

The Truth of All

A STORY OF WITCHKIND

DON JONES

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Thank you for reading my stories.*

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CHAPTER 1

A New Order

Finley darted down a narrow alley that ran between a tiny tea room and a somewhat more spacious dry goods store.

A dozen angry humans squeezed into the alley behind him, shouting for him to stop.

This is the problem with these smaller villages, he thought to himself. Everyone knows everyone. In the past, that wouldn't have been a problem—traders came through most villages almost constantly, always bringing new faces. That was the entire reason for the kitchenware business the Order maintained—giving its operatives an excuse to be in every human settlement on the continent. But with the recent uptick in sightings of actual magic, the humans had become more suspicious—and more on their guard. The Order's ordinary circuit agents—who actually took orders for the kitchenware as their main work and watched out for human inventions and innovations that might warrant the Order's attention—were well-known faces. Finley, on the other hand, was not.

He emerged from the alley at a run, immediately swerving

to his right and touching the first entry-rune he saw. A rush of magic carried him into one of witchkind's hidden spaces, which turned out to be an abandoned clothing store.

You feel it, his talent said grimly in his mind.

Yeah. Someone had probably seen him vanish into thin air, and the Veil had attempted to cover it. Attempted to make them think it had been a trick of the light or some other perfectly plausible explanation. That's what the Veil had done for millennia: kept any accidental sightings of magic from being remarked upon. But now, the Veil had been stretched thin. His talent—an ancient consciousness resting in the Origin of magic itself—had given him a direct sense for the Veil, an ability to feel it.

And what he felt now was tension.

The Veil had been stretched too thin. Landon's magical attacks a month prior couldn't be easily explained away. Finley's former classmate, and former apprentice in the Order, had lashed out with very visible magic, damaging human-made equipment, tearing down buildings, even whipping up storms, and the Veil simply couldn't cover it all up. As a result, humans had begun believing again. Believing in magic. And with that belief came danger, as one of the primary commandments of their religion was, "suffer not a witch to live." The enmity between witchkind and humans stretched back as far as the Veil, if not further, and in some villages the humans and their priests were calling for a resumption of the ancient Hunts—activities designed to root out and kill witchkind.

That the Hunts just as often swept up innocent humans who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or happened to own property that a power human coveted, didn't seem to be much of a concern.

Finley cast his eyes around the dim space, looking for

another way out. Nearly all secret spaces had them, often used as private entrances for the owners.

He'd been so careful. His travel magic had brought him here well outside the village limits, and well off the main trade road. He'd walked in like any human. He'd immediately been aware of the suspicious, nearly hostile stares cast at him by the villagers, but they'd left well enough alone. It wasn't until he'd sought out the local church that there'd been a problem.

His intent had been to check on the Order's runes. Churches were a standard part of all but the very smallest human settlements, making them a perfect constant on which to build the Order's confusion and suppression. Runes worked into the churches' existing exterior decoration helped the Order listen in, helped dissuade people from specific, targeted innovations the Order had suppressed in the past, and provided a basis for the Order to pass messages back to their headquarters. Runes even provided a platform for modifying the humans' holy texts, a technique the Order had exploited—probably too often—to condemn specific inventions, like the printing press.

Finley saw at once that the church's delicately carved exterior had been mauled, scraped, and scorched, breaking all of the Order's runes. That meant the humans would be on the lookout for other runes, which meant all of witchkind was in danger—likely why the owners of the shop he was now in had fled.

There, he thought, spotting the shop's second exit. This would be something of a gamble, but hopefully his pursuers were still occupied—

A shower of sparks from the corner where he'd entered interrupted his thoughts. They've destroyed the entry rune, he thought tightly. I need to go. His particular travel magic didn't work well from within hidden spaces, and while he had access to more flexible magics aligned to Sky, he wasn't yet comfort-

able with them. That'd be a backup plan. Besides, he still had work to do here.

In front of the church had been an angry mob of humans, all shouting so loudly that Finley couldn't make out what they were upset about. Not that it was difficult to guess, with the local priest pumping a fist in the air and yelling just as loudly, his fleshy face flushed with red. Having confirmed the destruction of the Order's runes, Finley had turned to leave, but a burly human had laid one meaty hand on his shoulder. "Not interested?" he'd asked dangerously.

"I—"

"Surely you're interested in what the priest has to say, stranger," the man insisted, all but pushing Finley toward the crowd.

This attracted the attention of a few humans at the back of the mob, who quickly strode over and encircled the two.

Finley had no doubt whose side they were on.

"We don't much like strangers," one of the newcomers warned loudly.

"I was just passing through," Finley said quickly as his mind began calling up defensive runes. "I didn't—"

"You're a witch aren't you?" someone sneered.

"Absolutely not," Finley insisted quickly. "I—"

"Prove it!" another shouted.

Well, that's it, he'd thought miserably. You couldn't prove you weren't a witch, not in a way any human would accept. That was kind of the whole point of their Hunts: convenient for catching witches, but just as convenient for accusing someone you didn't like and having the mob dispatch them.

Finley ducked down, pushed through the circle of humans, and ran.

You can't seriously expect to complete the mission, his talent thought wryly.

I can if you help a bit, Finley retorted. I need a good glamour and I'm terrible at them.

His talent seemed to shrug, and presented him with a rune. It was entirely unlike the New Runic constructs that Finley had grown up with and learned in school, and even unlike the older Middle Runic sigils from centuries past. These were oddly abstract and angular, representing a purer way to manipulate magic.

[[[RUNE: Glamour]]]

Finley fed the rune with Sky magic, and felt it take hold at once.

I can give you the travel magic as well, his talent offered.

Finley hesitated. It wasn't a bad idea. He could appear out of town and trudge in again, disguised as someone new. Unless someone waved a piece of iron too close to him, of course, as that would ground out the glamour. Using the shop's exit rune might expose him to more observers, and he'd be back where he started. Then he shook his head. Time is of the essence on this one, he said. I need to break this up, and if I take half a day to walk back in, it'll just escalate.

What about the rooftops? his talent offered.

Finley blinked. That's a good idea.

His talent gave him a second rune.

[[[RUNE: Short travel]]]

It'll need both Sky and Earth, it cautioned. Sky isn't good for short distances on its own.

And Earth moderates it, Finley agreed, feeding a careful trickle of the appropriate magics into the rune.

With a thunk, he dropped a few inches from the air onto the roof of a two-story stone-and-wood building that overlooked the square fronted by the church. Missed a bit, he complained.

You were driving the cart, his talent replied calmly.

The villagers who'd remained were now gathering into small knots of heated discussion. The priest was nowhere in sight. Finley took a deep breath and tried to slow his heart beat. He hadn't quite mastered Arcadia's Sky magic trick of sending whispers, but that had proved the most effective technique at de-escalating these situations.

"The Alderman is only doing this to distract us from the flooding."

"Didn't the priest say the same thing a fortnight ago? Wasn't it just the wind?"

"Nobody's seen anything, have they? Do you know anyone?"

"I heard in Harbsmouth this was all a property grab."

These and a dozen more, Finley sent on gentle breezes, adding to the conversations happening below him. At this point, he doubted it would stop anything, but it might lower the level of anger in the town enough to let some of the remaining people of witchkind make an escape. Right now, he knew, any that hadn't already left were probably holed up in their secret spaces. The village was already showing a hundred tiny signs of magic being withdrawn: the thin, poorly-made panes of glass on the street were starting to crack and chip. Plaster was beginning to flake off some of the building facades. Cobbles had wiggled themselves loose from the street. Even the roof Finley was standing on felt as if it might be beginning to sag.

This was the great secret of human civilization in the world: humans couldn't build anything very well. They'd had little need to, given that witchkind was always there beside them, carving and empowering tiny runes to shore everything up. And when humans had tried to improve their works, the Order of Some had slipped in and taken it all away.

A few more phrases on the wind and the crowd seemed to grow confused. Without anyone to keep them agitated and focused, they began to drift apart. Finley sent a few more whispers, reminding them of unattended children, work that needed doing, beasts that needed feeding. The crowd began to break up, and Finley rocked back on his heels, heaving a sigh of relief. He quickly worked up a Sending to the Order's agent for this village, who'd taken refuge in a pub of witchkind, letting her know that now would be the time for everyone to leave.

Finley dropped his glamour at the same time he summoned his familiar Earth magic to carry him away.

By convention, nobody arrived directly inside the Order's sprawling farmhouse. Having agents pop in and out indoors would have been too dangerous and chaotic. Instead, he arrived outside, between the farmhouse and one of the large outbuildings used for training apprentices.

He gasped as he saw the other good reason for not arriving directly inside: the farmhouse was already near-chaos.

The farmhouse was in the midst of a dizzying transformation, with construction projects radiating out in every direction like the spokes of a wheel. To the east, a sprawling new wing was taking shape, its timber frame skeleton already towering two stories tall. Thick wooden beams, their grain still redolent with the scent of the forest, were being guided into place by a

trio of witchkind using Sky magic, their hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as they conducted the building materials like an symphony.

The original farmhouse seemed to huddle beneath the grandeur of the additions, its weathered clapboard siding looking humble next to the crisp new shingles flowing up the roof of the western annex. There, workers swarmed over scaffolding like ants, laying course after course of cedar shakes in tidy rows. Whenever a shingle seemed inclined to wander out of alignment, someone would make a subtle gesture and it would snap smartly back into place.

Finley picked his way through the churned earth of the yard, dodging around piles of lumber and stacks of stone. The air was thick with the clean, sharp scent of sawdust and the pungent odor of wood smoke from the blacksmith's forge that had been erected on the south side of the building. There, a burly man with arms like tree trunks was hammering out bronze hardware for the myriad new doors and windows, his ringing blows punctuating the steady hum of activity while his Earth magic added a sizzle to the air.

As he passed the kitchen, Finley caught a glimpse of the renovations underway within. The once cozy space had been gutted to the bare studs, its walls now lined with freshly cut timbers. In the center of the room, a massive fieldstone chimney was rising up from the dirt like a monument, dwarfing the workers who moved around its base. New cabinets, their raw wood still pale and unstained, were stacked along the walls, waiting to be hung.

He finally reached the front door—now a grand, arched affair of stout oak planks bound with bands of brass—and slipped inside, marveling at the transformation. The entryway had been widened and a sweeping staircase added, leading up to the newly built second floor. The walls on either side were lined

with doors sporting gleaming new brass handles, each leading to one of the seemingly endless succession of rooms that now branched off from the central hallway.

Everywhere he looked, witchkind were hard at work, faces smudged with sweat and dust, eyes bright with purpose. It was controlled chaos, but chaos all the same, the air practically crackling with the hum of magic as they employed their Earth-aligned abilities to shape and strengthen the building's very bones.

Finley was filled with conflict. It was heartening to see all of this construction, all of this positive effort, after he'd been through village upon village of humans calling for Hunts to destroy witchkind. Seeing his people together like this, working with a shared purpose, should have given him at least a twinge of pride. Instead, it gave him little but tension and trepidation. The Farm was being expanded out of need, and that need was directly driven by all those angry, fearful humans.

"Finley. How'd it go?" Arcadia's voice, sharp and low, made Finley jump.

"Hey. Good, I guess. Everyone should be able to get out. I don't know how long they'll stay distracted, though."

Arcadia nodded. "I think that's all we can do in some cases. You know they have rumor riders running between villages, now? It's the most efficient communications network they've come up with."

Finley sighed. "I guess we could—"

"Do nothing," Arcadia interrupted firmly. "We'd never catch them all. Marteen ran some estimates, and he figures there might be a hundred or more. And if one doesn't show up on time, that village just sends someone else out with that news, and everyone gets even more riled up. And they're not writing anything down."

Finley nodded glumly. Written communications could be

surreptitiously modified by the Order, unless the humans thought to use engraved sheets of iron, which was expensive and laborious enough that they didn't do it for simple messages. But humans were immune to magic, and so something held only in their minds was impossible to change. "You seem pretty busy," he said, changing the subject.

Arcadia snorted. "Understatement. After Dmitry was exposed, Adomaitis stepped down from the Taryba. I thought we'd get a return to sensibility, and I guess for a moment we did. You know most of it."

Finley had been out of touch on mission after mission since Dmitry's exposure and death, but he knew the broad strokes of the situation. "I don't blame Adomaitis, really. Being frozen in crystal had to shake him up a bit. But that's what convinced the Taryba to take the Order public, right? So now we've got more help?"

"Yeess," Arcadia said, drawing out the word, "but I'm beginning to realize that they only did it out of fear. Keep in mind, most of them had no idea we existed, but now I think they see us as some kind of army, and they're very interested in us expanding. Every graduate from all three Great Schools is being examined for suitability, and if I'm honest, we're going to be pressured to accept most of them."

"Hence the construction."

"Hence," she agreed. "We're quadrupling sleeping quarters, doubling up on work rooms, and expanding the training facilities. There's a new iron-testing facility being built. That's pretty interesting to watch," she added with a grin. "Kelden's been running that, although he's visiting his family right now." Kelden's immunity to iron was a strange miracle of sorts. "But," Arcadia said, her grin vanishing, "the Taryba doesn't know what to do with us. I've had half our operatives just keeping their eyes and ears open, and the other half doing what

you're doing—trying to de-escalate situations as they arise. At least give witchkind a chance to get out.”

“That’s going to be tougher,” Finley said grimly. “At least in the smaller villages. They all know each other, and they’ve gotten incredibly suspicious of strangers. I got spotted just because I wasn’t joining the mob outside the church.”

Arcadia raised an eyebrow. “That’s... unwelcome news,” she admitted. “I’ll put the word out. It means—”

“We’ll lose the smaller villages,” Finley said, nodding tightly. “We should probably be telling people to evacuate right now. The big towns will be safer. They’re less... volatile.”

“The Taryba won’t like it,” she muttered. “An influx of witchkind into even the biggest towns is hardly unnoticeable. Families in Carvendam are having to expand their spaces to accommodate out-of-town relations, and there are still humans running around spiking buildings with iron. We’ve been trying to start a rumor that it’s brass, now, that the witches have adapted.” She shrugged. “It’s not going well.”

“There has to be something we can do.”

Arcadia lowered her voice. “I’ve not mentioned this to anyone. But... Finley, what if we’ve lost? Being secret, I mean. The Veil is crumbling. You’ve said you can feel it. People are getting spotted for the littlest things, now. There’s a little village near Harbsmouth, along the coast, where a fisherwitch was attacked because she’d been staring at a boat for too long.”

“Empowering the runes?”

“Obviously, but they accused her of putting a curse on it. Finley, she’d lived in that village for sixty years! She used to go out on that boat!”

“It’s bad everywhere,” he acknowledge. “But... where are you heading?”

She took a deep breath. “What if we just... tell them?”

“Tell... who, the humans? About magic?”

"About all of it, yes. How magic helps them in a thousand little ways, every day. They're scared because... maybe because they don't know. They fear what they don't know."

"So you're on the... what, Adomaitis' side, now?"

"No," she said firmly. "I don't want to subjugate them. I don't think we should rule them. But we can live alongside them openly, I think. If we do it right. And... we stop suppressing them. Maybe even give them back some of the inventions we've stopped, over all this time. Show them that we're... partners."

Finley considered it. "Have you taken this to the Taryba?"

Arcadia let out a joyless laugh. "Them? No. I told you, I haven't taken this to anyone. And certainly not the Oh-So-Great Council. Right now, they're probably more afraid than the humans. Nobody's talking about the subjugation path again, but I know they're all thinking it. They'd feel safer if they could... control it all."

"Witchkind is outnumbered a hundred to one," Finley said softly.

"But we have magic. And they have iron. I know, I know, I've heard all the arguments a thousand times. The arguments are centuries old. Because all we ever talk about is us versus them. Not us with them."

"Yeah."

Arcadia sighed and crossed her arms. "You're okay?"

"Me? Yeah. I'm fine. Just a little tired. You?"

"I can't believe I let them talk me into running all this."

Finley chuckled. "I was a bit surprised when you agreed."

"You know who else they were considering? Tsakos."

Finley frowned. "Dmitry's cousin? But why would—"

"I'm telling you, they're terrified. But he vanished. Along with, it turns out, the rest of Dmitry's clan."

"Wait, all of them?" Finley said, his brow furrowing.

“Apparently.”

I mentioned that we’d need to discuss that, his talent said darkly. Now’s a good time.

“Would you excuse me for a bit?” Finley asked.

“Sure. I need to go see if they’re putting the kitchen back together in the right shape.”

Finley wandered away from the bedlam of construction and into one of the orchards that surrounded the Farm’s central buildings. He found a sturdy fruit tree offering plenty of shade from the late-afternoon sun, put his back to it, and slid down to the sweet-smelling grass. Okay, he thought.

The trees seemed to dim a bit, fading and becoming slightly unreal. It took several moments for the landscape to disappear entirely, for Finley’s eyes to droop shut, and for his world to turn black.

Then the stars emerged, millions of tiny points of light drifting aimlessly through the sky. Whirls of dim, undirected magic drifted here and there—deep brown-green Earth magic, bright orange-red Flame, gentle blues of Sky, and the watery green-blue of Sea.

A figure began to take shape before him. A young man with rare, pale skin, piercing gray eyes, and thick black hair. The face of Finley’s talent, onetime Last Adherent, the man who’d brought about the End of the Age of Adherents. The man who’d freed magic before drifting into the Origin and falling asleep, until Finley’s birth attracted his—its—attention.

You’re not going to like this, it warned.

Just tell me, Finley said, feeling exhaustion seeping into his bones.

When you... when Dmitry attacked you. Under the Tary-

ba's chamber building. He was going to kill you, you know that.

I know. You showed me. The magic he'd pulled together... I've never imagined anything like it.

The man was a master, his talent admitted. In my time, even most adherents couldn't have been that precise with that much power.

But you gave me a rune to counter it.

Not... exactly. The rune I gave you was... one of mine. One unique to the Sixth Axis, at least back then. I wasn't... there was no guarantee it would even work. Whatever's inside of you—and I don't mean me—is expanding. That's why you can access all six forms of magic, now, not just the two you were born with.

Six?

A discussion for later. But yes, six. I know, because without the last two—well, without the Axis of Beginnings and the Axis of Endings, not to put too fine a point upon it—that rune wouldn't have worked. You'd be dead.

But Dmitry is instead.

Yes.

So, Finley asked carefully, what was that rune?

It's called the Demon Horde. *Demonų orda*, in the True Language. You give it a target, and it... wipes it out.

A sense of cold dread began to creep up Finley's spine, replacing his exhaustion with dismay. You said to concentrate on Dmitry.

I did.

And I did.

You did... but you named him. His full name. Including his clan name. When you did... you brought their clan identity, their clan rune, into your mind, at exactly the... well, wrong time or right time, depending on your perspective I guess.

You mean...

The Demonꝝ orda targeted them all.

Finley's soul turned to ice. He felt the world tilt around him as the full weight of his talent's words sunk in. He'd killed an entire clan. Not just Dmitry, his enemy who had been trying to kill him, but every member of Dmitry's extended family. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of witchkind, snuffed out in an instant because of him. Because he had unwittingly invoked their clan identity at the exact wrong moment.

A wave of nausea rolled through him and he rolled over, bracing his hands on the ground as he struggled to breathe. The peaceful orchard seemed to mock him now, the gentle rustling of leaves and chirping of birds a cruel contrast to the horrific truth reverberating inside him. He squeezed his eyes shut but could not block out the images flashing through his mind—men, women, even children, all bearing some resemblance to Dmitry, all crumpling lifelessly to the ground as the Demonꝝ orda tore through them.

"I didn't mean to," he whispered hoarsely. "I didn't know...I never meant for that to happen..."

But intentions meant nothing in the face of such a crime.

You didn't know.

But I... you told me...

You can't hold yourself to this, his talent insisted. You didn't know. There was no time to explain.

But an entire clan... Finley said miserably.

I know. I know how you feel.

You can't... Finley stopped. Did you...

His talent sighed, nodded, and looked away. How do you think the Age of Adherents came to an End?

Finley heard it that time, the emphasis on End. You killed them all?

I Ended them all. It's... not exactly the same. Then it sighed

again. But it's close enough. Then, after a brief hesitation, it added, There's something more you should know.

What now? Finley didn't know if he could contain any more misery.

It's very unlikely they're all dead.

Finley was confused. But you said...

The Horde is very specific. You targeted their clan rune. But remember what I told you about Clan Karal?

They... Then he realized it. You said they burn out their clan rune. Take on new ones.

