gained.

A cascade of light blasted down from the roiling black clouds above, less a lightning strike and more a divine Arrival. It brushed the ground and sent motes of pink light scattering in every direction—no few of which, Finley noted, were quickly absorbed by some kind of iron structure hidden beneath the hard-packed earth of the square. The column of light pulsed blue, then green, and then a purple-black, before exploding with a peal of thunder so loud that Finley's chest thrummed. The lights vanished almost instantly, and there was Landon.

He was clad like something from a child's tale: A shimmering black tunic over finely woven black trousers, with a silver-chased black cape settling behind him. His calf-high boots were of thick black leather, and on this brow—

Finley narrowed his eyes. Was Landon wearing some kind of crown?

It was a black circlet, resting just on the crown of his head, shining with a dim, coruscating purple light.

"You're kidding me," Arcadia said flatly.

"Behold, humans!" Landon's voice boomed throughout the square. He was using magic to amplify his voice, enhancing it in a way that made the buildings' windows vibrate. "You have accused me of crimes, but I have come to you to offer you mercy!"

"Mercy?" Kelden whispered.

"Mercy?" the priest on the stage barked. "We will hear of your crimes and punish you for them! Suffer not a witch to live!"

Landon barked a laugh. "I am to be your king, mortals! I will be the one hearing of crimes, and meting out your punishments!" His state-

ment was accompanied by a magically induced roll of thunder from above.

"Finley," Mila whispered quickly, "everyone's in place."

The priest on the stage had roused himself in an impressive display of righteous anger. "A king? You are nothing but a foul thug! You seek to rule? Then come here, come before me and make me bow!"

Finley frowned. "That doesn't—what's he doing?" he asked, half to himself. His eyes quickly scanned the square again. The people on the roofs weren't going to get a better shooting angle than the one they had, and it wasn't like the priest was actually going to—

Ah, he thought as he spied the traces of a trap door in the dust of the square, just paces in front of the hastily erected stage. I see what they're doing. That would explain the iron under the ground: they'd gone with a tried-and-true trap, likely a pit lined with iron bars. Something Finley had more than a little experience with. "Hold a bit," he told Mila.

Landon floated forward, showing a level of mastery with Sky magic that Finley himself struggled with.

"Finley," Arcadia said, pointing to the trap door.

"I see it," he replied, beginning to pull magic from his reserves into his mind. "Mila, tell everyone to be at the ready."

"We've never practiced this," she warned.

"No time like the present."

Landon was now standing directly over the trap door—but it didn't open. He's holding himself just off the ground, Finley realized. They didn't plan for that. He began assembling his magic, calling up a rune that, with any luck, would push Landon down, which would hopefully trigger the humans' trap. Having Landon surrounded by iron would make this a safer endeavor for everyone.

Then something strange happened.

It was as if a veil had been lifted in Finley's mind, revealing a new level of clarity and perception he had never before experienced. The once seamless connection between Finley and his conscious talent seemed to fracture, a sharp line of demarcation forming between his own thoughts and the whispered insights of what he'd thought of as his gift.

Finley's inner landscape shifted, his mental space expanding and reshaping itself to accommodate this newfound separation. Where before his talent's voice had been an integral part of his being, intertwined with his every thought and action, it now appeared as a distinct entity, observing from a distance. The change was both unsettling and exhilarating, a rush of independence and self-discovery that left Finley reeling.

As he grappled with this internal shift, Finley became acutely aware of the magic swirling in the air around him. The energy was palpable, a tangible force that danced across his skin and thrummed through his veins. He could sense the ebb and flow of power, the intricate weave of magical currents that surrounded Landon and permeated the town square. It was as if he had suddenly developed a sixth sense, a heightened perception of the arcane that required no input from his talent.

Amidst this newfound awareness, an idea began to take shape in Finley's mind. A new rune, born of his own creativity and intuition, blossomed within his thoughts. He focused intently on the design, carefully crafting each line and curve, imbuing it with purpose and power. The process was both familiar and foreign, a testament to his own innate magical abilities rather than the guidance of his talent.

As Finley worked, he could feel his talent observing from the sidelines, a silent spectator to his creative process. It offered no suggestions or insights, content to simply bear witness to Finley's independent endeavor. The absence of its input was both unnerving and liberating, a challenge to Finley's self-reliance and a confirmation of his own magical prowess.

The rune took shape, a complex array of interlocking symbols and glyphs that pulsed with latent energy. Finley could sense its potential, the raw power waiting to be unleashed upon the world. He marveled at his own handiwork, a creation born entirely of his own mind and will. It resembled the most recent type of rune his talent had created, but somehow felt more... right.

[[[RUNE Entrapment]]]

. . .

As he finished the design, Finley's attention snapped back to the unfolding scene before him. Landon still hovered above the trap, his presence a looming threat that demanded immediate action. Armed with his new rune and his heightened perception of the magical currents, Finley prepared to face the challenge head-on.

He empowered the rune.



A sudden shift occurred in Finley's perception. The world around him transformed, the veil of mundane reality peeling away to reveal a dazzling tapestry of magic woven into the very fabric of existence. Streams of rainbow-colored letters, numbers, and symbols danced before his eyes, their forms distended and constantly shifting in a mesmerizing display of arcane energy.

The magical currents that had once been a mere sensation now took on a tangible, almost physical presence. They swirled and eddied around Finley, their vibrant hues painting the air with a kaleidoscope of colors. Each stream carried its own unique signature, a complex arrangement of glyphs and equations that held the secrets of the universe within their ever-changing patterns.

Finley marveled at the intricate balance that existed within this newly revealed world. The streams of magic intertwined and interacted in a delicate dance, their movements governed by an unseen logic that seemed to hold everything in perfect harmony. It was a symphony of power, a cosmic ballet that played out on a scale beyond human comprehension.

As he focused on his newly crafted rune, Finley witnessed its effect on the magical landscape. The rune pulsed with an intense, radiant energy, its light cutting through the swirling streams like a beacon in the night. Where once the magical currents flowed in a seemingly random pattern, they now began to converge upon the rune, drawn to its power like moths to a flame.

The rune's influence spread outward, its energy rippling through the magical fabric and reshaping the very laws that governed it. The once chaotic streams of letters, numbers, and symbols began to realign

themselves, their distended forms straightening and condensing into new configurations. It was as if the rune had become the center of a new cosmic order, dictating the flow and balance of magic within its sphere of influence.

Finley watched in awe as the magical currents responded to his creation, their colors shifting and blending in ways he had never before witnessed. Reds and blues merged into vibrant purples, while greens and yellows danced together in a dazzling display of emerald and gold. The air hummed with power, the very essence of magic made manifest before his eyes.

As the rune's effect continued to spread, Finley could sense the change in the local magic. The once familiar currents had been transformed, their logic rewritten by the power of his creation. It was a fundamental shift in the nature of magic itself, a testament to the incredible potential that lay within Finley's newfound abilities.

The iridescent streams of magic coalesced over Landon's head.



Finley's perspective snapped back to the ordinary world, and several things happened almost at once as time slowed to a crawl.

A wave of power, unexpectedly gentle and subtle, shoved Landon down.

Multiple thwacks accompanied the release of a dozen crossbow bolts.

A kerchunk echoed through the square as the trapdoor beneath Landon fell open.

Two long iron chains, arranged in an "X," snapped up from where they'd been buried just below the surface of the square.

Finley's magic was disrupted.

Six people of witchkind materialized in the square. Four of them were caught mid-chest by the iron chains, and they fell, screaming in agony.

Landon lashed out with a blasphemous combination of Flame and Sky magic, sending a ring of blazing green flames rushing outward from his body.

Kelden threw Finley to the ground.



It's just another affinity, like all the others. Flame, Sea, Sky and Earth. Beginnings and Endings. They're each fragments of a former whole, colorings on a greater painting. Remember, they don't come from the Origin. They're merely given color by it.

The voice of Finley's talent was dim and distant in his mind.

I can't do this for you, it said. You have to look within yourself.

As the world erupted into chaos around him, Finley found himself retreating inward, seeking solace in the depths of his own mind. The screams of the injured, the roar of Landon's flames, and the frantic shouts of his allies faded into the background as he focused on the voice of his talent, now a mere whisper amidst the turmoil.

Finley's consciousness drifted, guided by an unseen force, until he found himself standing in a vast, ethereal space. The ground beneath his feet was a shimmering expanse of iridescent mist, swirling and eddying with each step he took. The air around him thrummed with energy, a palpable presence that seemed to pulse in time with the beating of his heart.

Before him, six towering pillars of light rose from the misty ground, each one a different hue. Crimson, azure, emerald, amber, amethyst, and a shimmering silver-white stood in a circle, their bases lost in the swirling vapors below. The pillars seemed to sway and dance, their colors bleeding into one another at the edges, creating a mesmerizing display of light and shadow.

Finley approached the pillars, drawn by an inexplicable force. As he drew closer, he could feel the distinct energies emanating from each one. The crimson pillar radiated the searing heat of Flame, while the azure pillar exuded the cool, refreshing essence of Sea. The emerald pillar pulsed with the sturdy, grounding energy of Earth, and the amber pillar crackled with the electrifying power of Sky. The amethyst pillar seemed to hum with the cyclic, transformative energies of Beginnings and Endings, while the silver-white pillar shone with a pure, untainted light that defied description.

As Finley stood at the center of the circle, he could feel the pillars' energies converging upon him, swirling and intermingling in a dizzying dance. The boundaries between the different forms of magic began to blur, their distinct hues merging into a kaleidoscope of color that filled his vision. He could feel the power building within him, a crescendo of energy that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

And then, in a moment of perfect clarity, Finley understood. These pillars, these fragments of magic, were not meant to be separate. They were pieces of a greater whole, facets of a single, all-encompassing truth. With a deep breath, he reached out with his mind, grasping at the strands of power that swirled around him.

As he did so, the pillars began to unravel, their light and energy spiraling inward towards Finley's core. He could feel the magic of Flame, Sea, Sky, Earth, Beginnings, and Endings flowing into him, filling every fiber of his being with their combined power.



Finley rose to his feet with no conscious effort, with no assistance from the muscles of his body. With a thought, Landon's eerie green flames, still expanding and sparking against the iron chains, was snuffed. With another thought, the threads of Sky magic holding Landon off the ground, and the threads of Flame-colored travel magic the man was starting to summon, were severed. With a gentle tap, Landon was shoved down into the iron-lined pit. And with a quick flick of pure power, the iron-bar cover of the pit was pulled up into place, clanging as its latches clicked home.

I pulled iron with magic, some distant part of Finley's brain observed.

The iron-tipped crossbow bolts, still flying slowly through the air, clattered to the ground, the energy of their launches stolen by a wisp of silvery energy. And the iron chains cross the square dissolved instantly into harmless rust, their normal lifespan accelerated and compressed by a thousand times.

Another detached part of Finley's mind continued to observe Landon. He's used to much magic that wasn't his own. He's burning

out his mind, his personality. It was entirely possible the iron bars wouldn't hold Landon for long, and entirely likely Finley was going to have to do something... more final.

Time resumed its normal speed.

An eerie silence descended upon the town square. The once roiling storm clouds above dissipated, revealing a clear, star-studded sky that seemed to mock the chaos that had just unfolded. The townsfolk, hunters, witchkind, and priests alike seemed frozen in place, their eyes wide with a mixture of awe and terror as they struggled to comprehend the incredible display of magic they had just witnessed.

Finley stood at the center of the square, his body thrumming with an otherworldly energy that crackled and danced across his skin. His eyes, once a warm, earthy tone, now glowed with an iridescent light that shifted and changed like the facets of a kaleidoscope. The very air around him seemed to shimmer and warp, as if reality itself was bending to his will.

Mila, Kelden, and Arcadia, along with the other members of the Order who had materialized in the square, slowly picked themselves up from the ground, their expressions a mix of amazement and concern. They had never seen Finley wield such raw, unbridled power before, and the implications of his newfound abilities were both exhilarating and terrifying.

The four members of witchkind who had been caught by the iron chains lay motionless on the ground, their bodies wracked with the lingering pain of the metal's touch. Finley's gaze fell upon them, and with a gentle wave of his hand, the rust that had once been the chains dissolved into a fine, glittering powder that swirled around the fallen figures. As the powder settled upon their skin, their wounds began to heal, the angry red welts fading into smooth, unblemished flesh.

The townsfolk, still gripped by a mixture of fear and uncertainty, began to whisper among themselves, their voices a low, buzzing hum that filled the square. Some pointed to the pit where Landon now lay trapped, while others cast furtive glances at Finley, their eyes wide with a newfound reverence.

Finley's mind raced as he grappled with the implications of his actions. He had tapped into a wellspring of power that he had never

before imagined, a force that transcended the boundaries of the known affinities. The very fabric of magic itself had bent to his will, and the responsibility that came with such power weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

But the thrumming in his chest was starting to become discordant. It was as if a great orchestra had, for one incredible, perfect moment, managed to strike the same exact note on a hundred instruments at once, but almost immediately their separate frequencies began to depart from that singular point. Finley felt himself vibrating, felt his magic rubbing against itself, felt the warm, coalesced affinities struggling to reassert their individual identities.

"Finley," Arcadia said, taking his arm in her hand. "Are you... okay?"

"I'm—" he managed before passing out.

CHAPTER 11

A New Path

Can you feel it? the voice asked in his mind.

It was different, now. Its timber was richer, and although Finley felt he could hear it better and more fully than ever, it was also distinct. It wasn't within him anymore, despite the fact that it filled his mind. Feel what?

The Veil.

Finley reached out with his senses, trying to grasp what the voice meant. At first, he felt nothing—the world seemed the same as always, the bustle of civilization distant but still audible beyond wherever he lay. But then, ever so faintly, he began to perceive it. Or rather, the absence of it.

The Veil had been a constant, detectable presence, even if he had never consciously known it until recently. It was like a thin gauze that lay over the world, softening edges, blurring lines, cloaking the arcane and ineffable from human perception. But that gossamer barrier had been torn away. All that remained were a few ancient threads, drifting this way and that on the eldritch wind of the world's magic.

I saw magic, he thought.

You did, the voice said, and Finley thought it sounded impressed. More purely than I've been able to, much as I've been trying.

I couldn't hold it.

The voice seemed to shrug. You'll try again. It's a lot. Believe me, I know, and I only held it for a few scant seconds. But it's in you, now. The... harmony.

Is this what Landon has?

No. The voice sounded utterly certain. He's been given new affinities, is all. The Earth he was born with. Flame, obviously. Sky, probably. I can't sense Sea in him, and he certainly hasn't touched on Endings or Beginnings. And he's all brute force. Very little in the way of subtlety. He's never bothered even trying to master the Control alignment, for example.

No. Even in school, Landon had struggled with precise magics. He leaned heavily into the Destruction alignment and little else.

But that trap of theirs won't hold him for long, I don't think.

No. His mind is... being burned away.

Which, in a way, the voice mused, makes him more dangerous. He'll force his way through something you wouldn't bother trying.

So what now? Finley asked.

Rest a bit longer. You probably need to Gather, to fill yourself, although I suspect in time you won't need to. You'll be able to manipulate ambient magic directly, now that you can see it.

Finley marveled at such a thing being conceivable, let alone available to himself.

When you wake, your friends are going to need you, the voice continued. The Veil is gone, and witchkind, and magic, are out. How you let that play out amongst the humans is very much up to you.

So either we let the Taryba subjugate them, or we convince them to live alongside us?

Oh, the voice said, its tone tinged with wry humor, I think the humans may have a thought or two as well.



The Council Chambers of the Taryba were a study in imposing grandeur, and to Finley it seemed as if someone must have been using

magic to reshape the room pretty often. It barely resembled the already-impressive chamber he remembered from his last visit.

The Chambers soared to towering heights, the vaulted ceiling adorned with an intricate mosaic depicting the history and triumphs of witchkind. Tiny tiles gleamed in hues of gold, emerald, and sapphire, each tiny piece painstakingly shaped and placed by masterful, magical hands. From the domed expanse hung an enormous chandelier, its countless crystals refracting the light into a dazzling array of colors that danced across the polished marble floor.

Thirteen ornate chairs—thrones in all but name—were arranged in a sweeping semi-circle, elevated on a raised dais that commanded attention from all who entered. Each seat was crafted from rare woods and precious metals, inlaid with glittering gemstones that seemed to pulse with an inner light. The central chair, reserved for the Taryba's leader, was the grandest of all, its high back carved with arcane symbols that shifted and flowed as one's gaze lingered upon them. It was a profligate use of magic, entirely for display, and clearly meant to convey the message that the Taryba had magic to burn.

Towering windows lined the walls, their panes not of mere glass, but of shimmering, translucent energy that cast an ethereal glow throughout the chamber. The ever-changing hues of the magical windows responded to the emotions and intentions of those within, shifting from soothing blues to fiery reds as debates grew heated. On his last visit, that trick had been limited to a few orbs spread in front of the council's broad desk, but again, this iteration of the Taryba wanted to emphasize that they had plenty of power to spare.

At the center of the chamber, a great circular table stood, its surface a swirling pool of liquid silver. Maps and images could be conjured from its depths, allowing the Council to view any corner of the world with a thought—and yet more magic. Runes etched along the table's edge pulsed with a steady rhythm, a heartbeat of power that resonated through the very stones of the room.

The air itself was alive with energy, currents of magic flowing like invisible rivers, intertwining and separating in an intricate dance. With each breath, Finley could taste the heady mix of power and potential,

the remnants of countless spells and incantations that had been cast within these walls over the centuries.

The grandeur was, in part, spoiled by the smug expressions on the councilors' faces.

High Councilor Jankauskas occupied the center seat, and the positioning of the other councilors was a transparent show of their position within the Taryba's complex and ever-shifting web of alliances and arrangements. To her right was Degutis, Abebe, Ohanian, Conteh, Okoro, and Perich, all staunch supporters of the subjugation strategy. To her left sat Bartosz, Dvořák, Kovalchuk, their smug, condescending expressions making it obvious where their loyalties lay. In sharp contrast were the last three councilors: Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken, who Finley knew were staunchly opposed to subjugation.

They were a sad minority in the room.

"Arcadia," Degutis said, his oil-slick voice immediately causing bile to rise in Finley's throat, "you've come with a report?"

"We both have," Finley said. "The Veil is gone. Landon's displays—"

"When you say gone," Degutis interrupted smoothly, "what do you mean, exactly? We've no proof that it ever existed, for example, and so I feel as if—"

Finley and Arcadia had discussed this, and decided it was time to put everything in the open. "I'm a Rune Smith," Finley snapped. And with barely a thought, he summoned a rune to mind:

[[[RUNE Carving]]]

It is vaguely unsatisfying, Finley thought idly as he filled the rune with power. The thought of manipulating magic directly, without the intermediary of a rune to shape the intent in his mind was... compelling.

But the rune's effect was no less impressive, despite the immense protections already laid on the chambers.

In Finley's mind, the rune pulsed with a blinding white light, and that radiance spread outward, flooding the chamber and causing the

councilors to shield their eyes. In an instant, the very fabric of the room began to unravel. The intricate mosaic on the ceiling shimmered and distorted, the tiny tiles cascading downward like a shower of shattered dreams. They clattered against the floor and vanished, now nothing more than packed dirt strewn with straw.

The grand thrones of the councilors shrunk and warped, their precious metals and gemstones melting away to reveal simple wooden chairs, worn and weathered. The once-imposing dais now stood as a humble raised platform, its grandeur reduced to mere scaffolding.

The shimmering windows dissolved, their magical energy dissipating into the air like wisps of forgotten enchantments. In their place, rough-hewn shutters appeared, hanging crookedly on rusted hinges. Sunlight streamed through the gaps, casting moted beams across the transformed space.

The great circular table at the center of the room rippled and churned, the liquid silver evaporating into a fine mist. As the haze cleared, a sturdy but plain wooden table emerged, its surface marred by countless nicks and scratches from years of use.

The very air seemed to change, the once-palpable currents of magic now nothing more than stale, musty drafts that carried the scent of ale and smoke. The runes etched into the table's edge faded and disappeared, their power extinguished like snuffed candles.

In mere moments, the grand Council Chambers had been reduced to a space reminiscent of a common tavern. The councilors blinked in disbelief, their expressions of smug superiority replaced by shock and confusion. They found themselves seated around the weathered table, their resplendent robes now appearing as simple, homespun garments.

Finley stood amidst the transformation, his hand still outstretched, the rune's power emanating from his fingertips. A smile played at the corners of his mouth as he surveyed the scene before him. The once-grand chamber, stripped of its illusions and pretenses, now reflected the true nature of the Taryba—a group of individuals no more impressive or powerful than the common folk they sought to subjugate.

Councilor Jankauskas fingers twitched, and Finley had to stop himself from grinning. He felt her magic stab into the room, attempting to reverse a portion of what Finley had transformed. But his

own magic was far stronger, and it held firm as he watched her shoulders droop. "Rune Smiths are something more than you might imagine," he said quietly as he slowly lowered his hand. Next to him, Arcadia was all but vibrating with barely repressed glee.

"The Veil was real," he continued, "but that's moot, now. It's gone. I know this, understand? I can see it. Or could, before Landon's flagrant displays shredded it. One of the most ancient magics in our world, and you destroyed it in just days." He shook his head sadly. "Now, the slightest display of magic will be visible to the humans. They'll question where their neighbors have been living all this time. They'll wonder why strange symbols have been carved into their buildings, their boats, everything around them. Magic can no longer be concealed." He stepped forward, sweeping his gaze across the councilors' dumbfounded faces. "Evermore will no longer be a secret. It was always the Veil that led all but the most determined humans away. They'll find the Farm, and every other place where witchkind has taken shelter."

"Some of witchkind have remained in their homes," Arcadia said quietly, stepping next to Finley. "We will suggest that the rest return. Not all at once, as they'll need to find actual, physical places to live, in most cases. But we must return. Openly. Let's show the humans how we've helped support them over the centuries. Let's show them magic as a partner, as a tool, and not a danger. Let's give them back their inventions, their innovations. Let them stand on their own, and let witchkind stand next to them."

Bit of a foregone conclusion on that one, Finley thought wryly. He had little doubt that Nordon was already duplicating the Order's books, and doing his best to ensure humans wouldn't lose the information again.

