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The Order of Some

A STORY OF WITCHKIND

DON JONES

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The Order of Some

A STORY OF WITCHKIND

Finley's in a pretty good place in life. He's on his last year at Disemstoke's, one of the Great Schools of witchkind. He's got a great set of friends, including best-friend-forever Arcadia. He even knows he's about to be offered a place in one of the school's prestigious and rare post-graduate programs. His family's proud of him, and he's even showing signs of runewright talent, the uncommon aptitude for being able to understand and reconstruct spells in the magic, diagrammatic language of his people.

But suddenly, just as he's teetering on the brink of adulthood with everything coming up roses, Finley is offered a choice: continue on this current path, enjoy almost guaranteed academic success, and set himself up for a prosperous and successful life, or... do something different: join a centuries-old secret Order that helps protect witchkind from the humans they live invisibly alongside. He can choose to set aside the sure thing, and join the select few who really make a difference in the lives of ordinary witchkind.

So what'll it be? A life of intellectual challenge and lifelong success—or a dive into a mysterious and unknown Order that is somehow essential to the continued survival of witchkind?

And what does this Order do, anyway?

The Order of Some continues the story of witchkind that first began in *Daniel Scratch*. Set some 200 years after the events of *Master of the Tower*, this new tale explores a world of witchkind that has changed, grown more prosperous, and

developed its own new mysteries. Whether you're new to the world of witchkind or an avid fan, *The Order of Some* presents a compelling story of adventure, adulthood, choice, and duty that will leave you anxious for more!

For my Family

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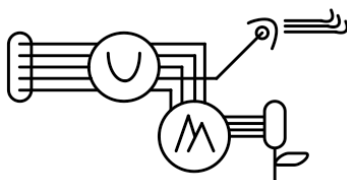
Disemstake's

“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 maneuver 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.

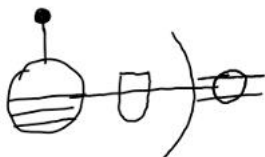
“I *hate* combat magic,” Lydia said, her voice uncharacteristically sharp. “Who are we even combatting with?”

“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.”

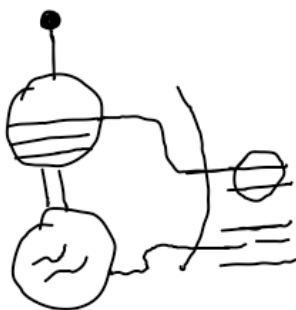
“But Filomena’s Sky, too,” Lydia objected. “She gets it better.”

“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

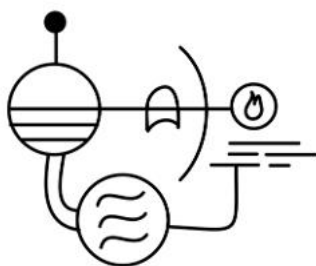
singed hair, and appropriated a large table in one of the more out-of-the-way group niches.

“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.”

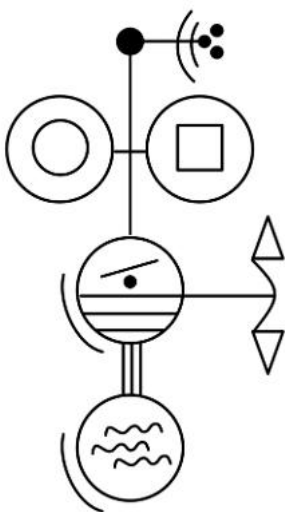
She nodded back. “It means someone with a very weak Sky affinity wouldn’t activate the draw. It’s clever. It means only someone at risk of ruining the spell and over-fueling the effect would activate the siphon and the secondary wind effect.”

“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 fire-ball 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 than 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

F inley 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 its 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 from 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 kuriy 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.

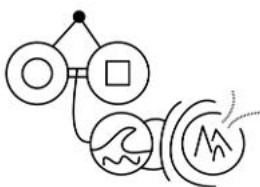
“Or what, wimp?” Landon laughed, stepping forward and extending an arm to push Finley again.

“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 fisher-witches, 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.”

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, dissipates 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 fish-monger'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 longingly 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.”