Yes. And I'll guarantee some of them are still around, under some other identity. They've existed since the founding of the world, I can't imagine them not taking precautions. It's... their way.

Finley felt a tiny flicker of relief pierce through the heavy shroud of guilt and horror weighing upon him. If some of Dmitry's clan had survived by taking on new identities, then perhaps his terrible mistake had not wrought quite as much devastation as he'd feared. But the relief was short-lived, quickly smothered by a fresh wave of shame. How could he feel anything but utter remorse at having caused so many deaths, even if inadvertently? Even if some had escaped the Horde's wrath, dozens of lives had still been snuffed out because of him. Because he had been careless with the incredible power he wielded.

He hung his head, hot tears pricking at his eyes as the faces of Dmitry's clan members swam before him once more. Young and old, all cut down in an instant, all because of him. The weight of it threatened to crush him entirely.

I'm a monster, he whispered brokenly. I don't deserve to have this magic if this is what I do with it. If I can destroy so many lives with a single wrong thought.

You acted to save your own life, his talent reminded him gently.

Finley shook his head, unable to accept his talent's reassurance. It doesn't matter, he said miserably. Nothing can justify what I've done. The lives I took... His voice broke and, in the dreamscape, he buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

The dreamscape faded and Finley was back in the orchard. For a long moment, there was no sound but the gentle whisper of the breeze through the branches and Finley's muffled weeping. Then his talent spoke again, its voice soft but firm in his mind. Listen to me. You cannot carry this alone. What happened... it's not your fault. You were defending yourself against an enemy who sought your destruction, and the destruction of so many others. Dmitry and his clan—they acted as one, driven by a twisted ideology that saw subjugation and domination as the only path. If they had succeeded, the death toll would have been catastrophic.

Finley lifted his head, eyes red-rimmed and haunted. "But I—"

You saved hundreds, possibly thousands, his talent interjected gently. The humans Dmitry sought to crush beneath his heel. Those of witchkind who would have died in the ensuing war. Which still might happen. Finley... it's an enormous responsibility. When I was... me, still, back then... most adherents did nothing of consequence. Many of my predecessors holed up in the Tower and ignored the world. I decided to do something. To use the power I'd been Chosen to carry. I made the best decisions I could. Some... weren't good. Some were. Maybe. I'll never be certain. But you do the best you can.

Finley wiped his face and nodded slowly.

You can choose to sit out. To not use your power.

"No. I don't think I can. And... isn't it your power?"

No, his talent said, but it sounded uncertain. I'm showing you how, but this is... it's something within you. Something you were born with, in some potential. What everyone calls a Rune Smith... we didn't have that, when I... back then. We couldn't, because magic was so split. Ordinary witchkind didn't even identify with a type of magic back then, it was so thin in the world. But you can touch all of it. I suspect you could even wield pure magic, magic that hasn't passed through the Origin. That's what would let you create new magic, even without my advice.

Finley absorbed this new information slowly. "I didn't realize."

You'd have no way to, without me. I think.

Finley was quiet for a long moment as he thought. Then, he asked, "Do you think we can fix it?"

Fix what?

"The Veil. The secrecy. The... everything."

The Veil? No. As I've said, I'm not even sure it was a good idea when it was made. But the world? It paused, and then continued more firmly. Yes. I think we can fix that.

"Then I choose to try."

Then the jangling of an urgent Sending filled his mind and he scrambled to his feet to go and find Arcadia.

A Disturbing Trend

Finley's magic took him to Nek, accompanied by Cian, a distant cousin, one of the Order's older operatives, and a canny user of Flame magic. Aware of the situation they were likely going into, the two arrived a good day's walk outside the village, and then used one of Finley's more rudimentary, Earth-based travel magics to approach the village in small jumps.

"I remember using that to go home during school breaks," Finley said quietly as they neared the edge of the village and began walking the rest of the way. "I was so proud of it."

"Always envied you mud-slingers," Cian teased. "My travel magic is a great deal flashier. Got accustomed to walking a good bit to avoid being seen. I've probably ridden on a wagon for more miles than I've traveled by Flame."

"You hear that?" Finley said even lower, his voice now tense. Cian nodded sadly. "Mob."

"Do we know how many of witchkind are left here?" Finley had gotten only the quickest of briefings from Arcadia before he and Cian left the Farm.

“Local agent left on his wagon before he did the Sending. Said as far as he knew, everyone had got out. Mostly fisher-witches, of course, and a brace of kids.”

“Good,” Finley murmured as they passed the first of the village’s outbuildings. This one was a large stable, and a few horses whinnied nervously inside. “That means we can be a bit creative.”

“Creative?” Cian frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“The idea is to see if we can break this up a bit. I’m going to put a glamour on you.”

“Makes my eyes itch,” the older man muttered, but he didn’t otherwise object.

Finley recalled the glamour rune his talent had given him—runes and ruin, had it just been earlier than same day?—and fed a slow thread of Sky magic into it. The glamour settled easily over the two of them, giving their faces and clothing something more like the appearance of west coast fishing villagers. Their clothing faded from grays to browns, with seams picked out in red thread—a fashion unique to this corner of the world. Their skin grew a bit rougher, their hair shorter. Their eyes—often a tell for witchkind—washed to the dun-brown of most of humanity.

As they stepped into the village proper, passing an inn usually frequented by traders and travelers, Finley almost gasped at how much the little settlement had changed since his last visit.

The village of Nek had once been a picturesque haven nestled against the rugged coastline, its modest wood and stone buildings huddled together as if seeking comfort from the salty sea winds. Brightly painted fishing boats would bob gently in the harbor, their holds brimming with the day’s catch, while gulls wheeled overhead, their raucous cries mingling with the shouts and laughter of fishermen returning home. The air had

always carried the rich aroma of smoked fish, and the villagers moved about their daily lives with the unhurried pace of those long accustomed to the rhythms of the tides.

But as Finley and Cian made their way along the narrow, winding streets, the village felt utterly transformed. Gone was the easy camaraderie, replaced by a miasma of fear and suspicion that hung heavy in the air. Shutters were drawn tight against prying eyes, and those few villagers who dared to venture out scurried from one sheltered doorway to the next, heads bowed and shoulders hunched. Conversations were conducted in furtive whispers, the words "magic" and "witches" hissing from behind cupped hands like curses. The once vibrant fishing boats now lay abandoned, their crews obviously taken up with new preoccupations.

As they drew closer to the center of the village, the distant murmur of angry voices grew louder, punctuated by occasional shouts and jeers. Exchanging a grim look, Finley and Cian quickened their pace until they emerged into the village square. There, a seething mass of villagers had gathered around the steps at the front of the village church, their faces twisted with hatred and fear. Upon the platform stood a man in the robes of a priest, his arms raised in exhortation as he stoked the flames of the mob's fury.

"...and I tell you, good people of Nek, that evil once again walks among us!" the preacher cried, his voice rising to a fevered pitch. "It comes cloaked in the guise of friend and neighbor, but its true nature is revealed in the unholy magics they wield! The ancient tales are true! The words of the holy books are true! And we must heed their warnings! You have heard it from the other villages—magic once again stalks amongst us!"

The crowd roared its assent, brandishing makeshift weapons and torches. Finley's heart sank as he realized the depth of the priests's influence. This was no mere rabble-rouser,

but a man who had carefully cultivated the villagers' fear and distrust, nurturing it into a potent weapon.

Then the priest's eyes lit on Finley and Cian. "You!" he cried, pointing across the top of the crowd. The mob of perhaps three dozen humans turned as one, glaring at the newcomers. "Who are you?"

Finley steeled himself. "Hunters," he said levelly. "From the north." Beside him, he senses Cian tense.

Interesting approach, his talent murmured in his mind.

"Hunters?"

Neither priest nor mob had been expecting that answer, Finley could see, and he squared his shoulders as he continued. "Yes, Hunters. We've been searching for signs of magic. For signs of witches. We've found mostly... hysteria. Panic. Lies, to be blunt about it. You've something more... credible, perhaps?"

The priest's jaw worked for a moment, but he said nothing.

"Magic!" one of the villagers cried, stepping forward. "A man, dressed in black, wielding green flames at his fingertips!"

"Green flames?" Finley said, smirking. He'd had just enough time at the Farm to prepare for this. He reached into one of his jacket pockets, pulled out a handful of powder, and stepped forward. The mob took a step back as Finley threw his handful at one of their torches. The flame instantly turned green, and burned higher, crackling and sparking. "Like that?" he asked as the humans gasped.

"Not—" the first villager started to say.

"Hardly magic," Finley interrupted, pulling out a bit more powder and holding his hand open for everyone to see. "Copper powder mixed with some other simple minerals." He brushed his hands, letting the mixture float to the ground. "A fine trick, but not magic. Certainly something someone might do if they wanted your... attention. Wanted you frightened, perhaps. Wanted to add some... flair to their stories."

The villagers stared at the green-tinged torch flames, already returning to yellow-orange as the copper mixture burned off, their eyes wide with a mixture of confusion and dawning realization. Murmurs rippled through the crowd as they turned to one another, whispering urgently. Some still gripped their makeshift weapons, but their hands had gone slack, uncertainty replacing the blind fury that had gripped them moments before.

The priest's face had gone pale, his lips pressed into a thin line. He glanced from the flickering flames to the faces of his congregation, seeing the first cracks in the facade of righteous anger he had so carefully constructed. Sweat beaded on his brow despite the chill in the air.

"It's a trick!" he cried, his voice cracking with desperation. "A deception, meant to lead us astray! We cannot allow ourselves to be swayed by the lies of outsiders!"

But his words rang hollow, even to his own ears. The villagers were no longer listening, their attention fixated on the now-orange fire and the strangers who had made it burn green with a bit of dust.

"I saw it too!" another villager shouted, shouldering his way to the front of the crowd. He was a grizzled fisherman, his weathered face half-hidden beneath a thick beard. "The witch! She made the very sea rise up and swallow my boat! I barely escaped with my life!" The crowd murmured agreement, and several people were nodding.

Finley turned to face the man, his expression carefully neutral. "A terrible experience, to be sure. But tell me, what exactly happened?"

"It was old Anežka," a woman said.

"She cursed my boat!" the man cried. "And she summoned a storm!"

Finley turned to confer with Cian. "You know the name?"

"Fisher," he said shortly. "Safe away."

"And the storm?"

"Along this coast?" He snorted. "Like as not she was trying to dispel it."

"Storms come through here infrequently, then?" Finley said more loudly, turning back to the crowd. "I'm from the south myself, and we certainly get our share of squalls. Not so, here?"

The villagers shifted uneasily, exchanging glances. A low murmur rippled through the crowd as they muttered amongst themselves.

"Well, now that you mention it," one weathered old fisherman said slowly, "we do get some mighty fierce storms blowin' through here on the regular. Waves high as a man, wind that'll tear the roof off your house if you ain't careful."

"Aye, and Sven's boat," another chimed in, jerking his thumb toward the red-faced accuser, "that old tub's been one good wave away from a disaster for years now. Sven's too tight-fisted to spend a copper on fixin' her up proper."

Sven sputtered indignantly, his face turning an even deeper shade of crimson. "Now see here—" he began, but the others ignored him.

"And Anežka," said a woman with salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a severe bun, "she's worked on near every boat in this village at one time or another. Been patchin' up Sven's sorry excuse for a vessel for a decade at least, and all without a word of thanks, I'd wager."

Nods and grunts of agreement rippled through the assembled villagers. The mood was shifting, the red haze of anger and fear dissipating like morning mist under the relentless light of reason.

Finley pressed his advantage. "And where is Anežka now?"

The villagers' muttering grew deeper. "Gone," someone barked.

"Gone?" Finley asked, slowly raising an eyebrow.

"You drove her away, Sven!" someone else shouted. "Drove her out for fear of her life!"

"Nobody was better with sail work!" a third person called.

As the villagers' accusations against Sven grew louder, the once-fearsome mob began to dissipate, their makeshift weapons lowering as they turned to one another in dismay. The realization that they had driven away one of their own, a woman who had been an integral part of their community for years, settled over them like a heavy shroud.

"She was the best sailmaker we ever had," lamented a grizzled old fisherman, his calloused hands twisting the frayed edge of his tunic. "Knew just how to cut the cloth to catch the wind just right. My boat's never sailed so well as when Anežka worked her magic on the sails."

Finley's lips twisted at the word magic.

"And she had a way with the young ones, too," added a matronly woman, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Always had time for a kind word and a bit of candy from her pockets. The children adored her."

The villagers began to cluster in small groups, their voices rising and falling as they shared memories of Anežka and all she had done for their small community. Some spoke of the intricate knotwork she wove into her sails, the patterns seeming to dance and shimmer in the sunlight. Others recalled the way she could predict the weather with uncanny accuracy, her keen eye always turned to the sky and the sea.

As the conversations flowed around them, Finley and Cian exchanged a weary glance. "We rode hard to get here quickly," Finley said, continuing to press. "All for more empty rumors." He shook his head sadly. "Might one of you at least loan us a couple of beasts so that we can investigate more credible allegations?"

As the villagers' chatter died down, an older man with a neatly trimmed beard and a faded blue cap stepped forward, his weathered face creased with guilt and shame. "I have a pair of horses you can take," he said gruffly, not quite meeting Finley's eyes. "Sturdy beasts, they are. They'll get you where you need to go."

Finley inclined his head graciously. "You have our thanks," he said. "We will return them to you when our work is done."

The man nodded, then turned and strode away, his shoulders hunched as if bearing a heavy weight. A few of the other villagers mumbled their apologies as well, their faces flushed with embarrassment at how easily they had been swayed by fear and suspicion.

As the crowd began to disperse, Finley and Cian made their way towards the edge of the village where the man had indicated his stables were located. The once-menacing mob had transformed into a collection of shamefaced individuals, each slinking back to their homes and shops like chastened children.

Finley glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes searching for the priest who had been so quick to fan the flames of hatred. But the man had vanished, slipping away into the shadows of the church like a wraith. The heavy wooden doors stood closed, the iron hinges glinting dully in the fading light.

"He'll be trouble," Cian muttered as they strode toward the old man's stable.

"He's opportunistic," Finley agreed. "I can't help but wonder if half of what we're seeing isn't just the church trying to use rumors to their advantage."

"You plan to ride back to the Farm, then?" Cian quipped.

"We'll ride to the next small settlement. There are a few without churches within an hour or so. We'll leave them there, and pay someone to return them."

Cian nodded silently as they watched the old man saddle up their mounts.

“So it was nothing?” Arcadia asked when they returned to the Farm.

“No, not nothing,” Finley said, shaking his head. “It’s likely one of them did see something. Either that, or someone’s deliberately playing tricks that seem like magic. Someone with strong Flame affinity can certainly make colored flames dance.”

“Aye,” Cian agreed. “Always a treat at parties.”

“But the priest had nothing more than rumors and claims. He’d seen nothing, or he’d have spoken up. But he was the one calling for a Hunt.”

“Seems like it’s only the priests doing so,” Arcadia observed.

“Makes sense. I mean, nobody in living memory even remembers one,” Finley said. “So they’re just pulling this from their books.”

Hunts are ugly, his talent said coldly.

“So on the one hand, we know some people have seen actual magic. We saw what Landon was doing. And the Veil is stretched thin. Even little everyday magics—”

“Word is well out about that,” Cian objected. “You’d have to be a fool to so much as use an entry-rune on a public street.”

Finley nodded agreement. “I’d imagine people would have created new entrances in more guarded locations by now.”

“But still,” Arcadia persisted, “we have legitimate sightings, a stretched Veil, and the human church apparently trying to take advantage of this.”

“Priests, at least,” Finley agreed. “I don’t know much about their church’s actual organization.”

“Me either,” Arcadia sighed, looking to Cian. The older

man simply shrugged. "We do have someone who does." She closed her eyes to form a Sending, and a few moments later a damp breeze blew up and a middle-aged woman appeared. "Mila. You know Cian and Finley?"

Mila smiled and nodded. "Cian and I go a ways back. Finley only through reputation, but it's all good."

"You know a bit about how the human church is organized?" Finley asked.

Mila frowned a bit. "Such as it is. Priests are largely autonomous. There's a bit of organization in the larger towns—bishops and such overseeing several priests. There are a couple of cardinals who like to think they call all the shots, but they mainly just live well off the portions of tithes that get sent up the chain. They can put some pressure here and there, move a priest around now and again if they don't like how he's preaching." She shrugged. "By and large they leave alone."

"And would they take an opportunity to gain more power for themselves?" Finley asked.

She chuckled. "In a moment. Back centuries ago, they had a lot more structure. A lot more power. More even, in some ways, than the human village councils and Aldermen. I don't doubt the ones higher up would like that back."

"So that's what we're seeing," Arcadia said. "If the Aldermen can't protect you, the church will, and it'll do that by organizing Hunts."

Mila nodded slowly. "It's plausible. Is that what you're seeing out there?"

"You don't get out much these days?" Cian asked, his eyes twinkling.

"You know I'm invaluable here," Mila shot back, but the dancing light in her own eyes belied her haughty tone.

"You actually are," Arcadia insisted. "Mila receives most of

the incoming dispatches. Including Sendings. She's the one who's been getting the most work, right now."

"We're all working hard," Mila said gently, all teasing gone from her voice. "We can't—" She stopped suddenly, her eyes glazing over the way many people's did when they received a detailed Sending. "Sowsee," she said as her eyes refocused. "Almost everyone's out."

"Finley, that's—"

"Mom and Dad are in Evermore now," he said quickly. "All the family left a moon ago. What's happening?"

"Mob," Mila said succinctly.

"I'm on it."

"Finley, take—" Arcadia began.

"I'd like to go," Mila said quickly. "If the church is behind this... that's meaningful." Arcadia looked doubtful. "Laszlo can fill in. He's good. Any Sendings directed here will go to him if I'm not around."

"I suppose," Arcadia said, still doubtful.

"Let's go, Finley," Mila said, grabbing his forearm as her Sea magic blew up around them.

A Grab for Power

“**T**his is pretty close for comfort,” Finley said as they appeared within sight of Sowsee’s outermost buildings. He immediately empowered a rune that would identify anyone watching them, but it flickered and faded instantly, giving him some reassurance.

“Sorry,” Mila murmured as they began walking slowly toward the village. “I have cousins here. I know Cian would—”

“I understand,” Finley said quickly. “I’m going to cast a glamour over us.”

Finley had grown up in this part of the world, and although he fit the local stereotypes well, he didn’t want to take any chance of anyone recognizing him. After all, the human cabal that had opposed the Order for years was still out there, and they knew him very well.

Their new appearance settled over them: light-gray tunics and coal-black trousers underneath sturdy but well-worn medium-gray tunics. Once again, their eyes faded to brown, but this time the light tan that was more common in this part of the

world. Finley's short hair grew and arranged itself into a tail, while Mila's shortened into a close-cropped bristle.

Finley added swords at their hips, hung from wide, black leather belts. Mila's eyebrows rose at that, but she said nothing.

Like Nek, Sowsee had changed.

Just a month ago, Sowsee had been a vibrant, thriving fishing village, its narrow streets alive with the bustle of daily life. In the early morning light, fishermen would gather on the docks, their weathered faces creased with laughter as they prepared their boats for the day's catch. The air was filled with the pungent aroma of bait and the salty tang of the sea, mingling with the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the village bakery.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the village would come alive with activity. Children darted through the streets, their bare feet slapping against the cobblestones as they played tag and hide-and-seek among the colorful houses. Women in bright skirts and aprons would gather at the well to fill their buckets, their cheerful chatter and laughter ringing out across the square.

In the market, stalls overflowed with the bounty of the sea and the land. Silver-scaled fish gleamed on beds of ice, their glassy eyes staring up at the passersby. Baskets of plump, red tomatoes and crisp green lettuce sat beside wheels of pungent cheese and jars of fragrant honey. The air hummed with the cries of the vendors hawking their wares, their voices rising and falling like the waves against the shore.

As the day wore on, the fishermen would return, their boats low in the water with the weight of their catch, and half the town would turn out to unload it, sort it into crates, top those with chunks of ice, and load them onto wagons bound for inland villages and towns.

But as Finley and Mila stepped into Sowsee, the once

vibrant village felt like a hollow shell of its former self. An oppressive silence hung over the narrow streets, broken only by the occasional creak of a shutter or the distant caw of a gull.

The few villagers who dared to venture out moved with a furtive, hunted air, their eyes darting nervously from side to side as they hurried about their business. Conversations were conducted in hushed whispers, the words snatched away by the chill sea breeze before they could reach unwanted ears. Suspicious glances followed Finley and Mila as they made their way deeper into the village, the weight of the villagers' fear and distrust palpable in the air.