"Ridiculous," Councilor Okoro stammered. "The humans will never accept magic as anything but a threat. We've—"

"Yes, you've tried to see to that, haven't you?" Finley barked. "Sending Landon around to conjure 'demons,' to burn down their towns. But he's gotten away from you a bit, hasn't he?" Okoro opened her mouth, but hesitated. "Yes, I know everything. The entire Order of Some knows now, as well, and we won't keep the informations secret. You are responsible for the destruction in Lakewood, including the

property and lives of the witchkind who lived there." He shook his head. "Landon never had a strong mind. Never had a grip on the Control alignment. And all he wanted was the approval of others, and if he couldn't have that, then he wanted power over them. And Dmitry, what, gifted him two entirely new affinities? You have to suspect it's burning out his mind, his personality. Well, suspect no more. It has."

"You've seen him?" Councilor Baltakis rasped.

Arcadia nodded. "We helped a group of humans trap him, in fact. We're not confident it'll hold him long, but they're being careful. Industrious. Clever."

"So that's where he's been," someone muttered. Finley didn't see who.

But Councilor Degutis had flushed almost purple with anger. "You helped humans against one of your own? How—"

"Landon," Finley said, his voice low, cold, and irresistible, "is not one of our own. He is mad. Broken. Sick. Probably beyond help, probably beyond mending, thanks to all of you and your scheming."

"You can't—" Councilor Jankauskas began.

"Let me clarify something," Arcadia said cooly. "We did not come here to request something of you. We came here to inform you. Your collusion, your direction in the deaths and injuries of witchkind is now known. We are advising all of witchkind to present themselves to humans. Openly, as friends and partners. We will help keep them safe as they do so. The Order of Some, despite your intentions, is not your private army with which to subjugate the humans and put them under your rule. You may retain your seats on this council," she added with a shrug, "but I frankly don't think this council is going to matter much longer if you don't change your approach."

"You arrogant, stupid children," Councilor Perich snapped. "You spread lies and deceit! You can't possibly—"

"Let me reiterate, Perich," Finley broke in, his tone hard and uncompromising, "I am a Rune Smith. You're known as something of a scholar, yes?" In his mind, he summoned one of the Middle Runic runes his talent—the voice in his head—had shown him.

. . .

[[[RUNE Forced Truth]]]

He concentrated for a moment, bringing his six affinities together into one for a brief moment of harmony. He fed this power to the rune, and laid it over the entire Taryba.

Impressive, the voice said. I don't think I ever managed to do that to more than two people at once.

"You are perhaps familiar, from your studies, of the different Forms of magic that the Adherents of the Axes could practice. This is one from the Sixth Axis, from its Form of Mind, I believe. Tell me, Councilors: Are you responsible for the destruction in the human cities? For the death of some of your own people? Have you been holding Landon's leash as he wreaked havoc across the continent?"

"Aš tai įrašinėju," Arcadia whispered, invoking a rune that would capture everything that was seen or said in the room. She held out a palm, displaying a small crystal orb, into which the sounds and images would be captured and retained.

The Councilors squirmed in their seats, their faces contorting as they fought against the irresistible demand of Finley's magic. Beads of sweat formed on their brows, and their eyes darted about the room, seeking escape from the inescapable truth that now demanded to be spoken.

Councilor Degutis was the first to succumb, his words spilling forth in a torrent of confession. "Yes," he gasped, his voice strained and trembling. "We are responsible. We orchestrated the destruction, the chaos. We saw an opportunity to seize control, to assert our dominance over the humans once and for all."

His admission hung in the air, heavy and damning. The other Councilors looked on in horror, their own secrets bubbling up within them, ready to burst forth.

Councilor Jankauskas spoke next, her words laced with a mix of defiance and defeat. "Landon was our instrument," she said, her eyes flickering with a fading ember of pride. "We knew he had been gifted with new affinities, we knew it would make him more powerful, more volatile. We needed a weapon, and he was all too eager to be wielded."

The confessions continued, each of Jankauskas' allies revealing their part in the grand scheme. They spoke of manipulating Landon's mind, of directing his attacks, of callously sacrificing the lives of their own people to further their agenda. The words poured out of them, unstoppable and undeniable, captured forever in the crystal orb Arcadia held.

Councilor Perich, once so haughty and self-assured, now slumped in her seat, her voice a broken whisper. "We thought we could control him," she murmured, his gaze distant and haunted. "We believed we could harness his power."

As the confessions wound to a close, the chamber fell silent, the weight of the truth settling upon them all like a suffocating blanket. The Councilors, stripped of their illusions and machinations, sat exposed and vulnerable, their grand designs laid bare for all to see.

Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken looked triumphant. The magic hadn't compelled them to say a thing, but everything they'd known about their colleagues, everything they'd suspected, had finally been brought into the open. "You're monsters," Baltakis rasped.

Finley surveyed the room, his expression a mixture of triumph and sorrow. He had known the depths of their deceit, but hearing it spoken aloud, seeing the resignation and shame etched upon their faces, made it all the more real, all the more tragic.

Arcadia stepped forward, her voice ringing clear and strong in the hushed chamber. "Your words have been saved," she declared, holding up the crystal orb, its surface swirling with the captured confessions. "The truth of your actions will be known to all of witchkind, and even to the humans you sought to subjugate. You have brought this upon yourselves, and now you must face the consequences."

The Councilors seemed to shrink in their seats, the weight of their misdeeds bearing down on them.

"I think," Councilor Baltakis said in his rough voice, "some new Council elections may soon be in order."

Finley and Arcadia exchange a satisfied glance before Arcadia's magic swept them up and carried them away.



The salty sea breeze whipped through Finley's hair as he walked alongside Kelden and his parents towards the bustling heart of Sowsee. The quaint fishing village, nestled against the rugged coastline, was a picturesque tableau of weathered wooden houses, their painted facades faded by the sun and the brine. Narrow, winding streets were lined with colorful buoys and fishing nets hung out to dry, their intricate knots and patterns a testament to the generations of skilled hands that had woven them.

As they approached the central square, the distant crash of waves against the rocky shore mingled with the lively chatter of the villagers going about their daily routines. Fishermen, their skin tanned and leathery from countless hours under the sun, hauled in their catches from the docks, their nets brimming with silvery fish that glinted in the morning light. The air was thick with the pungent aroma of the sea, mixed with the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the village bakery.

In the heart of the square stood a towering statue of a legendary fisherman, his bronze features etched with the determination and resilience that had made Sowsee famous. The statue's outstretched arm pointed towards the vast expanse of the ocean, a silent reminder of the village's lifeblood and the challenges its people faced every day.

As they walked, Finley couldn't help but feel a surge of nostalgia wash over him. The cobblestone streets beneath his feet, worn smooth by the passage of time and countless footsteps, held memories of his childhood spent exploring every nook and cranny of the village whenever his parents brought him on a visit. He remembered the laughter and the stories shared around the crackling bonfires on the beach, the taste of salt on his lips and the warmth of the community that had embraced him.

Now, as they approached the gathering crowd in the square, Finley felt a sense of purpose and determination settle over him. His parents, walking slightly ahead, exchanged glances filled with a mix of nervousness and resolve. They had come to Sowsee to reveal their true nature, to show the villagers that magic was not something to be feared, but rather a tool that could be used in harmony with the human world.

As they reached the center of the square, Finley's father stepped

forward, his voice ringing out clear and strong above the murmur of the crowd. "People of Sowsee," he began, his eyes sweeping over the gathered faces, "we come to you today not as strangers, but as friends. As neighbors who have lived and worked alongside you for years, sharing in your joys and your hardships."

The crowd fell silent, their attention focused on the man before them. Finley watched as his father took a deep breath, his shoulders squared and his chin held high. "We have a truth to share with you," he continued, his voice steady and unwavering. "A truth that has been hidden for generations, but one that can no longer be kept in the shadows. We are witchkind, blessed with the ability to wield magic."

A ripple of surprise and confusion ran through the crowd. Finley saw faces etched with fear—but also a hint of curiosity. His mother stepped forward, her gentle smile a beacon of reassurance.

"Magic is not something to be feared," she said, her voice soft yet filled with conviction. "It is a gift, one that we have used to help and support this community for as long as we have been a part of it. The nets that never seem to break, the boats that weather even the fiercest storms—these are the subtle ways in which we have woven our magic into the fabric of Sowsee."

Finley watched as realization dawned on the faces of the villagers. Whispers turned to murmurs of understanding, and the tension in the air began to dissipate.

“Magic has been sent against you, recently,” Finley said. “But against us, as well. A single madman, given more power than he could handle, directed by more madmen who wanted to use him to seize power. Our people, witchkind, suffered from his attacks, just as you did. Those madmen wanted to rule not just you, but us as well. The terrors in Nek and Lakewood killed as many of us, destroyed as many of our homes, as you and yours.” The villagers’ faces were pensive now, waiting for his next words. “I have stopped them. The madmen who sought power. As for the man who attacked us all... he is in custody. Human custody, and those humans are free to work their justice against him.” He lowered his voice, and the villagers leaned in a bit to hear. “And if they leave anything of him, we will take ours.”

"We do not seek to rule or dominate," Finley's father continued.

"We simply wish to live openly and honestly, to share our gifts and work alongside you as equals. The world is changing, and the time for secrets is over."

An elderly fisherman, his face weathered by the sea and the sun, stepped forward from the crowd. "I've known ye for years," he said, his voice gruff but not unkind. "Ye've always been there, lending a hand when times were tough. If what ye say is true, then I see no reason why we can't continue as we always have—as friends and neighbors."

"But," a woman called from the crowd, "what if we say no? What if we want no magic here? We're an honest people, a holy people. Nekęsk ragana gyventi," she said, and again Finley felt an odd dissonance at those old words, the True Language of magic, spilling from human lips. "Suffer not a witch to live! What if we say no?"

A low, urgent murmur spread through the crowd. Finley and his parents had discussed this before coming, and they'd immediately agreed on the right answer.

"Then we will leave," his mother said sadly, spreading her hands in acceptance. "If we cannot earn your trust, if you would not have us as neighbors, then we will go."

"Where?" someone else shouted.

"To someplace that accepts us openly," Finley's father called back. "And if there is no such place, then we will make our own. Away from you, as far as we may. I will miss the sea," he admitted, "but if you all bid it, then we will go."

The muttering of the crowd was mixed now, as some of the villagers seemed to argue for them to remain, while others insisted they go.

A middle-aged main wearing a mayor's chain of office stepped forward. "We will need time. To discuss. To decide."

"Of course," Finley's mother said soothingly. She took a tentative step forward and held out a hand. In it were two clay discs, one colored a rusty red, the other dyed a cobalt blue. She offered them to the mayor, who looked at them for a long moment before hesitantly accepting them. "When you decide, break one of these. Break the red one, and we'll know we are welcome. Break the blue, and we know to never return."

"How many of you?" someone called.

"A few," Finley's father assured them. "And perhaps you will decide on a number. Some ratio you can be comfortable with. I will tell you this: you outnumber us more than ten to one across the world. We are few, compared to you. We live longer, we have fewer children. It has always been so. In our home village, there were ten of witchkind to more than a thousand humans."

The crowd's murmurs were more subdued now, carrying a note of surprise and... confidence?

"Where will you live?" someone wanted to know.

This was the subject they'd known would come up, if they weren't attacked immediately, and the one likely to cause the most consternation and fear. They'd agreed that the truth remained the best path. "One of our magics," his mother explained slowly, stepping back, "creates spaces within spaces. Entire homes, hidden in the eaves of a house. An inn, concealed in the spaces between walls. This is where many of us lived. But going forward, if you invite us back, we will build our own homes, just as you have. We will be seen. We will not skulk in the shadows, will not hide ourselves from you. No longer. But if that magic can benefit us all—create safe shelters during storms, create cool rooms in which to store the day's catch, create warm spaces in the deep of winter—then we will offer it to you. Freely. Our magic costs us little. We can use it to benefit us all."

The crowd's murmurs were thoughtful now, Finley thought.

"I would say something."

The crowd parted as their old priest stepped gently to the fore. This was a discussion they hadn't wanted to leave to chance, and they'd approached the man the day prior. He'd been responsible for bringing the crowd together here, and he offered their best chance at being accepted.

"Speak, Father," the mayor offered.

"You spoke the words well," the priest said to the old woman. "Nekęsk ragana gyventi. But I will tell you—not everything in our oldest books is true and honest. This past fortnight, I was visited by our bishop of the Southern Eparchy. He had much to say about our holiest texts." The man paused, turned, and surveyed the crowd before him. "But he used those words. He would have us turn out our own mayor,

and our Aldermen. He would have us grant full authority over our lives to him. He brought stories of magic—not the attacks we have all heard of, but tales that were patently false, of babes stolen from their cribs, of kraken summoned from the sea." He shook his head. "My point is that our texts, and the god's words, have been, and will be, used against us. I would argue that it is actions we should examine. The actions of those who would seize power for their own gain, and the actions of those that would live in peace." Again, he slowly surveyed the crowd, which had fallen into a contemplative silence. "That is all I have to say." He turned, nodded to the four people of witchkind, and then retreated back into the crowd.

"We will go now," Finley's mother said softly. "And await your decision."

And then, in a move they had deliberated for longer than any other, they wrapped themselves in magic and vanished.



Across the continent, similar scenes unfolded as witchkind stepped forward to reveal themselves to the human communities they had long lived alongside in secret. In the bustling port city of Landshire, a trio of witchkind approached the town square, their steps measured and their expressions a mix of hope and trepidation. The cobblestone streets echoed with the clatter of horse-drawn carts and the shouts of street vendors hawking their wares, while the salty sea breeze carried the tangy scent of fish and brine.

As they reached the center of the square, the people of witchkind exchanged glances before the eldest among them, a woman with silver-streaked hair and kind eyes, raised her hands to gather the attention of the passing townsfolk. "People of Landshire," she called out, her voice clear and resonant, "we come to you today with open hearts and a desire for understanding."

Curious faces turned towards them, some etched with suspicion, others with genuine interest. The woman continued, "We have lived among you for generations, using our magic to subtly aid and support this community. The ships that always find safe harbor, the crops that

flourish even in the harshest seasons—these are the fruits of our labors, the ways in which we have woven our magic into the fabric of Landshire."

Murmurs rippled through the growing crowd, a mix of surprise and skepticism. A burly dock worker stepped forward, his brow furrowed. "Magic, you say? And you've been using it on us all this time?"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes, but never to harm or control. Only to help and protect. We seek only to live openly and honestly, to share our gifts and work alongside you as equals."

As the crowd processed this revelation, a young woman with a baby in her arms spoke up, her voice hesitant. "But what of the stories we've heard? Of witches stealing children and summoning monsters from the depths?"

The second person of witchkind, a man with a neatly trimmed beard and gentle eyes, shook his head. "Those are lies and misconceptions, spread by those who fear what they do not understand. We are not the monsters of legend, but rather your neighbors and friends."

The third, a young woman with fiery red hair, stepped forward. "We understand your concerns and your doubts. But we ask only for a chance to prove ourselves, to show you that magic can be a force for good when wielded with wisdom and compassion."

The crowd exchanged glances, their expressions ranging from cautious acceptance to outright hostility. The dock worker crossed his arms, his stance defensive. "And what if we refuse? What if we want no part of your magic in our lives?"

The eldest of witchkind smiled sadly. "Then we will leave, as much as it pains us. We will not force our presence upon you. But we hope that, in time, you will come to see us as we truly are—not as threats, but as allies. And until you decide, we will go." A set of clay tokens was provided, and the three took themselves away by magic.

In the charred ruins of Lakewood, a very different scene unfolded. The once-thriving town lay in smoldering shambles, its buildings reduced to piles of blackened timber and scorched stone. The acrid stench of smoke and ash hung heavy in the air, a suffocating reminder of the magical onslaught that had ravaged the community just a moon before.

Amidst the rubble, two figures picked their way carefully through the debris-strewn streets. They were emissaries of witchkind, a man and a woman, their faces etched with a mix of sorrow and determination. They had come to Lakewood with the same message of peace and coexistence that their brethren were sharing across the continent, hoping to bridge the gap between their people and the humans who had suffered so greatly at the hands of magic gone awry.

But as they approached the makeshift gathering place at the heart of the ruined town, it became clear that their words would find no welcome here. A crowd had assembled, their faces haggard and their eyes haunted by the horrors they had witnessed. They clutched makeshift weapons in their hands—iron pokers, rusty shovels, and fire-hardened sticks—their knuckles white with the force of their grip.

The emissaries stopped a safe distance away, their hands raised in a gesture of peace. The man, his dark hair flecked with grey, stepped forward, his voice steady despite the tension that crackled in the air. "People of Lakewood," he began, "we come to you in a spirit of reconciliation and—"

"Spare us your pretty words, witch!" a grizzled man snarled, brandishing a jagged piece of iron like a sword. "Your kind brought nothing but death and destruction to our town. We want no part of your magic or your lies!"

The crowd surged forward, their faces contorted with rage and fear. The woman, her chestnut hair braided down her back, tried to reason with them. "Please, listen to us. We are not the ones who attacked you. We want only to help, to rebuild what was lost and—"

"Lies!" a woman shrieked, her voice raw with grief. "My husband died in the fires your magic started. My children are orphans because of you!" She lunged forward, swinging a heavy iron skillet with a strength born of desperation.

The emissaries leapt back, narrowly avoiding the blow. Around them, the crowd pressed in, their makeshift weapons glinting in the ashen light. Iron pokers thrust forward like spears, rusty shovels swung like clubs, and fire-hardened sticks jabbed like daggers. The air crackled with the energy of their hatred and fear, a palpable force that seemed to smother any hope of reason or understanding.

The man and woman exchanged a glance, their eyes filled with a profound sadness. They had hoped to find common ground, but there was none to be had. They quickly summoned their magic and fled, not bothering to leave behind the two clay tokens they'd optimistically brought.

CHAPTER 12

A Divided World

Where do we stand so far?" Finley asked, leaning over the map table.

Arcadia tapped the upper-left. "Rushford and Greensea are accepting witchkind."

"No surprise," Kelden murmured. "I don't think the woodwitches would have permitted anything else."

"True," she acknowledged. "Most of the northeast, as well. Northsea, Soloton, Chiton, Landshire—Kelden, your mother was one of the three who approached them as she did marvelously. Taliesin, Spurham. Farreach in the North, Twynsits, and Baythwaite, which is a bit of a relief given how close it is to Disemstoke's." As she spoke, the towns and villages she named glowed a mild green. "Now, for the bad news, and it's mostly the west. Lastpointe, Westhead, Fyngershire, Lakewood—unsurprising, and the witchkind who approached them were attacked—and Cuppton. Little Bay, Hook, Harbsmouth, everyone along Southwestern Lake. Nek, again unsurprising. Farreach in the South."

"Unsurprising," Finley sighed.

"Bryssi and Withering have held as neutral, so far," Arcadia continued. "The larger towns—cities, really—are taking longer to commit, and there are some signs that some of them may try and walk both sides

of the line. Carvendam and Nworlons, too. Most of the southeast is still on the fence: Meadowside, Pease, Sowsee—that one's disappointed me as well, Finley—and Wisding.

"More importantly, and somewhat worryingly, we're seeing the smaller settlements pull up their stakes and merge back into the nearest decent-sized village. It's as if everyone senses something in the wind, and they're huddling up for protection."

"Which brings us to the really terrible news," Kelden said. "Arcadia, you haven't seen this yet. In fact, from the reports I've been reading, I think it's worth doing a scry. Let me get Nik, he's best at this." Kelden stepped out of the room for a moment and returned with a nervous-looking young man. "Go ahead, Nik. Do Westhead."

Nik nodded silently and closed his eyes. Finley felt for him: scrying was the single most difficult magic he'd ever encountered. A strange mix of Sky and Sea, it provided an invaluable ability to view a scene remotely, but it was notoriously difficult to cast and maintain, let alone control. Sweat immediately broke out on Nik's forehead, and Finley's sympathy for the boy doubled.

But he was nothing if not capable: within moments, a mist rose from the map table, and formed itself into a fuzzy picture of the coastal town of Westhead.

The town had changed.

The mist shimmered and rippled, gradually resolving into a crisper, more vivid image of Westhead. But it was a Westhead transformed, a far cry from the quaint fishing village Finley remembered.

A formidable iron-reinforced wooden stockade now encircled the entire town, stretching from the rocky cliffs all the way to the pebbled shore. The stockade's rough-hewn logs, easily twice the height of a man, bristled with vicious iron spikes. Squat, sturdy watchtowers punctuated the perimeter at regular intervals. Atop each tower, grim-faced guards stood sentinel, clutching iron-reinforced crossbows and hefty ballistas loaded with wickedly sharp iron-tipped bolts.

Just inside the completed outer stockade, work was already well underway on a second, even more imposing inner wall. Thick stone blocks, their surfaces still rough from the quarry, were being hoisted into place by teams of laborers. The wall's foundation was deep and

broad, promising a barrier that would stand unbreached for centuries. At its top, the first hint of crenellations could be seen taking shape, soon to provide protected vantage points for defending archers.

The air about the town hung heavy with tension, a constant thrum of anxious activity. The cheerful bustle of fishmongers and net menders near the docks had been replaced by the grim purpose of a settlement girding for war. Where once children played freely in the streets, now only the measured tramp of patrolling guards could be heard.

Finley's heart sank as he absorbed the scene. This was no longer a village where witchkind and humankind lived side-by-side in amiable, if secret, peace. Westhead had become a fortress, an armed camp braced for imminent attack. The transformation was as startling as it was disheartening.

"I don't understand," Finley murmured, half to himself. "Why would they go to such lengths? What are they afraid of?"

Arcadia shook her head grimly. "Not afraid of. Preparing for." She gestured at the image of the reinforced town. "That's not defense. That's offense. Westhead is readying itself to wage war. On us."

“They’re calling themselves an Iron City,” Kelden said. “And they’re calling on other cities to expel witchkind and fortify themselves similarly. Nik, close in a bit, like we discussed.”

As Nik refocused his scrying magic, the misty image above the map table shimmered and rippled, zooming in on a cluster of buildings near Westhead's central square. Or rather, what remained of those buildings.

Where once stood sturdy stone and timber structures—a tailor's shop, a cobbler's workshop, the town records office—now there were only piles of rubble and splintered wood. The destruction was not the result of age or neglect, but of deliberate and systematic demolition.

Finley leaned in closer, his brow furrowed as he took in the scene of devastation. Amid the debris, the telltale glint of iron caught his eye. Iron spikes, dozens of them, driven deep into the very foundation stones of the ruined buildings. And there, etched into a toppled lintel, the fractured remnants of a protective rune, its power broken by a spike hammered ruthlessly through its center.