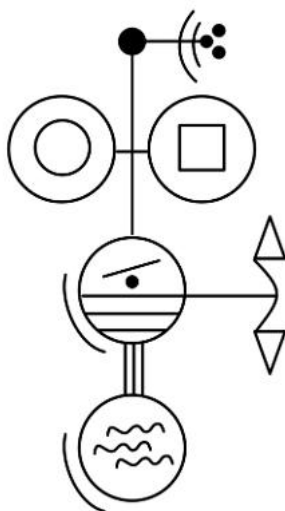
Father tilted his head a bit, thinking. “I know some of the Evermore guilds keep a runewright on staff when they can get one. Might pay better, but the Great Schools contribute an awful lot of good to the general populace. At least Duocastella’s does. You know that new construct we started using in the 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 smile 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?”

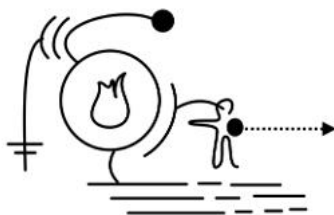
Finley took his plate and mug to the washing-closet as he thought. “Most of the Earth-affinity ones are slow. *Tunelis* isn’t bad, but you end up filthy. And we’re not supposed to use it on the grounds. On the Flame side, I can do *plūduriuojanti kibirkštis*. It’s not much faster, though, but it uses... 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 *ikaitēs 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 *taiko-suoga*. 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 physical 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 as 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 specifi-

cally. 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.

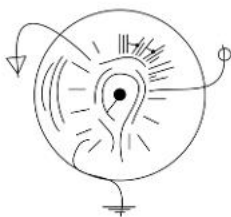
Remembered Mother's cries.

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: *As*.

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.

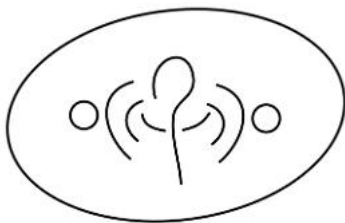
The Gather rune was working, wasn’t it? Wasn’t that part

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, clam-

oring 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.”

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 round-about, 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 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.

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 something 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.

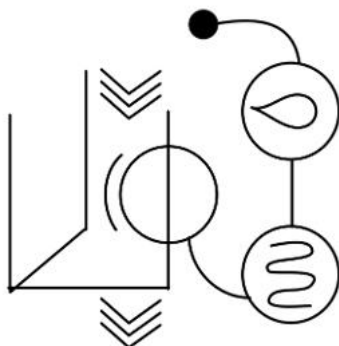
He probed deeper, the others’ conversations fading from his consciousness. He could feel the bookcase’s magic slipping through the books themselves, and he felt it pooling and swirling around one book in particular.

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 actually 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 immediately 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 Acadia 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 connections 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 hardest 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.”

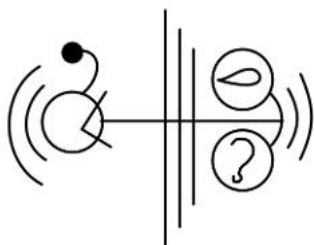
“Without being seen,” Finley pointed out.

“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—hope-

fully 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, goutts 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 stum-

bled, 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.

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 fisher-witches 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 understand 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."

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.”

“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."

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 *badn'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 it 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, uncreative 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.

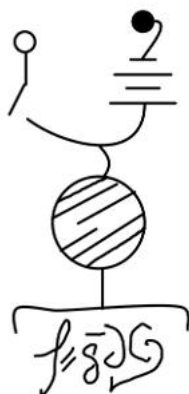
This will do nicely, he thought with satisfaction.

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 sunset 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 build-

ing, 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."

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."

“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, actually,” 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 profiligately 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 water-

front 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—seemingly 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 unfortu-

nate 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.

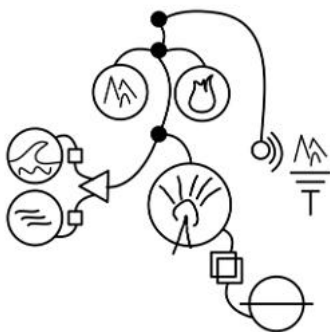
Waited until those steps seemed to descend into the basement, until it became clear that they were coming for him.

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.

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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.

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