The once bustling marketplace was a ghost of its former self, the stalls standing empty and abandoned. A few withered vegetables lay scattered across the ground, trampled underfoot by the villagers in their haste to be elsewhere. The pungent aroma of fish and brine that had once permeated the air was conspicuously absent, replaced by a sour, musty smell that spoke of neglect and decay.

But it was the activity at the edge of the village that had drawn Finley and Mila's attention. A group of men were erecting thick wooden timbers on either side of the road. Each tall log had been sharpened to a point at one end, forming the beginnings of a stockade on either side of the trade road. A trench had been dug from the road clear to the high-tide line.

"They're fortifying," Finley murmured as he and Mila stepped into the village square. "That's a bad sign."

"So's this," she muttered back, nodding toward the church.

As they approached, Finley and Mila were struck by the eerie stillness that had settled over the gathered crowd. The villagers stood in huddled clusters, their faces drawn and pale, their eyes fixed on the man who stood before them on the church steps. He was clad in the rich, dark robes of a high-ranking priest, the fabric heavy with embroidery and gleaming

with threads of gold. A large, ornate brass chain hung around his neck, the metal catching the weak sunlight and throwing off glimmers of cold fire.

The priest's voice carried across the square, low and intense, each word carefully measured for maximum impact. "My children," he intoned, his eyes sweeping over the assembled villagers, "a great evil has come upon us. An evil we thought long vanquished, driven from this world by the righteous fury of our ancestors. But now, in our complacency, we have allowed it to creep back into our midst, to take root like a cancer in the very heart of our community."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, fear and unease written plainly on every face. The priest let the whispers die away before he continued, his voice rising in volume and intensity. "I speak, of course, of the scourge of witchcraft. Of the unholy powers wielded by those who have sold their souls to the forces of darkness. Even now, they walk among us, cloaked in the guise of friend and neighbor, waiting for the moment to strike, to unleash their foul magics upon the innocent and unsuspecting."

The crowd shifted nervously, suspicious glances darting from face to face as each person searched for signs of the accused in their midst. The priest's words hung heavy in the air, fanning the flames of paranoia and distrust.

"But fear not, my children," the priest continued, his voice dropping to a soothing purr. "For the Church stands ready to protect you, to root out this evil and purge it from our village. We will not rest until every last witch has been brought to justice, until Sowsee is once again safe and pure."

He raised his arms, the sleeves of his robe falling back to reveal hands heavy with jeweled rings. "Come forward, then, and let us begin the cleansing. If you have knowledge of any who practice the dark arts, if you have seen signs or portents of

their foul rituals, speak now. The Church will hear your testimony, and we will act."

For a long moment, there was only silence, broken by the distant crash of waves against the shore. Then, slowly, a woman stepped forward from the crowd, her head bowed and her hands clasped before her.

"Your Eminence," she said, her voice trembling, "I fear—"

"What's this, then?" Finley called loudly. The crowd turned toward him.

The priest frowned. "Who are you, my child? Do you live here?"

Not local, then, Finley confirmed to himself. He could sense Mila starting to tremble next to him. "Hunters, Father," he called back, hoping he'd gotten the right honorific.

"Eminence," Mila piped up. "Hunters from the West. We've been following... rumors."

"Not rumors, child," the priest said, suspicion lining his features. "Facts. Evidence." His frown deepened. "I was unaware of the commissioning of... Hunters, at this time."

"The Western Eparchy has moved quickly to confirm witchcraft and Hunt it down," she said firmly. Finley felt himself starting to tremble as he realized how unprepared he was this time. He clenched his stomach and tried to stand straighter. "Our Hunt has brought us here, still searching for evidence. It's comforting to know you have some, Eminence. May we know of it?"

The priest's frown had twisted into a scowl. "You are out of your Eparchy, child," he began. "And I—"

"A commissioned Hunter knows no boundaries in pursuit of their Hunt," Mila interrupted. "As you know, Eminence."

The man's face was flushing near-purple now. "I have come seeking such evidence myself," he snarled. "And this woman was about to speak."

“Apologies,” Finley said, bowing his head. “Please continue, sister.” He glanced at Mila, who gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod.

The villager, clearly taken aback by the presence of “Hunters,” began to speak again, but this time her voice wavered. “The Widow Bondar,” she said. “The one who lingers around the sorting shed when the catch is unloaded.”

Likely not a fisherwitch, then, Finley thought quickly. Probably holding the temperature down inside the shed and keeping the ice solid. She’d have been strong in Sea magic, then, if not drawn to the actual ocean.

“I saw her... appear, Eminence!” The villager’s voice picked up confidence and pitch as she eased into her story. “Next to the apothecary! One moment she wasn’t there, I swear it, and the next she was!”

Caught exiting her home, likely, Finley thought somberly.

“And you confronted this widow?” the priest asked.

“I did, Eminence, but—she said I must have just blinked. That she’d just stepped out of Janne’s. The apothecary, I mean.” The woman sounded less certain as she added, “She did have a paper of willowbank powder in one hand.”

A statue carved from stone would have exhibited more emotion than the priest at that moment. “Thank you, sister.” His eyes stabbed at Finley and Mila. “There is no need for panic, my children. I am here, and Father Dormas remains here with you. I ask that you bring us your stories. Your... evidence of magic in your village. Until then, go about your business. But... be on guard. As the Greatest Book tells us, Kai tarp jüsų vaikšto raganos, mato tik nekalti.”

Finley started at the words. For witchkind, it was the True Language, the oldest language in the world, the language of magic itself. He knew that humans had spoken it as well at the world’s founding, and that some of their oldest texts still used

it. Nonetheless, it was... strange to hear it coming from the priest's lips.

When witches walk amongst you, only the innocent may see, his talent translated. Not very helpful.

I doubt most of them know what it means.

"Hunters!" the priest called as he turned toward the church's doors. "Attend me, please."

"None of them know what that meant," Mila muttered as they strode toward the church. "They pull that out when they want to impress. I doubt he knows what it means."

"Thank you," Finley whispered back. "If Cian had been here, I don't—" he stopped suddenly, almost breaking his stride. "They've put iron bars around the door frame," he added urgently. "Do you know—"

"I do," she replied quickly.

Finley quickly envisioned the rune construct—an unusual one of his own devising—that bottled up his magic inside himself. Neither of them would be any more powerful than a human while it was in effect, but—

Your glamour! his talent warned.

Finley dropped the rune immediately. "Mila," he warned as they approached the steps of the church, "I'm not going to be able to—"

"Right. Neither of us can," she said, her jaw tight. "Maybe—"

You can, his talent said. But you're not going to like it. Tell her to hold her breath and not scream.

Hold—

Just empower this. Earth magic, as much as you can spare.

"Mila, I'm going to try something. It'll hurt. Don't scream."

. . .

[[[RUNE: Transform Appearance]]]

That's different, Finley remarked. This new rune lacked the angles and abstraction of the ones his talent had been using the most. This one felt more... organic. Natural, although the twisting—

Just empower it!

Finley did so, and almost choked in pain, quickly clenching his jaw around a scream.

As Finley poured Earth magic into the strange new rune, a searing agony ripped through his body. It felt as if his very flesh was being kneaded and reshaped by invisible hands, his skin stretching and contorting grotesquely. Beside him, Mila let out a choked gasp, her face twisting in anguish as the same excruciating transformation overtook her.

Their skin began to shift and flow like wet clay, features melting and re-solidifying into new configurations. Finley's angular jaw softened, his cheekbones sinking into a rounder, more nondescript visage. Mila's delicate nose broadened, her high forehead sloping into a heavy brow. Even their eyes changed, irises swirling with flecks of unfamiliar colors before settling into the same flat, unremarkable brown that Finley's glamour had cast over them.

As their faces reshaped themselves, the color simultaneously leached from their skin and clothing. Healthy pink flesh faded to a sickly grayish-white, as if all the blood had been drained away. Mila's russet hair dulled to a lifeless ash-brown, while Finley's darkened to the hue of charcoal. Their garments lost all vibrancy, leaving only shades of slate, granite, and coal.

The entire process took mere seconds, but the pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that both Finley and Mila stumbled on the first step of the church. They recovered quickly as the

pain subsided as fast as it has come. Already, they could feel the iron greedily sipping at their magic, trying to draw it from them, and Finley hastily empowered his protective rune.

"Ah, Hunters," the priest said coldly as they stepped through the door. He paused for a moment, glancing to one side of them and then the other.

Looking at the iron, Finley thought smugly.

"I am Bishop Silva, head of the Southern Eparchy. I was... surprised to see you here. To see that Hunters had already been commissioned, in fact. Has Bishop Fresheri decided to... advance his agenda?"

"We are not privy to his Eminence's plans, Eminence," Mila said softly. "And we apologize for interrupting your... sermon."

"Not privy... hah," Silva said mirthlessly. He began pacing back and forth in the small entryway.

Silva stopped his pacing abruptly, his black robes swirling around his ankles. He fixed Finley and Mila with a piercing stare, his dark eyes glittering with a mixture of calculation and disdain.

"Let us dispense with the pretense, shall we?" he said, his voice low and cold. "We both know that these... sightings of magic are little more than rumor and hearsay. Old wives' tales and the fevered imaginings of the ignorant masses, brought once more into the light."

Finley and Mila exchanged a quick glance, their transformed faces carefully neutral. They remained silent, waiting for the bishop to continue.

Silva's thin lips curved into a mirthless smile. "Oh, I have no doubt that some of these people believe they have seen something. A flickering light in the darkness, a strange figure vanishing into the mist. But magic? True witchcraft?" He scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "It is a child's fantasy, nothing more."

He began to pace again, his footsteps echoing hollowly on the stone floor. "But the church, you see... we are in a unique position. These rumors, these whispers of witches among us... they have spread like wildfire, fanned by fear and ignorance. And fear, my dear Hunters, is a powerful tool."

Silva paused, his gaze distant, as if envisioning some grand scheme. "The people are losing faith in their Aldermen, in their ability to protect them from this imagined threat. They look to us now, to the church, for guidance and salvation. And we shall provide it."

He turned back to Finley and Mila, his eyes hardening. "We have worked tirelessly to ensure that these rumors reach every corner of the land. Our rumor riders, simple messengers, carry tales of witchcraft and dark magic from village to village, stoking the flames of paranoia and mistrust."

Silva's voice took on a note of cruel satisfaction. "The Aldermen are powerless against such pervasive fear. Their reassurances fall on deaf ears, their authority crumbles like sand. And in their place, the church shall rise, a bastion of strength and protection in these troubled times."

He stepped closer to Finley and Mila, his face a mask of cold determination. His eyes narrowed as he regarded Finley and Mila with a mixture of suspicion and barely concealed anger. "But it seems," he hissed, "that Bishop Fresheri has overstepped his bounds. The agreement, reached in utmost secrecy among the highest echelons of the church, was clear. We would foment fear, collecting scraps of circumstantial evidence and half-truths, stoking the flames of paranoia until they consumed reason itself. We would rouse the crowds, guiding their terror and fury until they turned to us, the priests, as their last bastion of hope against the imagined scourge of witchcraft."

He began to pace again, his movements sharp and agitated, like a caged predator. "And then, with the people

firmly in our grasp, we would assume control. The Aldermen, those weak-willed fools, would be cast aside, their authority crumbling to dust beneath the weight of the church's righteous power. We would rule, not just as spiritual leaders, but as the true masters of every aspect of their lives."

Silva whirled to face them, his robes swirling around him like tendrils of darkness. "But this... this brazen act by Fresheri, sending his own Hunters into my territory, into the very heart of my Eparchy... it reeks of a power grab, a blatant attempt to seize more than his allotted share of control."

His face contorted with barely suppressed rage, a vein throbbing at his temple. "Does he think himself above the agreement? Does he believe that he can simply march into the Southern Eparchy and claim it as his own, riding on the coat-tails of this manufactured crisis? The arrogance, the sheer audacity of it..."

Silva's voice dropped to a menacing whisper, each word dripping with venom. "I assure you, Hunters, that the other Eparchies will not stand for such insolence. Fresheri may have his delusions of grandeur, his dreams of sole dominion, but we are not so easily cowed. There will be consequences for this breach of trust, this blatant power grab."

He stepped closer to Finley and Mila, his eyes glittering with malice. "You may carry this message back to your master, Hunters. Tell him that the Southern Eparchy, and indeed all the others, will not tolerate his attempts to subvert our carefully laid plans. We will not allow him to upset the delicate balance of power we have so painstakingly constructed."

Silva's lips curled into a sneer, his face a mask of cold fury. "If Fresheri persists in this foolish endeavor, if he continues to send his lackeys into our midst, seeking to undermine our authority... well, let us just say that the church has ways of

dealing with those who would defy its will. Even one of our own is not immune to the consequences of our wrath.”

Mila nodded respectfully. “Yes, your Eminence. Understood. We will convey your... message. Clearly.”

“See that you do,” the priest snarled. He whirled and strode into the church’s nave, the inner door slamming shut behind him.

Finley and Mila exchanged glances as they turned and left the church, and both breathed a sigh of relief as they released their holds on their magic.

“Do you think—” Mila asked.

Finley shook his head, saying nothing.

They walked quickly out of the village, following the path they’d taken in, and it wasn’t until the village’s outskirts were well out of sight behind them that Finley spoke. “This is an interesting new discovery,” he said quietly, once again using his magic to check for watchers. “Let’s get back to the Farm.”

Quickly. That transformation magic is going to reverse and it’s going to hurt worse going back.

Mila’s Sea magic once again embraced them and carried them away.

Arcadia listened intently as Finley and Mila recounted their harrowing experience in Sowsee, her brow furrowed with concern. The flickering light of the candles cast dancing shadows across the rough-hewn walls of the Farm’s still-intact main hall, the ancient stone seeming to absorb the gravity of their words.

When they had finished their tale, Arcadia leaned back in her chair, her fingertips steepled before her as she processed the shocking revelations. “This is... unprecedented,” she murmured,

her voice thick with a mixture of awe and trepidation. "The church, moving so openly, so brazenly... I never thought they would dare to be so bold."

She rose from her seat and began to pace the length of the hall, her footsteps echoing softly on the worn flagstones. "To think that they would deliberately sow fear and mistrust, using the specter of witchcraft as a tool to seize power... it's both brilliant and utterly reprehensible."

Arcadia paused, turning to face Finley and Mila, her eyes glinting with a fierce determination. "But in a way, it's almost a relief to know that there haven't been more genuine sightings of magic. If the villagers were truly witnessing blatant displays of witchcraft, it would mean that our own people had grown careless, risking exposure and putting us all in danger."

She sighed, running a hand through her long hair. "No, it's far more likely that the villagers are simply more attuned to the small, everyday magics that have always been present, but have gone unnoticed for generations. A flicker of light as a witch opens a hidden door, a shimmer in the air as a spell is cast... these things have always been there, but fear has a way of sharpening the senses, making the mundane seem extraordinary. And of course, with the Veil stretched so thin..."

Arcadia resumed her pacing, her brow creased in thought. "But the church... to use witchkind as their ghoul, their boggart to bring the masses under their control... it's a stroke of twisted genius. They prey upon the ignorance and superstition of the people, fanning the flames of paranoia until reason itself is consumed."

"Bringing the truth seems to defuse the situation," Finley pointed out.

"Only with someone less experienced than Silva," Mila countered. "And less clever. He sent people away to think. They'll dream up new things they've seen."

Arcadia nodded. "I'm not sure we can directly counter—" Her eyes flew wide as she stopped.

"A Sending?" Mila asked with a frown.

"Directly to me," Arcadia said quickly. "It's happening. Now. Actual magic. Lakewood. Finley, go!"

He vanished in a gust of cold air.

A Magical Display

Finley arrived in Lakewood just as the sun was setting below the horizon. The sky transformed into a stunning masterpiece of burnt orange and deep plum hues, casting a warm glow over the horizon. However, it was not the most captivating light to behold in that moment.

Lakewood was under attack.

Finley's eyes widened as he took in the breathtaking yet terrifying scene before him. Lakewood, a charming town nestled along the northern edge of a tranquil lake, was now a spectacle of magical chaos. The town, which typically buzzed with the gentle hum of everyday life even as night fell, had been transformed into a battlefield of arcane force.

As Finley watched in awe and horror, brilliant lances of colored flame burst forth from the heart of a nearby building. The structure seemed to shudder under the onslaught, its walls cracking and splintering as the magical fire tore through it with relentless fury. The flames danced and twisted in mesmerizing patterns, their hues shifting from deep crimson to electric blue to an eerie, sickly green.

Across the town, numerous other buildings had fallen victim to the same fate. Roofs collapsed inward as the enchanted flames consumed them from within, sending plumes of multi-colored smoke billowing into the darkening sky. The air crackled with energy, and the ground trembled beneath Finley's feet as the magical destruction continued unabated.

The once-peaceful streets were now illuminated by the unnatural light of the fires, casting distorted shadows that seemed to writhe and dance of their own accord. The lake, usually a serene mirror reflecting the stars above, now glowed with an otherworldly sheen, as if the magic had seeped into its very depths.

Screams of terror and confusion echoed through the night, mingling with the roar of the flames and the ominous creaking of buildings on the verge of collapse. Finley stood frozen, his heart pounding in his chest as he tried to comprehend the sheer scale of the magical destruction unfolding before his eyes.

A rush of hot air and a shower of sparks announced Cian's arrival. His eyes flew open immediately. "What in the name of the Origin..." he breathed.

"Find where it's coming from," Finley ordered. In his mind, he was already assembling the most powerful Sea magic he knew. It wouldn't be nearly as effective with the lake's freshwater, but it might still help douse these flames and save... what could be saved.

Try this instead, his talent suggested, taking the rune construct Finley knew and... reinventing it.

[[[RUNE Douse Fire]]]

Strange, Finley noted as he began pouring Sea magic into it.

Flame as well, his talent directed. And... I think I'm onto something.

It wasn't wrong, Finley noted. The rune—whatever it represented—consumed less of Finley's magic than he'd expected, and less than a quarter of what the more traditional New Runic construct would have required. It felt effortless, and... connected, somehow, although to what, Finley couldn't say.

As Finley poured magic into the rune, a remarkable transformation began to take place. The nearby lake, its surface shimmering with an otherworldly glow, started to churn and froth as if stirred by an invisible hand. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, tendrils of water rose from the lake's depths, twisting and coiling into the air like ethereal serpents.

The water, infused with Finley's magic, took on a luminescent quality, casting an eerie blue light that mingled with the harsh glow of the arcane flames. As the tendrils grew in size and number, they began to weave together, forming a dense, shimmering fog that hovered above the lake's surface.

With a gesture from Finley, the fog surged forward, propelled by an unseen force. It rolled across the shore and into the streets of Lakewood, engulfing the town in a cool, damp embrace. The fog seemed to possess a sentience of its own, seeking out the raging fires that consumed the buildings.

As the enchanted mist encountered the flames, it wrapped itself around them like a smothering blanket. The fires sputtered and hissed, their magical energy dissipating as the water-laden fog extinguished them with ruthless efficiency. Steam billowed from the points of contact, creating an eerie, shifting landscape of half-seen shapes and dancing shadows.

The fog continued its relentless advance, snaking through shattered windows and crumbling doorways, filling every nook and cranny of the ravaged structures. It seeped into the very

stones and timbers, quenching the flames at their source and preventing them from reigniting.

Gradually, the chaos that had engulfed Lakewood began to subside. The screams of terror faded, replaced by the hissing of steam and the creaking of damaged buildings settling back into place. The multi-hued glow of the magical flames flickered and died, leaving only the soft, pulsing light of the enchanted fog.

As the town fell into an uneasy silence, Finley stood at the edge of the destruction, his hands still outstretched, maintaining his connection to the rune and the magic that had saved Lakewood from total annihilation. The fog swirled around him, cool and comforting against his skin.

Cian reappeared next to him, breathing heavily. "I spotted him, but he vanished. Flame magic."

An uneasy sensation gripped Finley's guts. "Can you describe him?"

"Better. I got a good look." With a quick glance around to ensure they weren't being observed, Cian conjured a small ball of flame in one hand. It glowed white-hot, and quickly began shaping itself, almost as if Cian was sculpting it with his mind.

The sensation in Finley's stomach grew colder. "Landon," he said flatly.

"Your classmate? The one who was... expelled from the Order?"