"They're not just fortifying," Arcadia said softly, her voice tight with

anger and sorrow. "They're erasing us. Obliterating any trace of witchkind's presence."

Nik's magic shifted the view toward the harbor, where Westhead's once-proud fishing fleet bobbed at anchor. But the boats, too, had been transformed. Crews swarmed over the decks, tearing out planks with fervent, almost frenzied energy. As each plank was ripped free, a glimmer of fading magic could be seen, protective runes and wards carved lovingly into the wood by the fleet's fisherwitches, now discarded without a second thought.

In place of the removed planks, the boats' hulls were being hastily reinforced with crude iron straps, pounded into place with a blacksmith's ruthless efficiency. The message was clear: iron over magic, no matter the cost.

"They're crippling themselves," Kelden murmured, shaking his head. "Those runes kept their boats safe, made their nets heavy with catch. They're throwing away generations of knowledge, of symbiosis, for what? Fear? Hatred?"

Finley tore his gaze away from the heartbreaking scene, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "They're making a choice," he said, his voice low and resolute. "And so must we. If they would see us as enemies, then we must be prepared to defend ourselves. To fight for our right to exist."

Arcadia nodded, her eyes hard as flint. "Agreed. We'll reach out to the towns that stand with us, coordinate our efforts. If Westhead and its allies want a war, then by the stars, we'll give them one."

“So, speaking of that,” Kelden said. “Nik, go to Taliesin.”

The boy clenched his jaw and nodded, and the image of Westhead faded. It was replaced by Taliesin, which sat at the foot of the southern end of the Great Northern Range.

This village had clearly taken the other approach, welcoming witchkind and their magic—but its residents clearly had few illusions about the future state of the world, for they’d also begun fortifying their home.

The misty image of Taliesin shimmered into focus, revealing a village transformed not by fear and rejection of magic, but by an embrace of its potential. Where Westhead's fortifications were crude

and hastily erected, Taliesin's defenses were a marvel of magical engineering, a testament to the power of witchkind and humankind working in harmony.

The village was encircled by a wall that seemed to grow organically from the earth itself, its foundation melding seamlessly with the rocky terrain at the foot of the Great Northern Range. The wall's surface was a tapestry of intricately carved runes, each one pulsing with a soft, steady glow. The runes were not mere decorations, but living enchantments, weaving together to form a complex web of protective magic. And presented as they were in the open, rather than being furtively carved into an inconspicuous location, these runes seemed even more majestic and alive.

As Finley watched, a team of witchkind and stonemasons worked side by side to raise a new section of the wall. The masons shaped the stones with expert precision, their chisels and hammers guided by steady hands. Beside them, people of witchkind chanted in low, melodic tones, their fingers tracing patterns in the air as their song kept their magic synchronized. As each stone was set in place, it seemed to meld with its neighbors, the seams vanishing as if the wall were a single, unbroken entity.

At regular intervals along the wall, graceful towers rose toward the sky, their spires twisting and curving in ways that defied conventional architecture. The towers were not built of simple stone and mortar, but of living wood, coaxed into shape by the gentle persuasion of the village's Earth-affinity witchkind. The wood was not cut or harvested, but grown in place, the towers rising from the ground like great, twisting trees.

The effect was breathtaking, a perfect fusion of nature and magic. The towers' surfaces were adorned with intricate carvings, each one a masterpiece of woodworking art. But the carvings were more than mere decoration. They, too, were runes, each one imbued with protective magic. The runes glowed with a soft, pulsing light, casting a warm, inviting radiance over the village.

At the base of each tower, great stone doors stood open, their surfaces etched with yet more runes. The doors were not simple barriers, but portals, each one linked to its counterparts around the village.

Through them, defenders could move instantly from one part of the wall to another, responding to threats with preternatural speed and coordination.

"Šokinėti durys," Arcadia breathed. "I've only ever read of them."

As the view shifted to the village center, Finley saw that the magical fortifications extended beyond the wall. The village's central square was dominated by a great stone fountain, its waters cascading in a shimmering curtain from a towering sculpture of a great tree. The tree's branches were spread wide, as if sheltering the village beneath its canopy. And indeed, the sculpture was more than mere art. Its surface, too, was covered in glowing runes, each one a part of a vast enchantment.

"They're calling themselves an Arcane City," Kelden said softly, his voice full of pride.

"So now the two sides of the war have names," Finley said sadly.

"More than two sides," Kelden said. "Go ahead, Nik."

The misty image above the map table rippled once more as Nik focused his scrying magic on Evermore, the once-hidden heart of witchkind. The city had always been a closely guarded secret, known only to a select few among humankind. But now, as the specter of war loomed, Evermore had abandoned its secrecy, revealing itself as a bastion of magical might.

The city was nestled in a verdant valley, surrounded on all sides by towering, mist-shrouded hills. The hills themselves seemed to bend and curve around Evermore, as if cradling it in a protective embrace. Their peaks glowed with an ethereal light, the very rock suffused with ancient, powerful enchantments woven by generations of witchkind's most skilled mages.

As the image clarified, the city's outermost defenses came into sharp focus. The walls, once a decorative boundary demarcating the edge of the city proper, had been transformed into a formidable, multi-tiered fortification. The lower sections were constructed of massive blocks of granite, each one etched with a complex lattice of defensive runes. The runes pulsed with a steady, silvery light, their power thrumming through the stone like a heartbeat.

Above the granite base, the walls seamlessly transitioned into

gleaming metal, an alloy forged from silver, copper, and rare ores. The metal was not only nigh indestructible but also served as a conduit for the city's protective enchantments, allowing the magic to flow freely through the entire defensive perimeter.

Along the top of the walls, a series of crystalline minarets had been erected, each one housing a contingent of newly trained battlewitches. The minarets were not mere watchtowers, but focal points for the city's magical defenses. Within each one, a team of witchkind maintained a constant vigil, their combined power weaving an invisible, impenetrable shield around Evermore.

The city's skyline, once dominated by graceful spires and soaring towers, had undergone a drastic transformation. The tallest structures had been deliberately dismantled, their materials transformed for the coming war. In their place, a series of low, heavily fortified buildings had been erected, each one a veritable stronghold in its own right.

These squat, unassuming structures belied their true nature. Beneath their reinforced stone exteriors, each building housed a labyrinthine complex of research facilities, artifact vaults, and arcane training grounds. Here, the city's most brilliant minds worked tirelessly to unlock new magical techniques, to devise new spells and enchantments that could turn the tide of the coming war.

Arcadia sighed. "I've known about this one. They've militarized the entire city. A full quarter of the population left immediately, but the rest... well, the people of Evermore have never been fully anchored in reality. The evidence notwithstanding, they probably believe everything the Taryba is telling them. Most of them probably don't ever think it'll come to war, and they certainly can't imagine Evermore being a target."

"Where did all those people go?" Finley wondered.

Arcadia gave him an odd look, and then chuckled. "I forgot, you brought yourself directly here. Let's go outside. Brace yourself."

"That'll do, Nik," Kelden said approvingly. "Go and rest."

The boy nodded and led the way out of the map room.

Kelden and Finley followed Arcadia out, and Finley mentally braced himself for what lay beyond the door. But nothing could have truly prepared him for the sight that greeted his eyes as they stepped into the bright sunlight.

He'd grown accustomed to the massive expansion of the once-modest farmhouse that had served as the Order's headquarters. But it was now dwarfed by the sprawling network of buildings that had sprung up around it, seemingly overnight.

Finley blinked, his mind struggling to process the sheer scale of the change. Where there had once been rolling fields and pastures, there now stood a bustling, impromptu city, its streets teeming with life. The air hummed with the mingled sounds of conversation, laughter, and the steady rhythm of hard work.

The architecture of this new settlement was unlike anything that had once been in Evermore. Rather than the soaring spires and organic curves favored by witchkind's ruling class, the buildings here were low and simple, their lines clean and functional. Sturdy wooden frames were quickly being filled in with wattle and daub, the earthy scent of fresh clay mingling with the tang of sawdust on the breeze.

As they made their way down what was rapidly becoming the main thoroughfare, Finley marveled at the cobblestone streets taking shape beneath his feet. Teams of workers, both witchkind and human, labored side by side to lay the stones, their faces beaded with sweat but alight with purpose. The sight of humans working openly alongside magic-wielders was almost as startling as the city's sudden appearance.

"Refugees," Arcadia said, answering Finley's unspoken question. "From all over. When word spread of the divisions forming, of the Iron Cities and their stance, those who refused to turn against witchkind began making their way here. Humans and witchkind alike, seeking a place where they could stand together." She smiled. "They're calling it Crafthold."

Finley nodded, a lump forming in his throat as he watched a human child dart laughing through the crowd, a flickering wisp of conjured light bobbing playfully along in her wake. The easy acceptance, the seamless integration of magic and the mundane, was a balm to his troubled heart.

As they walked, Finley began to pick out the telltale signs of magic at work, though they were subtler than he'd grown accustomed to seeing. A mason, her hands moving in fluid, practiced motions, coaxed a stack of bricks to assemble themselves into a neat, level wall. Nearby, a

carpenter's saw danced through a plank of its own accord, following a line only it could see, while its owner conferred with a human colleague over a set of meticulously drawn plans.

Magic was everywhere, but it was a magic tempered by practicality. Finley and Arcadia stopped in front of a large, circular structure that seemed to be the heart of Crafthold's bustling activity. The building's walls were a patchwork of stone and timber, with wide, open doorways on all sides. Above the central entrance, a freshly painted sign proclaimed: "Crafthold Assembly Hall".

As they stepped inside, Finley was struck by the air of purposeful energy that filled the space. The hall was divided into sections, each one dedicated to a different aspect of the burgeoning community's needs.

In one corner, a group of witchkind and human healers huddled around a large table, sorting through piles of herbs and vials, their voices low as they discussed the most effective ways to combine traditional medicine with healing magic. Across the room, a team of craftsmen and Earth-affinity witchkind pored over detailed plans for new buildings, debating the merits of various materials and construction techniques.

At the center of the hall, a large, circular platform had been erected, its surface etched with a complex array of runes. A group of witchkind, their clothes marked with the sigils of the four elemental affinities, stood around the platform, their hands linked as they chanted in soft unison. As their voices rose and fell, the runes began to glow, pulsing with a soft, steady light.

"They call it a heartstone," Arcadia explained, her voice hushed with reverence. "It's to be the core of Crafthold's defenses, a focal point for the combined power of all who call this place home. Cooperative defense. Nothing like what Evermore is doing."

Finley watched, transfixed, as tendrils of energy began to spiral outward from the heartstone, weaving themselves into the very fabric of the building. The walls seemed to pulse with a living warmth, the air humming with the gentle thrum of protective magic. It lulled him, for just a moment, into a near-trance, the sound of the chanters mingling with the soft tingle of magic. And then, for just a moment, his vision... slipped.

The tendrils of magic emanating from the stone were no longer

mere wisps of light, but intricate tapestries woven from countless shimmering threads, each one a complex sequence of luminous symbols.

The symbols danced and swirled in mesmerizing patterns, their colors spanning the entire spectrum of the rainbow and beyond, into hues that defied description. Finley found himself instinctively understanding the meaning behind each symbol, his mind attuned to the intricate language of magic in a way he had never experienced before.

The threads of Sea magic flowed in undulating waves, their symbols fluid and ever-changing, adapting to the ebb and flow of the energies around them. They were a vibrant azure, shot through with glints of silver that reminded Finley of sunlight dancing on the crests of waves. Each Sea symbol found its counterpart in the steadfast, enduring runes of Earth, their rich, deep green intertwined with veins of golden light.

The Sky magic soared overhead in graceful arcs, its symbols a brilliant, ethereal blue that seemed to hold the very essence of the heavens within them. They darted and swooped, playful yet precise, each one perfectly balanced by the grounding presence of the Earth symbols below.

And then there was the Flame magic, its threads a vibrant, pulsing orange shot through with flickering tongues of red and gold. The Flame symbols danced and leaped, their energy wild and untamed, yet never straying from the harmonious pattern of the whole. They were tempered by the soothing, mutable flow of the Sea symbols, the two elements working in perfect synergy.

As Finley watched, he could see the intent of the witchkind shaping and directing the threads of magic, their thoughts and emotions guiding the symbols into ever more complex and beautiful configurations. The heartstone pulsed with the combined power of their focused will, the runes on its surface glowing brighter with each passing moment.

The magic suffused the very stones of the Assembly Hall, weaving itself into the foundation and walls, creating a living, breathing shield that would stand against any threat. Finley could feel the love and dedication of Crafthold's inhabitants flowing through every thread, their commitment to unity and cooperation manifest in the glorious tapestry of magic before him.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the vision faded, the luminous threads and symbols giving way to the mundane reality of the Assembly Hall once more. Finley blinked, his mind reeling as he tried to process the incredible sight he had just witnessed. The witchkind around the heartstone continued their chant, unaware of the wondrous hidden world their magic had briefly revealed.

You're getting it, the voice in his head whispered.

"A moment," Kelden said, his eyes taking on a faraway look. His jaw tightened as he held out one hand, and an eye blink later, a small sheaf of papers appeared in it. Arcadia moved to stand behind him as they scanned the dispatch. "This is bad," he said.

"Back to the map room," Arcadia ordered in a low voice.

Tension drew Finley's shoulders tight as Arcadia simply took them there using her magic. She stared intently at the map table for a moment, then referred back to the dispatch Kelden still held. "Here," she said, tapping the map.

A glowing yellow line extended from Lakewood. It crawled eastward for the distance of perhaps a day's ride, and then stopped. A yellow dot glowed to life at its end.

"What is it?" Finley asked.

"A small war party, we think," Arcadia said grimly. "Kelden, is there any chance Nik could—"

But Kelden was already shaking his head. "He's a good lad, but that was his limit. It'll be tomorrow before he can try again, and even then it'll give him a terror of a headache."

Arcadia sighed in mild frustration, but acquiesced. "According to the dispatch, it's a small band of humans. Armed with iron weapons. Not large enough that I'd call them an army, maybe three or four dozen. But they've wagons with iron-reinforced arbalests, and probably more our scouts didn't see."

"And they're marching on... Twynsits?"

"Likely," she said. "Or one of the smaller outlying settlements that hasn't yet abandoned their homes and moved to the bigger town."

"What could they possibly hope to do against Twynsits? It's already pretty well fortified," Finley pointed out.

"I wish we had a dozen more Niks," Arcadia grumbled. "But yes

and no. Twynsits has a defensive wall, but it's centuries old, from when the humans fought each other a lot more frequently. Something witchkind put a stop to, by the way, even before the Order was formed. But the town—well, be honest and call it a city, it's big enough—outgrew those walls generations ago. At most, they're relying on stockades designed to keep wildlife out, and even that's only a fraction of their perimeter. We've been expecting something like this, though, and if I have to guess, I'd say Lakewood is trying to see what happens."

"Trying—what do you mean? They'll be crushed!" Finley exclaimed.

"Yes and no," Kelden said. "Keep in mind we spent a lot of time on strategy and tactics at Thornwaithe's. Not that anyone thought this would ever happen, but... our founder was a bit paranoid and a big believer in being prepared, and our faculty took pretty much the same approach. My guess is that Lakewood's going to make a feint. They're going to try their weapons against magical defenses and see what happens. They know there's some risk, but look at the dispatch." He tapped a page.

Finley skimmed it quickly. "They're all mounted?"

"Exactly," Kelden said. "They're prepared to abandon their wagons and make a run for it, if needed."

"But that's still absurd," Finley protested. "Has Twynsits' witchkind been reinforcing their defenses?"

"Not as heavily as Taliesin's, no," Arcadia replied. "Not yet."

"They can deploy a purely magical defense," Kelden suggested. "Covering the entire perimeter would be difficult, but an arc in front of the Lakewood force would be easy enough."

"But still—"

"Backed by physical and magical reinforcements," Arcadia added. "Which unfortunately means a counterattack."

"Then—"

"It'll be a few days before they arrive," Kelden pointed out. "And this dispatch has already been forwarded to Twynsits' council. They'll have ample time to prepare. I imagine they're already sending their own scouts to take a look, and you know that'll involve Sky-affinity witchkind."

"But Lakewood has sent a small arsenal of iron," Arcadia reminded Finley as he again opened his mouth to speak. "They're probably hoping to be spotted, so they can try their crossbows and those arbalests. And whatever else they've come up with."

"There's a deep mine not a quarter day's ride from Lakewood," Kelden pointed out, tapping a spot on the map. "Every deep mine in the west has been reopened and is working triple shifts to produce more ore."

"And the blacksmiths are working themselves to the bone," Arcadia added sadly. "These weapons are mostly crude, slapped together quickly, but against magic—they're likely to be effective."

Finley closed his eyes, trying to envision the impending clash between Lakewood's iron-armed forces and Twynsits' magic-infused defenses. In his mind's eye, he saw the small but determined band of human warriors approaching the city's outskirts, their wagons creaking under the weight of their deadly iron cargo.

The mounted scouts at the vanguard of the force would be the first to spot Twynsits' outer defenses—not the ancient stone walls of generations past, but a shimmering, translucent barrier that seemed to rise from the very earth itself. The barrier pulsed with a soft, ethereal glow, the light dancing and swirling in intricate patterns that spoke of the complex web of protective enchantments woven into its very essence.

As the scouting party drew closer, they would see that the barrier was not a solid wall, but rather a tapestry of living energy, each thread a masterful work of elemental magic. Tendrils of verdant green, the lifeblood of Earth magic, twined seamlessly with the flowing azure currents of Sea, while the brilliant gold of Sky magic darted and wove between them like playful zephyrs. The fiery orange-red of Flame magic pulsed at the heart of it all, a steady, unwavering beat that seemed to lend strength and vitality to the entire structure.

A four-in one, fully integrated magical defense.

Still no proof against cold iron.

The scouts would rein in their mounts, eyes wide with awe and trepidation as they took in the magnitude of the magical fortifications. For a moment, they might question the wisdom of their mission,

wondering how their crude iron weapons could possibly stand against such a display of arcane might.

But their orders were clear, and the lure of testing Lakewood's new arsenal against witchkind's defenses too tempting to resist. With a signal from their leader, the wagons would rumble forward, the iron-reinforced arbalests and other strange contrivances glinting with cold menace in the sunlight.

As the main force approached the shimmering barrier, the air would seem to thicken with tension, the very fabric of reality straining against the impending clash of iron and magic. The human warriors would ready their weapons, crossbows and arbalests loaded with iron-tipped bolts, while those with more experimental armaments would take their positions, hands gripping unfamiliar triggers and levers.

On the other side of the barrier, Twynsits' defenders would stand ready, their stances calm but alert. Among them, witchkind of all affinities would be arrayed, their hands already weaving the intricate gestures that would summon forth their elemental powers.

The moment of impact would be unlike anything anyone in living memory had ever seen. The first volley of iron bolts would streak towards the magical barrier. In Finley's mind, the cold, lifeless metal sucked the very light from the air as it hurtled towards its target.

With a discordant, shrieking sound that Finley could imagine all too well, the bolts would strike the shimmering wall of magic. For a heartbeat, the barrier might hold firm, the intricate weave of elemental energies straining against the onslaught. Emerald strands of Earth magic, sapphire threads of Sea, golden filaments of Sky, and crimson cords of Flame would all pulse, as if rallying to repel the attack.

But iron was relentless. Where each bolt struck, the magical tapestry would fray and blacken, the living energies recoiling from the dead metal's touch. Hairline fractures begin to spiderweb outward from the impact points, the cracks glowing an angry, poisonous green as the iron's disruptive influence spread and the tightly woven tapestry unraveled.

In Finley's mind, the watching defenders cried out in dismay and redoubled their efforts, pouring more of their power into the faltering barrier. But with each new volley of bolts, the damage spread further,

the once-vibrant weave of magic unraveling with terrifying speed. Defender after defender would collapse, their magic spent and grounded by the iron bolts.

Through the widening gaps in the failing barrier, Finley could see the grim determination on the faces of Lakewood's warriors. They worked with methodical precision, reloading their arbalests and adjusting their aim for maximum effect. Beside them, the crews of the stranger weapons were engulfed in frenetic activity, swarming over the iron-encased contrivances with wrenches and hammers, making final adjustments before unleashing their untested might. The witchkind of Twynsits, unaccustomed to battle, would lose confidence, which would affect their ability to summon new defenses, let alone a counterattack.

With a final, tortured groan, the magical barrier shattered in Finley's imagination, dissolving into drifting motes of colored light that winked out like dying stars. The way into Twynsits lay open, the city's outer defenses breached.

Shake it off, the voice in his head, distant but firm, warned. You're skirting on the edge of oracular magic, and I don't recommend it.

But the battle wasn't done playing out.

The defender of Twynsits would know iron was being leveled against them, know that a purely magical attack wouldn't, couldn't, hold.

The glimmering shield would have been little more than a holding action. A way of getting the Lakewood attackers to stop. A way for Twyncits to see what had been brought before them. And without time to prepare more complex, physical defenses or counterattacks, the people of Twynsits would rely on witchkind.

Those with Sky affinity would fly high overhead, carrying compatriots with Flame and Earth affinity, and the attackers from Lakewood would see what true magic was all about.

With grim determination, the Earth witchkind began to weave their magic, their hands twitching through intricate patterns as they drew upon the power of the land itself. The ground beneath the Lakewood attackers began to tremble and heave, the once-solid earth transforming into a treacherous, shifting morass.

Horses stumbled and fell, their riders thrown from their saddles as

the very ground beneath their hooves turned against them. The iron-clad wagons, once a symbol of Lakewood's might, now became their undoing. As the earth liquefied, the heavy wagons began to sink, their wheels mired in the sucking mud.

But the Earth witchkind were just getting started. With a concerted effort, they focused their magic on the sunken wagons, their hands clenching into fists as they exerted their will upon the land. Spires of stone stabbed upward, shattering wagons. Sinkholes appeared from nowhere, swallowing both men and horses.

And then those with affinity for Flame joined the fray.

As the Earth wielders immobilized the Lakewood attackers, their Flame-affinity brethren unleashed their own devastating assault from above. With eyes blazing and hands wreathed in shimmering coronas of heat, they called forth the primal power of fire, shaping it to their will with fierce determination.

Searing bolts of crimson flame streaked downward from the sky, leaving trails of shimmering afterimages in their wake. The air crackled and hissed as the superheated projectiles found their marks, exploding amidst the mired Lakewood forces with concussive blasts of light and sound.