"Former classmate. And yes. I'd... there was a chance he'd died."

"He didn't."

"Clearly."

"You know him well enough to trace him?"

Finley sighed and looked away. "I should. And I should be able to. I've tried, several times this past moon, but no luck. Even..." he stopped himself. Cian not only didn't know about Finley's talent, he didn't, couldn't, know the nature of it. Only

Arcadia and Kelden knew what was going on inside Finley's head. "...Arcadia couldn't, and she's much better at tracing." Even the better tracing rune you gave me isn't doing it. Somehow, it's being blocked.

Or he really is dead.

Cian saw him.

Hmm. Perhaps a new approach, then.

[[[RUNE Powerful Trace]]]

What are these? Finley asked.

I don't know. They're closer than the last ones. Those were... straightforward. But magic isn't straightforward, is it? It bobs and weaves. I can see it, you know. All around us. These are... closer. I'm trying to mimic what I see, but there's something missing. But... try it. Sky magic.

Finley empowered the rune. It glowed in his mind, and he felt it tingling on his skin. It reached out, almost as if it was aware, and Finley hastily locked an image of Landon into his mind. The magic seemed to study it for a moment, and then began reaching out... but it was only a few heartbeats before it retreated gently, coiling around itself and fading. Guess not.

Something strange has happened to that young man, his talent said, clearly mystified.

"Nothing?" Cian asked.

"Nothing," Finley confirmed, shaking his head. "And now there will be calls for Hunts."

Cian snorted. "Not entirely unjustified, if you take my meaning."

"I suppose not."

"We need to get witchkind evacuated."

“Of course we do!” Finley snapped, suddenly overflowing with frustration and fatigue. “But to where? There are, what, five thousand of us here? Six? Where can they all go?”

Cian was silent.

“Sorry,” Finley apologized, rubbing his eyes. “I’m exhausted. Today has been too much already. Yes, of course. Do a broad Sending. Assuming anyone isn’t smart enough to figure it out on their own. Say that, if anyone has absolutely nowhere to go, they can come to the Farm. It’s not a secret anymore.”

“The farmhouse—”

“They’re witchkind, Cian. They won’t die of a night sleeping in a field. And it’ll be safer than here, come tomorrow morning. There might even be riots tonight, after that.”

Cian looked at him closely, and then nodded agreement. “On it.”

“I’ll head to the Farm and tell Arcadia.”

The old man nodded again, his eyes already closed to work the Sending as Finley’s waning magic embraced him and took him home.

A Fee, Returned

“So it was definitely Landon?” Arcadia sighed.

Finley nodded. When he’d arrived at the Farm, he’d all but collapsed, his magic exhausted and his body not far behind. She’d put him in bed immediately, finding him a space in one of the newly built sleeping rooms in the one completed new wing of the farmhouse. He’d slept until sunrise, and then sought her out in the small, makeshift outdoor kitchen the Order was using. “Cian got a good look at him, and he sculpted a likeness from flame. There’s no doubt.”

“You tried tracking him?”

“Of course. Nothing worked. My talent even... it’s experimenting with new runes. Nothing worked. Something’s different about Landon, now. Different enough that it’s like I don’t know him.”

Arcadia gave him a small smile. “It’s still strange to hear you talk about your talent as if it’s alive.”

He shrugged. “It was, once. But... I am starting to understand where I stop and he—it—starts. There is a difference

between us. You know I can manipulate all four kinds of magic, now? Equally well?"

Her eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Yes. Well, not equally. Sky magic is still pretty... subtle. But I can Gather as much of that as I can anything else." He hesitated, but decided to tell her everything. "And it's six kinds of magic. Not four."

Her eyes widened further, but then she nodded slowly. "The Six Axes."

"Apparently. Although you got it faster than I did."

"You never liked history."

"True."

She leaned back against the heavy timber table where a light breakfast had been laid, and looked at the bustle of activity before them.

As Arcadia surveyed the scene before her, she couldn't help but marvel at the progress they'd made in such a short time. The once modest farmhouse was being transformed into a grand headquarters right before her eyes.

Witchkind bustled about, their magic weaving visibly through the air like shimmering threads. Some levitated massive stone blocks, fitting them together with precision to form sturdy walls. Others coaxed mighty oaks to grow and shape themselves into support beams and rafters, their branches twisting and intertwining in intricate patterns. Still others sliced planks of perfectly straight lumber from huge trees that had likely been grown over the course of a day and a night.

In one corner of the sprawling structure, a group of witchkind worked in unison, their voices rising and falling like a melodic tide to help them keep their magic synchronized. Runes of strength and protection glowed upon the freshly laid floorboards, pulsing with newly laid power. The wood itself

seemed to come alive, knots and grains swirling into mesmerizing designs.

High above, more of witchkind perched on newly shingled roofs, their hands outstretched as they conjured invisible wards and enchantments, laying them into more runes that glowed briefly as they settled into the materials. The air crackled with energy, and Arcadia could feel the hum of magic resonating in her bones.

Everywhere Arcadia looked, the ordinary was giving way to the extraordinary. Simple wooden doors became portals, their surfaces etched with runes for protection and warmth. Stained glass windows cast kaleidoscopes of colored light across newly laid floors, each pane telling a story of its own. Even the chimneys had been spelled to emit enchanting wisps of smoke that took on shapes of birds and flowers before dissipating into the sky.

Arcadia turned back to Finley, a smile playing at her lips. "I think we're going to need a new name for this place. 'Farmhouse' doesn't quite seem to capture it anymore, does it?"

He chuckled. "Not quite, no. I guess just 'headquarters?'"

"I'm sure we'll think of something grander," she chided him. Then she grew serious again. "So we can't find Landon. But what he's doing—Origin protect us, Finley—it doesn't matter if the human church is faking it, if Landon's going to be wandering around burning down entire towns with magic fire. And since when did he get an affinity with Flame?"

"I don't know, but there's no way he had a Forged artifact with that much power in it. This was him, unless someone Cian didn't see was there helping him."

"The Taryba is going to have a cat," she sighed. "It's getting harder and harder to talk them down, and this... will make it substantially worse."

"But the humans didn't—"

“Oh, they’ll know that. But what the humans are going to do, are probably doing right now in Lakewood, that is going to set them off.”

Finley opened his mouth to protest, but then nodded acceptance. “We warned everyone before we left. As far as I know, Cian is still there helping.”

“I’ll send some more people to help, too,” Arcadia said, closing her eyes for a moment. “This isn’t going to be as easy as pretending you’re Hunters and pulling off a trick.”

“Yeah. Last night’s a little difficult to explain any other way than actual magic. We could—”

“Actually, don’t.”

“What?” Finley’s brow wrinkled at Arcadia’s flat tone.

“Don’t go. We can’t fix this one, Finley. It was... too much. It was magic, pure and simple, and if the humans launch a Hunt looking for the perpetrator, I wouldn’t even blame them. Lakewood is lost.” She paused for a moment. “Have you had any other contact with our... friends?”

“The cabal? No. And I’ve been checking for watchers. But they must be delighted about this.”

“I seriously doubt it. It’s their people being hurt and probably killed.”

Finley felt a stab of regret. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But no, I haven’t. And I don’t even know how to get hold of any of them.” Then something occurred to him. “But they’re involved.”

“How so?”

“That church in Sowsee. It had iron rods along the door frame, remember? It’s why I had to... change us. Physically.”

Arcadia nodded as she put it together. “So they know iron is a weakness.”

“The priest was very obviously looking for a reaction from us. Or it, actually. He was looking at the door frame as we

walked through. I'm not sure what they think it does, but they know it does something."

"And the cabal is the most likely way they know."

"Best I can think of."

"So. Where does that leave us?"

Finley sighed. "We need to find Landon. And whoever is working with him." His stomach growled, and he felt an emptiness in his spine. "And I hate to say it, but I need to sleep some more. I still haven't Gathered enough."

"Go," Arcadia said. "Do that. I'll put the word out about Landon. To everyone, everywhere. It'll get back to the Taryba, but that's inevitable. If someone finds him, we can move in."

"Tell them to be careful. Wake me, in fact. He's... not who he used to be. The power he used..."

"I understand. Go. Rest up. Gather. You'll need it."

Finley retired to his small room, his body still leaden with exhaustion. As soon as his head touched the pillow, he plummeted into a deep sleep, his mind swirling with the chaotic events of the past days.

In his dream, he found himself in a dark, cavernous space, an endless void stretching out before him. Suddenly, flames erupted all around, their colors shifting and morphing in a dizzying dance. Crimson bled into emerald, which then burst into a brilliant sapphire before cycling back to a searing orange. The flames licked at his skin, but instead of burning, they seemed to whisper secrets in forgotten tongues.

Amidst the inferno, figures began to take shape. Towering priests with severe expressions and cold, glinting eyes loomed over him. Their robes were the color of fresh blood, and they carried iron rods that pulsed with a sickly green light. They

chanted in low, menacing tones, their voices rising in a crescendo that shook the very ground beneath Finley's feet.

As the priests' chanting reached a fever pitch, the flames parted, revealing a scene of utter chaos. Witchkind ran in terror, their faces contorted in fear as they fled from the mobs of human hunters that pursued them. The hunters brandished torches and pitchforks, their faces twisted with rage and hatred. They shouted accusations and slurs, their voices joining the cacophony of the priests' chanting and the roar of the flames.

Finley tried to move, to help his fellow witchkind, but his feet remained rooted to the spot. He watched helplessly as the hunters closed in, their weapons glinting in the firelight. Just as they were about to strike, the scene shifted, and Finley found himself standing on a precipice overlooking a vast, dark chasm.

The flames and the chaos receded, replaced by an eerie calm. The starscape above him was unlike anything he had ever seen. The stars pulsed and swirled, their colors shifting through every imaginable hue. Some seemed close enough to touch, while others were distant pinpricks of light, barely visible against the inky blackness of the void.

As Finley watched, the stars began to move, tracing intricate patterns across the sky. They formed runes and glyphs, their meaning just beyond his grasp. He felt a strange pull, as if the stars were trying to tell him something, to impart some great cosmic wisdom.

We have some work to do.

Finley experienced the most disconcerting sensation of becoming incredibly alert and deeply relaxed in the same moment. You're getting to be quite chatty, he replied. We must be getting close.

Quite the opposite, actually. I'm becoming more... distinct. I can still speak to you, I can still hear you, but I'm gaining more awareness of the rest of the world. The image of the pale,

dark-haired young man faded into existence. I'm not sure I like it, but I'm aware of it.

What work, then?

Two things. First, I need to explain what I think is happening to you. You're going to need it, and to use it, you're going to need to understand it. I just hope I have it right.

And the second?

His talent smirked. We need to figure out your old classmate.

Finley groaned in his sleep. Let's definitely do that second. What's happening to me? Is it bad?

His talent's avatar drifted closer, and everything around and behind them grew darker and darker. No. I don't think so. You're channeling all four of the elemental Axes, which is... unusual. I'm not aware of that having been possible before now.

Arcadia would remind you that I'm bad at history.

Right. But you know about the Adherents, right?

Of course.

Four Axes, then: Sky, Earth, Flame, and Sea. Dozens to hundreds of Adherents for each, Chosen at birth, identified at thirteen, and taken by their fellows to learn the ways of their Axis. But none of them controlled all of their Axis' power, right? It was spread between them. So they were still ridiculously powerful, but not infinitely so.

But you, Finley recalled, were the sole Adherent of the Sixth Axis.

Of Endings. And Death, technically. Yes. And so I had much more power, but it was... difficult to use. You had to kind of convince the Axis that what you wanted was Ending a thing. Clan Karal... they hoarded magical power. Power stolen first from witchkind, and when I Ended that, from humans—and yes, that's when I figured out humans are actual fonts of pure

magic. They used that power to try and re-enact the Forging, to create the Fifth Axis. But it turns out... this is difficult to explain. I'm going to try and show you.

Finley's vision zoomed out.

Finley found himself floating in a vast, polychromatic sphere, a cosmic bubble that pulsed with an otherworldly energy. The sphere was a kaleidoscope of colors, each hue more vibrant and mesmerizing than the last. Swirls of deep indigo danced with shimmering emerald, while ribbons of fiery orange wove through veins of rich, royal purple. It was as if the very essence of magic had been distilled into a single, breathtaking orb.

Piercing the sphere were four distinct lines of energy, each thrumming with its own unique frequency. The first, a searing crimson that crackled and popped, represented the raw, untamed power of Flame. It pulsed with an intensity that threatened to consume everything in its path, yet there was an undeniable beauty in its primal fury.

The second line, a deep, resonant blue, embodied the mysterious depths of the Sea. It flowed with a serene grace, its surface calm and inviting, yet beneath its tranquil exterior lay unfathomable power and secrets waiting to be unlocked.

The third line, a gossamer silver that shimmered and danced, personified the elusive nature of Sky. It twisted and turned, never quite solid, always just beyond reach. It whispered of freedom and endless possibilities, of dreams that could soar beyond the confines of the earth.

The final line, a rich, earthy brown shot through with veins of gold, symbolized the steadfast strength of Earth. It was solid and unyielding, a foundation upon which all else was built. It spoke of ancient wisdom and the enduring cycle of life and death.

But it was what surrounded the sphere that truly captivated

Finley's attention. A circle, roughly half white and half black, encompassed the polychromatic orb, its two halves perfectly balanced in a dance of light and shadow. The white half radiated a pure, almost blinding brilliance, a light that seemed to emanate from within. It was warm and inviting, a beacon of hope and renewal.

In contrast, the black half of the circle glowed with its own peculiar light, a light that seemed to absorb rather than emit. It was a darkness that held secrets and mysteries, a void that promised both oblivion and revelation. Yet, despite its ominous appearance, it did not feel threatening or malevolent. Instead, it felt like a necessary counterpart to the light.

Four Axes, Finley's talent said. Converging in the middle. The Origin. And surrounding them, the infinite circle of Beginnings and Endings.

Finley frowned. But if it's a circle, it can't be an axis. They don't converge.

Exactly. And that's what Karal learned. They manage to harness some portion of the Fifth Axis, but it drove him mad. And damn near killed me. The origin Forging failed to capture the Fifth because it wasn't a distinct power. Endings and Beginnings, they're two sides of the same coin. Two faces of the same thing. Distinct, but connected. Aron—that was his name, the boy of Karal they bound to the Fifth—gave it up. Voluntarily. And when he did, it all snapped back to me, Beginnings and Endings. And I saw this. The Origin.

And you Ended the other Adherents.

Most of them asked me to, actually. They just couldn't do it themselves. But that doesn't matter right now. Somehow, you've got the potential power of six Adherents. It's... what I had. Briefly. Before I... gave it up.

Finley's heart clenched. What are you saying?

I'm saying there's always a reason behind these things. You

obviously don't hold as much power, because the adherents had four-fifth of the world's magic to themselves. Magic hasn't thinned for everyone else. But you have access to far more than ordinary witchkind do, in both variety and quantity.

Okay. And?

And you need to embrace it. You keep avoiding Sky, for example.

Even with his eyelids closed, Finley's eyes rolled. It's so... ephemeral.

Which means you're avoid Flame as well.

I'm comfortable with Earth and Sea, Finley protested.

Get comfortable with them all. If you have them, there's a reason, and I don't know what it is, but you need to be ready.

Finley opened his mouth to protest again, but then assented. Fine. I will.

There's more. You need to actively try and create runes when you need them.

But you're my talent. I thought—

I'm not. I can, and I can give them to you, but I can't exercise magic on my own. I'm... in the middle of it. But you can do it on your own, too. I can sense it within you. You just don't... reach for it.

Okay.

Truly. Reach for it. Let it speak..., well not literally. Not like this. But let it... give it its head. Does that make sense?

I think so.

Which brings us to the subject of Landon.

Finley sighed.

First, I have an idea of how he's avoiding you. What was his clan?

Karcz, Finley replied. Then he hesitated. You said 'was.'

What if it isn't, anymore?

That's why I can't trace him. You're saying Dmitry—

It's a strong possibility and it's the simplest explanation. Dmitry didn't add Landon to his own clan, and that leads me to the second point. Do you have inheritance magic, still?

I've no idea what you mean.

Well, good. But I suspect that's what happened. Karal—and every clan identity they carried before that, and I imagine since—was extremely good at keeping records. So inheritance magic would still be on the table for them, I would think.

Can you explain what it is?

His talent shrugged. More or less what it sounds like. You can beneath you ability to someone else. Even across clans, although that's riskier.

Bequeath—that doesn't make sense. You can't gift power from one person to another. We all Gather our own.

Actually you can, but that's a different topic. I said ability. Dmitry was a master at his craft. Evil and misguided at the least, but a master. The complexity of that attack—and he didn't have me, or, as far as we know, a Rune Smith's talent. Can you imagine how intricate his rune construct must have been, to raise that attack while attempting to hold a defense at the same time?

Finley couldn't—but something in him could. Instead of reaching for it, he relaxed into it.

[[[RUNE: Reverse Engineer]]]

That's close, his talent said, and Finley thought he detected a hint of admiration in its tone. You're getting it. You could do a more powerful version, now. Simplified. Tighter. But my point is that he could have bequeathed that to Landon.

A spark flared in Finley's mind. The Flame affinity—Dmitry had that. And now Landon—

Exactly, his talent confirmed. That's what I think happened.

Last night's attack wasn't exactly refined.

No, and it'll take him some time to come to grips with what he now knows, and what he can do. Always does. You're still avoiding Sky magic, after all.

Point taken, Finley sighed. So that's why we can't trace him. I think so.

And why he's suddenly so powerful.

Again, I think so.

So what do we do now?

His talent grinned and began to fade. I'm a centuries-old remnant of an orphan who destroyed an entire social order and all of his colleagues. How should I know?

Everything faded, and Finley spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon in blissful unconsciousness.

Finley awoke around dinnertime, and found the Farm all but deserted and Arcadia looking tense and frustrated. "What's happening? Where is everyone?"

"Helping family and relatives, mostly. Grabbing what possessions they can. It'll be a few days of... well, chaos." She rubbed her face and exhaled heavily. "I've been to see the Taryba. They're closing the gates of Evermore. The city's too full, it can't absorb more people. Not this quickly. They've got people working to make more expanded spaces available, but Evermore already has so many, and you can't overlap them, and I don't even understand the geometry on that magic, and—"

"Arcadia," Finley said gently.

She exhaled again. “Right. We’ve told people they can come here, if they’ve nowhere else. Just past the orchard there’s a kind of encampment going up. People are volunteering to take shifts to enclose the camp with their magic.”

“So... everyone is evacuating?”

“No, not everyone. You know, in a lot of the smaller villages, witchkind lives in normal homes. So they’re weirdly less vulnerable because they’re not vanishing and appearing all the time. People—humans—know them, know where they live. So they think they’ll be fine. But everyone who lives in a hidden space... yes. As far as I know almost all of them are leaving. Humans have started asking questions like, ‘where do you actually live?’ and there’s no good answers.”

“The Veil,” Finley said sadly.

“It’s going,” Arcadia agreed. “For all intents and purposes, it’s probably gone.” She took another deep breath and exhaled it in a whoosh.

“Your family?”

“They’re fine. Dad’s always had an apartment in Evermore, so they’re all there. it’s tight, but they’re working to expand the space, once they get approval. And I checked on yours—they’re fine, also.” She smiled. “Your family has got to be one of the toughest. They and a bunch of others have just gone into the Great Northern Range. There are hundreds of passes, crevices, caves, you name it, only accessible by magic. There are a dozen little encampments setting up everywhere, and humans will never find them.”

Finley grinned despite the situation. “Yeah, that sounds like them. From the warm southern coast to the coldest place in the world, without blinking. My Uncle’s got a strong flame affinity. They’ll be fine.”

Arcadia’s expression dimmed. “But there’s more.”

“More?”

“The Taryba... there’s definitely something going on. They were... cagey. There are three new councilors, people I’ve never met before. They’ve basically given up on the Veil, which I guess is reasonable, but... they’re not exactly outright suggesting we start putting human villages under our control, but I feel like they’re basically headed there.” She shook her head in frustration. “They’re not telling me anything, and there’s no way to find out.” She looked sheepish for a moment. “I tried listening in on them, but the Private Chambers are shielded against Sky magic.”

“Probably against any magic,” Finley said. “But you’re right, it would be useful to know what’s actually happening.”

I... might be able to help, his talent suggested. There was a hesitation, though.

“My talent might have... an idea,” he told Arcadia.

You’re going to wait to lie down.

“I think I’m going to need a bit.”