Iron-clad wagons erupted into blistering pyres, their reinforced timbers and metalwork no match for the raw, elemental fury of the Flame witchkind's magic. The screams of panicked horses mingled with the cries of their riders as the conflagration spread, the acrid stench of burning flesh and molten iron choking the air.

Finley, the voice in his mind, now more distant and fuzzy than ever, warned. You go too far. You're tampering with Time, and it will retaliate. Pull yourself back!

Finley physically shook his head to clear it.

"You okay?" Arcadia said with concern, placing a hand on his forearm.

"No," he said, his heart slowing. "It's going to be a massacre on both sides," he said flatly. "How many days did you say we have?"

"Three, probably. Four if the weather doesn't hold," Kelden estimated.

"Then we need a plan."

CHAPTER 13

A Captive

Landon lay on the earthen bottom of the pit, moaning softly. All around him, iron bars sucked greedily at his magic, the hated metal's powers enhanced by its direct contact with the earth itself. Landon tried to protect himself, tried to use Finley's technique for bottling up his magic, but his magic was too much.

His magic churned within him, a maelstrom of raw power that threatened to tear him apart from the inside. The Earth affinity he had always known now warred with the fierce heat of Flame and the wild, untamed energy of Sky. Each element vied for dominance, sending jolts of pain through his body with every surge.

He could feel the magic's consciousness, separate from his own, scheming and strategizing in ways his mind couldn't comprehend. It whispered dark secrets, promising him unimaginable strength if only he would surrender control. But he knew that way lay madness and destruction.

Although perhaps he'd already walked that road.

Landon gritted his teeth, trying desperately to hold the affinities in balance. Sweat poured down his face as he strained against the onslaught. His vision swam with visions of towering infernos, howling gales, and heaving mountains, each one more vivid and terrifying than the last.

Through the haze of pain, he dimly realized that his mind was fracturing under the immense pressure. Memories slipped away like wisps of smoke, replaced by twisted phantasms that gibbered and shrieked. He could no longer distinguish reality from delusion.

A bitter laugh escaped Landon's cracked lips. To have so much magic at his command, yet be rendered helpless by his own power - there was a cruel irony in that. He had always dreamed of wielding multiple affinities, but never had he imagined it would be like this - a curse rather than a blessing, a harbinger of insanity instead of greatness.

As the iron bars continued to leech away his magic and his sanity, Landon curled in on himself, lost in the tempest of his own abilities. Only the faintest spark of his true self remained, flickering in the chaos, and he clung to it with the desperation of a drowning man. "I'm to be king," he groaned.

Landon latched onto that like a lifeline. He was to be king. The Councilor had promised it!

In his fractured mind, Landon saw himself seated upon a throne of gold and obsidian, resplendent in robes of finest silk. The crown upon his brow pulsed with the combined might of Earth, Flame, and Sky, a trinity of power that made him nigh-invincible.

Before him stretched a vast hall filled with courtiers and supplicants, all bowing low in reverence. Humans and witchkind alike knelt in submission, their petty differences forgotten in the face of his supreme authority. He was their king, their god, and they existed only to serve his every whim. They welcomed his firm, guiding, relentless hand.

"I'm to be king," he whispered miserably.

"Not if I can help it," came a voice from above.

Landon looked up through bleary eyes. It must have been somewhere near midday, for the figure staring down at him through the iron grates was backlit. But Landon remembered the voice: it was the voice of his captor. His tormentor.

A human.

"So what are we going to do with you?" the man asked, almost to himself. "Feed you?"

"Food," Landon whimpered, rolling onto his back. "Water."

"Not just yet," the human said, his voice as cold and unyielding as

the iron cage. The dark shape turned aside and called, "Aimery, think we could get a blanket of chain mail through the gaps in the bars?" There was a distant, indistinct reply, and the shape stood and walked away.

Landon let out a single, tortured sob, the pain of his magic leaving him almost unbearable. It had been, what—a day? A fortnight? A century, that he'd lain here? As powerful as he was, as powerful as he'd become, surely it must take decades for the earth to suck away all of his magic.

Finley would know how to get out, a small, sane portion of his brain suggested. Finley has done this before.

Landon blinked, his pain momentarily diminished. Finley had been through this once before, hadn't he? Trapped in a pit in the ground, trapped like an animal by the foul humans. Surrounded by cold iron. Ah, but Landon was so much stronger than Finley.

He frowned. Had he been the one to free his weak classmate? His shattered mind struggled to remember. It must have happened that way, he told himself. Finley was trapped. Nothing he could do but bottle up his magic. Iron all around him, iron above him, and I told him—

A cube has six sides. I learned that in school. At Disemstoke's, a detached corner of his mind whispered. Left, right, ahead, behind, up...

And down.

Landon rolled over, his nose pressed into the hard-packed, gritty dirt.

All around him, iron drew on his magic. Left, right, ahead, behind, up...

But not down.

Landon pressed his face deeper into the dirt, ignoring the grit that clung to his sweat-slicked skin. He focused what of his mind he could, pushing past the pain and chaos, reaching for the familiar comfort of his Earth magic. It was there, buried beneath the maelstrom of Flame and Sky, a steady pulse that beat in time with his heart.

He latched onto that connection, pouring all his concentration into strengthening it. The Earth magic responded sluggishly at first, drained by the constant pull of the iron, but Landon refused to relent. He coaxed it forward, whispering promises of freedom and vengeance, until it surged within him like an awakening giant.

With a grunt of effort, Landon began to push himself downward. The earth resisted him, packed hard from countless centuries of compression, but he refused to be deterred. He visualized his body sinking into the soil like a stone into water, slow and inexorable.

Inch by painful inch, he forced his way deeper. The iron bars seemed to scream in protest, redoubling their efforts to steal his magic, but Landon gritted his teeth and pushed onward. Dirt filled his nostrils and mouth, threatening to choke him, but he didn't dare stop for breath. His Earth affinity seemed to kick in automatically, protecting him and providing him with fresh air from... somewhere.

As he descended, memories began to surface through the haze of his fractured mind. He saw himself as a child, playing in the gardens of his family's estate, shaping the earth into blocks. He remembered the pride on his father's face when he'd first manifested his Earth affinity, the knowing smile of the old man as he taught Landon to nurture plants from nothing in just moments.

These memories strengthened Landon, reminding him of who he was beneath the madness and pain. He was Landon, son of a strong family, destined for greatness. He would not be defeated by some crude cage, not when his birthright awaited him. I am to be king.

With a final, herculean effort, Landon pushed himself fully into the earth. The soil closed over his head like a lover's embrace, welcoming him into its depths. For a moment, he simply lay there, reveling in the sudden absence of pain as the iron's influence faded away.

Then, with a thought, he began to move forward, swimming through the earth as easily as a fish through water. His Earth magic propelled him onward, parting the soil before him and closing it behind, leaving no trace of his passage.

I could escape, he thought to himself.

I must punish the humans, himself thought to him.

A king never runs, him told he.

He angled upward.



In the bustling town square, the three humans labored under the harsh midday sun, their brows furrowed with concentration and worry. Aimery grunted as he hauled a heavy coil of iron chains over to the pit where Landon lay trapped. The chains clinked and rattled, a discordant symphony that set teeth on edge.

Beside him, Eira wiped sweat from her brow. She held a bundle of iron chain mail, the intricate links glinting in the sunlight. The mail was crude and had been made hastily, its links too thick to lend the mail much flexibility. It had been a chore to forge this much, but iron was their only protection against these witches.

Nordon paced around the pit, his boots kicking up small clouds of dust, as he mulled over their options. The iron bars of the cage had seemed sufficient at first, but Landon's agonized cries and the palpable aura of magic emanating from the pit had quickly disabused them of that notion. Every bit of their organization's experience told Nordon that the young madman should have been unconscious, if not dead, yet he lay there, moaning and ranting about being king.

"The chain mail might work as a blanket," Nordon said, his voice tight with tension. "If we can get it through the bars and wrap it around him, it should suppress his magic further. But we'll need to be quick about it—who knows how long those bars will hold?"

Aimery frowned, eyeing the narrow gaps between the bars. "It'll be a tight fit," he rumbled. "And even if we get it in, there's no guarantee he won't just roll out of the way."

"What about the chains?" Eira asked, gesturing to the coil at Aimery's feet. "If we can loop them around the bars, maybe we can create a sort of secondary cage. Even if he gets past the mail, he'll still be trapped."

Nordon considered this, his fingers drumming a restless tattoo against his thigh. "It could work," he said slowly. "But we'd need to anchor the chains deep in the ground, and I don't like the idea of getting that close to the edge. If he manages to grab one of us..."

He left the thought unfinished, but they all knew the risks. Landon was powerful, and more than that, he was unpredictable. And, from what the other witches had said, insane.

For a half-moment, Nordon wished he had some way of

summoning those other witches, some way to get them to deal with one of their own. But he killed the thought almost as it was born. They would not owe a favor to "witchkind." It was up to him, here and now, to prove that humans could stand alone against the threat of magic and those who wielded it.

"Let's—" he started to say.

A thunderous crack split the air, cutting off Nordon's words. Across the square, the earth heaved and buckled, sending cobblestones flying like missiles. People screamed and scrambled for cover as a geyser of dirt and rock erupted from the ground, rising higher and higher until it towered over the surrounding buildings.

And there, at the heart of the maelstrom, stood Landon.

He was barely recognizable, caked from head to toe in thick, dark soil that clung to his skin and matted his hair. His once-fine clothes hung in tattered ruins, shredded by his subterranean journey. But his eyes... those blazed with a feverish intensity, twin pools of molten gold that seemed to burn right through to the soul.

Flame magic crackled around his hands, writhing tendrils of orange and red that cast eerie shadows across his dirt-streaked face. The very air around him shimmered with heat, distorting the buildings behind him like a desert mirage. Landon took a step forward, then another, his bare feet leaving charred footprints on the cobblestones.

"Kneel," he commanded, his voice booming across the square with unnatural volume. "Kneel before your king!"

Panic erupted among the townspeople. They ran in all directions, tripping over each other in their haste to escape the mad witch. Mothers clutched wailing children to their chests, while men brandished pitchforks and shovels in trembling hands. But Landon paid them no heed, his burning gaze fixed solely on Nordon, Aimery, and Eira.

"You dare to imprison me?" he snarled, the flames around his hands flaring brighter. "You insignificant specks of dust? I am your sovereign, ordained by the very elements themselves!"

He thrust out a hand, and a wall of fire roared to life, cutting off the far side of the square. The heat was intense, searing the skin even from a distance. Several people who had been fleeing in that direction skidded to a halt, their faces blanching with terror.

"On your knees," Landon repeated, his tone brooking no argument. "Swear fealty to me, and I may spare your miserable lives."

Nordon stepped forward, his jaw set in a stubborn line. "We kneel to no one," he said firmly, drawing his sword, "least of all a deranged witch drunk on his own power."

Landon's eyes narrowed to slits. "You will learn respect," he hissed.

Thunks sounded from above, and a dozen iron-tipped crossbow bolts flew through the air.

As if I wouldn't take precautions, Nordon thought as he and his companions dove to the ground.

A second, heavier thunk announced the firing of a large arbalest, one fitted to cast a heavy sheet of iron chain mail. More thunks sounded as ground-level crossbows were loosed, sending more iron-tipped quarrels flying.

Landon's eyes widened as he sensed the incoming barrage of iron, the metal's insidious aura sending shudders through his magic-enhanced senses. With a snarl of defiance, he thrust out both hands, calling upon the roiling power of Flame to shield him.

A blistering wall of fire erupted around Landon, the scorching heat so intense that it seemed to melt the very air. The iron-tipped crossbow bolts plunged into this inferno, their deadly points glowing white-hot in an instant. Some were vaporized on the spot, dissolving into ash and smoke, while others were deflected off-course, sent spiraling away like meteors.

The heavy chain mail, propelled by the powerful arbalest, fared slightly better. It punched through the outermost layer of Landon's defenses, the iron links sizzling and warping as they absorbed the brunt of the Flame magic. But even this sturdy barrier could not withstand the full might of Landon's power. The center of the chain mail began to glow a dull red, then a bright orange, as Landon focused his will upon it. In a matter of seconds, the links softened and ran like molten wax, the once-solid sheet of metal deforming and splitting apart.

But Landon's magic, as vast and potent as it was, was not infinite. The constant assault of iron, combined with the effort of maintaining his fiery shield, began to take its toll. Beads of sweat ran down his face,

mingling with the dirt and grime, and his breath came in ragged gasps. His control wavered for just a fraction of a second—but it was enough.

Two crossbow bolts, their iron tips still glowing from the heat of Landon's barrier, found their mark. They punctured his defenses as if they were paper, the weakened Flame magic parting before the onslaught of iron. One bolt buried itself deep in Landon's shoulder, while the other found its home in his thigh.

The pain was instantaneous and all-consuming. It was as if the iron was not merely piercing his flesh, but his very soul. The metal's nullifying properties clashed violently with Landon's magic, sending shock waves of agony through every fiber of his being. It felt as though his blood had turned to acid, corroding him from the inside out. His magic, once a raging tempest within him, now writhed and convulsed like a wounded animal, lashing out in a futile attempt to expel the intrusive iron.

Landon's scream rent the air, a sound of such pure, unadulterated suffering that it seemed to still the very breeze. His legs buckled beneath him, and he crumpled to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut. The flames around him sputtered and died, leaving only wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of burning iron.



Landon blinked.

Landon lay on his back in the grass, staring up at the sky with unfocused eyes. The blades of grass tickled his skin, their soft caress a stark contrast to the searing pain that had consumed him just moments before. Or had it been hours? Days? In this strange, timeless place, it was impossible to tell.

The sky above him was a deep, endless blue, unmarred by even the faintest wisp of cloud. It seemed to stretch on forever, an infinite expanse that made Landon feel infinitesimally small. The sun, a perfect golden orb, hung motionless at its zenith, casting a warm, gentle light that suffused the entire landscape.

As Landon's senses slowly returned, he became aware of the utter silence that enveloped him. There was no rustle of wind through the

grass, no chirping of birds or buzzing of insects. Even his own breathing seemed muted, as if the very air was holding its breath. It was a silence so profound that it was almost a presence unto itself, vast and all-encompassing.

"Hello?"

Hmm? Oh. Hello. Didn't expect you here.

The disembodied voice seemed to come from both everywhere and nowhere, all at once. It thrummed in Landon's chest, filled him, and then emptied him when it was finished speaking.

"Who are you?"

Mmm. Probably doesn't matter. I'm a little surprised you could touch this place. Let's have a look... ah. Well, there it is.

"What?"

The Sea affinity you've been missing. It's there. Opened, even. But Dmitry hadn't mastered it, and so he couldn't pass it along. And I think... yes, there they are. The Fifth and Sixth. Nascent and latent, but there. That explains it.

"Who are you?" Landon insisted.

No, we've done that one. Next, you ask where you are.

"Where am I?"

In the Origin. Or near to it.

"Am I... dead?"

The voice paused for a long moment. Yes. Or near to it. Your mind wasn't meant for all of this, you know.

Suddenly, Landon's body was full of anguish, as if a blanket of iron had been laid over him. His magic screamed, and his—

Ah, ah. Let's not feel all of that right now.

The pain vanished, replaced by a cool, fresh breeze. "What about my mind?" Landon asked as the pain receded.

It isn't once in a generation, you know. I'd know. I've watched. It's once every few centuries. And it wasn't you. Even with the inheritance magic, you shouldn't have gotten this bad. I'm guessing it was done poorly, or that you were even more ill-prepared to receive it than anyone thought.

"Can I go home?" Landon asked in a very small voice.

Mmm. No, I don't think that's going to happen.

"What will happen to me?"

Why don't we just stay here and talk for a bit?



The witch was down, another blanket of chain mail draped across him. The man who'd thrown it was kneeling on the ground, panting from the effort, and Nordon could hear his fighters frantically winding their crossbows for another volley.

"Nordon!" someone shouted.

He turned himself on the ground, rolling quickly to one side as a sharpened iron rod thudded into the ground next to him, vibrating from its impact. He stood quickly, grabbed the spear, and turned to the fallen witch.



"I was never good enough," Landon said softly, sinking to his knees in the grass.

You were fine. You were the only one who thought you weren't.

"I wanted to be powerful."

You were. Earth magic is subtle, but it's amongst the most powerful. And it can last forever.

"I'm not going to last forever."

A long pause, and then, No. You're not.

"Will you stay with me?"

Until the end. Possibly beyond.

"Thank you."



Nordon drove the spear through the fallen witch's chest. The body convulsed once, and then lay still.



Landon's world began to crack and splinter. The meadow fractured, grassy earth flying away in flat shards, leaving behind an empty, inky darkness.

Yet there was no pain in this unmaking, no sense of loss or anguish. Instead, as the last vestiges of Landon's dream crumbled away, a profound sense of peace and belonging washed over him. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, a burden he had carried for so long that he had forgotten what it felt like to be free of it.

As the grass and sky of his imagined landscape faded, Landon found himself floating in a vast, star-strewn expanse. It was the Origin, he realized, but not as he had ever perceived it before. Here, in this place beyond time and space, magic was not an abstract concept or a tool to be wielded. It was a tangible presence, a living, breathing force that suffused every atom of his being.

Around him, great orbs of pure elemental energy drifted and spun, each one a microcosm of the affinities he had known in life. There was the deep, rich green of Earth magic, pulsing with the steady rhythm of growing things. The fiery orange of Flame magic crackled and danced, casting flickering shadows across the void. The pale, ethereal blue of Sky magic swirled and eddied, carrying with it the whisper of wind and the promise of freedom.

And there, intertwined with the others, was a new presence: the shimmering, mercurial silver of Sea magic. It flowed and surged around Landon, its touch cool and soothing against his incorporeal form. He could feel its vast, untapped potential, the power of the tides and the secrets of the deep.

Landon realized now that this was what he had been missing all along. Not power for its own sake, not dominion over others, but a true connection to the source of all magic. Here, in the heart of the Origin, there was no need for thrones or crowns or grand titles. There was only the pure, unadulterated joy of being one with the fundamental forces of the universe.

As Landon's consciousness began to dissolve, merging with the swirling energies around him, he felt a profound sense of acceptance and understanding. All his struggles, all his pain and confusion, those didn't matter anymore.

He lay back and exhaled gently.



"Is he..." Aimery asked, brushing dirt from his clothes.

Nordon nodded. "We just needed enough iron."

"That was a bloody lot, though."

Nordon looked him in the eyes. "But it was enough. We can defend ourselves, Aimery. We have their notes, and we have ours—we can rebuild. Build more. For the first time in... probably millennia, humans can be human. Do you see it?"

Aimery nodded slowly at first, then emphatically. He lunged forward and embraced his friend. "Nordon, this makes us free."

"It does," Nordon said, slapping his friend on the back. "But," he added, pulling away and again meeting the man's eyes, "it might not be easy."

Aimery frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Some of them will leave us be. They have places they're welcome, now—those so-called Arcane Cities. If we're lucky, they'll leave it at that, leave us... leave the Iron Cities alone. But... remember what that Finley told us."

Aimery considered, and then nodded. "There are factions within the witches."

"Exactly. And we don't know what the others will do. So." He stepped back and looked around the square. "We need to take the path Westhead took. Build Farreach in the South into an Iron City. Help every other town and village who has rejected the witches do the same. Give them our weapons designs. Tell them what we've accomplished here today." He nodded slowly to himself. "We've work to do. Eira!" he called to the young woman who was just pulling herself upright. "Get the others! We have work to do."

CHAPTER 14

A Clash of Forces

Finley awoke with a start as the farmhouse's alarms went off. Reflexively, his magic spun around him, pulling on clothes and taking him to the second-story map room.

"Finley!" Arcadia said, relief evident in her voice. "They pulled a fast one on us."

"Who?" he asked, blinking sleep from his eyes. "Is it the Lakewood—"

"No, they slowed down—they're still two days out, at least. It's Fyngershire—they've launched an attack on Rushford!"

Finley paled. Rushford sat on the southern border of the Great Northern Wood, a part of the continent that had been all but off-limits to everyone, human and witchkind alike, for time immemorial. Only a handful of hard Woodwitches dared live there, self-appointed guardians and caretakers who were known for having little patience for intrusions. And even in Rushford, witchkind minimized their use of magic to avoid angering the Wood itself. "How could they have—"

"It's my fault," Arcadia said. "We've been spread so thin—we didn't think anyone would actually march an iron-armed army toward the Wood! I've had everyone watching the other Iron Cities, trying to infiltrate, and everyone's been so busy building Crafthold, we—"

"It's fine," Finley said quickly. "Summon whoever you can. Is Kelden—"

"Already gone. Along with two other Thornwaithe's alum."

Finley's spine chilled. "That's not good." Thornwaithe's was the most unusual of witchkind's three Great Schools. Secretive, fascinated with combat strategy and tactics, and possessed of an eerie, mysterious connection with magic itself. Any threat to magic—which would include the Great Northern Wood, Finley imagined—was met with mind-controlled Thornwaithe's alum in possession of vast, brute-force powers. "I'm going now. Get who you can." His magic rushed up and carried him away.

The sky was a deep indigo, the first hints of dawn barely visible on the eastern horizon as Finley materialized on a hilltop overlooking the village of Rushford. The air was still, heavy with the earthy scents of the Great Northern Wood that loomed just beyond, its ancient trees rising like silent sentinels.

Rushford itself was a quaint hamlet of thatched roofs and stone walls, nestled in a shallow valley. Wisps of smoke curled from chimneys as the villagers stirred, just now aware of the threat approaching from the south. Finley's keen eyes picked out the enemy forces immediately.

A line of wagons stretched across the southern approach, widely spaced to avoid presenting a single target. Each was laden with crude iron weapons—pikes, swords, crossbows, even a massive carronade. The dull metal seemed to drink in the torchlight of the accompanying soldiers, armed men who marched alongside with grim purpose.

Finley cursed under his breath.

A glimmer of magic between the village and the approaching army heralded the arrival of another of witchkind, and then Finley spotted them all: A dozen Thornwaithe's alum, ranged out in the field, ready to confront the humans.

He grimaced. This was likely to go poorly, just as it had with the carronade outside Evermore. Iron was iron; the semi-sentient force of magic might control incredible power, might summon every alum who'd ever graduated, but it was still subject to the laws of nature. Those laws demanded that magic be grounded by iron.