“Go,” she said, nodding wearily. “I’m hungry. Meet me here.”

Knowing the other side of the once-peaceful orchard was now home to hundreds of displaced witchkind, Finley headed to the other side of the Farm. A creek ran through the densely spaced trees here, creating a perfect sense of calm. He lowered himself to the ground. Okay.

Look at this.

[[[RUNE Middle Runic Visitation]]]

That’s... got a strange feeling to it, Finley said after studying it for a moment. Indeed, his stomach was churning uncomfortably and he had a distinct feeling of unease.

Good. It's probably supposed to.

This is... a spying rune?

Sort of. Not exactly, not in the way you're thinking. His talent's voice took on a reflective tone. This was the first thing I learned. After I'd been Chosen, taken to the Tower, and... left. This probably saved my sanity, those first couple of years. It's the Sixth Axis' First Form. Once I'd... well, it's a long story.

Something tickled Finley's memory. I remember this. This is how you... saw. What Karal was doing. Before you'd even ascended.

Yes.

How do I remember that?

An even longer story, it sighed. For now, let's focus on the rune.

But what magic do I use? Sky?

No. As I said, this is the Sixth Axis' First Form of Magic. The first and simplest expression of its power. It... represents the soul, in a way.

But then—

This is what I said earlier. You have it in you. All of it. All four of the elemental alignments, but also the... extra. The circle of Beginning and Ending. It's time for you to embrace that. Use that to empower this rune.

This... that's what you did? Back then?

Well, yes, but it was a lot easier for me, wasn't it? This was the only magic I'd ever known.

Right. Finley closed his eyes and took a deep breath, reaching deep within himself to find the source of this alleged power. He visualized the polychromatic sphere he had seen in his dream, the cosmic bubble that pulsed with the essence of magic itself. The four elemental lines of energy thrummed and pulsed, converging at the center in a blinding point of pure Origin.

But it was the encompassing circle of light and shadow that drew his focus now. The balance of Beginning and Ending, of life and death, creation and destruction. He let his consciousness drift toward that infinite loop, feeling its pull like a magnetic force.

As he drew closer, the black and white halves seemed to swirl and dance, blurring together into shades of shimmering grey. Finley felt a rush of energy course through his veins as he tapped into this primal power. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before—a sense of boundless potential tempered by the weight of inevitable conclusion. Beginning... and End.

With a surge of will, Finley directed this energy toward the rune his talent had shown him. The Middle Runic sigil blazed to life in his mind's eye, etched in lines of searing silver against a backdrop of deepest black. As he fed more of the Beginning and Ending force into the rune, it pulsed and grew, expanding outward like a living thing.

Suddenly, Finley felt a wrenching sensation as his consciousness was ripped free of his physical form. His body slumped to the ground, lifeless, as his spirit soared skyward, unencumbered by the shackles of flesh and bone.

The world blurred around him as he rocketed through the aether, distance and time losing all meaning. The lush green of the Farm's orchards gave way to rolling hills and sprawling plains, then to jagged peaks and yawning chasms. He caught glimpses of hidden witchkind enclaves nestled in secret valleys or perched on inaccessible mountainsides. New, emergency settlements as they fled their homes amongst the now-suspicious humans.

Finley marveled at the scope and scale of the world below, seeing it with new eyes granted by this out-of-body experience. But even as he reveled in this newfound freedom, he felt the

rune's power tugging him inexorably toward his intended destination.

The city of Evermore rose on the horizon like a behemoth of stone and light. Its towering spires and sprawling districts stood in stark contrast to the untamed wilderness surrounding it. As Finley drew closer, he imagined could feel the thrum of the city's life force—the hopes and dreams, fears and frustrations of its inhabitants pulsing like a collective heartbeat.

Guided by the rune's unerring navigation, Finley's spectral form dove down into the city proper, phasing through solid walls and soaring over bustling streets unseen by the populace. He wove between buildings old and new toward the Taryba's elegant spire, diving through its walls and, without the slightest resistance, into the Private Chambers.

Where the entire Taryba had convened.

CHAPTER 6

A Shifting Tide

The Private Chambers of the Taryba were a sight to behold. While not as ostentatious as the Public Chambers, they nevertheless exuded an aura of power and mystique that could only be conjured by the most adept magic. The walls shimmered with an opalescent sheen, as if imbued with the very essence of magic itself. Intricate tapestries depicting ancient runes and symbols adorned the walls, their threads seeming to move and dance of their own accord in the flickering candlelight.

In the center of the room stood a grand circular table hewn from a single slab of obsidian, its surface polished to a mirror-like sheen. Thirteen high-backed chairs, each carved with unique designs representing the different districts of the world, were arranged around the table. The air crackled with tangible energy, and Finley could feel the protective enchantments woven into the very fabric of the chamber. It was as if an invisible barrier separated this space from the outside world.

The thirteen Councilors were already seated, their expres-

sions a mix of solemnity and unease. Some leaned in close to whisper to their neighbors, while others sat back with arms crossed, eyeing their fellow council members warily. The tension was palpable, hanging thick in the air like a gathering storm cloud.

At the head of the table sat the High Councilor Jankauskas, resplendent in robes of deepest midnight blue embroidered with her clan rune in silver thread. Her long silver hair was plaited with glowing crystal beads that seemed to capture and reflect the candlelight. Despite her age, her eyes sparkled with keen intelligence and an unmistakable aura of authority.

The other Councilors were, broadly speaking, less striking in appearance. Most wore their formal Council robes of heavy fabric, with their clan runes embroidered in bright colors. A couple wore more ordinary clothes, in the drab hues favored by humans and by witchkind seeking to pass unnoticed amongst the humans. Finley supposed they may have come directly from their homes in distant towns and villages.

Finley stood unseen in a corner of the room, a phantom for all intents and purposes. They can't see me? he asked his talent nervously.

But there was no answer.

"Friends," Jankauskas said quietly, and the murmured side conversations came to a halt. "We're here to discuss the... situation."

"The situation?" spat one of the ones dressed in human-style garments. Finley had never paid much attention to the Taryba's makeup, but thought he recalled the man's name being Baltakis. An old family, based in Twynsyts. He'd held his seat on the Taryba for a long time. "The situation is that someone's been playing fast and loose with magic. Making displays. Attacking humans! If the Veil hasn't been completely torn, then it—"

“The Veil,” purred one of the more richly-garbed councilors, “is, and has always been, a myth.”

“Your opinion, Degutis,” Councilor Baltakis snapped. “But there’s an awful lot of history for a myth.”

Degutis shrugged, his face a portrait of condescension. “Notwithstanding. If it existed, it has indeed been damaged. Beyond repair, I would imagine, since nobody seems to know anything at all about it. Which brings us—”

“To the situation,” Jankauskas took over smoothly. “Regardless of how we got here, this is where we are: humans have seen magic, in some cases in epic measures. They are afraid, and they are reacting as they always do when they are afraid: with violence. Witchkind has been forced to evacuate its homes—”

“With nowhere to go, now that you’ve closed the city!” barked the other plainly dressed councilor.

“A necessary measure, Councilor Aitken,” Jankauskas said firmly. “Evermore cannot handle more refugees at this time. Work is already underway to provide more expanded spaces, but it will take time, and magic, to accomplish. But the situation before us is what to do with the humans.”

“Do with them?” asked another councilor sharply. She was dressed in robes of deep crimson, her clan rune embroidered in gold. “Surely you’re not supporting Adomaitis’ position? Subjugate them, rule over them? it’s ridiculous!”

“Is it, Lynch?” Degutis argued. Finley thought the man’s voice sounded like it was dipped in oil. “While I have always been sympathetic to former Councilor Adomaitis’... position on the subject of humans, doesn’t the current situation require us to reexamine our long-held beliefs? Secrecy is no longer an option, Councilors.” His voice had gone sharp. “We are found out. The Veil, if it existed, is surely gone. The humans are calling for Hunts. We have two options, do we not? Leave our

homes, retreat into the wild, and live in hiding. Or, we bring the humans to heel. I, for one, prefer the comforts of a large town.”

“You scarcely leave Evermore,” Councilor Lynch muttered, but she said nothing else.

“Which feels like a third option,” another councilor, this one in purple robes threaded with white, suggested gently. “Expand Evermore. Or build another—the land the Order of Some uses for their Farm is more than adequate. Build residences around Disemstoke’s and Duocastella’s. Withdraw from human society entirely. Let them see the folly of that. Has that not been our lever all along? The threat of losing magic, once they found out about it?”

“An option, Councilor Abebe” Degutis agreed, his voice once again slick as oil. “But is it truly viable? Evermore was built over a thousand years! Even with all the magic in the world, raising cities to support—what, one hundred thousand? Two? That many of witchkind cannot be accommodated so easily, I think.” He leaned back in his chair, a smug grin playing across his lips.

“True, true,” Abebe conceded, smiling broadly. “I simply wanted to ensure we’d considered it, but your points are valid.”

“And there’s more to consider,” said a small-statured man in black robes.

“Oh, Councilor Ohanian?” Abebe asked.

“Indeed, yes. We have already been nearly attacked here in Evermore, and that was with the Veil intact. With our secrecy gone, surely the humans will hunt out any additional cities of magic we should choose to found.”

“Ah, again, you have me,” Abebe said, his nod exaggerated. “I yield to your greater wisdom.”

They’re playing off each other, Finley realized. This isn’t a real debate.

“Another option,” this time from a councilor in rich, earthy brown with bright yellow stitching, “would be to live in peace, no?”

This feels like the same thing, Finley thought.

“Oh, Councilor Conteh?” Jankauskas said easily. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, surely we could just reveal ourselves to the humans,” Conteh replied, his deep voice no less oily than Degutis’. “Explain how we’ve been supporting their civilization in secret for millennia, and offer to simply live alongside them openly, now.”

“I think,” said someone else, a broadly built woman in bright yellow robes with black stitches, “perhaps we might be too far gone for that, no? I mean, the destruction of Lakewood might surely give them pause.”

“Ah, Councilor Okoro, you have me there,” Conteh replied, shaking his head in defeat. “I had not considered the actions that have already been taken. A pity we cannot simply travel back in time and undo what has been done. Alas.”

“You’re all playing this like a game,” Baltakis snapped. “Let us to it, then. A show of hands. Which of you supports this nonsense of somehow ruling the humans?”

Ten hands went up.

“Opposed?”

Two hands joined Baltakis’.

“Enough then. You’ll do as you please with or without us.” Baltakis rose and strode angrily from the room, Aitken and Lynch close behind him.

Jankauskas sighed as the door slammed shut behind them. “Finally,” she said, her voice suddenly coarse. “And he’s not wrong, Enough with the charade. Okoro, you’ve been in charge of the Karcz boy. Report.”

Finley's ghostly eyebrows rose to his hairline.

"A useful tool. More... powerful than we had been led to realize. I suspect Dmitry did something to... enhance him. But useful." The Councilor's voice was all business now, and she spoke quickly.

"An inheritance, do you think?" Abebe asked, echoing Finley's thoughts.

"Possibly," Okoro allowed, "although that's very old magic indeed. But from him, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Surprising that he'd leave it to someone outside his own clan," a man in cream-colored robes mused.

"Not when they've all vanished," Abebe countered. "But I interrupted you, Okoro. What next?"

"More displays," Okoro replied crisply. "Hopefully nothing as... drastic as Lakewood. That should have been demonstration enough. Their church will have spread that news to the corners of the continent already, I expect."

"When you say 'hopefully,' Okoro... what do you mean?" asked a woman in copper-orange robes.

Okoro sighed. "Landon is an excellent tool for our purpose. But as we proceed, he has become... unstable. He seeks our approval. Position. Power. And so long as I can keep his actions aligned to those goals, he is... manageable. But the degree of destruction in Lakewood was... spontaneous."

"Did the job," Degutis murmured.

"I have been surprised to see their church play so well into our hand," the woman in copper-orange said.

"Ah, that was Dmitry's work," Jankauskas said with satisfaction. "Plans upon plans, that one. He's allowed the Order of Some to manipulate the human church so much, and so drastically, that once the humans discovered it, some kind of explosion was inevitable. And the politics between the human Aldermen and the church priests has never been more tense.

Fortuitous timing, in some ways, but it's played out exactly as Dmitry predicted. They're doing half our work for us."

"Which does bring up the question of the Order of Some," a woman in light-blue asked.

"How so, Perich?" Jankauskas asked.

"What do we plan to do with them? Especially in their expanded condition? And their Head, this Arcadia girl... I feel that was a mistake."

"I have that well under control," Degutis said. "She's the right person for right now. She believes we can live peacefully, in the open, with the humans, but that doesn't in any way further our goals. She's excellent at recruiting. Once the humans rally themselves and truly restart the Hunts, the Order will have the hands, and magic, needed to quickly put them down. We lost in the past only because of a reluctance to work together, yes? We've all read the histories. Humans could come after us one or two at a time. That isn't the case, now. Evermore itself will be protected by the Thornwaithe's alum, as has always been the case, and we will dispatch the Order to put down any Hunts that do spring up. That can, in fact, be our opening volley against the humans. Let them resist, let them think they have the upper hand, and then we will put them down decisively. When the time comes, the proper leader can be installed to ensure cooperation."

Finley felt sick.

"So we wait for the humans to make their move?" the man in cream asked.

"Certainly not," Jankauskas sniffed. "We've already begun. You've seen the streets here in Evermore—the city is overflowing with refugees. We've closed the city gates, and will take no more. Many of witchkind, and certainly those who enjoyed living in secret amongst the filthy humans, are either miserable here or miserable elsewhere. They've given up their possessions

and homes. Their local councils are effectively gone. They're ready to accept our authority during this emergency. Without question. That is the first step."

"There may be, I wonder, a loose thread in all this," Perich said softly. "The humans who knew about us. The Order was adamant about the threat."

"Ram was adamant," Jankauskas said, rolling her eyes. "Dmitry was somewhat less impressed with them. Still," she acknowledged, "they are not without resources. Keeping records on thin sheets of iron was... ingenious of them."

"And tells us they know of at least some of our weaknesses," Perich added. "Which is the root of my... inquiry."

Everyone considered that for a moment.

"It is warranted," Jankauskas said at last. "If nothing else, their information on witchkind would be useful to the human church, and if their Hunts became sophisticated, we would indeed face... challenges."

"Do we know where they can be found?" Perich asked.

Jankauskas nodded. "Farreach in the South. At least, a large cohort of them. They operate above a tailor's shop near the middle of the town."

Perich frowned. "Not many of witchkind live there."

Jankauskas shrugged. "A very old superstition that witchkind could not live there. Nothing to it, of course, but it may be why they've chosen it as a base. All to our advantage, if we can sow some confusion about our actual weaknesses."

Perich nodded slowly. "Leave them to me, then."

"Very well. Anything further to discuss?" Heads shook around the table. "Excellent. Then prepare yourselves. We will allow a few more... demonstrations from the boy, and then call an emergency session. An open session, so best behavior, please. There, we will declare the formal emergency, enumerate our

emergency powers, and prepare for what will be a very short and very decisive war with the humans.”

The heads around the table nodded, and the councilors stood and began filing out.

Finley felt as if he might vomit, and wondered what that would be like in this insubstantial state. Can you hear me? he asked his talent.

Again, there was no reply.

He decided to take a moment to review what was happening outside, in the streets of Evermore. Arcadia would want to know, if anything else—she’d said her family was here.

Finley drifted through the walls of the Private Chambers, his insubstantial form passing like mist through the shimmering opalescent stone. He emerged into the bustling streets of Evermore, but the usually vibrant city had taken on a somber, desperate air.

The sidewalks overflowed with makeshift shelters cobbled together from blankets, tapestries, and whatever scraps of wood could be scavenged. Witchkind of all ages huddled together in these cramped spaces, their meager belongings piled around them. Finley’s heart ached at the sight of families who had clearly lost everything, now reduced to seeking shelter in alleyways and doorways.

Despite the overcrowding, the people of witchkind did their best to maintain order and cleanliness. Designated areas had been set aside for waste disposal, and volunteers worked tirelessly to keep the streets as tidy as possible under the circumstances. The sharp, astringent scent of cleansing charms hung in the air, mingling with the musky odor of too many bodies in too small a space.

Finley drifted past a group of children playing a listless game of knucklebones on a scrap of tattered carpet. Their laughter held a brittle edge, and dark circles shadowed their

eyes. Even the youngest among them seemed to carry the weight of their people's uncertain future.

Nearby, a line of bedraggled witchkind waited patiently for their turn at a communal cooking fire. A massive cast bronze cauldron bubbled with some kind of thin stew, tended by a careworn woman with silver hair plaited into a crown around her head. She ladled out meager portions into proffered bowls, murmuring words of encouragement and comfort to each recipient. Even with the ability to summon food magically, it had to come from somewhere, and right now there seemed to be nowhere to raid.

As Finley made his way deeper into the city, he couldn't help but notice the pervasive atmosphere of fear and desperation. Witchkind clustered together in small groups, speaking in hushed tones and casting furtive glances over their shoulders. The usual hum of magic that suffused the city had taken on a discordant note, jangling against Finley's senses like an off-key violin.

He paused beside a once-grand fountain, its intricately carved basin now serving as a makeshift washbasin. A young woman with hollow cheeks and haunted eyes scrubbed at a tattered shirt, her knuckles raw and chapped. Tears streaked her grimy face, leaving trails through the dust and grime.

All this after just a few days, he thought miserably.

Overhead, the sky had taken on a leaden hue, as if even the heavens mourned for the plight of witchkind. A fitful breeze stirred the air, carrying with it the acrid scent of distant smoke. He looked up, and realized that the city's usual shroud of weather-moderating magic was gone. Ridiculous, he scoffed. They're doing that to deliberately keep people on edge and unhappy.

Angry and dejected, he let his concentration drift for a moment, and found himself snapping back into his body.

“So they’re the ones directing Landon,” Arcadia grumbled. “Good to know, I guess.”

“Directing at most,” Finley clarified. “Definitely not controlling. The one councilor made it clear that he’s becoming more and more difficult to manage.”

“Hardly comforting.”

“No.” Finley paused. “I was gone, what, a candlemark?”

“About that,” Arcadia said. “Why—oh, right. Yeah. People started trickling back the past quarter-mark or so.”

The sun hung low on the horizon now, casting a warm golden glow across the bustling activity at the Farm. Finley and Arcadia stood side by side, watching as a steady stream of witchkind returned to resume their work on the sprawling structure. The air hummed with a palpable energy, a blend of determination and hope that seemed to buoy the spirits of all those present.

A group of wood workers gathered around a partially completed wall. With a series of intricate gestures and murmured incantations, they coaxed large wooden planks to lift themselves into place, slotting together like pieces of an enormous puzzle. The wood seemed to come alive under their skilled hands and magical influence.

Nearby, a trio of glassworkers, clearly skilled in intricate Earth magic, stood before a large, arched window frame. Shimmering globes of molten glass floated before them, suspended in midair by invisible threads of magic. With delicate movements, they shaped the malleable orbs, stretching and molding them until they formed intricate panes of stained glass. Vibrant hues of ruby, emerald, and sapphire blended together in an abstract design that seemed to dance and shift with each passing breeze.

As more witchkind arrived, they seamlessly reintegrated

into the ongoing work, their unique talents and specialties adding new layers of wonder to the ever-growing structure. Weavers conjured tapestries and rugs of impossible softness and intricacy, their fingers dancing across looms that seemed to operate of their own accord. Stone workers shaped blocks of granite and marble into smooth, gleaming surfaces etched with protective runes and symbols of power.

Throughout it all, soft laughter and gentle conversation flowed freely, the camaraderie among the workers evident in every interaction. The air was filled with the scents of freshly cut wood, hot brass, and the subtle perfume of blooming flowers that had been coaxed from the earth by the green-thumbed among them.

"They act like nothing happened," Finleys observed.

"They're putting a good face on it," Arcadia said. "Most of these people brought their families here, so they're safe, at least. If not as comfortable as they're used to."

"Any of them from Lakewood?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I'm not sure if we had anyone from there working here in the first place, but the last Sending I got from Cian is that they're still helping people evacuate. He's got a small team with him now, and they've been covering people's exits and such. Buildings are still falling. After that fire, anything not reinforced with magic was doomed anyway, and nobody's focused on empowering runes right now."

"Obviously." Then, after a pause, he continued more quietly. "We need a plan."

Arcadia ran a hand through her hair and then sighed. "We do. I just don't know what to do."

"Stop them from replacing you would be a start."