Finley quickly called a combination of Earth and Sea magic, soft-

ening the ground across the enemy's front, a simple enough tactic that still required more finesse than the alum were likely to exhibit in their current condition. Curses went up from the human soldiers, but they immediately started readying their long-range weapons: arbalests, the carronade, even a small catapult that likely had projectiles laced with iron.

Finley turned and scanned the village. Its witchkind had mustered, and he could sense them already beginning to work magic. But it was too little, accustomed as they were to minimizing their use of magic for fear of disturbing the Wood. And then, just beyond the village, he began to sense the Woodwitches gathering, grimly intent on their mission of safeguarding the forest. Too many people wearing blinders, he thought at once. The Thornwaithe's alum would act on their own, as would the Woodwitches.

He crafted a Sending.

Work together. Protect the village, protect the Wood. We face iron, and they have ranged weapons.

Hopefully that would get everyone—likely not the alum, who had already ceded control to magic itself—to cooperate to greater effect. And then, he saw, it had: several Woodwitches, who tended to be incredibly strong in Earth affinity, had used magic to carry themselves to the village's southern perimeter. Already, they were unleashing more magic than the environs of the Wood had probably seen in generations, hauling spires of rock from the earth itself, forming a rough stockade to protect the village's approach.

And not a moment too soon.

The carronade belched fire and smoke, its heavy iron projectile hurtling through the predawn gloom. It collided with the newly-formed stone wall with a thunderous crack, sending shards of rock flying. The wall held, but a spiderweb of fissures spread out from the point of impact, weakening the hastily-erected barrier.

Immediately, the gathered witchkind sprang into action. Earth mages thrust their hands forward, pouring their magic into the stone. The cracks began to seal, the rock fusing back together as if it had never been sundered. But even as they worked, a second projectile slammed into the wall, opening fresh wounds.

Finley jumped with alarm. The humans had pulled a tarp from a second carronade!

Behind the beleaguered barricade, more magic was at work. Witchkind with affinities for Sky and Flame stepped forward, weaving their power together. A shimmering dome of force began to take shape, rising up from the ground to arch protectively over the village. It was translucent, shot through with dancing motes of light that sparkled like captured stars.

The dome had barely solidified when it was tested. The catapult on the enemy lines fired, hurling a jagged sphere of iron straight at the heart of Rushford. It struck the magic shield.

That shield must have had a legendary amount of power in it, Finley realized, because while it shattered upon contact with iron, that destruction was more than the iron itself could take. The projectile shattered as well, drops of molten iron spattering down on the rock wall below. A ragged cheer went up from the defending witchkind.

But Finley, watching from his hilltop vantage, felt no such jubilation. He could see the strain on their faces, the tension in their stances. Maintaining such a working was no easy feat, and against the relentless onslaught of cold iron, even their formidable magic would eventually falter. Witchkind could only use magic they'd Gathered into themselves, and with that kind of expenditure, they'd be empty quickly.

Finley began pooling his own magic into his mind.

The Thornwaithe's alum had engaged now, moving forward in eerie unison. They did not waste effort on shielding spells or barricades; their magic was of a more direct sort. With a gesture, one of them set the grass before the iron-laden wagons alight, sending up a wall of hungry flames that were far hotter than their fuel should have made possible. Another made a grasping motion, and purple sparks danced from the iron-reinforced wagons, protecting the wood beneath from whatever magic had attempted.

A noise like a hundred whistles sailed overhead, and Finley realized that Rushford's human defenders had finally come to the fight. Renowned as archers, they let loose a flight of arrows over the rock wall, descending on the heads of the humans. In the pre-dawn dark, the humans would only be able to hear it coming, and Finley suspected

their attention was full captured by the still-raging flames in front of them.

He was right.

The cloud of arrows descended upon the human forces like a dark swarm, whistling ominously as they fell. Screams of pain and surprise erupted from the ranks as the shafts found their marks, piercing flesh and felling soldiers. In the flickering light of the flames, Finley could see bodies crumpling to the ground, blood darkening the earth.

But the humans were quick to retaliate. Their own archers nocked arrows to bowstrings, the iron tips glinting cruelly. With a whoosh of released tension, they let fly, sending a deadly volley arcing toward Rushford's defenders.

The witchkind rallied, pouring their magic into the shimmering dome once more. It sprang back into existence, a gossamer barrier against the incoming missiles. Many of the arrows struck this shield and shattered, unable to pierce the combined power of Sky and Flame, although each contact weakened the shield as well.

Yet iron was iron, and magic could only resist it for so long. Here and there, arrows found the gaps in the reforming shield, slipping through like silver fish darting through a net. They plunged into the village, finding targets both human and witchkind.

A woman screamed as a shaft buried itself in her shoulder, spinning her to the ground. Nearby, a Woodwitch grunted in pain, an arrow protruding from his thigh, the iron tip disrupting his magic. All along the barricade, defenders fell, clutching at wounds, their blood mingling with the dirt.

Finley gritted his teeth as he surveyed the chaos. The shimmering dome was fracturing, the magic of its creators stretched to the breaking point. Each volley of iron-tipped arrows opened new rents, and there was simply not enough power to seal them all.

Still, Rushford's defenders fought on with grim determination. The human archers loosed shaft after shaft, their aim true even in the half-light of dawn. Flame-affinity witchkind hurled fireballs at the wagons, trying to ignite the iron-laced wood. Earth witches raised walls of stone to provide cover, only to see them shattered by the relentless, booming carronade fire.

And always, the Thornwaithe's alum moved forward, their magic a palpable force. One gestured, and a whirlwind sprang up, hurling humans and broken wagons aside like toys. Another stamped her foot, and the ground rippled outward in a shockwave, staggering the front line of soldiers.

But for every human that fell, two more seemed to take their place, pouring from the wagons in a ceaseless tide. They advanced relentlessly, heedless of the flames, the arrows, the very earth that bucked beneath their feet. Their eyes were fixed on Rushford, on the Great Northern Wood beyond, and in those eyes Finley saw a zealous determination that chilled him to his core.



"HURTS!!!"

Finley blinked in confusion.

He was standing in a meadow at night, the grass itself glowing a soft emerald, with yellow motes dancing above its gently waving tips. Underneath, the earth glowed in ominous streaks of orange and red, and the scent of sulphur filled the air.

Before him was the strangest creature he'd ever seen. Its skin was midnight-blue, its long, unbound hair a glossy black. Its ears came to graceful points on either side of its head, and its lean, muscled arms ended in tightly clenched fists.

"HURTS!!!" it screamed again, green spittle flying from its mouth. "HELP US!!!"

"I'm... trying..." Finley said, trying to understand what was happening to him.



The magical dome shattered like a crystal goblet struck by a hammer, shards of iridescent energy dissipating into the dawn air. The witchkind maintaining it staggered back, their faces ashen with exhaustion. Without the protective shield, the village of Rushford lay bare before the relentless onslaught of the human forces.

The arbalests unleashed a storm of iron-tipped bolts, the heavy projectiles whistling over the stone wall like a swarm of enraged hornets. They punched through the thatched roofs and wooden walls of homes and shops with frightening ease, leaving gaping, splintered holes in their wake. Flames blossomed in the bolts' fiery trails, licking hungrily at the dried straw and aged timbers.

Screams of terror rose from the villagers as they cowered behind the meager protection of the stone barricade. Witchkind rushed to and fro, their magic straining to douse the spreading fires and bolster the crumbling wall. Those with Sea-affinity summoned great gouts of liquid from wells and nearby streams, directing them at the burning buildings in sizzling arcs. Earth witches thrust their hands forward, pouring their power into the stone, causing it to flow and reform like molten wax to seal the cracks and grow higher still.

But for every breach mended, every flame extinguished, two more appeared in its place. The arbalests fired with mechanical precision, their iron-armed wielders cranking back the powerful springs with grim efficiency. The bolts they launched were as thick as a man's thumb and twice as long, capable of skewering a draft horse at two hundred paces. Against the village's soft targets, they were brutally effective.

A bolt punched through the wall of the village's small inn, exploding out the back in a shower of splinters and plaster. Inside, patrons screamed and dove for cover as another projectile shattered the heavy oak bar, sending shards of wood and gouts of ale spraying across the room.

In the village square, a trio of bolts struck the ancient stone well at its center, pulverizing the masonry and sending jagged chunks of rock flying like shrapnel. A knot of villagers that had been huddled near the well for shelter scattered in panic, only to be cut down by the razor-sharp fragments.

Finley watched the unfolding devastation with a growing sense of despair. The human forces seemed inexhaustible, their weapons implacable. For every iron-tipped arrow that found its mark in witchkind flesh, for every stone blasted from the barricade, the defenders' strength waned. Even the mighty Thornwaithe's alum, still striding forward through the chaos with single-minded purpose, could not stand indefinitely against the onslaught

of cold iron. Their attacks were too brute-force, too focused on smashing, too easily deflected by the immense amount of iron arrayed before them.



"HURTS!!!" the blue creature screamed again.

Finley shook himself, once again disoriented by the sudden change.

Then something deep within him made a suggestion.

"You're magic, aren't you?"

"The land!" it moaned, falling to its knees. "The land and the world!"

"Let them go!" Finley shouted angrily at it, causing it to scrabble backwards in the grass. "Let the Thornwaithe's alum go! They're not doing any good this way!"

The creature's lips twisted. "Must smash them!" it snarled. "Must protect—"

"Smashing isn't working!" Finley hollered back. "Give them to me!"



Finley stood atop a low hill, his heart pounding as he surveyed the unfolding chaos below. The witchkind of Rushford fought with desperate ferocity, hurling everything they had at the relentless human attackers.

With their magical reserves dwindling, they resorted to more primal tactics. Earth-affinity witchkind wrenched massive boulders from the ground, the stone groaning and cracking as it was ripped free. With grunts of exertion, they lobbed these projectiles at the enemy lines, the huge rocks tumbling end over end before crashing into the iron-clad wagons with thunderous impacts.

The boulders smashed through wood and metal alike, sending splinters and shards flying in all directions. Human soldiers scattered, shouting in fear and pain as they were pelted by the debris. Horses reared and whinnied in terror, their eyes rolling white as they strained against their harnesses.

But even this display of raw power was not enough to halt the human advance. For every wagon destroyed, two more seemed to roll forward to take its place, disgorging fresh troops armed with cold iron. They surged towards the village barricades like an inexorable tide, their weapons glinting in the growing light of dawn.

Desperate, the witchkind turned to the wreckage of their own village for ammunition. Flame-affinity witchkind set their power to the broken timbers of collapsed buildings, the wood igniting with searing heat. The air shimmered and wavered as tongues of fire danced along the beams, licking at the splinters and charred edges.

Then, their jaws clenched, those few of Earth-affinity with any remaining power took control of the burning wood. They shaped and molded it with their magic, the timbers flexing and warping like living things. Sharpened points emerged from the ends, honed to wicked edges by the intense heat. In moments, the witchkind had created massive, improvised spears, each one as long as three men laid end to end.

With a synchronized heave, they launched these flaming javelins at the enemy ranks. The oversized spears hurtled through the air, trailing plumes of smoke and sparks, before plunging into the mass of human soldiers. Men screamed as the white-hot points pierced armor and flesh alike, the searing heat cauterizing even as it skewered. The stench of burning hair and charring skin wafted across the battlefield.

Yet even this desperate measure bought the defenders only a brief respite. The human forces were too numerous, their iron too abundant. They trampled over the smoldering corpses of their comrades and pressed forward, their faces set with zealous determination.

Amidst this carnage, the Thornwaithe's alum suddenly faltered. They blinked and shook their heads as if waking from a dream, their previous single-minded purpose evaporating.

Kelden swiftly ran to Finley. “There’s too much iron, too many attackers. Even I... I don’t know what—”

“I do,” Finley said quickly. “You have Sky affinity; we need to get those with Flame into the air to—”

“No!” Kelden barked, causing Finley to take a half-step back. “No,”

he repeated. “Flying is forbidden here. Flame, too. The witchkind here—”

“Why?'“ Finley demanded, beginning to summon his own Sky magic.

“We don’t know, just that it is,” Kelden said. He turned to face the humans, who’d slowed in firing their heavy artillery. “You have Earth. Make a sinkhole.”

Finley shook his head. “Even the ground I softened has firmed up. There’s way too much iron. Are you sure we can’t—”

Suddenly, the world around him seemed to shimmer and dissolve, the sounds of battle fading into a muted hum.



Finley found himself standing in a strange, ethereal space, a void filled with swirling mists of indigo and violet. Glowing motes drifted lazily through the air, pulsing with inner light.

Before him, a scene unfolded like a living tapestry woven from gossamer threads of magic. He saw a group of Sky-affinity witchkind, their faces set and shoulders squared, rising into the air on currents of wind. Each carried a large bucket in their hands, the contents sloshing and splashing as they ascended.

As they gained altitude, Finley saw that the buckets were filled with oil, the dark liquid gleaming with a greasy sheen. Tongues of flame danced along the rims, casting flickering shadows across the witchkind's features.

Higher and higher they rose, until they were soaring above the battlefield like a flock of avenging angels. With precise movements, they began to tip their buckets, sending cascades of burning oil raining down upon the human forces below.

The flaming liquid splattered across the iron-clad wagons and the tightly packed ranks of soldiers, igniting instantly. Men screamed as the searing oil clung to their skin and hair, the flames hungrily consuming everything they touched. The air filled with the acrid stench of burning flesh and melting metal.

For a moment, it seemed as though the tide of battle might turn in

favor of the defenders. The human advance faltered as soldiers frantically tried to beat out the flames engulfing their comrades. The iron wagons creaked and groaned as the intense heat warped their metal frames.

But then, from the depths of the Great Northern Wood, a new horror emerged. The trees at the forest's edge shook and swayed, their branches cracking and snapping as if lashed by a fierce wind. Dark shapes burst from the foliage, rising into the sky on leathery wings.

They were creatures out of nightmare, twisted amalgamations of bat, serpent, and insect. Their bodies were covered in oily black chitin, glistening in the dawning light. Serrated mandibles clacked and snapped, dripping with viscous ichor. Eyes the color of molten gold glared with malevolent hunger.

The winged monstrosities fell upon the airborne witchkind like a pack of ravenous wolves. Razor-sharp talons slashed and tore, ripping through flesh and bone with sickening ease. Barbed tails lashed out, coiling around limbs and necks, yanking the witchkind from the sky.

Screams of agony followed them to the ground. They—

Fmmly, stpp!

A voice in Finley's head, deeply muffled and far away, shouted for his attention.

The scene shifted.



As the horrific visions faded, Finley found himself once again standing on the hilltop, the battle raging before him. The human forces had rallied, their iron weapons glinting in the growing light as they pressed their attack. The witchkind defenders, exhausted and depleted, fought on with grim determination.

But then, a new vision swam into focus before Finley's eyes, superimposing itself over the chaos of the battlefield. In this shimmering, ethereal scene, he saw the Flame-affinity witchkind step forward, their faces set with fierce resolve. They raised their hands, calling upon the deep wells of power within them.

Fireballs blossomed from their outstretched palms, swirling orbs of

searing heat and light. With sharp, precise gestures, they hurled these flaming spheres at the advancing human ranks, the projectiles streaking through the air like miniature comets.

The fireballs detonated amidst the tightly packed soldiers with thunderous concussions, sending up gouts of flame and smoke. Men screamed as the searing heat washed over them, igniting clothing and hair, blistering skin and melting armor. The stench of charred flesh mingled with the acrid tang of burning metal.

More Flame witchkind joined the fray, weaving intricate patterns in the air with their hands. Ribbons of fire followed their movements, swirling and coalescing into massive, serpentine forms. These fiery constructs lunged forward, engulfing entire wagons in their blazing coils, reducing wood and iron to ash and slag.

For a moment, it again seemed as though the tide was turning. The human advance faltered as soldiers frantically beat at the flames consuming their comrades, their formation breaking apart under the relentless onslaught of magical fire.

But then, something new emerged from the depths of the Great Northern Wood. The trees at the forest's edge trembled and shook, their leaves rustling as if disturbed by a sudden wind. Shapes darted from the shadows of the undergrowth, scuttling forward on clawed feet.

They were lizard-like creatures, their scales glistening in hues of obsidian and emerald. Tongues of flame danced along their sinuous bodies, flickering between the razor-sharp ridges of their spines. Eyes like smoldering coals glared with primal hunger as they surged onto the battlefield.

To Finley's horror, the creatures seemed drawn to the magical flames, devouring them with ravenous appetite. They leapt into the blazing wagons, bathing in the searing heat, their own bodies igniting with an eerie, greenish fire. They grew larger with each conflagration consumed, swelling in size until they towered over the human soldiers.

Panic spread through the ranks of witchkind as the flaming lizards rampaged through the village, setting small fires to everything their bodies touched. In moments, Rushford was being consumed by flame.

Finley! His voice was shouting now, screaming for attention. You have to stop this! She's too close—

The trees of the forest that were closest to the village caught fire, sparks fountaining from their canopy and spreading... spreading... before long—

Finley! the voice demanded. Please! Shake yourself out of—

"What's this, then?"



Finley's eyes snapped open...

...and time was stopped.

Not slowed; this wasn't the sudden, impossible clarity of a mind working in overdrive, filled with adrenaline and fear. Time was literally stopped.

Finley blinked in astonishment. The battlefield below him was utterly still, as if a painting had sprung to life before his eyes, only to freeze in place once more. Tendrils of smoke hung motionless in the air, curling up from the smoldering wagons and scorched earth like sculpted ribbons of gray. Flames, halted mid-flicker, cast an eerie, unmoving glow across the scene.

Soldiers were caught in a macabre tableau, their faces contorted in silent screams, weapons raised in interrupted strikes. Some were frozen mid-leap, hanging suspended above the ground like marionettes with invisible strings. Others were captured in the act of falling, their bodies tilted at unnatural angles, yet never reaching the blood-soaked soil beneath them.

Finley's gaze drifted to the witchkind defenders, their expressions locked in a mix of determination, fear, and desperation. Hands were thrust outward, fingers splayed, magic halted in the space between heartbeats. Flame-affinity witchkind were encased in cocoons of motionless fire, the heat of their power palpable even in this frozen moment. Those of Earth-affinity were caught with arms raised, rock and soil suspended in mid-air around them, waiting for a command that would never come.

At the edge of the Great Northern Wood, the trees stood in eerie stillness. Leaves, caught in the act of fluttering from branches, hung like delicate green jewels against the sky. Sparks from the encroaching flames

were suspended in a glittering array, a deadly constellation that would never find its mark.

In this crystallized second, Finley could see every detail with impossible clarity. The individual links in the soldiers' iron armor, the sweat beading on their brows, the flecks of blood and dirt on their skin. The intricate weave of magic around the witchkind, shimmering threads of power frozen in complex patterns. The facets of the flames, each lick and curl perfectly preserved in a moment of terrible beauty.

It was as if the world itself were holding its breath, waiting for some unseen force to release it from this uncanny paralysis. Finley stood at the center of it all, the only moving thing in a universe of stillness, his heart pounding in his ears like a drum beating against the silence.

"What's this?"

Finley turned—why can I move?—and found himself face to face with a stooped, impossibly old woman. Her short hair was pure white, a stark contrast against her midnight skin. Her eyes were flashing with barely suppressed anger. "You don't know me, boy, but—"

Call her Aunt.

"Aunt?" Finley said aloud.

One thick finger stopped midway to Finley's chest as the woman's eyes narrowed. Then her lips thinned and she gave a shallow nod. "See you in there, boy." She lowered her hand. "This can't happen here," she continued, turning her head to take in the carnage. "Too much magic. Too close." She waved a hand. "Take it away."

"I can't just take it away," Finley snapped.

Careful, the voice warned.

"And you," the woman growled leaning toward Finley staring daggers into his eyes. "You stay out of what's mine!" Her shout thundered across the plain, echoing off the frozen trees and resonating deep within Finley's chest. Then she peered closer. "You did this to him?" She shook her head and snorted. "No, no. You just showed the way." She shrugged. "Can't stop that. But this must go." Again, she waved a hand, indicating the battlefield. "No magic in the Wood. You've seen what happens," she growled. "Will let you keep it, if this goes away."

"Who are you?" Finley blurted out.

"Ikwity," she snapped. "Names don't matter," she added as Finley opened his mouth to give her his.

"We can't stop them," Finley reiterated. "There's too much iron. Our magic—"

"Magic," she muttered. "Can't you see, boy?" She looked at him again, and Finley had the distinct impression she was looking through more than just his soul, that she could somehow perceive his entire life. "Ah," she said softly, nodded slowly, as if she'd just discovered something important. "Can't see yet. Didn't show him the whole way?" she called mockingly, and Finley realized she wasn't talking to him.

Tell her all in good time.

"He—it—that is, he says 'all in good time.'"

"Hah!" Ikwity barked. "No time is good. No time bad. Dithering, is all you do."

Tell her—

Can't you talk to her directly? Finley asked.

And bring her into the Origin? Absolutely not.

Is she... witchkind? Even as he asked it, Finley knew the old woman was not. He had no sense of her in his mind, not even the dim, dull sense that he felt from humans in his presence. She was like a hole in the world.

She's not of magic, the voice said, and Finley sensed a warning in its words. She's just inevitable.

"No chatting," the old woman grumbled. "If he won't show you, Ikwity will."



Finley inhaled sharply as he found himself floating high above the Great Northern Wood. This was no vision, he realized at once—he could still see the bright flames from the battle below, frozen points of light shining bright as the first rays of morning slid across the horizon.

Another, much brighter point of light, glowed from the midst of the forest. It was pure white, a white that can only be obtained by mixing every color imaginable with every color that wasn't. An all-encompassing, all-containing white that represented the all.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"A source," Ikwity whispered beside him, causing him to start. He hadn't realized he wasn't alone.

It's one of two sources of magic in the world, his voice explained.

"Pure and wild. Untamed, uncolored," Ikwity continued, her voice soft on the stilled breeze. As Finley watched, time seemed to come very slightly unstuck, and he could see energy fountaining from the forest. It rose high into the sky, almost to where he and Ikwity were floating, before cascading down and sinking into the earth. The amount of power coming out was immense, and while it seemed to be flowing incredibly fast, a quick glance at the battlefield told Finley that time was barely moving.

It sinks in, his voice said, and Finley definitely shared its obvious sense of wonder. It joins with the steadier flow from the bones of the world. That's absorbed into the Origin, and colored with the affinities.

"But while it's here," Ikwity said, and Finley wasn't sure if she'd heard his voice or not, "it is easily influenced by your magic. Your affinities. Only the Earth is safe, and only the smallest amounts." The cadence of the woman's voice had changed, becoming steadier, and her tone became lighter. Finley turned and saw that she's somehow de-aged, shedding pounds of weight and what must have been centuries of wrinkles. She was middle-aged now, and reminded him of his own mother—save for her pure-white hair and ebony skin. "Call your Flame magic, and the power responds. Call on Sky, and it plays along." She shook her now-regal head. "We can't have magic here."

"I told you, the iron—" Finley started.

She cut him off with a deep, throaty chuckle. "Look. Look deeply, at the bones of the world."

That phrase again, Finley thought. He looked down, and the separation between reality and vision seemed to shiver. He, or his spirit, dove down into the forest.



Finley's spirit plunged through the canopy of the Great Northern Wood, the leaves and branches parting before him like a veil of emerald

silk. He descended past the gnarled trunks of ancient oaks and towering evergreens, their bark etched with the intricate patterns of centuries. The scent of rich loam and sweet sap enveloped him as he sank into the earth itself.

Deeper and deeper he went, the soil growing darker, denser. Tree roots wove through the substrate like thick ropes, pulsing with life. Tiny creatures scuttled through the gaps—beetles with carapaces of iridescent blue, centipedes with legs of delicate gold, their movements leaving faint trails of bioluminescence in the subterranean gloom.

The roots gave way to rock, the earth's flesh parting to reveal its skeleton beneath. And there, threading through the stone like glittering filigree, Finley saw them - the bones of the world. Veins of ore, some no thicker than a strand of hair, others as wide as a man's arm, branched and interlaced in a vast, shimmering web. Iron, copper, silver, gold—the metals caught the faint light filtering from above, reflecting it back in a mesmerizing dance.

Finley's spirit followed these gleaming conduits, marveling at their intricacy. They seemed almost alive, their surfaces shivering with subtle energies. As he tracked them deeper, he sensed a palpable presence, a thrumming power that suffused the very bedrock. The veins of metal were like blood vessels, he realized, carrying the lifeblood of the earth itself.

Down, down he went, the pressure of the rock above him an almost physical weight. The air grew warmer, the darkness more absolute. And still the metallic threads continued, plunging into depths unfathomable. Finley had the dizzying sense that he was sinking not just through earth, but through the very fabric of reality itself.

Flashes of heat and light began to strobe past him—pockets of magma, churning slow and angry red in the deep places of the world. The metal veins wound through these blazing caverns unfazed, the molten rock flowing around them like water parting for a stone. Finley marveled at their resilience, their ancient, unyielding strength.

Deeper still, and the sense of some vast, ineffable presence grew stronger. The metal veins pulsed in time with a rhythm he could feel in his bones, in his soul. They were converging now, the thousands of

gleaming strands flowing together like tributaries merging into a great river.

And then he stopped.

Or rather, he was stopped.

Magic—the purest he could ever imagine, flowed along these veins of iron. But it flowed upward, it came from someplace ahead of him. Someplace down. He pushed himself, and felt resistance—something was pushing back. Frowning, he concentrated harder, willing his body to descend, to follow the trail of—

"That way is closed," Ikwity said.

Finley blinked, and he was back on the ground with her, the battle still frozen around him.

I'll take it from here, his voice said.



Now Finley was on a broad, grassy plain, standing at the foot of a shallow hill. Atop the hill were four pillars. He climbed the gentle slope of the hill, the soft grass cushioning his footsteps. As he neared the top, the four pillars came into clearer view, each one a marvel of elemental beauty.

The first pillar was of purest obsidian, its surface as dark and glossy as a moonless night sky. Intricate veins of glittering minerals—quartz, mica, feldspar—ran through the volcanic glass like frozen lightning, forming patterns that seemed to shift and dance as Finley moved around it. The pillar was cool to the touch despite the warm breeze, and he could feel the solid, unshakable strength of the earth itself thrumming within the stone. This was the pillar of Earth, immovable and eternal.

Beside it stood a pillar of living flame, tongues of fire in every shade of red, orange and gold twining around each other in an endless, mesmerizing dance. The heat radiating from it was intense, yet instead of burning, it filled Finley with a sense of energizing warmth, like the first rays of the sun on a cold morning. Sparks drifted up from the ever-shifting surface, winking out like fireflies against the blue sky. At the

pillar's heart, the flames burned white-hot, a pure, shimmering radiance. This was the pillar of Flame, vibrant and transformative.

The third pillar seemed woven from the very air, a swirling vortex of mist and wind. Tendrils of cloud spun and eddied, forming delicate patterns that resembled lace, feathers, the branches of trees in winter. As Finley watched, a miniature thunderstorm formed within the pillar, complete with tiny forks of lightning that flickered and danced. A cool, refreshing breeze sighed constantly from the pillar, carrying with it the petrichor scent of rain on dry earth. This was the pillar of Sky, dynamic and elusive.

Last was a pillar that seemed carved from the ocean itself, seawater swirling within an invisible boundary. The water was a blue so deep it bordered on black, shot through with ribbons of turquoise, teal, and foam white. Its surface was in constant motion, waves rising and falling, crashing and reforming endlessly. The briny scent of the sea filled the air, and Finley could almost hear the distant cries of gulls. As he peered into the pillar's depths, he glimpsed darting silver fish, drifting fronds of kelp, the glint of nacre on a shell tumbling in the currents. This was the pillar of Sea, fluid and fathomless.

Stretched between the pillars, low to the ground and almost obscured by the grass, were small figures of clay. The resembled people, but they were crude, simplistic, little more than bobs with short extensions for legs, arms, and heads. But each was connected to the next, forming a perfect circle that connected the four pillars. He stepped over them and toward whatever was in the center of that circle.

It turned out to be a whirling vortex, a gaping maw in the earth, swirling in shades of gold and silver. Finley looked up and saw lines of energy connecting the four pillars to each other, and at the apex, directly over the vortex, threads of white energy were flowing up and down.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your vision of the Origin," his voice said. Finley turned and saw the young, pale-skinned, dark-haired man standing there, giving him a gentle smile. "I must say, it's very relaxing."

"Earth, Flame, Sky, Sea, I get," Finley said, turning slowly. Then he

looked at the swirling maw. "Beginnings and Endings?" The young man nodded. "They were a pillar of their own, last time."

He shrugged. "They're not really magic. They're more... of an inevitability."

Finley blinked. "I'm not sure what I'm meant to—"

"You did it once before, remember?" the man said. "You brought them all together."

"Yes, but only for a—" Finley stopped as the moment replayed itself in his mind. "It was white."

"Yes."

"All of the affinities, combined."

"Yes."

"It's too much, isn't it? That's why the Origin separates it out? Most people can only deal with one, maybe two."

"Not you."

Finley blinked as comprehension dawned. "The iron."

The man smiled. "Yes."



Finley was once again on the battlefield. Aunt Ikwity was nowhere in sight, and time had resumed.

As the sky began to blush with the first rosy hues of dawn, the human forces launched their next assault on Rushford. The carronades belched smoke and fire, hurling their iron payloads with thunderous booms. The massive projectiles arced through the brightening sky, leaving trails of acrid smoke in their wake.

They smashed into the crumbling stone barricade with shattering force, pulverizing rock and mortar, sending jagged shards flying like deadly shrapnel. The wall, already weakened by the relentless bombardment, began to give way, gaping holes appearing as dust and debris rained down.

Through these breaches poured the human soldiers, their iron-clad boots trampling the rubble, their weapons glinting coldly in the growing light. They charged forward with zealous fervor, a tide of steel

and determination that crashed against the faltering defenses of Rushford.

The villagers and witchkind rallied for one final stand. The archers of Rushford, their quivers nearly spent, loosed a volley of arrows over the disintegrating wall. The shafts whistled through the dawn air, catching the golden rays of the rising sun as they descended upon the advancing enemy.

Some found their marks, piercing gaps in armor, sinking into exposed flesh. Soldiers stumbled and fell, clutching at the shafts that sprouted from their bodies. But for each one that fell, two more surged forward, trampling their fallen comrades in their relentless advance.

Behind the crumbling barricade, the witchkind of Rushford pooled the dregs of their power for a last, desperate defense. Those of Earth-affinity poured their magic into the very ground, causing it to buckle and heave beneath the iron-shod feet of the attackers. Soldiers stumbled and staggered as the earth itself seemed to rise up against them.

Sky and Flame witchkind wove their magic together, creating a shimmering dome of force over what remained of Rushford. The air within the dome crackled with energy, motes of light dancing like fireflies. It was a shield born of desperation and defiance, a final bulwark against the iron tide.

But even as the dome solidified, flickering with the waning strength of its creators, the humans brought their final weapon to bear. The catapult, its mighty arm cranked back, launched a massive sphere of cold iron directly at the heart of the magical shield.

The projectile, easily the size of a horse's head, hurtled through the air with a sound like a thousand angry hornets. It struck the dome with a blinding flash and a concussive boom that shook the earth. For a heartbeat, the shield held, the iron star sizzling against its shimmering surface.

Then, with a sound like a thousand mirrors shattering, the dome burst apart. Shards of magical energy rained down.

"Enough," Finley said, and his voice seemed to echo through the ground itself. His chest was thrumming a deep, resonant harmony, and he could feel his affinities weaving themselves together in his mind. He didn't even need runes, anymore. All of magic was simply arrayed

before him, strangely shaped symbols and letters dancing in an elegant ballet of balance and order.

"This Ends."

It was not a statement.

It was a command.

In that moment, every lick of fire in the field, every spark in the village, was snuffed.

The crumbling of the stone wall ceased, and it drew itself back together before sliding silently into the earth.

Even the breeze stilled.

And then the iron began to flake.

It was as if every weapon, every boot-plate, every ring of mail, every single shard of iron had been made of a light, airy pastry, the kind Finley had enjoyed so much as a child. The kind of pastry that the human baker down the street had made fresh, every morning, the aroma irresistible in the cool, salt-laden morning air. The kind of pastry that flaked when you touched it, got crumbs everywhere, and melted in your mouth.

Flakes of black metal fell to the ground, where they crumbled further into dust and were absorbed into the earth. Iron-shod horses were bare-hoofed. Carts and wagons collapsed as their iron reinforcements trickled away like dust. Even the mighty carronades poured to the ground as if they'd been made of black sand.

It took everyone present a moment to absorb what had happened.

Then the people of Rushford, human and witchkind alike, let out a triumphant cheer.

The attacking humans fled, leaping onto horseback when they could and simply running flat-out when they couldn't, the last flakes of their former weapons tumbling from their hands and belts as they went.

CHAPTER 15

A New Taryba

I GUESS it could be have been worse," Arcadia said dubiously. The sun had risen outside, painting the sky in pleasant, calming pastels that belied the tightness in Finley's heart.

"Obviously, but... four people died. Three of witchkind, one human," Finley said sadly. "And I couldn't even tell you how many of the humans from Fyngershire."

"Fyngershire never had as many armed men and women as in that attack," Kelden said darkly. "They were reinforced."

"So we should expect this again," Arcadia said. "I'll make sure the word gets out. We should probably set up some kind of perimeter around the Iron Cities."

"To catch this kind of thing sooner?" Kelden asked.

She nodded. "Maybe at some point they'll see that it's futile." She looked sidelong at Finley. "Especially now, it seems."

"Yeah," Finley sighed.

"Do you... feel any different?" she asked.

"Me? No, not really. I mean, I just feel like I can melt iron with magic and summon the combined powers of four elements and something that transcends magic itself. The usual." His expression was dour.

"Finley."

"Yeah, I know. If you can set up a perimeter, then I can definitely

stop them. Definitively. So that's good. In fact..." he mused. "Do you think it's worth going to back to Farreach in the South?"

Kelden frowned. "To what possible end?"

"To just preemptively put a stop to this. Nordon has a lot of influence—it wouldn't surprise me if the human cabal, or whatever's left of it, was behind the Fyngershire attack. If I can make him see that it's pointless, that I can stop them... maybe they won't try again."

"Maybe," Arcadia said. "We still need a plan. We can't just... divide the continent in half."

"Right down the middle," Kelden joked. "Starting with Evermore."

"Which... is another problem all its own," Arcadia said. "It's getting worse, there. The Taryba has set themselves up as a... dictatorship, really. I've friends there, still. The scholars are fine, so long as they keep tothemselves. The wealthy merchants—which is most of the Taryba to begin with—are fine. They're in charge, after all. But a lot of the ordinary people aren't doing well. There are restrictions on using magic, they—"

"What for?" Finley asked.

"I... it's possible the Taryba wants to move against one of the Arcane Cities. See if they can extend their control."

"What?" Kelden asked, aghast.

"They can't attack the Iron Cities. Not without Finley here. I mean, unless they just want to obliterate one, which I guess they could still do. But they're power-mad. They still want to subjugate humans, and from what I'm hearing, they're not opposed to subjugating witchkind as well."

"Then," Finley said heavily, "I think my next stop isn't going to be Farreach in the South. Let's get our own house in order first."

Arcadia gave him a long, searching look before she nodded solemnly. "I'm coming with you."



Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden approached the gates of Evermore, the once-resplendent city now transformed into a stark stronghold. Where graceful spires of alabaster stone once stretched skyward, embracing the

heavens, now stood bulky fortifications of cold grey rock. The elegant curves and soaring arches that had embodied the spirit of witchkind's unity with the natural world were replaced by harsh angles and towering ramparts, projecting an aura of unyielding dominance.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised they're blocking travel magics," Arcadia murmured as they approached. Her magic had refused to take them directly into the city, and Finley had been reluctant to use his own magic to try and force it. Instead, she'd cast about until her magic latched onto an "empty" spot, which turned out to be a flat section of bare earth designated as an arrival zone.

A path of slate stones led to the city's entrance, and as they passed through the heavy bronze portcullis, Finley felt a shiver run down his spine. The streets, once vibrant with life and pulsing with arcane energy, now lay shrouded in a miasma of fear and suspicion. Furtive glances darted from shadowed doorways and narrow alleys as the ordinary folk of Evermore went about their daily lives, shoulders hunched and voices hushed. The refugees, those desperate souls who had sought sanctuary within the city's walls, huddled in small clusters, their haunted eyes speaking volumes of the horrors they had witnessed.

"There are fewer people living on the streets than last time," Finley murmured as he nodded politely to a woman wrapped in threadbare cloaks. "So I guess that's something."

"Ma'am," Arcadia said boldly, strolling over to the woman. "Can you tell us what's going on here? What's happened?"

The woman's eyes flicked back and forth, scanning the street behind them. "Anyone fit to fight has been conscripted," she coughed. "Magic's been rationed. The fighters are in the new dormitories. At least they're housed, and fed," she added. "My husband and my two boys are with them."

"Conscripted for what?" Arcadia asked.

"To free the others," the woman said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Free—what?" Kelden blurted.

"The Prison Cities," the woman said, shaking her head. "You must come from a very small village indeed, not to know. Cities clad in iron,

with witchkind huddled in pits. forced to work their magic for the benefit of the humans. The Taryba says they'll free them."

"This is—ugh," Arcadia said with disgust. "Never mind. Are you getting food, even?"

"A ration, yes," the woman said, bobbing her head. "Refugees get one per day. Workers two. The figures, three, along with the upper class, of course. They get their regular meals, as they have to work so hard to keep us all safe."

"Rations," Kelden said flatly. "We're witchkind. We can summon food. We can create it."

"Ah, but magic is so thin, now, with all the Prison Cities' iron pressing us down," the woman corrected him.

"Have you left Evermore? Seen any of this for yourself?" Finley asked.

The woman drew back in horror. "Of course not! We're not permitted to leave. It's dangerous out there! They're saying even the Great Schools have fallen!"

"Let me assure you," Arcadia said through gritted teeth, "that these are lies. The Schools stand. Yes, there are Iron Cities—not prisons, as they've turned out all of witchkind. But there are Arcane Cities as well. Witchkind are living in the open, side by side with humans. They're beautiful." She looked around at the squat, gray stone of Evermore. "They remind me of what Evermore used to look like."

"And magic isn't 'thin' anywhere," Finley added. His senses cast about, and he realized it did seem strangely diffuse here. "Except here, for some reason. Outside the city, you'd have as much magic as you've ever had."

The woman's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Then why are they telling us these things?"

"That," Arcadia said firmly, "is what we've come to correct."

Finley took a moment to summon a large, simple meal for the woman, using his personal pool of magic. He was surprised that, as he reached out to Gather more magic to replace it, even he could feel how reluctant, how wispy, the ambient magic felt.

They're hoarding it, the voice in his head said. And they're doing something else to keep it from flowing back in. Finley felt it sniffing at

the air. It's something with this shield they've put up, the one that's interfering with travel magics as well.

Finley briefly probed the shield and then disregarded it. He wouldn't have any trouble breaking it—Ending it—when they needed to.

The three of them began the slow, winding walk from the city's entrance to the Taryba's squat, brutal tower, which sat in the exact middle of the city.

"They've reconfigured it," Arcadia muttered as they went.

And they had: Evermore's streets had once been concentric circles surrounding the Taryba tower. Broad avenues had radiated outward from that tower, providing easy ways for pedestrians and wagons to make their way through and across the city.

That was all gone. Instead, the roads and buildings had been reconfigured through profligate use of magic, into two concentric, winding spirals that led outward from the tower.

Defensive, the voice in his head noted.

"It's defensive," Kelden said in almost the same moment. "Chiton was once laid out this way. You can still see the remnants of it from above. It forces an attacking force to follow the path you want them to. Slows them down. Confuses them. Gives you plenty of opportunity to counterattack from the tops of buildings and from alleys."

As they made their way along the winding road towards the Taryba tower, they took in the changed atmosphere of Evermore. Shops still lined the streets, their doors open and wares still on display, but the once vibrant energy of commerce had been replaced by a subdued, almost furtive air.

In one shop window, bolts of richly dyed fabric in deep crimsons, royal purples, and emerald greens were draped artfully, the shimmering silks and plush velvets a testament to the skill of the city's weavers. Yet the shopkeeper, a thin man with a carefully trimmed beard and watchful eyes, stood in the doorway, his hands clasped tightly before him as he surveyed the passersby with a mixture of hope and apprehension.

Further along, a bakery's shelves were lined with golden loaves of bread, their crusts gleaming with a brush of butter, and flaky pastries

dusted with cinnamon and sugar. The rich, warm scent of baking drifted out into the street, a tantalizing reminder of simpler, happier times. But the baker, a plump woman with flour-dusted apron, handed over the precious loaves to her customers with a quick, almost furtive motion, as if afraid to linger too long in the exchange.

The people of Evermore moved through the streets with purpose, their heads down and their steps quick. Gone were the leisurely strolls and friendly greetings that had once characterized the city's social fabric. Now, neighbors passed each other with barely a nod of acknowledgement, their eyes darting nervously about as if searching for hidden threats.

As they walked, the divisions within the city's population became increasingly apparent. The refugees, with their threadbare cloaks and haunted eyes, huddled in the shadows of buildings, their meager possessions clutched close. They were the bottom rung of Evermore's new social ladder, dependent on the meager rations doled out by the Taryba.

A step above them were the workers, their hands callused with unaccustomed physical labor, their faces lined with weariness. They moved with the steady, plodding pace of those accustomed to long hours of work, whether in the fields that surrounded the city or in the workshops that produced the goods sold in the shops. Their clothing was plain but well-mended, a sign of the small but precious advantage their status afforded them.

The shopkeepers and tradesmen occupied the next tier, their attire more carefully tailored and their bearing more confident. They were the backbone of Evermore's economy, the ones who kept the wheels of commerce turning even in these troubled times. Yet even they were not immune to the pervasive sense of unease that hung over the city like a pall.

"To have changed so much, so quickly," Arcadia said in a low voice.

There's something underneath it, the voice in Finley's head said. Can you feel it?

Finley extended his senses and—there. "The city's trying to shift itself back," he said aloud, keeping his voice low as well. "That's one reason. magic is so thin. They're spending to force the city to stay this way."

"It's making my ears ring," Kelden muttered.

"That's not all," Arcadia said, casting her eyes to the middle of the road.

Above everyone in the new social ranking, literally and figuratively, were the fighters and the upper class. The fighters, conscripted from among the city's able-bodied men and women, strode through the streets with a grim sense of purpose. They wore uniforms of deep blue, the color of Evermore's flag, with a silver emblem of the Taryba emblazoned on their chests. Their eyes were hard, their jaws set with determination, and they carried themselves with the coiled tension of those ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

The uppermost class, the wealthy merchants and the members of the Taryba staff, were a study in contrast. They moved through the city with an air of entitlement, their clothing rich and elaborate, adorned with jewels that sparkled in the sunlight. They walked with their heads high, their gazes sweeping over the lesser folk with a mixture of disdain and indifference.

But even their privileged status could not entirely shield them from the new militaristic overlay that had settled over Evermore like a suffocating blanket. On every corner, guards stood at attention, their stances rigid and their eyes constantly moving, scanning the crowds for any sign of trouble. They wore armor of polished black leather, reinforced with plates of gleaming steel, and carried long, wickedly sharp spears. But it was the subtle crackle of combat magic that surrounded them, the barely-perceptible shimmer of defensive spells and offensive enchantments, that truly spoke to their readiness for violence.

Patrols roamed the streets, groups of four to six fighters moving in tight formation, their boots striking the cobblestones with a rhythmic thud. They eyed everyone they passed with open suspicion, their hands never straying far from the hilts of their swords or the focuses of their magic. The people of Evermore, in turn, lowered their gazes and hurried on their way, desperate to avoid attracting the attention of these grim-faced enforcers.

The very fabric of the city itself seemed to have been altered to reflect this new reality. Shops and homes that had once stood open and inviting now had heavy wooden shutters installed, ready to be slammed

closed and barred at the first sign of trouble. The bright, cheerful paint that had once adorned many of the buildings had been replaced with somber shades of gray and brown, as if the city itself was trying to fade into the background, to avoid notice.

There was a sense of menace that hung in the air, a palpable feeling of fear that permeated every interaction, every movement. It was in the way people hurried through the streets, their shoulders hunched and their eyes darting; in the way conversations were conducted in hushed whispers, as if afraid of being overheard; in the way children were kept close to their parents' sides, their innocence and curiosity suppressed by the omnipresent threat of violence.

"This is disgusting," Arcadia grumbled.