She snorted. "That's not going to happen. Nobody here, nobody in the entire Order, is going to become their army."

They might start one of their own, but the Order isn't going to be its foundation." She paused. "But Finley... what's the goal, now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Secrecy is out of the question. I actually agree with whatever councilor said that. If the Veil still exists, then it's damaged beyond repair." She gave him a sharp look. "You should be able to tell."

Finley nodded, closed his eyes and let his consciousness drift, his magical senses reaching out to touch the ancient, elusive magic of the Veil. At first, there was nothing, just a vast emptiness where the comforting presence of the Veil had once resided. But as he pushed further, deeper into the ethereal realms, he began to feel the faintest whispers of its tattered remnants.

It was like brushing against the frayed edges of a once-magnificent tapestry, its intricate weave now unraveled and torn asunder. Where the Veil had once been a shimmering, gossamer curtain separating the world of magic from the mundane, it now hung in shreds, its power diminished to mere wisps and fragments.

Finley's heart ached as he sensed the extent of the damage. The Veil had been a masterpiece of ancient magic, woven from the most delicate threads of power and sustained by the collective will of witchkind for centuries. It had been their shield, their sanctuary, a shroud of secrecy that allowed them to live and thrive unseen by the eyes of the human world.

But now, as Finley's magical senses traced the ragged edges of the once-mighty Veil, he could feel the gaping wounds left by Landon's reckless displays of power. Each tear in the fabric of the Veil was like a scar, a raw and painful reminder of what had been lost. The magic that had once thrummed through its ethe-

real fibers was now faint and erratic, like the faltering heartbeat of a dying creature.

Tattered strands of the Veil drifted aimlessly in the astral winds, their once-vibrant colors faded to muted shades of gray and silver. Finley reached out with his mind, trying to grasp at the fraying edges, to somehow weave them back together through sheer force of will. But the magic slipped through his incorporeal fingers like smoke, insubstantial and elusive.

The magnitude of the loss hit Finley like a physical blow. The Veil had been more than just a magical construct; it had been a symbol of their people's unity, a testament to the strength and ingenuity of witchkind. And now, it lay in tatters, its once-magnificent presence reduced to mere shreds and echoes.

Finley withdrew his senses, his heart heavy with the knowledge of what had been lost. As he opened his eyes, the golden light of the setting sun seemed dimmer, as if even the natural world mourned the loss as well. "It's gone," he said with a long sigh. "Or all but."

"So secrecy isn't an option. Becoming the Taryba's private army, not an option."

"Stopping Landon?" Finley asked.

Arcadia's jaw clenched. "I feel we owe it to humanity to do that much, at least."

"Stopping the Hunts?"

She shook her head sadly. "Not if the Taryba wants them to happen. It's more work for us to defuse one than it is for them to get one going again. And if the human church is using this as a political opportunity, we'd be fighting it on two fronts. I just don't see it working."

Finley tried to summon an argument, but he couldn't. "Yeah. That sounds about right."

“Which leaves living in our own cities, or coexisting with the humans. Openly.”

“I... It can’t be one or the other of those. I think it has to be both.”

“You agree with that councilor?”

“I do,” Finley admitted. “I hate it, but I do.”

“You think they’ll find us regardless.”

“Of course they will. The world is big, but it isn’t infinite, and they outnumber us by a huge margin. Even if we build our own cities, even if we cover them with magic and glours, we’re too easy to find. It’s too easy to run their iron roadway until they run into—or even nearby—one of our cities. If we can’t have peace with them, open peace, then having our own places won’t work.”

“Yeah.”

They watched the workers finish up their work for the evening and begin heading through the orchard to where their families had set up camps. Arcadia wandered over to one of the newly finished exterior walls, and ran one hand softly down the newly installed siding. “You know...” she mused.

“What?”

“We’re at a junction, aren’t we? A tipping point.”

Finley frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“We’re at the end of one story. Our secrecy is gone, fine. The humans haven’t yet discovered that most of their civilization can’t exist without us. At least, not as it is right now. They’ll have to start over, build from scratch.”

“Okay.”

She turned back to him, her expression firm and her eyes alight. “But the Hunts haven’t started yet. And we happen to have documents of every human innovation and invention we’ve ever suppressed.”

Finley’s eyes widened. “You’re saying...”

"I'm saying now's the time. Humans know we exist, but they don't know they need us yet. They don't all hate all of us. Not yet. We've got a lot we can bring to them. A lot we can do for them, if we can convince them to let us."

"Arcadia..."

I see where she's going. She's not wrong, his talent whispered.

Oh, you're back?

I never left, it replied with a mental shrug. You did.

"I'm saying," Arcadia finished, excitement rising in her voice, "why don't we help them rebuild Lakewood?"

Finley's jaw dropped.

"It's the perfect time."

"You're not wrong, I guess," he said, thinking it through. "But... there's a loose thread. What that councilor said."

"The human cabal, you mean."

"Yes. We could be working with them. Should be. Let's help rebuild the right way. Give them their inventions back. Give them structures that stand on their own, without magic. Show them we can be partners, but that we won't make them depend on us."

"The Taryba isn't going to go for it," Finley warned.

"I have a feeling," Arcadia said slowly, "that there's going to be more than two sides in this fight."

"Yeah."

"Do you think you can find them? The cabal?"

"Probably. The councilor was pretty specific about where they are. At least one branch."

"Then go. First thing in the morning. Do that."

"Arcadia, they're hardly going to trust me."

"You don't know. We bought into their compromise. We've left them some things, you and I."

“Yeah, but maybe we shouldn’t trust them,” he countered. “They didn’t stick with that compromise.”

“They might have more reason to, now. Explain the Taryba. Tell them about Landon—they know about him already. Explain the Hunts. The church. The whole thing.”

He nodded slowly. “I can try.”

Arcadia grinned. “You and your talent. If anyone can make this happen, it’s the three of us.”

“I’m going to go back to sleep.”

“Me too. See you in the morning.”

“I’m going... to the camps.”

Arcadia paused for a moment, and then nodded agreement. “We both should.”

They walked slowly through the orchard, and came upon the field of witchkind camps.

As Finley and Arcadia approached the sprawling field of witchkind camps, a soft, ethereal glow illuminated the night. Hundreds of small, individual campsites dotted the landscape, each one a testament to the resilience and adaptability of their people in the face of adversity. The air hummed with the gentle murmur of voices, punctuated by the occasional flicker of witchlight dancing between the shelters.

Earth-affinity witchkind had risen to the challenge, using their innate connection to the land to create temporary dwellings that blended seamlessly with the natural surroundings. Smooth, curved walls of stone emerged from the ground, their surfaces adorned with intricate patterns and protective runes that glimmered softly in the moonlight. These small, domed structures provided a sense of security and comfort, their interiors warm and inviting despite the uncertain times.

In other parts of the field, those with a love of flora had coaxed the very trees to grow and bend to their will, forming living canopies that sheltered entire families. The branches

intertwined overhead, creating a dense network of leaves and vines that filtered the starlight into a soothing, emerald-tinged glow. Delicate flowers bloomed along the edges of these organic sanctuaries, their soft petals releasing a gentle fragrance that mingled with the scent of earth and moss.

Witchlights, conjured by seemingly everyone who could manage, drifted lazily between the camps, casting a warm, comforting radiance across the field. The spheres of light bobbed and weaved, their hues shifting from pale gold to soothing lavender, as if reflecting the emotions of those who had summoned them. The witchlight seemed to possess a calming presence, its gentle illumination a reminder that even in the darkest of times, hope could still be found.

At the heart of the encampment, Flame-affinity witchkind tended to the communal cooking fires, their faces aglow with the flickering orange light. They moved with practiced ease, their hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as they coaxed the flames to dance and leap, ensuring that each fire burned steadily and efficiently. The scent of simmering stews and freshly baked bread wafted through the night air, a comforting reminder of the simple pleasures that could still be enjoyed amidst the chaos.

Despite the somber atmosphere that hung over the camps, there was an undercurrent of determined optimism, a quiet resilience that seemed to emanate from every witchkind present. Families gathered around their small fires, huddled together for warmth and comfort as they shared stories and words of encouragement. Parents held their children close, whispering reassurances and tales of brighter days to come, their voices soft and soothing against the backdrop of the night.

"This is quite the workforce if we're to rebuild Lakewood," Finley said softly as he and Arcadia found an empty section of land. A thread of his Earth magic summoned a half-dome of

stone from the ground, easily the least taxing magic he'd dealt with in a fortnight.

"And I'm betting they'll be happy to do it."

"Even after generations of secrecy?"

"No more lies, Finley," Arcadia said quietly as her Sky magic blew in a bed of soft leaves and grasses. "The truth is what will save us, now. The truth of all of us."

The two moons overhead beamed down their gentle light in silent approval.

A Change in Perspective

Nordon saw his humble village engulfed in chaos and destruction. Flames licked at the thatched roofs, casting an eerie orange glow against the night sky. The air was thick with smoke, stinging his nostrils and choking his lungs.

Amidst the inferno, dark figures moved with unnatural grace and speed. The witches had descended upon the village like a plague, their howls and cackles echoing through the narrow streets. Their eyes glowed an otherworldly green, pulsing with malevolent power. With a mere flick of their fingers, they unleashed torrents of unnaturally colored fire and lightning, reducing homes to smoldering rubble.

Villagers ran in all directions, their screams of terror piercing the night. Some were struck down by the witches' dark magic, their bodies contorting in agony before crumpling to the ground. Others tried to flee, only to be ensnared by tendrils of inky darkness that dragged them into the shadows, never to be seen again.

Nordon stood frozen, his feet rooted to the spot. He

wanted to run, to fight, to do something—anything—but his body refused to obey. His mouth opened in a silent scream, his voice stolen by the suffocating fear that gripped his heart. He watched helplessly as his neighbors, the people he had grown up with, were slaughtered without mercy, as the village itself was smashed and burned to the ground.

The witches moved through the village like a swarm of locusts, leaving only devastation in their wake. They tore through homes, shattering windows and splintering doors with their dark magic. The air crackled with energy, the stench of brimstone and decay heavy on the wind.

Nordon's eyes darted frantically, searching for any sign of a survivor, of someone he knew, but he knew deep down that he was now alone. As the flames grew higher and the screams grew fainter, Nordon felt a crushing sense of helplessness wash over him.

The lead witch, a slim man with skin as pale as bone and eyes that burned with malice, turned his gaze upon Nordon. A cruel smile twisted his thin lips as he raised a delicate-looking hand, dark energy swirling around his fingers. Nordon braced himself for the inevitable, his heart pounding in his chest as the witch's power surged towards him.

With a gasp, Nordon jolted awake, his body drenched in cold sweat. He sat up, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. The nightmare had felt so real, the horrors still fresh in his mind. He looked around his small, empty room, the silence broken only by his own ragged breaths.

Witches.

The rest of the world was only now realizing that they were

real. That magic was real. But Nordon had known for years—indeed, for most of his life. He and a small group of humans had been fighting the witches, fighting to preserve human innovation and invention. They'd made so much progress—realizing that witches couldn't change or erase information engraved into iron sheets, for example, had been a game-changer. Realizing that the witches had subverted the church itself, and moving their efforts at innovation to small settlements that didn't have a church. Baiting them with inventions that should have been innocuous, should have been left alone—all to see how they'd respond. Finally inventing a strong iron alloy, plieno, that didn't threaten the witches or their magic at all. Offering that as a compromise to put the witches' innovation-killing cult off their guard.

Everything had been going... if not well, then at least to plan. The locations of the remaining iron mines had been protected, and so many people had sacrificed their freedom, their families, and everything to help humanity gain its independence.

And now it seemed the witches had given up all pretenses of secrecy.

Soloton, the entire fishing fleet sunk in under a candlemark. Pease, the herds of cattle and sheep scattered and killed. Nek—far too close to Farreach in the South for comfort—attacked by malignant creatures.

Lakewood. The worst attack yet, with a quarter of the village probably still smoldering and untold hundreds probably dead and dying.

The riders had only arrived last night with the dire news, which is probably what had started the nightmare. He couldn't fully imagine the destruction, the death, even with the riders' gruesome accounts.

But Nordon had seen Nek for himself.

Nordon's mind drifted back to that fateful night in Nek, the memories as vivid as if they had just happened.

He had met with Jaron, a fellow member of their secret organization, to arrange the transfer of crucial iron-engraved documents. The documents contained the schematics for a new invention—a device that harnessed the power of steam to automate certain tasks. It was a breakthrough that could revolutionize everything, but they knew the witches would stop at nothing to destroy it. It was to be their fourth attempt at a steam engine of some kind or another.

After finalizing the plans, Jaron had insisted Nordon stay the night, citing the late hour and the dangers of traveling alone. Reluctantly, Nordon agreed, and the two found themselves in a cozy pub, nursing mugs of ale and quietly discussing their hopes for the future. The pub was warm and inviting, with the soft glow of candlelight illuminating the rough-hewn wooden tables and benches. The air was filled with the rich aroma of roasted meat and freshly baked bread, mingling with the sweet scent of pipe smoke.

As the night wore on, the pub grew more crowded, with villagers seeking refuge from the cold and the darkness outside. Laughter and chatter filled the air, and for a moment, Nordon allowed himself to relax, to forget the constant threat of the witches and their insidious magic. He and Jaron swapped stories and jokes, their voices rising and falling with the ebb and flow of the crowd.

But then, without warning, the door to the pub burst open, and a wave of icy wind swept through the room, extinguishing the candles and plunging everything into darkness. Screams of

terror filled the air as an enormous, shadowy creature lumbered into the pub, its eyes glowing a sickly green.

It was a demon.

Chaos erupted as patrons scrambled to escape, knocking over tables and chairs in their haste. The demon lashed out with razor-sharp claws, tearing through flesh and bone with ease. Blood splattered the walls and floor, and the stench of death filled the air.

Nordon and Jaron leapt to their feet, drawing their iron daggers—the only weapons that could disrupt the magic and, hopefully, harm the demon. They charged forward, dodging the creature's attacks and striking at its thick hide. But the demon was too powerful, too fast. With a single swipe of its massive paw, it sent Jaron flying across the room, his body slamming into the stone wall with a sickening crunch.

Nordon let out a cry of anguish, but he had no time to mourn. The demon turned its attention to him, its maw dripping with saliva and gore. Nordon backed away, his heart pounding in his chest, his mind racing to find a way to escape. And then he saw it, out the pub's ruined door: the door to the village gaol, with its sturdy iron-barred cells.

He ran.

The demon was preoccupied, continuing to slash and tear at already-dead bodies, and it took it a moment to catch Nordon's dash for safety, but Nordon could hear its claws scrabbling against the cobblestones as it pursued him.

Nordon burst out of the pub into the night, his lungs burning as he gasped for air. The village was in utter chaos, a nightmarish scene that defied comprehension. Everywhere he looked, he saw destruction and death. The once-peaceful streets were now a hellish landscape, bathed in an eerie, pulsating green light that emanated from the writhing mist that blanketed the ground.

Inhuman shrieks and howls filled the air, mingling with the desperate screams of the villagers as they tried to flee the horrors that now stalked them. Shadowy figures darted through the mist, their forms twisted and grotesque. Some were vaguely humanoid, with elongated limbs and distorted features, while others were little more than amorphous blobs of darkness, pulsing with malevolent energy.

A building to Nordon's left exploded in a gout of green flame, the force of the blast knocking him off his feet. He scrambled to his hands and knees, his ears ringing and his vision blurred. Through the haze, he saw a group of villagers running towards him, their faces contorted in terror. But before they could reach him, a massive, tentacled creature burst from the ground in front of them, its maw lined with rows of jagged teeth. It snatched up the villagers with lightning speed, their screams cut short as it dragged them into the earth.

Nordon staggered to his feet, his heart pounding in his chest. He knew he had to keep moving, had to reach the gaol before the demon caught up to him. He ran down the street, dodging the debris and bodies that littered the ground. The air was thick with the stench of blood and smoke, and the heat from the burning buildings was almost unbearable.

As he ran, he caught glimpses of other horrors in the chaos. A group of children, their eyes glowing the same sickly green as the mist, tore at the flesh of a fallen villager with their bare hands. A pack of grotesque, wolf-like creatures bounded through the streets, their jaws snapping at anything that moved. And in the distance, silhouetted against the burning buildings, Nordon saw a massive, winged shape circling overhead, its piercing cry sending shivers down his spine.

But he couldn't stop, couldn't let himself be overwhelmed by the madness that had engulfed the village. He focused on the gaol, on the promise of safety that its iron bars offered. His

lungs burned and his legs ached, but he pushed himself onwards, driven by desperation and the primal need to survive.

Behind him, he heard the heavy footfalls of the demon, its growls growing louder with each passing second. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw it bounding towards him, its eyes blazing with malice. It was closing the distance between them, its massive form moving with unnatural speed.

Nordon lunged for the gaol door, his fingers grasping the cold iron handle. With a mighty heave, he wrenched the door open and stumbled inside, slamming it shut behind him just as the demon's claws raked across the metal. The creature howled in frustration, its putrid breath seeping through the cracks.

Panting heavily, Nordon leaned against the door, his mind reeling from the horrors he had just witnessed. Jaron was dead, torn apart by the demon's merciless assault. The schematics, the hope for humanity's future, were lost in the chaos.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing and gather his thoughts. The gaol was dark and dank, the air heavy with the stench of mildew and despair. Rusty iron bars lined the walls, forming small, cramped cells. Nordon could hear the demon prowling outside, its claws scraping against the stone.

Suddenly, a soft whimper caught his attention. Nordon's eyes snapped open, scanning the shadows. There, huddled in the corner of one of the cells, was a young woman. Her dress was tattered and stained, her dark hair matted with grime. She looked up at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"Please," she whispered, her voice hoarse and trembling. "Don't let it take me."

Nordon approached the cell, his heart aching at the sight of the young woman's distress. He knelt down beside her, reaching through the bars to gently touch her shoulder. "It's alright," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I won't let them hurt you. We're safe here, for now."

The woman looked up at him, her dark eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I'm Eira," she said, her voice trembling. "I was just walking past when those... those things attacked. I didn't know where else to go."

Nordon nodded, understanding the terror she must have felt. "I'm Nordon. I came here to escape them too." He glanced around the gaol, taking in the thick iron bars and sturdy stone walls. It was a small comfort, but at least they had some measure of protection here.

Outside, the sounds of destruction and agony continued, the screams of the dying villagers mingling with the unholy shrieks of the demons. Nordon and Eira huddled together in the cell, their hearts pounding in unison as they listened to the carnage unfolding beyond the gaol's walls.

As the night wore on, the two found solace in each other's presence, their whispered conversations a fragile lifeline amidst the horror. Eira told Nordon of her life in the village, of her dreams and aspirations, now shattered by the witches' attack. Nordon, in turn, shared stories of his own struggles, of the sacrifices he and others had made in their fight against the witches' tyranny.

Secrecy seemed less urgent, just then.

They spoke of happier times, of the simple joys of life that now seemed like distant memories. Eira described the beauty of the village in springtime, when the fields were ablaze with wildflowers and the air was sweet with the scent of fresh grass. Nordon reminisced about the laughter and camaraderie he had shared with Jaron and the others in their secret organization, the sense of purpose that had driven them to risk everything for the sake of humanity's future.

As they talked, Nordon found himself drawn to Eira's quiet strength, the way she clung to hope even in the face of overwhelming despair. And Eira, in turn, found comfort in

Nordon's steadfast resolve, the unwavering determination that burned in his eyes.

Throughout the long, harrowing night, Nordon remained vigilant, his ears straining for any sound that might indicate another survivor seeking refuge. But as the hours dragged on, no one else came. The gaol remained a lonely bastion, a fragile island of safety amidst a sea of chaos and death.

The two huddled close, sharing their meager warmth as the cold seeped into their bones. Eira's head rested on Nordon's shoulder, her breathing slow and even as exhaustion finally claimed her. Nordon stayed awake until the first light of dawn snuck through the gaol's barred windows.

Nordon shook himself. Lakewood, on top of Nek... it was too much. If Lakewood was worse than Nek, and from all accounts it was, then the witches had definitely changed their tactics.

And the humans were responding—or trying to. Villages all over the continent were calling for Hunts. But Nordon knew they wouldn't do any good. Not without iron. Not without further understanding how the witches' magic truly worked, and what other weaknesses it might have. Their organization should have been a source of that information, should have been able to help those Hunts be more effective—but the chaos had disrupted their fragile, secretive lines of communication. Nordon didn't even know how many of the organization had survived the partial destruction of Lakewood, where they'd recently moved their leadership.