"We're here," Kelden said softly.

They'd arrived at the Taryba's tower. Gone were the gentle, flowing lines, the graceful, soaring windows. Like the rest of the city, the tower had been reimagined for wartime.

They stood before the transformed Taryba tower, their eyes tracing its stark, forbidding contours. The once-graceful structure now loomed over them like a monolithic sentinel, its presence as oppressive as the new regime it represented. The tower's exterior had been stripped of all ornamentation, leaving only the raw, unforgiving stone that seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. The gentle curves and flowing lines that had once characterized the building had been replaced by sharp, heavy angles, giving it a brutalistic appearance that was both intimidating and devoid of warmth.

The windows, once large and inviting, allowing sunlight to stream into the interior and illuminate the vibrant tapestries and artwork within, were now small and narrow, mere slits in the stone that seemed designed to keep the outside world at bay. They were placed at irregular intervals, their placement more strategic than aesthetic, as if the tower's new architects had been more concerned with defense than with beauty.

At the base of the tower, the main entrance had been replaced by a heavy stone door, its surface rough-hewn and unadorned save for the thick brass bands that reinforced its edges. It stood like a silent challenge, daring anyone to attempt to breach its defenses. Before the door,

a contingent of guards stood at attention, their stances rigid and their expressions impassive. They wore the same deep blue uniforms as the fighters they had seen patrolling the streets, the silver emblem of the Taryba gleaming on their chests like a badge of authority.

As Finley leaned back, his gaze traveling up the length of the tower, he could make out the glass dome that crowned its summit. Once a marvel of engineering and artistry, its panes had been a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors, casting a mesmerizing play of light into the chamber below. Now, however, the glass had been replaced with panes of somber grays and muted blues, as if even the sky itself had been leached of its vitality.

The dome's bronze framework, once delicate and almost lace-like in its intricacy, had been reinforced with thick, unyielding struts that criss-crossed the surface like the bars of a cage. It was a stark reminder of the Taryba's firm grip on the city, their determination to maintain control at any cost.

As they stood there, taking in the altered visage of the tower, Finley could feel the weight of the magic that permeated the structure. It was a dense, heavy presence, a palpable force that seemed to press down on him from all sides. He could sense the layers of defensive spells woven into the very stones of the tower, the intricate network of wards and enchantments designed to repel any attempt at infiltration or attack.

"How do we do this?" Kelden asked.

Arcadia took a step forward, and two of the guards seemed to straighten ever further, their eyes snapping toward her. "I suppose—"

"We go straight to the top," Finley said firmly, his eyes still pointed upward. "Take my arms."

Whatever the Taryba had done to Evermore, it resisted Finley's travel magic even inside the shield. He clenched his jaw as he concentrated, pushing more and more Earth magic into—

Stop, the voice in his head suggested gently. You don't need to fight it. Just bypass it.

Bypass—oh.

Finley forced himself to relax, inhaled deeply, and with a quiet, purposeful intent, willed himself and his friends into the Taryba's chambers.

They vanished from the street without a sound, and appeared inside without so much as a spark.

The councilors had undone the changes Finley had made on his last trip here, restoring their chambers to their former glory. Unlike the dour, blocky new architecture of the city outside, the chambers still had the flowing lines, the graceful arcs, and the decadent trappings of the past. The council was obviously in session, with all but three of the thirteen councilors present: High Councilor Jankauskas, Degutis, Abebe, Ohanian, Conteh, Okoro, Perich, Bartosz, Dvořák, and Kovalchuk.

They froze, Abebe's mouth half-open, as Finley and his friends appeared, but it took them only a moment to recover.

"Įstrigti!" Degutis snapped, flinging a hand toward them. Strands of Earth magic shot forth, writing in a complex pattern that sought to bind and entrap them.

Finley simply said, "No," and the attack dissipated into a thin fog. "We've come to talk, but we can fight if you prefer," he added. He could feel Kelden and Arcadia pooling their own magic, preparing for battle.

"What do you want?" Jankauskas snapped, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Where are Councilors Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken?" Arcadia asked. They were the only three who'd resisted the plan to subjugate the humans.

Degutis sneered as Jankauskas said, "We decided the Taryba needed only ten councilors. They've been... dismissed. Now speak."

"You've made a lot of changes," Finley said quietly. "It's disappointing. Let me tell you what's been happening outside your walls."

"We know—" Kovalchuk started.

"All of witchkind have safely left the Iron Cities, despite what you've told the people here," Finley said, ignoring the woman. "And the Arcane Cities are flourishing. Unlike your people here." His voice became hard. "There was an attack by one of the Iron Cities. On Rushford. That won't happen again. After we're done here, I'll be making sure of that. So there's no need for... whatever you've done here. No need for people to—"

"What do you know of need?" Degutis snarled. "You're the one

responsible for this! For Evermore's state of emergency! If you hadn't meddled, if we'd been able to—"

"All right," Arcadia said wearily. "That's enough. If you're truly down to believing your own lies, then there's nothing more to talk about. I'm pretty clear on what's happened here. You want power. You want to lord it over someone. You couldn't subjugate the humans, so you're subjugating your own kind."

"That stops today," Kelden said cooly.

"CHILD!" Degutis screamed, standing from his chair. This time, his Earth-based attack was reinforced by Sea and Flame magic from Perich and Conteh. A maelstrom of elemental magic surged forth, a dazzling display of raw power that illuminated the chamber with its fearsome brilliance. Tendrils of earthy brown, shot through with veins of glittering gold, snaked outward from his outstretched hands, writhing and twisting like living things as they sought to ensnare Finley and his companions.

These earthen bindings were soon joined by searing ribbons of flame, vibrant oranges and reds that danced and flickered with a wild, untamed energy. They coiled around the earthy strands, infusing them with a blistering heat that seemed to make the very air shimmer and warp. The fiery tendrils lashed out like whips, crackling and hissing as they sliced through the space between the councilors and their intended targets.

And then came the final element, a surging torrent of seawater that burst forth from Councilor Perich's fingertips. The sapphire blue liquid, flecked with frothy white foam, swirled and eddied as it rushed to join its elemental brethren. It flowed smoothly around the intertwined earth and fire, a cool and fluid counterpoint to their solidity and heat. The water seemed to possess a life of its own, forming intricate spirals and eddies as it surged forward, its surface glittering like a malicious jewel.

That's actually... impressive, the voice in Finley's head said admiringly. Pointless, but impressive.

You do have to be at the top of your game to be on the Taryba, Finley acknowledged as he cancelled the attack.

Motes of stray energy drifted gently to the chamber floor as the attach vanished.

Perich's jaw dropped.

Finley's voice was laced with confidence and a hint of superiority as he spoke. "Let me explain something before we go on," he said, his eyes piercing into the other person's soul. "You see, you're not going to win this battle. In fact, there won't even be a battle. You are outmatched beyond your comprehension." A sly smile graced his lips as he continued, "I not only control all four affinities, but I also wield the power of Beginnings and Endings. All six of the legendary Axes of old are under my control. And I possess the ability to bring them together in ways that you cannot even fathom."

His words echoed through the air, and he could see doubt creeping over the councilors' features. Finley's eyes sparkled with an otherworldly glint as he declared with conviction, "I know the source of magic. I know that it is brought into our world in its purest form through the iron bones of the earth." He paused for a moment and closed his eyes, channeling his power.

Suddenly, the tower began to tremble. Dust and debris fell from the ceiling as a deep rumbling filled the air. The ground shook beneath their feet, a physical manifestation of Finley's raw and unparalleled strength.

The councilors looked at each other with a growing sense of unease as the trembling grew into a shudder, then into a shake, and then into a physical roar.

"Guard yourselves," Finley said softly to his friends.

An immense pillar of pure iron, no larger than Finley himself, erupted from the very center of the council chamber's floor. It surged upward with tremendous force, shattering the dull and lifeless gray dome that covered the building and sending shards of glass flying in all directions. Acting on instinct, Finley quickly threw up a protective shield over himself and his companions, bracing for the impact. The sound of metal grinding against metal filled the air as the powerful shaft continued to rise, like a giant sword piercing through the heart of the chamber. The room was now bathed in natural light, streaming in through the gaping hole in the ceiling. All eyes were fixed on the

extraordinary spectacle before them, unable to comprehend the sheer strength and magic behind it. Shards of glass slid over and around Finley and his friends, clattering and shattering on the marble floor.

The councilors weren't so fortunate.

Most of them did try to put up personal shields, Finley noticed idly, but their magic was instantly sucked into the iron pillar. As the shards of glass fell, the councilors abandoned their magic and threw their arms over their heads. Their thick robes protected them fairly well, suffering only a few tears. As the last of the glass fell and the councillors lowered their arms, Finley saw that a few of them had suffered minor lacerations on their faces.

Councilor Jankauskas was the first to recover from the shock of the iron pillar's emergence. With a snarl of rage, she thrust her hands forward, summoning a swirling vortex of wind that howled and shrieked as it raced towards Finley. The miniature cyclone, infused with the raw power of her Sky magic, tore at the chamber's tapestries and sent loose papers fluttering wildly. But as the vortex neared the iron pillar, it seemed to shudder and warp, its form distorting as if pulled by an invisible force. In a heartbeat, the howling winds were sucked into the pillar, vanishing without a trace, their power absorbed by the unyielding metal.

Undeterred by Jankauskas's failure, Councilor Abebe stepped forward, his eyes blazing with determination. He slammed his palms together, and a crackling sphere of Flame burst forth, arcs of lightning dancing across its surface. The ball of energy hurtled towards Finley, the air sizzling and popping in its wake. Yet, just as with the wind, the lightning was drawn inexorably towards the iron pillar. The moment the sphere made contact, it was absorbed, the pillar glowing briefly with a blinding white light before returning to its impassive state.

Councilors Ohanian and Conteh moved in unison, their hands weaving intricate patterns as they summoned forth their respective magics. From Ohanian's fingertips poured a torrent of water, the liquid shimmering with an otherworldly blue glow as it surged across the chamber floor. Conteh's magic manifested as a wall of roaring flames, the heat so intense that the air around it shimmered and wavered. The

two elements raced towards Finley and his companions, the water and fire intertwining in a mesmerizing dance of destruction.

But Finley merely raised an eyebrow, a faint smile playing across his lips. With a casual wave of his hand, he redirected the elemental assault, sending it careening towards the iron pillar. The water and fire collided with the metal surface, the impact creating a deafening hiss as steam billowed outwards, obscuring the chamber in a thick, white mist. When the steam cleared, the pillar stood unscathed, the water and fire nowhere to be seen, absorbed just like the wind and lightning before them.

Councilors Okoro and Perich, desperation etched onto their faces, joined their magic in a final, frantic attempt to overcome Finley. The ground beneath their feet trembled and cracked as they summoned forth the power of the earth, jagged spikes of stone erupting from the chamber floor. At the same time, the air around them grew heavy and oppressive as they wove a spell of crushing gravity, seeking to immobilize their foes. The stone spikes hurtled through the air, their razor-sharp edges glinting menacingly in the light that streamed through the shattered dome. They were accompanied by an invisible force, a crushing weight that seemed to press down upon Finley and his companions from all sides, threatening to drive them to their knees. The very air itself felt thick and syrupy, each movement requiring a herculean effort as the spell of gravity took hold.

But Finley stood unbowed, his eyes now blazing with an inner fire. With a casual flick of his wrist, he redirected the stone spikes, sending them arcing gracefully through the air to orbit the iron pillar like satellites caught in its inescapable pull. They circled the metal shaft in a dizzying dance, their paths growing tighter and tighter until, with a series of resounding clangs, they collided with the pillar's surface and shattered into a thousand glittering shards.

As for the crushing force of gravity, Finley simply shrugged it off as if it were no more than a gentle breeze. The oppressive weight that sought to drag him down was brushed aside, dissipating like mist before the morning sun.

The councilors stared in disbelief, their faces a mixture of awe, fear,

and growing desperation. They had thrown the full might of their combined magic against Finley, and yet he and his friends had emerged unscathed, their attacks not just nullified, but absorbed and dissipated by the iron pillar he had summoned.

Councilor Bartosz, his voice trembling with a combination of rage and fear, cried out, "How is this possible? No one should have this much power!"

Finley fixed him with a piercing gaze, his eyes seeming to bore into the councilor's very soul. "You still don't understand, do you?" he said, his voice calm and measured. "This isn't about power. It's about understanding. About knowing the very nature of magic itself."

He took a step forward, and the councilors instinctively recoiled, their bodies tensing as if preparing for another attack. But Finley merely raised his hand, and the iron pillar began to glow, pulsing with a deep, inner light.

"Magic," he said, his voice resonating through the chamber, "is not a force to be hoarded or controlled. It is a gift, a sacred trust that flows through all things, connecting us to the very heart of creation. And iron, the bones of the earth, is the conduit through which that magic flows in its purest form." He paused to let that sink in. “And I control it now. Just as the Adherents of old—only I’m not hoarding that power for myself, as they did, and as you’ve done.”

The pillar's glow intensified, bathing the chamber in a radiant, silvery light. The councilors squinted against the brightness, their faces etched with a mixture of wonder and fear.

"You sought to use magic as a weapon against your own people,” Finley spat. You withheld it—I admit, I don’t know how you pulled that off, but it doesn’t matter. You’re done. In fact, this entire council is done. Finished.”

Finley closed his eyes, reaching deep within himself to a place he had never before consciously explored. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a hidden sense, a new way of perceiving the intricate tapestry of magic that wove through all of existence. With this newfound awareness, he could see the threads of magic that connected each councilor to the greater weave, shimmering strands of power that pulsed with the

rhythm of their very lives. These were the dancing, rainbow-colored symbols he'd seen before, flowing smoothly through the air, ready to move and reshape themselves under his guidance.

He extended his hand, his fingers moving with a delicate precision as he reached those glimmering threads. The councilors gasped as they felt his touch upon their very essence, a sensation unlike anything they had ever experienced. It was as if he held their souls in his hand, the very core of their being laid bare before him.

With a gentle but firm twist of his fingers, Finley began to pinch those threads, constricting the flow of magic that sustained each councilor. The effect was immediate and profound. The councilors staggered, their faces draining of color as they felt their power diminish, reduced to a mere trickle of what it had once been.

Councilor Jankauskas clutched at her chest, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she struggled to remain upright. "What... what have you done?" she whispered, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and disbelief.

Finley opened his eyes, his gaze sweeping over the assembled councilors. "I have given you exactly what you deserve," he said, his voice calm but laced with an undercurrent of steel. "You will still have your magic, for to take it away completely would be to rob you of your very lives. But never again will you wield it as a tool of oppression, never again will you use it to subjugate and control those you deem beneath you."

The councilors looked at one another, their expressions a mix of horror and despair. They could feel the truth of Finley's words, could sense the fundamental change that had been wrought upon them. Their magic, once a raging torrent of power, had been reduced to a mere whisper, barely enough to sustain their own existence.

Councilor Degutis fell to his knees, his head bowed in defeat. "We are undone," he murmured, his voice hollow with the realization of their fate. "Our power, our influence... it is all gone."

Finley nodded, a grim satisfaction etched onto his features. "And so it should be," he said. "You have proven yourselves unworthy of the gift of magic, undeserving of the responsibility that comes with wielding

such power. From this day forward, the Taryba will be no more. Evermore will be free, its people no longer bound by your tyranny."

He turned to Arcadia and Kelden, his companions standing tall and resolute by his side. "It is time to set things right."



"Well, that didn't go entirely how I'd expected," Kelden admitted. They'd spent the better part of two days in Evermore, and finally returned to the Farm exhausted but satisfied.

"Putting the city back instantly would have done more harm than good," Finley pointed out. "It'll slowly resume its old shape, I think, and now that the Taryba isn't hoarding all the local magic, the people there can help the city reshape itself."

"But they're already talking about electing a new council!" Kelden said, clearly frustrated.

Arcadia shrugged. "It's what they're used to. And it doesn't hurt to have a group of people guiding things, so long as they're acting for the people, not against them. And whatever new Taryba they create will just be for Evermore. I don't think the Arcane Cities are going to accept anyone ruling them but their own."

"And plenty of people are leaving Evermore," Finley added. "There was a group of over a hundred preparing to leave just as we did."

"Oh?" Kelden said, brightening. "I hadn't noticed. Where are they going?"

"One of the Arcane Cities, I think. Most of them were originally from Farreach in the North, someone said."

"There were other groups leaving for their home towns, and several were coming here to Crafthold."

"Well, I guess that's good," Kelden allowed.

"And you can understand why the scholars would all stay," Arcadia said. "Evermore still has the biggest library on the continent."

"True." He hesitated. "I still don't think I understand about the merchant class, though. Everyone's fine with them staying on?"

Finley shrugged. "They'll always exist. And... I have a suspicion that

trade will actually open up a good bit more. At least, that's what I'm hoping to achieve."

Arcadia's jaw tightened a bit. "You're going to Farreach in the South?"

Finley nodded. "And... I think it'd be best if I went alone on this one."

Arcadia and Kelden said nothing, but Finley could see the concerns written into their features.

CHAPTER 16

A Detente

From a hilltop a ways away, Finley looked down at the still-distant city of Farreach in the South, its low skyline now jagged with iron-reinforced ramparts and watchtowers. The sea breeze carried to him the distant clang of hammers on anvils and the acrid scent of forges. It had been just a moon ago when the town had been a tranquil port known for its sun-bleached stones, fragrant lemon groves, and the laughter of fishmongers in its winding cobbled streets. But a shadow had fallen across this part of the world, and like so many others, the once-welcoming gates of the town were now shut tight against the midday sun.

Finley's eyes traced the contours of the new, fortified walls encircling Farreach, their pale wooden beams now clad in sheets of hammered iron that glinted harshly under the warm sun. The once-welcoming main gates had been replaced by a portcullis of black iron bars as thick as a man's arm, its pointed ends stabbing down into the dusty earth like the fangs of some great beast. Along the ramparts, soldiers in leather hauberks patrolled ceaselessly, their crossbows held at the ready and their eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of trouble.

In the forests that blanketed the hills around the town, he could make out the sound of axes and saws rang out as crews of lumberjacks felled towering oaks and elms, their trunks as wide as wagons. The logs

were hauled back to Farreach by teams of oxen, the beasts' muscles straining against their yokes as they dragged the timber over the rutted roads. In the town's bustling yards, carpenters and joiners shaped the raw wood into planks, beams, and braces to shore up the walls and towers. Forges fires burned hot, their plumes smoke streaking the blue sky an ominous black.

Farreach in the South had gone from tranquil coastal town to fortress.

With a heavy sigh, Finley started down the hill. This road, once well-traveled by merchants and their caravans, was empty save for a few hardy weeds pushing up through the cracked earth. As he drew closer, the walls of Farreach loomed like iron-clad giants. The iron-covered battlements bristled with spikes and ballistae, their oiled iron chains glinting in the sun. Arrow slits punctured the tall curtain walls at regular intervals, and the iron portcullis stood ready to drop at a moment's notice. Just inside that portcullis was a stout, iron-strapped wooden gate, firmly closed.

Finley approached with a slow, purposeful stride. Up close, the iron-clad doors were massive, easily twice his height and still smelling of fresh-cut lumber. Finley could feel the iron licking at his magic, but now, it felt more like the curious lap of a strange dog. Finley's magic, glowing cool and white within him, didn't respond.

A small, barred window set into the gate cracked open, and a pair of suspicious eyes peered out. "State your business," a gruff voice demanded.

"Finley. I'm here to speak with Nordon. He'll see me, I suspect."

There was a long moment of silence. "You a witch?"

"Yes," he replied calmly. "And I'm happy to stay here and wait for Nordon."

There was no further challenge, although it took several moments for someone to fetch Nordon. All the while, Finley could hear men moving behind the curtain wall, hear more crossbows being wound tight, hear more iron-tipped spears being rattled into place. He studiously ignored it all, taking several steps back and slowly examining the new fortifications.

It's odd, the voice in his head observed. I've never experienced iron like this.

Finley knew what the voice meant. In his head, every piece of iron—every chain's link, every crossbow bolt's tip, every iron nail hammered into the wood, showed as a dimly glowing pinpoint. He let his eyes relax, unfocusing them slightly, and the world's ambient magic appearing. This close to the town's masses of iron, the kaleidoscopic letters and symbols, given their hue by the Origin and aligned to one of the four elements, seemed to write uncomfortably. They twisted rather than flowing, jittered and jumped rather than slipping easily through the air. Where they contacted the iron, their shapes fractured and shattered, dimming to darker shades before settling into the iron and vanishing.

But now, Finley could see what happened next. Magic of Sea, Sky, Earth, and Flame, tinted in shades of blue and green, orange and brown, merged within the iron. They combined into the pure magic that seeped up from the bones of the world, an intense white shot through with streaks of pink and light blue-green.

The iron doesn't drain magic... it just recombines it. Interesting, the voice said.

You've never seen it this way?

No. Not from within the Origin. There, everything has been broken out into the Axes—the different alignments. I knew about the pure magic from the portal in the Great Northern Wood, but I didn't know it seeped up from the ground as well.

And from the humans, Finley pointed out. Although he couldn't see any of them behind their defensive wall, he could clearly see the bright plumes of unaligned magic streaming upward. It's like they're... aligned with iron.

A sudden chunk accompanied the opening of a small man-door within the larger wooden gate, and Nordon stepped out. The door slammed shut behind him, latching with another chunk and the thud of a brace being slid home.

"I'm not sure all this is worth it," Finley said calmly. "You do know, if we wanted to, a large enough group of us could drop a mountain on your town, iron or no."

Nordon frowned. “That’s supposed to comfort me?”

“Yes, actually. Because we haven’t.”

The man considered that. “Why are you here?”

“Fyngershire sent a well-armed group against Rushford, along the edge of the Great Northern Wood. That’s to stop. First of all, in the future, any attacks against or near the Wood will be met with absolute annihilation. Please believe me. The Wood is ours. It is... sacred to us, in a way.”

“We didn’t—”

“I’m not finished. Attacks against the Arcane Cities will also cease. You have your... fortresses,” he pointed out, nodding to the iron-clad walls behind Nordon, “and we’re happy to leave them to you. But our towns and villages are off-limits to you as well. They’re open to anyone who can coexist peacefully with magic, and closed to anyone who can’t. Am I clear?”

“What makes you think I—”

“You spread the word. You spread your plans for your weapons, your inventions. The ones I have back to you, remember. Now spread this.”

“Or you’ll drop mountains on us,” Nordon said coldly.

Finley chuckled. “I won’t need to.” He raised his hand, fingers splayed, and focused his gaze on a section of the iron wall. The metal began to tremble, as if sensing his intent. Flakes of rust blossomed across the surface like a spreading plague, the corrosion accelerating with each passing second.

Nordon turned at the first hissing sound, and watched in horror as the iron crumbled away, disintegrating into a fine, reddish powder that swirled in the sea breeze. The once-mighty rampart seemed to age centuries in mere moments, its strength and solidity giving way to the inexorable march of rust and decay.

Finley's eyes glowed with an otherworldly light, his power pulsing through the air like a tangible force. The metal that the city relied upon for protection was as malleable as clay in his hands.

The iron spikes adorning the battlements twisted and bent, their sharp points curling in on themselves like the withered petals of a dying flower. The ballistae, once poised to rain death upon attackers,

slumped forward on their mounts, their chains rusting away to nothing.

Panicked shouts from the human men and women on the now-bare wooden wall told Finley his work had gathered plenty of witnesses.

Nordon stumbled back, his face ashen. The gruff confidence had evaporated, replaced by a dawning realization of his town's vulnerability. He glanced from the crumbling wall to Finley, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe.

Finley lowered his hand, and the rust's progress halted. The iron walls now bore a gaping wound, a testament to his new power. The distant sounds of the city fell silent, as if Farreach itself was holding its breath.

"Do you understand now?" Finley asked softly, his voice carrying an undercurrent of steel. "Your iron is no protection against me. It is only by our choice, our restraint, that Farreach still stands."

Nordon swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. He nodded slowly, unable to tear his gaze away from the ruined section of the once-impregnable wall. "So that's it, then."

"That's it?" Finley asked, confused.

"That's it. We're done. You'll take back the Iron Cities. Rule over us."

Finley sighed. "You're not listening. We won't go where we're not wanted. We don't want to rule over you. I've just..." He stopped and considered. He'd already extended so much trust to this man, to the cabal he represented, and had so much of it thrown back in his face. Still, the balance of power had tilted. "Our city is called Evermore," he continued softly. "That's where our Great Council, our Taryba, used to meet and deliberate. They were the ones—most of them, at least—pushing for subjugation. But not just of your people—of mine as well. I've just come from there. The Taryba is gone. I've taken the magic from them, and Evermore is free again." He tilted his head. "Do you understand? This wasn't all of witchkind set against you. Most of us were happy living alongside you." He held up his hand as Nordon opened his mouth, eyes flashing with anger. "I know it was in secret, and yes, we kept you from advancing yourselves. That's ended as well. If you want to keep your Iron Cities for those sins of the past, fine. But

you won't attack us. You won't attack the humans who've chosen to live alongside us."

He sighed. "If you prefer," he added gently, "I can cut you off."

Nordon's brow wrinkled, his face still ashen. "What do you mean?"

"I'm something... more. As you can see. More than other witchkind. If you want, I can carve a channel in the continent. South of Rushford, north of Fyngershire. Probably east of Withring, connecting the two—"

"Why?" Nordon cried.

"If you want," Finley continued, keeping his voice calm, "I can do this. It might give you some... measure of comfort. We can build bridges. You can control who can cross to your side."

Nordon looked at Finley as if the latter man had gone mad. "Your kind can still... fly."

Finley shrugged. "Some can. Not all. About a quarter, perhaps. Although, again, we don't tend to go where we're not wanted."

Nordon stared at him for a long moment, and then shook his head. "No. No channel. Don't cut us off. What you're talking about—we have few enough farms, on this side of the continent. You're talking about carving away most of them."

"True. And... very well. I'd... hoped you wouldn't ask me to, if I'm being honest. Can I ask about your church?"

Nordon blinked at the change in topic. "The church?"

"Yes. I assume it still exists?"

"Very much so," Nordon answered, his brow wrinkling in confusion. "Why do—"

"Tell me about its structure."

Understanding dawned on Nordon's features. "The Western Eparchy is all that's left. It encompasses all the Iron Cities. The others have... dissolved."

Finley nodded. "I suspected as much. And you've given them the power they wanted?"

Nordon hesitated before nodding wearily. "They've taken it, yes. They're the government now, more or less. The Aldermen work under them, now."

"Fine. I hope that's a structure you can all be happy with."

"Father Joaquin is leaving," Nordon blurted out.

Finley tilted his head. "I'm not sure I know him."

"He was one of the priests. Here."

"Ah. And where is he going?"

"To an Arcane City. He didn't say which one."

"Mmm."

"We..." Nordon started to say. He shook his head, unable to finish.

"May have gone too far?" Finley suggested gently.

Nordon exhaled heavily. "Perhaps."

"It isn't irreversible."

"How?"

Finley took a step closer to the man. "Allow trade. We've had... rumors, you know. Of your inventions, in just the past fortnights. The Arcane Cities won't be interested in all of them, of course. With magic used openly now, we can do more for our human friends than ever. And anything of iron, of course, wouldn't be welcome. But you do have something to offer. And more of the continent's farms are surrounded by Arcane Cities, rather than Iron. They'll have produce to trade."

Nordon frowned. "We wouldn't allow—"

"Trade with humans," Finley clarified. "Again, witchkind won't go where we're not wanted. But perhaps, over time, if we can offer each other things of value, perhaps if we can come to trust each other, all this won't be necessary." He nodded to the rotted iron of the town's wall.

"What about the unaligned towns?"

Finley shrugged. "I intend to ensure they have a choice. They can welcome witchkind, or not. I don't think they need to go through all this," he added, gesturing again to the rusted iron battlements, where human workers were starting to scurry about and assess the damage. "I can fix that, by the way. If you want."

"I, ah... don't think that would help," Nordon said, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips. "But thank you."

"So we are agreed? You stay within your Iron Cities, and witchkind will stay within the Arcane Cities. We won't go where we're not welcome, and neither will you. When you're open to trade, send an emissary to whatever town you prefer." He raised an eyebrow. "You know, Withring is still unaligned. You might approach them about

being a... third thing. A Trade City. Perhaps they could welcome witchkind as traders, if not residents."

"Neutral ground?" Nordon asked.

"If you like."

The human nodded slowly. "I'll spread the word."

"Add that I'm extremely serious," Finley reiterated. "Any attack will be met with very decisive force. I can go anywhere in the world in an eye blink, and any Arcane City can summon me before your weapons are within range. Iron won't stop me."

Nordon swallowed heavily. "I understand. I'll make sure everyone does. We'll send riders before the sun sets."

"Good. I... hope this is temporary."

Nordon said nothing.

Finley gathered magic about himself and was gone.



In my day, we would have called you an 'activist adherent,' the voice in Finley's head said.

Finley had taken himself to a quiet cove well away from Farreach in the South, one with no human settlements. The sun-warmed sand welcomed him as he landed softly on the secluded beach. The rhythmic whisper of waves lapping against the shore filled the air, a soothing counterpoint to the distant cries of seagulls wheeling overhead. The water stretched out before him, a vast expanse of shimmering turquoise that melted into the horizon, where sea and sky became one.

He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the briny scent of the ocean mingled with the delicate perfume of blooming sea roses that dotted the dunes. The breeze, warm and gentle, carried with it the promise of a peaceful respite, far from the tensions that gripped the realm.

"I take it that's a good thing?"

It wasn't always. But... it's the path I chose, as well.

Finley walked along the water's edge, his bare feet sinking into the damp sand with each step. The grains, sun-kissed and fine, tickled his skin as the cool water lapped at his ankles. Tiny, iridescent shells littered the shore, their delicate shapes a testament to the artistry of the sea. He

stooped to pick one up, marveling at the intricate swirls of color that adorned its surface.

"Do you think it will hold? This... whatever it is?"

Sutartos paliaubos, in the True Language. And yes. I do.

"A... peace from negotiation?"

'Truce' is a better word. It will be tense, for a while. But... I find that people have difficulty staying riled up for long.

As he wandered further down the beach, Finley came upon a small tide pool nestled between two rocky outcroppings. The clear water within was a window into a miniature world teeming with life. Anemones, their tentacles swaying gently in the current, clung to the submerged rocks, while small crabs scuttled about, their shells a kaleidoscope of colors. A tiny starfish, its arms outstretched, rested on the sandy bottom, content in its aquatic haven.

Finley knelt beside the pool, his reflection rippling on the surface. He dipped his hand into the cool water, feeling the soft caress of the sea. A sense of tranquility washed over him, as if the ocean itself was offering a balm for his troubled thoughts.

"I hope you're right," he murmured, watching as a small fish darted between the rocks, its silvery scales catching the sunlight. "I don't want this division to last forever."

No one does, my friend. But change takes time. Patience is key.

Finley nodded, rising to his feet. He cast one last glance at the peaceful tide pool before continuing his walk along the shore. The sand stretched out before him, an endless canvas waiting to be explored.

As he walked, he let his mind wander, imagining a future where the Iron Cities and the Arcane Cities could coexist in harmony. A future where the barriers of fear and mistrust had crumbled away, replaced by understanding and cooperation. It seemed like a distant dream, but one worth fighting for.

The sun began to dip towards the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink. The sea breeze picked up, carrying with it the promise of change on the wind.

CHAPTER 17

A New Era

"They seem to be behaving themselves," Arcadia said, tapping the map table. "We've had those with Sky affinity patrolling from above, keeping a close eye on the Iron Cities. Not so much as a fighter on horseback has been sent out. That's where Kelden is right now, in fact. He's been organizing the patrols."

"Good," Finley said, nodding approval. "I'm glad Nordon took me seriously. I'm glad he was able to spread the word." He turned to a window. "You know, I barely recognize the place."

Arcadia chuckled. "I know what you mean. Crafthold has gotten huge—it's going to be as big as Evermore in a generation, I think."

"I'm a little surprised it hasn't swallowed the farmhouse."

Crafthold's structures, constructed with magic and manual labor, had crept up to the very edge of the farmhouse, and then split and flowed around it. The growing city now surrounded the Order's original headquarters, although the builders had continued to reflect the simpler construction of the towns and villages they'd left behind. Buildings kept to two stories in most of the city, three at most, and used the familiar stone-and-wood structures seen all over the world. But the farmhouse had been left intact, a small oasis in the midst of the city.

"There's a bit of a legend growing about this place, I think,"

Arcadia said, smiling broadly. “The Crafthold council intends to maintain the Farm—well, at least this much of it—as a remembrance.”

“The training grounds?”

“Oh, nobody was comfortable that those being nearly in the middle of the city,” she laughed. “They’ve been banished to the outskirts. Not that I think anyone minded. I mean, it’s all shops and taverns right around us, now.” She paused, and then added, “Did you know they took you up on our advice? Withring is going to declare itself the first Trade City.”

Finley turned back, one corner of his mouth twitching up. “Tell me they’re going to charge trade fees.”

Arcadia grinned back. “That’s the word. Their council is expected to publish a list in the next few days.”

“And the humans from the Iron Cities?”

“Already dragging in inventions to sell, and Withring is constructing a produce market on the east side of the town. With help from witchkind, of course,” she added, her eyes twinkling with delight. “I’ve gotten some reports on what the Iron humans are bringing, and I have to tell you, it’s pretty impressive.”

“I’m sure some of it’s familiar.”

“Oh, absolutely. Printing presses, to begin with. But beyond those, the humans have brought real marvels," she said, her eyes now sparkling with excitement. "They've developed these incredible devices called 'telescopes'—long brass tubes with polished glass lenses at each end. When you look through them, distant objects appear startlingly close! The humans say they can study the stars and planets in the night sky with stunning clarity. It’s more than I’ve ever been able to do with Sky magic."

Finley raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Interesting. What else have they brought?"

"Well, there are these intricate machines called 'clocks'—made entirely of bronze gears, springs and weights. They keep remarkably accurate time, far more precise than any sundial or water clock. Some are small enough to carry in a pocket! The humans claim they will revolutionize productivity and scheduling."

"Incredible," Finley murmured, stroking his chin. "To think, all this

innovation happening without magic. The ingenuity of humans never ceases to amaze me. Especially now that we don't have to actively suppress it all. Were these 'clocks' something we'd seen before?"

She nodded. "Ages ago. They were definitely in the journals you gave Nordon. Ram was probably a field agent when those were suppressed, and they never came up again. Oh, and you should see some of what they're doing with ships. They're building ships with multiple masts and complex rigging systems, allowing them to harness the wind like never before—all without magic. And a navigational tool called a 'sextant.' They won't need fisherwitches to sail anywhere they want."

"A sextant?" Finley asked quizzically.

Arcadia ruffled through a few papers on one side of the map table. "Here," she said, sliding a sheet over. Finley peered at the detailed sketch. "It's a device made of brass and mirrors that lets sailors determine their position based on the positions of celestial bodies, like the two moons. Remarkably clever." Arcadia grinned. "But perhaps the most astonishing to me are the humans' experiments with harnessing the power of steam."

Finley grinned. "You mean the things we spent the most time suppressing?"

"Exactly so. Smaller ones, now, not just the behemoths they use in the iron horses—oh!"

"I was going to ask about the iron roadway."

She nodded. "It's being dismantled."

Finley's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Truly. The majority of the line ran through what are now Arcane Cities, and they can directly see how much damage the iron does. They'd rather have magic. But I gather they plan to replace it with an ordinary road—but one paved with one of the humans' poured-stone inventions." She frowned slightly as she ruffled through a few more pages. "Cementas, it's called. Seems similar to those building blocks you suppressed, but they've apparently found another way to make it."

"I can probably undo what I did," Finley mused. "But to what end?"

"A smooth road that cuts across the entire continent? Imagine

wagons powered by magic—we can move goods just as quickly as they did on the iron roadway, without the iron."

"Oh," Finley said, blinking quickly in surprise. "That's... actually amazing. Everyone's working together."

"Exactly."

He thought for a moment, and then asked, "What about the church?"

"In the Arcane Cities, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Dissolved. Well, more or less. The priests are still doing services, but every town is autonomous, now. I'm told," and again she shuffled through a stack of papers until she found the one she wanted, "yes, here. A group of priests, mostly from the old Eastern Eparchy, have gotten together to go through their holy texts."

"Oh?"

"They're determined, this says, to get to the root of their beliefs. To establish..." She paused and read from the page in front of her. "'To establish a new canon for our new world.'"

Finley's eyes widened slightly. "Does that mean they'll suffer a witch to live?"

Arcadia laughed. "I think that's the plan." She looked up at him and her expression softened. "So what will you do next?"

"Next?" He laughed. "I hadn't even thought about 'next.' Ever since we left school, it's just been..." He trailed off, searching for the right word.

"Chaos?" Arcadia offered. "Constant stress? No rest for the weary, no—"

"Yeah," Finley interrupted with a sad smile. "Something like that. I don't know. I guess... I'll hang out. In case I'm needed. I still can't quite imagine the Iron Cities just... giving up. Maybe... I should go see my parents, actually. They're in Sowsee, now."

"I didn't know."

"Yeah. It's going to go Arcane, Dad said. And they love the sea."

"Wisding is expected to declare as a Trade City," Arcadia noted. "Sowsee's so close, your parents will probably be pretty busy."

"That'll make them happy. And... I don't know. If everything settles down, maybe... I guess I will too."

She tilted her head and smiled. "Somehow I can't imagine that."

"Right back at you."



They finished running through the remaining dispatches, and Finley decided to take himself back to the little village where he'd grown up. It was completely abandoned, now, most of the humans having moved to Harbsmouth, the nearest Iron City, while most of witchkind had either moved to Sowsee or Crafthold.

He walked slowly through the empty streets of his childhood village, his footsteps echoing off the weathered cobblestones. The salty sea breeze carried with it a tinge of nostalgia, as if the very air remembered the laughter and bustle that once filled these lanes.

He paused before the old bakery, its windows shattered and door hanging askew on rusted hinges. Yet the faded paint still hinted at the cheery blue it had once been, and Finley could almost smell the warm, yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread that used to waft from the shop each morning, enticing the villagers awake.

Further down the street, the old tavern stood, its thatched roof now more moss than straw. The raucous laughter and clinking of mugs that once spilled from its doors late into the night had been replaced by a heavy silence. But the worn wooden sign still creaked in the wind, the faded letters spelling out "The Merry Mermaid" as if waiting for patrons who would never return.

Finley turned a corner and found himself facing the village square. The central fountain, once a gathering place for gossiping housewives and playful children, now sat dry and still. Cracks spiderwebbed across the stone basin where a graceful mermaid statue had once presided, now toppled and broken on the ground, a casualty of the riots.

Yet even amidst the ruin, there were signs of the life that had once thrived here. Wildflowers peeked through the cracks in the cobblestones, their delicate petals a defiant splash of color against the grey stone. The old oak tree in the square, its branches gnarled with age, still

stood tall and proud, as if guarding the memories of generations who had sought shade beneath its leafy canopy.

As the sun began to set, casting a warm golden glow across the abandoned village, Finley could almost see the ghosts of the past going about their daily lives. The fishermen, with their nets slung over their shoulders, returning from a day at sea. The children, their laughter ringing out as they chased each other through the streets. The old women, sitting on their stoops and sharing stories over cups of tea.

For a moment, it was as if the village had come alive again, the weight of its history and the echoes of its former inhabitants palpable in the air. Finley closed his eyes, allowing himself to be transported back to a simpler time, before the world had been turned upside down.

When he opened his eyes again, the illusion faded, and he was once more standing alone in the midst of the abandoned village. But somehow, the melancholy that had initially filled him had been replaced by a sense of peace. This place, despite its scars, still held the essence of the community that had once called it home.

Things change, the voice in his head said.

"I know. And I imagine people will come back, one day."

Sometimes they don't.

"Feeling negative today?" Finley teased.

Maybe a bit. I think... it's probably time for me to go.

Finley's shoulders tensed. "Go? Go where?"

Back into the Origin. Back... to sleep. You developed your talent, yourself, into its own thing. I don't think you need me anymore. You're something... more than I was. And... I suspect it's not for the best to have me conscious in the world, all the time.

Finley said nothing. The voice in his head—the voice he'd once thought was his talent—had been with him for what seemed like forever, at this point. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about being alone in his own head.

You need to find people to talk to who aren't in your head, the voice said gently.

"Yeah. So you'll just... go?"

More or less. Now that things have calmed down, I can almost feel it calling to me.

"So this is goodbye?"

Or something as good as.

"I... thank you. For everything."

You're welcome. A last piece of advice?

"Please."

You hold a lot of magic, now. Power that... I'm not sure the world has ever seen. I know you'll use it wisely. Compassionately. But... if the time should come...

"What?"

Don't let yourself slip into the Origin. Or something else. Take your time, and then go.

Finley was quiet for several long moments. "Yeah."

The voice said nothing more, but Finley knew the exact moment when it withdrew from his mind. As it did so, Finley felt a profound sense of emptiness, as if a part of himself had been gently extracted, leaving behind a space that was not quite a void, but rather a newfound expanse waiting to be explored. It was a feeling akin to stepping out of a cozy, familiar room and into a vast, open landscape—disorienting at first, but filled with the promise of new discoveries and self-reflection.

He realized, with a start, that the presence had been with him for as long as he could remember, a constant companion nestled in the recesses of his consciousness, even when he was a child. It had been a source of comfort, a guiding emotion that had helped him navigate the turbulent waters of his life. But now, as he stood alone in the abandoned village, he understood that the presence had been something separate from himself, an entity that had shared his mental space but was never truly a part of him.

As the initial shock of the presence's departure began to subside, Finley felt a growing sense of curiosity and anticipation. He was now free to explore the depths of his own mind without the influence of another, to discover the contours and textures of his own thoughts and emotions. It was as if a veil had been lifted, allowing him to see himself in a new light, unfiltered and unencumbered.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, allowing himself to fully inhabit the space within his mind. The gentle sea breeze caressed his skin, carrying with it the scent of salt and the distant cries of seagulls.

The sound of the waves crashing against the shore filled his ears, a rhythmic pulse that seemed to echo the beating of his own heart.

As he stood there, immersed in the sensations of the present moment, Finley began to notice the intricate workings of his own consciousness. Thoughts and memories drifted through his mind like wispy clouds, some clear and distinct, others hazy and half-formed. Emotions welled up within him, a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that he had never before had the chance to fully appreciate.

He marveled at the complexity and beauty of his own inner world, a realm that had always been there but had been overshadowed by the presence of another. Now, with the space to himself, he could begin to unravel the mysteries of his own psyche, to explore the hidden corners and secret passages that made him who he was.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, Finley felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over him. The departure of the presence, while bittersweet, had given him a precious gift—the opportunity to truly know himself, to embrace his own identity and chart his own course through life.

He extended his senses outward, feeling the weft and warp of the world. Ambient magic glowed to soft life before him, iridescent letters and symbols dancing gently in the breeze. Here, on the coast, at this time, he could see the aligned magic at its simplest. Blue-green tendrils slipped between the waves lapping gently at the shore. Red-orange symbols cavorted in the last of the sun's rays. Cool blue sparks darted this way and that in the cooling air. And, as always, the steady, green-brown patterns that sank deep into the earth.

And, far to the north, that fountain of white, the combination of them all, splashing pure magic into the world. And far below it, far below everything, the bones of the world slowly brought more magic, spreading it across the land, feeding it into the Origin, which tinted it with the hues of the alignments.

Far below everything...

But that way is closed, a memory reminded him.

Finley's lips twitched into a grin. "We'll see."

Epilogue

I CAME AWAKE SLOWLY, as always seems to be the case. Everything around me was at peace, and in balance. I quickly realized what had woken me: another bright light, shining in the distance, insistent for my attention.

I reached out.

Are you a dream?

No, I'm quite real. Perhaps not in the way you're used to, but I'm real.

Mother says I made you up. That she's never heard of you.

Well, that's because I don't talk to very many people. You're special that way.

Why don't you talk to them?

Mostly because they can't hear me. Or don't want to.

Can you tell me stories? I like stories.

Stories? Yes, I have quite a few stories. My own story is quite... Well, I suppose it's interesting, but it's also quite long.

I'm not tired. I like long stories.

No, I guess you do have the time. What's that?

I said, can you skip the boring parts?

Yes, I could skip the boring parts. I feel like I skipped them myself sometimes.

Can you start now?
You're quite sure?
Yes, please.
Well, then let's begin.

About the Author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

Connect, get free novels and short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by visiting Don's author website at DonJones.com.