Which left Nordon and his small team in Farreach in the South as, possibly, humanity's last hope.

There was a knock at the door of his small, one-room dwelling. "Come!"

The door opened a handbreadth, and Eira poked her head in. "I know it's early—"

"I... was awake," Nordon said, grabbing a shirt from the hook by the bed and pulling it down over his head.

"Lakewood," she said miserably, her eyes wetting.

"I know."

"It made me think—"

"I know. Me, too. We should get the others. We need to... take action."

She nodded and turned, closing the door behind her. Nordon pulled the heavy curtains away from the room's single window, letting in the wan, early light of morning. He gazed out the window, taking in the familiar sight of Farreach in the South as it slowly awakened. The small coastal town was bathed in the soft, golden light of the rising sun, the sky a delicate palette of pinks and oranges. The air was crisp and cool, carrying the faint scent of salt from the nearby sea.

Below his window, the narrow cobblestone streets were beginning to fill with life. Shopkeepers emerged from their homes, unlocking doors and setting out their wares. The tailor's shop beneath Nordon's rented room was already bustling with activity, the thunk of bolts of cloth being unloaded from a wagon drifting up through the floorboards.

Farreach in the South was a picturesque town, its white-washed buildings with red-tiled roofs clustered along the winding streets. Colorful flowers spilled from window boxes, their delicate petals swaying in the gentle breeze. The town square, visible from Nordon's vantage point, boasted a grand fountain carved from pale marble, its cascading waters glittering in the morning light.

Despite the town's tranquil beauty, an undercurrent of tension hung in the air. The news of the devastating attacks on Nek and Lakewood had spread like wildfire, and the people of

Farreach in the South were on edge, waiting for the inevitable strike that seemed to loom on the horizon.

Nordon watched as a group of fishermen made their way towards the docks, their weathered faces etched with worry. They carried their nets and gear, the rhythmic clunking of their boots against the cobblestones echoing through the streets. The docks were a hive of activity, with boats of all sizes bobbing gently in the calm waters of the harbor. Seagulls wheeled overhead, their mournful cries mingling with the shouts of the fishermen as they prepared for another day at sea.

In the distance, beyond the rooftops, Nordon could see the glimmering expanse of the ocean, its surface painted in shades of blue and green. The water sparkled like a thousand diamonds, the sunlight dancing across the gentle waves. The sight was breathtaking, a reminder of the raw beauty and power of nature.

As Nordon's gaze swept across the town, he couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. The people of Farreach in the South were going about their daily lives, but there was a palpable sense of fear in the air. Mothers kept their children close, their eyes darting nervously at every unfamiliar sound. Men gathered in small groups, their voices low and urgent as they discussed the latest news and rumors.

The town's defenses, once merely a formality, had been reinforced in recent days. At the local priest's urging—after a quiet talk with Nordon about witches' likely weaknesses—iron bars had been hastily installed over many windows and doors, and a small militia had been assembled and was drilling in the square, their movements clumsy but determined.

Nordon knew that these measures alone wouldn't help.

The door to his room swung open and his small, determined band of colleagues filed in, their faces drawn. Apparently nobody had slept well last night.

Last in was an unexpected face.

“Godwin!” Nordon said, a measure of relief filling his voice.

“Godwin, you’re safe!”

“Aye.” Godwin was an older man, beginning to stoop a bit, his dark-skinned head already bald. He looked especially weary. “I made it out on the back of a wagon. We just... ran. Ran until the horses couldn’t run anymore, and then we left them and kept running. I’d thought to stop in Nek, but...”

“We know,” Nordon said quietly. “I’m glad you’re alive. Did... any others...?”

Godwin shook his head and lowered himself carefully to Nordon’s lone chair as Eira closed the door. “I don’t know. All our means of communication are... broken. I might be the last of the leadership.”

The group took the possibility well, Nordon thought. Around the room, jaws tightened and hands clenched, backs straightened and eyes narrowed. “At least you made it,” he said softly. “We’ve been working on... possibilities.”

Godwin sighed. “All we have now is information.” Then his eyes widened slightly. “Please, tell me you still have—”

“I do,” Nordon said firmly. “My visit to Nek was only to arrange for their transfer—I didn’t have them with me. They’re all here. Safe.” He nodded to an iron-bound wooden chest in one corner of the room. “Here, and elsewhere in the town. With people I trust.”

“They mean to rule us, I think,” Godwin said wearily.

“We planned for that,” one of the other men, Aimery, said.

Godwin snorted. “We had ideas for that. But we never thought it would come to it. But... yes. Plans, of a sort.” He breathed heavily as he pulled himself back to his feet. “What we have now is information. Weaknesses. Observations. Designs for weapons. One set here, one set in Farreach in the North.

We've had no word from them, and may not for days. So we need to begin sharing that information."

"With who?" another of the group, Everard, asked.

"Priests, to begin with," Godwin said. He rubbed his lower back. "I need rest. And a meal. Can you all start? Obtain some paper, some charcoal? Begin making rubbings?" Everyone nodded. "Nordon, you'll know which ones to focus on. Everard, you know the local priest best, still?"

"Aye."

"Go. Tell him who we are. Tell him what we know. Ask for his help. The rest of you, gather supplies." He frowned. "I wish we could engrave more sheets of iron, but... it seems the witches have abandoned subtlety. And we have no time. Paper will have to do." He looked around the room, nodding at each of them. "Go."

Everyone filed quickly out the door, Godwin bringing up the rear. "The proprietor of the Inn of the Setting Sun is part of our extended network."

Nordon raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know."

"We've been as careful as we can. In case... you were caught. Or one of your team. I'll go see him now. There are some backup communications channels we can try. If nothing else, I'll put a man on a horse. We need to see what we have left to work with."

"I'll start ordering the sheets."

"Good man." Godwin pulled the door closed behind him as he left.

Nordon turned and knelt next to the chest. The lock was hefty and complex, and made entirely of iron, and it took him several minutes to release it. That accomplished, he levered back the heavy lid—lined with iron sheets—and withdrew a heavy stack of thinner, more precisely milled, sheets. These were engraved with tiny, crabbed writing and concise diagrams—part

of the organization's library, and their hard-earned trick for keeping the witches from erasing and modifying their painstakingly won knowledge.

Nordon carefully sifted through the stack of iron sheets, his fingers tracing the intricate engravings that covered their surfaces. Each sheet was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, the product of countless hours of painstaking labor by the organization's most skilled and diligent artisans. The engravings were so fine and detailed that they seemed almost magical themselves, as if they contained the very essence of the knowledge they sought to preserve.

One sheet depicted a marvel of engineering—a steam engine, its complex system of pistons, valves, and gears rendered in exquisite detail. Nordon could almost hear the hiss of steam and the clank of metal as he studied the diagram, marveling at the ingenuity of its design. This engine, if built, could power mills, pump water, and even propel vehicles, all without the need for muscle or magic. It was a testament to the boundless potential of human innovation.

Another sheet showcased a printing press, its sturdy frame and intricate letterpress intricately etched into the iron. This device, Nordon knew, could revolutionize the spread of knowledge, making books and pamphlets available to the masses. No longer would learning be the exclusive domain of the wealthy and the privileged. With the printing press, ideas could flow freely, sparking new thoughts and igniting the fires of progress.

As Nordon delved deeper into the stack, he came across the sheets that always sent a chill down his spine. These engravings depicted weapons, each one carefully designed to exploit the weaknesses of the witches and their dark magic. One sheet showed a crossbow, its bolt tipped with cold iron, the bane of all things magical. Another featured a carronade, its barrel measurements carefully detailed. Though untested, these

weapons offered a glimmer of hope in the fight against the witches' threat.

A threat they'd never seriously thought would materialize.

Other sheets contained schematics for witch traps and cells, each one crafted to neutralize and contain the witches' power. One design showed a cage of iron bars, its floor etched with a complex array of sigils and wards. Another depicted a pit, its walls lined with salt and silver, substances known to weaken and bind magical entities. These designs were born of desperation, the last resort of a people pushed to the brink by the witches' cruelty.

Among the technical engravings, Nordon found sheets that told a different story—the history of the organization itself. These sheets were filled with tiny, meticulously engraved text, each letter no larger than a grain of sand. The words spoke of the organization's founding, of the brave men and women who had first dared to defy the witches and their oppression of humans. They told of the trials and tribulations the organization had faced, of the sacrifices its members had made in the name of freedom and progress.

“Don't be afraid.”

Nordon stood and whirled in a single movement, the thin iron sheets falling back into the chest. He hadn't even heard his door open, but here stood an average-looking young man. Medium-brown skin, piercing green eyes, and a red tint to his—

Nordon's heart began hammering in his chest, and his eyes automatically darted to where he'd hung his iron dagger—across the room, next to his bed.

The man followed his gaze. “Please don't. I'm not here to hurt you. The opposite, actually. I want to help. My name is—”

“Fin,” Nordon said, his voice rough with fear.

The man tilted his head a bit. “Finley, actually. Nobody calls me Fin. But yes. You know me?”

"I know of you. We all do. How did you find me?"

Finley shrugged. "We know things as well."

"Why are you attacking us? After all this time, all these—"

"That's not us," Finley growled. "Far from it. There's... it's complicated." He sighed and glanced out the window. "Do you have time to talk?"

"Half a mark. Maybe less."

"Hmm. I'll do my best. The short version. We have a government, led by a... Grand Council. We call it the Taryba. It was... subverted, I guess you could say. One of our clans, a family... they're hungry for power. They came up with the notion of witchkind ruling humans. They were the ones... directing us. Me, I mean, and my colleagues. Our... Order." Nordon thought Finley looked distinctly uncomfortable, and realized he would probably feel the same way, if he was explaining his secret organization to...

To the enemy.

"We were suppressing more than we should have," Finley continued. "Some of us weren't. The bread mold—there was no harm in that. You created that new alloy... we thought we had a compromise. If you could have your inventions without iron, without risk to us... well. A few of us thought it was worth it."

"So what happened?"

"The clan... they're gone, now. There was a fight. We don't all agree that we should rule humans. I don't think very many of us think so, actually. But that clan left contingencies. And they left their... power, I guess you could say. And they, or their allies, control our Council now. As near as we—I—can tell, all the attacks, all the destruction—they're the work of one man, acting under the direction of some of those councilors."

Nordon's eyebrows climbed to his hair. "One?"

Finley's lips twisted. "Yes. And... we're going to try and stop

him. But... look, there are two things.” He gestured to Nordon’s bed, and with a rush of wind, a pile of leather-bound books appeared out of thin air and thumped to the thin straw-filled mattress. “Our notes. Of every human invention or innovation we’ve seen. Every one we’ve suppressed, the ones we’ve let be. They’re... resistant,” he added, nodding slightly. “They can’t be tampered with. Not easily. I saw to that myself.” His eyes took on a faraway look for a moment, and then he gave a slight grin. “I had help.

“The second thing. Much as I hate to say this, you’re going to need to equip yourselves. You know about... iron. Use that. It can protect you. To a point. Against most things.”

“To a point?” Nordon asked, still in awe at the books’ appearance.

Finley nodded grimly. “We can’t use magic directly against you. And you know iron presents a... challenge to us.” He sighed. “It grounds our magic. Cancels it out. But... that wouldn’t stop us from creating a sinkhole beneath a building that had been reinforced with iron. We can’t act against iron, but we can act around it. We’re clever, most of us.”

“And dangerous,” Nordon ground out.

Finley shook his head firmly. “No. Not dangerous. Not most of us. We’ve lived alongside you for centuries. You know that. Our magic keeps your buildings upright. Your fishing boats afloat. We’re leaving now, have you noticed? My people are terrified, and they’re leaving their homes. Their businesses.”

“Are they leaving here, too?”

Finley’s lips briefly twitched into a near-grin. “Strangely, witchkind never really settled Farreach in the South. There’s something of a superstition amongst us. I don’t know why, or where it came from, but there’s probably less than half a dozen of us living here.”

“See that they leave,” Nordon growled.

"I—" Finley started, but then stopped when he saw the cold anger in Nordon's expression. "I will. But you should know something. Our magic fades, over time, if it's not renewed. Your buildings are going to weaken. Your street lights will blow out in the slightest breeze. A hundred, a thousand, little things will start to go wrong and decay. Maybe less so here, but still."

"Because you've kept us from improving."

Finley sighed. "Yes. Mostly. We were afraid... we told ourselves that taking away our magic could be a lever against you. But now... we're dying in these attacks as well. And your priests are rallying for a return of the Hunts." He cocked his head. "You do know what's going on with your church, right?"

"I..." Nordon blinked. "I hadn't thought about it. Of course they're calling for Hunts, you've been—"

"They're seizing a political opportunity. They want power. They want you to turn away from your Alderman, they'll tell you they can't protect you. Which is true enough, I suppose. You'll hand over immense power, put up with immense sacrifices, all in the name of being safe. We do, too," he added wryly. "We're not all that different. Yes, that one man—his name is Landon—is behind the attacks. But your priests make up stories of more, to spread even more fear. To make you turn to them, to hand them power."

Nordon considered that, and then shrugged. "We've designed weapons."

Finley's shoulders slumped a bit at that. "I assumed you had. And you'll give them to the church? Arm the Hunts?"

"We have to protect ourselves."

"I know. And so do we. And my point is that neither of us represents a danger to the other. If we can stop Landon, the attacks will stop—"

"The Council of yours. They won't find someone else?"

It was Finley's turn to blink a few times as he considered it, and then his shoulders slumped further. "They might."

"Then we protect ourselves."

Finley hesitated, and then nodded slowly. "We'll protect you as well. As best we can. I just ask... most of my people are very ordinary. Like any of you. They just want to live, to have some good moments, to give their children everything they can. Just... think of that. Please."

Nordon said nothing.

"They're playing a canny game, our Council," Finley continued, his tone more urgent now. "Landon attacks you with magic. Your church calls for the Hunt. My people become afraid—and they let our Council have its way. Subjugate the humans, something most of us would never even consider, all in the name of staying safe. Meanwhile, your own church, hungry for political power, plays into it. Makes up stories about magic, blows small things out of proportion, all so you'll let them take charge and protect you. They raise the Hunt... and my people fear for their lives. And so we give our Council the power they want." He shook his head. "And most humans, and most of witchkind, are simply caught in the middle."

Still, Nordon remained silent, but Finley could see he was calculating.

"Keep it in mind."

The human remained silent, and after several moments Finley nodded again. With another rush of wind, he was gone.

Nordon's vision grew black for a heartbeat, and when it returned he found himself sitting on the floor, breathing heavily and sweating through his shirt.

A Defensive Strategy

“**A**ll right, Nordon,” Godwin said, settling himself across the table. “You’ve been thinking about this. What’s the plan?”

Nordon’s team of six had joined him at the Inn of the Setting Sun. The proprietor had provided them with a private room near the kitchen for their discussions. “The priest has a dozen people making rubbings of the most important things. He says two of the blacksmiths in town can make more of the thin iron sheets, and he’s got a couple of people with steady hands who can engrave them. He’ll focus on the paper rubbings first, and then start making iron copies.”

“What of the books?” Godwin asked. Nordon had told everyone about Finley’s visit, and brought a couple of the leather-bound books to the inn.

He tapped one. “They’re real. I mean, it’s everything, like he said. I’ll spread them around, like I did with the iron sheets, and we’ll keep them in iron-lined chests. We’ll make copies... well, when there’s time.”

“Copies of things won’t protect us,” Amabel pointed out.

Her blue eyes were flashing with anger and eagerness. "We need actual weapons."

"The copies will protect others," Nordon countered. "It's easier and faster to spread those around than to try and make those weapons ourselves. And all four of the town's smithies already have copies of the most critical things, the things we'll need first, and they've promised to keep their forges running 'round the clock."

"Let me ask you something," Aimery said slowly. "What makes us think the witches won't find out? They're all around us, aren't they?"

"He—Finley—said they've been leaving our towns and villages. And that there were only ever a handful here in the first place. And he said he'd tell them to leave."

"And they'll just obey him?"

Nordon shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea. We'll assume not, and act accordingly." He nodded to the walls of their private dining room, where the proprietor had hastily nailed iron horseshoes all over. "Iron is their weakness. And... he said they can't use magic directly against us."

Everyone took a moment to process that, their expressions showing varying degrees of surprise and calculation. "That makes sense," Godwin said slowly. "We've never had any reports of magic being used directly against us. Not to modify our memories, which we always assumed they could, and would, do."

"Those demons in Nek—" Eira began.

"Were some kind of physical creature," Nordon said, shaking his head. "He was clear that they can work around the limitation. An iron building can fall into a sinkhole, he said. Basically. He said they're clever. We need to be just as clever."

"So what's next?" Godwin asked.

"Traps," Nordon said firmly. "And a lure, once the traps are

set. Iron chain mail. Pits with iron bars, we know that's worked in the past." He gave Godwin a grim smile. "We haven't been idle down here, this last moon or two. We have some things manufactured already. More of the crossbows with iron bolts. We've gone back and lined them with iron rods as well, after the incident with the carronade. We have piles of chain mail ready, hundreds of iron bars. They're all buried—Aimery, Everard, you two know where we've hidden them. When we're done here, grab some people and start digging them up." The two men nodded agreement.

"Why traps?" Eira asked.

"Because we need more information," Nordon said. "We need to know more about their weaknesses, more about what they're thinking."

"Hostages," Blazh said. He was the quietest of Nordon's team, but also the cleverest.

Eira's eyes widened, but Godwin nodded. "Exactly. Ones we can, hopefully, distribute to other villages. If they attack us, they attack their own."

Nordon's stomach knotted itself. "Finley—he said the attacks were from one man. That they—the witches—had been attacked as well. Hostages... may not work that way."

Godwin considered that. "Possibly. But we will try it nonetheless."

Nordon nodded slowly, but his stomach didn't unclench. Something was bothering him about this. Yes, they need to protect themselves. To do that, they needed more information. But wouldn't hostages just rile the rest of the witches? If the attacks really were from one man, wouldn't hostages make the others more sympathetic to him?

"...immediately," Godwin finished.

Nordon realized he'd missed whatever the man said. "I'm sorry. Just trying to put it all in order. What did you say?"

"He said we start laying the traps now," Blazh said, standing. "I've a gang of boys who'll be eager to help dig."

Blazh led a crew of strapping lads, ranging from gangly fifteen-year-olds to brawny young men on the cusp of twenty, into the heart of the village. They marched with purpose, shovels and pickaxes slung over their shoulders, determination etched on their faces. The sun beat down on the packed earth of the town square, which stretched before the stone edifice of the church.

Blazh halted his crew in the center of the square and pointed to a spot just a dozen paces from the church's arched wooden doors. "There," he declared. "We dig the pit there. Deep and wide."

The boys exchanged glances, some eager, some apprehensive, but all resolute. They knew the stakes, the threat that loomed over their homes and families. Without a word, they set to work, driving shovels and picks into the hard-packed ground.

Blazh worked alongside them, his lean muscles flexing as he hefted loads of earth. Sweat ran in rivulets down his dust-streaked face, but he never slackened his relentless pace. Steadily, the hole grew, deepening and widening with each passing hour.

As the sun reached its zenith, they paused to gauge their progress. The pit yawned before them, a gaping wound in the earth over eight feet deep and twelve feet across. Blazh nodded with grim satisfaction.

"Joren, Kai—fetch the iron bars from the forge," he instructed. The two older teens sprinted off without hesitation.

While he waited, Blazh turned his mind to the next critical step - the lure. They needed to draw their quarry to this specific

spot. His gaze fell upon the church doors, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"Lads, gather round," he called. "Listen close. Here's the plan..."

Joren and Kai soon returned, joined by a few blacksmiths. They bore dozens of iron bars, each over an inch thick and six feet long. With great care, they lowered the bars into the pit, fitting them upright against the earthen walls.

The boys watched in rapt attention as Blazh directed the placement of each bar, creating an impenetrable iron cage. The metal gleamed dully in the waning sunlight, a promise of protection and a portent of violence.

As the last bar slotted into place, Blazh climbed from the pit and surveyed their handiwork. The pit sat like a hidden maw, waiting to snap shut on any hapless victim who stumbled into its depths. Iron bars jutted up from the floor of the pit, ready to immobilize their prey.

Blazh turned to his crew, pride shining in his eyes. "Well done, lads. You've done your part. Now, let's see about baiting the trap."

He turned and strode into the church.

As the sun rose from the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, Nordon strode purposefully towards the smithy at the edge of town. The clang of hammer on anvil rang out, a cacophony of determined industry that swelled with each step he took.

He ducked through the low doorway, blinking as his eyes adjusted from the bright morning light to the dimness within. The air hung heavy with the acrid scent of smoke and hot

metal. Sweat already beaded on his brow from the sweltering heat of the forge.

"Rendel!" Nordon called out over the ringing impacts. "A word, if you please."

The brawny smith looked up from his work, his face ruddy and glistening. He set his hammer down and wiped his hands on his leather apron as he approached. "Nordon, good morn. What news?"

Nordon clasped the man's forearm in a firm warrior's grip. "I wished to discuss the progress on our new armaments. Time grows short, my friend."

Rendel nodded gravely. "Aye, and we're working as fast as the metal allows. Come, see for yourself."

He led Nordon deeper into the smithy, past the main forge where apprentices pumped the bellows and worked the coals. Against the far wall, a line of newly forged weapons gleamed in the ruddy light. Crossbows of various sizes lay alongside piles of iron-tipped quarrels, each one viciously barbed for maximum damage. Iron bars and rods were stacked neatly, ready to reinforce doors, windows, and other vulnerabilities.

But it was the massive arbalests that drew Nordon's eye—great, mounted crossbows taller than a man, their steel arms as thick as a sapling's trunk. Windlasses and pulley systems allowed them to be drawn with tremendous force, unleashing iron bolts as long as a man's arm with devastating power.

"We've built a dozen of the siege arbalests so far," Rendel said, running a callused hand along one's stock. "Those plans of yours were perfect. These can punch clean through metal plate at two hundred paces. We'll have them mounted on rooftops and walls throughout the town."

Nordon felt a grim smile tug at his mouth. "Excellent. And their frames are iron-reinforced?"

"Every inch," Rendel confirmed. "Wrapped in bands of

cold-forged iron, tempered and quenched for maximum strength. Even if they try their magic on them, they'll hold true."

"What of the other projects I mentioned?" Nordon asked.

Rendel beckoned him to a workbench strewn with intricate mechanisms of gears and springs. "We've made good progress on the traps and snares you described. Iron-jawed bear traps that could hobble a horse."

Nordon picked up one of the wicked-looking traps, marveling at the craftsmanship. The jaws, each inlaid with jagged iron teeth, gleamed with deadly promise. He could imagine them snapping shut on a witch's leg with bone-crushing force.

"And these," Rendel said, gesturing to a rack of what appeared to be oversized manacles. Each cuff was lined with dull spikes, poised to pierce flesh. "Shackles, like you asked for. But with a nasty surprise built in."

Nordon hefted a pair, noting their weight and brutal design. "For the hostages," he said softly. "To bind their magic."

Rendel grunted. "If you can get close enough to slap them on. Blazh is working on that part now with his pit trap in the square."

"What about the rest of the townsfolk? Are they outfitted?"

"Near enough," Rendel replied. "Every man and boy old enough to hold a weapon has an iron-tipped spear or crossbow, or will have by the week's end. The women have iron daggers and chain shirts. We've handed out those holy symbols the priest made too, for whatever good they'll do."

Nordon nodded, feeling a faint stirring of hope kindling in his chest, even while Finley's allegations about the church seizing power murmured in his mind. Perhaps they stood a chance after all. With these weapons, these defenses, perhaps Farreach in the South, at least, could weather the coming storm.

"You've done well, Rendel," he said, clasping the smith's shoulder. "Better than I could have hoped. Keep at it - we'll need every blade and bolt you can forge."

Eira and Amabel moved with purpose through the winding streets of Farreach, their keen eyes scanning every edifice and structure for the telltale signs of witchcraft. The morning sun beat down upon them, casting sharp shadows that seemed to writhe and dance with each step they took.

They made an striking pair, these two young women—Eira tall and athletic, with the bearing of a born warrior, Amabel petite and lithe, her movements quick and precise. Both wore expressions of grim determination as they searched, iron spikes and hammers clutched tightly in their hands.

As they neared the town center, Eira paused before a squat stone building, its facade weathered and pitted with age. The wooden sign above the door proclaimed it to be "Elden's Sundries and Dry Goods." She frowned, her eyes narrowing as she studied the rough-hewn blocks of granite.

"There," she said, pointing to a spot just above the lintel. "Do you see it?"

Amabel stepped closer, her gaze following Eira's gesture. At first, she saw nothing out of the ordinary, just the play of light and shadow on the pitted stone. But then, as she tilted her head just so, a pattern seemed to emerge—a complex knot of lines and curves, etched into the rock with painstaking precision.

"A rune," Amabel breathed, her voice tinged with both awe and revulsion. "Hidden in plain sight. It's just as Nordon said."

Eira nodded grimly. "And carved with magic, no doubt. The stone shows no tool marks." She hefted her hammer,

feeling its reassuring weight in her palm. "Well, there's nothing for it. We'll have to break it."

Together, they approached the rune, Amabel holding the iron spike steady as Eira raised her hammer high. With a mighty swing, she brought it down upon the spike's head, driving the metal straight into the heart of the arcane symbol.

The moment the iron pierced the stone, a blinding flash of sickly green light erupted from the rune, sending both women staggering back. A high, keening wail filled the air, like the death-cry of some unseen creature. The very stones of the building seemed to shudder and groan, as if in pain.

Cracks raced out from the ruined rune, zigzagging across the facade like bolts of jagged lightning. Mortar crumbled and stones shifted, the entire structure letting out an ominous creak. For a moment, it seemed the building might collapse in on itself entirely.

But then, as quickly as it had begun, the maelstrom subsided. The eldritch light faded, the wailing cry dwindled to silence, and the building settled once more, its facade now marred by a spider's web of cracks radiating out from the destroyed rune.

Amabel and Eira exchanged a wide-eyed glance, their hearts pounding in the sudden stillness. "Well," Eira said, her voice a bit unsteady. "I suppose that's one way to break magic."

Amabel nodded mutely, her gaze still fixed on the ruined stone.

They moved on, their steps perhaps a bit more hurried than before. As they walked, they scanned the buildings around them with new wariness, seeing shadows of witchcraft in every carved lintel and etched cornerstone. How many more hidden runes lurked in the heart of Farreach? How deep did the rot of magic go?

"The stables," Amabel said suddenly, pointing to a long, low structure just ahead. "We should check there next."

Eira grimaced at the thought. "Right."

They approached the stables cautiously, hammers at the ready. The earthy scent of hay and horses filled their nostrils, undercut by a faint, acrid tang that set their teeth on edge. The horses shifted restlessly in their stalls, eyes rolling and ears flicking.

Amabel moved down the central aisle, running her hand along the rough-hewn beams. Her fingers caught on a knot in the wood, and she paused, frowning. The knot seemed to twist and writhe under her touch, its whorls forming an all-too-familiar pattern.

"Here," she called softly to Eira. "Another one."

Eira joined her, iron spike in hand. Together, they drove the metal deep into the rune-carved wood. This time, there was no dramatic flash of light, no keening wail. But as the iron pierced the curse-knot, the horses suddenly quieted, their agitation fading like mist beneath the rising sun.

"Two down," Eira murmured. "Saints only know how many to go."

They continued their grim work, moving from building to building, ferreting out the hidden marks of witchcraft wherever they found them. By midday, their arms ached from swinging hammers and their eyes burned from scouring stone and wood. But a fierce satisfaction burned in their hearts as well. With each destroyed rune, each broken curse, they felt Farreach's chains of bewitchment loosening.

"This feels... good," Eira said as they stopped for a mug of cool small beer. "After Nek."

"Like you have some control again?"

"Exactly."

"Agreed." Amabel drained her mug. "Come. We've got half the town yet to cover."

Aimery and Isabella stood atop the bell tower of the town's church, the highest vantage in all of Farreach. The sun beat down upon them, making the iron chain mail they handled warm to the touch, but they worked with grim determination, sweat beading their brows.

Before them, a complex apparatus of pulleys, winches, and taut ropes spread across the tower's flat roof. At its heart sat a massive arbalest, its iron alloy arms gleaming in the harsh light. The weapon was a marvel of engineering, designed to propel a payload far heavier than any normal bolt or quarrel.

"Careful now," Aimery grunted as they maneuvered a folded sheet of chain mail into place at the arbalest's business end. The rough iron links rasped and clinked, seeming to writhe with a life of their own as they settled into the launching cup. "We'll only get one shot with each of these. It has to be perfect."

Isabella nodded, her face set with concentration as she adjusted the tension on the winch. Her chestnut hair, bound back in a practical braid, glinted with strands of copper in the sunlight. "The trajectory has to be just right," she murmured, sighting along the arbalest's stock. "Too high and it'll overshoot. Too low and it won't unfurl properly."

They had spent the morning preparing these unorthodox projectiles, and the smiths had worked their forges continuously for a fortnight to craft sheets of iron mail light enough to fly true, yet heavy enough to bind a target on impact. Each sheet was cunningly folded, designed to unfurl in mid-flight and spread its metal web wide.

Aimery double-checked the moorings of the guide ropes, ensuring each was securely fastened to the mail's corners. When launched, these ropes would trail behind the projectile like the strings of a puppet, allowing them to steer the descending mail and cinch it tight around their victim.

"I think that's got it," he said, stepping back and wiping his brow. "Let's run the line and check the other launchers."

They moved to the tower's edge, where a thin rope bridge connected to the roof of the town hall across the way. More guide ropes ran from the arbalest to a series of pulleys and eyelets anchored along the bridge's length, allowing them to control the mail's flight from a distance.

As they carefully navigated the swaying bridge, the bustle of preparations in the streets below caught their eye. Townsfolk moved with purpose, ferrying bundles of crossbow bolts and iron stakes, their faces grim and determined. In the square, Blazh's crew labored over the massive pit trap, their shovels rising and falling in steady rhythm.

"It's really happening, isn't it?" Isabella murmured, pausing to gaze down at the ordered chaos. "We're going to war."

"It's coming to us," Aimery countered grimly.

Everard crossed his arms in the hushed sanctuary of the church. Shafts of multicolored light streamed through the stained glass windows, painting the worn wooden pews in a kaleidoscope of hues. The faces of the three robed figures in front of him—the town's priests—were lined with worry and grim determination.

Blazh walked in quickly, his footsteps echoing.

"Father Anselm, Father Doran, Father Joaquin," Everard introduced the men, "Blazh here dug the pit out front. Now we just need to bait it."

Father Anselm, the eldest of the three, nodded gravely. His wizened face was a map of creases, his white hair thin and wispy about his tonsured pate. "We discussed. We've had a few... ideas."

"As do I," Everard continued. "Blazh's crew have done a remarkable job constructing the thing, but we need a way to ensure our quarry finds their way into it, should the need arise."

Father Doran, a stout man with ruddy cheeks and keen blue eyes, stroked his grizzled beard thoughtfully. "So a lure, then. Something to draw the witch to the precise spot. Rather than... coercing them?"

Everard nodded. "Or both. We were hoping you might have some ideas on that front. The church is a central gathering place, after all. If we could stage some kind of event, or ritual perhaps..."

Father Joaquin, the youngest of the priests, spoke up, his voice rich and melodious. "A pageant, maybe? Some kind of grand spectacle to capture attention?" His dark eyes glinted with a spark of inspiration.

Everard considered this, his brow furrowed. "That could work. If we could somehow maneuver the witch into position as part of a... performance..."

"It would have to be something significant," Father Anselm mused. "A banishing ceremony, perhaps? Would the witch be arrogant enough to stand come before us?"

Blazh, who had been listening quietly, suddenly straightened. "What about a trial?" he suggested, his voice low and intense. "A mock trial, with someone playing the role of a condemned witch. We could stage it right over the trap, make a big show of the sentencing and the execution."

A heavy silence fell as they all contemplated the grim prospect. It was Father Doran who finally spoke, his tone measured and grave. "It's a dangerous gambit. If our ruse is too

convincing, we risk drawing not just one witch, but many. And if they suspect a trap..."

"We'll need contingencies," Everard said.

Father Anselm stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps we could bury iron chains in the dirt of the square," he suggested. "Concealed, like a spider's web. If the witch attempts to flee, we could raise them, herd our quarry toward the pit."

Father Joaquin nodded eagerly. "Yes, and we could station men with crossbows in the bell tower, armed with those new iron-tipped bolts from the forge. A hail of those would drive even the most powerful witch to seek cover. That, with the chain mail your people have been preparing..."

"The mock trial itself could be our most potent weapon," Father Doran mused. "If we craft our pageantry with care, weave in the holy words and symbols we've uncovered... it may weaken the witch, make them more vulnerable to our devices."

Blazh rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

Everard felt a grim smile tug at his lips. "Hiding our snares in plain sight. I like it."

Father Anselm leaned forward intently. "We'll need to choose our players with care. The one who acts the condemned witch, they'll be right over the trap. One step too far..."

"I'll do it," Father Joaquin declared, his youthful features hardening with resolve. "I'm spry enough to leap clear if needs be. And it feels... fitting, does it not? For a man of the cloth to play the part."

Father Anselm laid a gnarled hand on the young priest's shoulder. "You're certain, my son? The risk is not inconsiderable."

Joaquin met his elder's gaze steadily. "I am. I'll practice the steps until I can dance them in my sleep. Blazh's lads can mark out the safe path for me."

Everard nodded slowly, a reluctant respect kindling in his

breast. "Very well. But we'll have a rope about you, just in case. One of Blazh's boys can be ready to haul you clear at the first sign of trouble."

"And the rest of us will be stationed all around," Father Doran added, "armed and ready. If the opportunity presents itself..." He made a sharp gesture, as if thrusting a blade home.

"We'll need to spread word of the trial discreetly," Blazh said. "And be ready to stage it the moment the witch appears."

Father Anselm's eyes gleamed in the colored light. "Leave that to us. A few whispers in the right ears during confession, a few circumspect announcements at service. We can have the right people ready at a moment's notice."

Everard clapped his hands together, the sound echoing in the vaulted space. "Then we have our plan. I'll coordinate with Aimery and Isabella, ensure we have eyes on every approach. We'll ring the square with men, crossbows and chains at the ready."

The five men nodded agreement, and Everard and Blazh turned to go. The priests began speaking in quick, low voices, planning out their next steps.

The sun had long since dipped below the horizon as Nordon and his team filed wearily into the Inn of the Setting Sun. The common room buzzed with a tense, electric energy. Townsfolk clustered around rough-hewn tables, their faces flickering in the warm light of the hearth's dancing flames. Mugs of ale were clutched in white-knuckled grips, eyes darting nervously to the iron-banded door at every errant creak or gust of wind.

Yet beneath the tension thrummed a sense of grim purpose. These were not the faces of the frightened and cowed, but of those steeling themselves for the battle to come. In hushed

tones, they spoke of the day's preparations—of iron-tipped bolts and cleverly laid snares, of runes broken and wards raised. The air fairly crackled with their collective resolve.

Nordon and his companions threaded their way through the crowd, exchanging nods and brief clasps of shoulders as they passed. More than a few raised their mugs in salute, a gesture of respect and solidarity that warmed Nordon more than any ale could.

At last, they reached the sanctuary of their private dining room. The moment the door closed behind them, sealing them off from the hum of the common room, a collective sigh of exhaustion seemed to ripple through the group. They practically fell into the chairs ringed the large table, limbs heavy with fatigue.

"Saints, what a day," Eira groaned, rolling her shoulder with a wince. "I feel like I've been swinging a hammer since sunrise."

"You practically have been," Amabel pointed out wryly. "I lost count of how many curse-marks we shattered after the first half-dozen."

"Better than I expected to find," Nordon admitted. "Well done, both of you. Blazh, what news of the square?"

The wiry man leaned forward, his dark eyes glinting in the candlelight. "The pit's dug and reinforced. Bars of good iron, just like you said. My lads even added a few spikes at the bottom, in case our guest gets feisty." His smile was sharp and mirthless.

"And the chains?" Everard asked.

"Laid and buried. We've got four separate lines crisscrossing the square, just waiting to be hauled up. Like a spider's web, the priest said."

Nordon nodded, feeling a flicker of grim satisfaction. "Good. Aimery, Isabella, what of our... other preparations?"

The two exchanged a glance before Aimery spoke. "The

arbalests are in place and calibrated. We've got the bell tower and the roof of the town hall covered. Blazh's guide ropes are threaded and ready. We can steer those mail nets wherever we need them."

"Though we'd best pray we only need them once," Nordon mused.

Isabella nodded gravely. "It's a risk, to be sure. But one we must take. If we can capture even one of the witches alive, the information we could gain would be invaluable."

Godwin, who had been listening intently, leaned forward, his brow furrowed with concern. "Speaking of risks," he said slowly, "I've just come from the forges. Rendel and the other smiths are working themselves to the bone, but they're starting to run low on raw iron. At the rate they're going, they'll be scraping the bottom of the barrels within a fortnight."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the implications sank in. Their entire strategy hinged on iron—on the weapons and wards and snares it could create. Without a steady supply, their defenses would crumble like sand before the tide.

Nordon felt a cold knot of dread settle in his gut. "How much do we have in reserve?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Godwin shook his head grimly. "Not enough. Even with rationing, even if we melt down every scrap of iron we can spare, it'll only buy us a moon at best. And that's assuming the witches don't launch an all-out assault before then."

Isabella slammed her fist on the table, making the candles flicker. "Damn it all! We can't have come this far just to be hamstrung by a lack of metal. There must be something we can do!"

Amabel's brow furrowed in thought, her quick mind visibly turning over the problem. "What about the old mines?" she asked suddenly. "The ones in the Ironspine Hills, a day's

ride to the east of Nek. They've been abandoned for decades, but there might still be veins of ore left untapped."

Nordon straightened, a spark of hope kindling in his chest. "It's a long shot," he said slowly, "but it's better than nothing. If we could send a team to reopen the mines, get the forges running there..."

"It would be difficult," Everard warned. "You know the strictures the church has about mining the bones of the earth. And we need the priests' cooperation, just now."

Nordon snorted. "'Bones of the earth.' It's all but certain the witches put that stricture in the books in the first place. We know they have that ability."

"Yes, but proving it," Godwin grumbled.

"You really think our priests will object?" Eira asked.

"No, probably not," Everard said. "But the heads of the Eparchies are putting a lot of pressure on the priests. Observing the canon, calling for Hunts—we've not seen so much of it here, but Father Anslem is expecting his Bishop any time, so they can't be seen doing anything counter to scripture."

"What if we could prove it?" Nordon asked slowly. All eyes turned to him.

"How, exactly?" Everard asked.

Nordon's smile was flat and cold. "We have their books," he reminded them.

The room was filled with a stunned silence, enough that they could hear the quiet murmurings from the inn's main room. "Everard, Blazh," Godwin said slowly after a moment. "Help Nordon retrieve those books. Eira, ask the innkeeper to bring more food. And small beer. And candles. We may be here for a while."

CHAPTER 9

A Risky Venture

At first light, Nordon and Everard strode purposefully into the dimly lit sanctuary of the church, their faces weary, but firm with determination. The leather-bound books from the witch felt heavy in their hands, the pages seeming to hum with the weight of the secrets they contained.

Father Anselm, Father Doran, and Father Joaquin awaited them by the altar, their robes glimmering faintly in the candlelight. As the two men approached, the priests regarded them with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. The team had sent a boy ahead with a message, and the priests looked as if they'd barely risen from their beds.

"You said you had something of great import to show us," Father Anselm said, his wizened face creased with concern. "Something that could not wait until morning prayers."

Nordon nodded gravely. "We do, Father. Something that may well change the very foundation of our faith." He held up one of the ancient tomes, its cover worn and faded with age. "These books were given to us by... an unlikely source. They

purport to detail some... truths of our church. Of our beliefs. And the role the witches have played in shaping it."

Father Doran's bushy eyebrows shot up in surprise. "The witches? Shaping our faith? Surely you jest!"

"I wish I were," Everard said grimly. "But the evidence in these pages is difficult to refute. It appears that a group known as the Order of Some has been manipulating our holy texts for generations. Inserting passages and strictures that align with their own agenda."

Father Joaquin frowned, his youthful face troubled. "But to what end? What could they possibly hope to gain?"

Nordon flipped open one of the books, the parchment crackling softly beneath his fingers. "Power," he said simply. "And protection. Look here." He pointed to a densely written passage, the ink faded to a rusty brown. "This details how the Order added the prohibition against mining iron to our scriptures. Because they knew their kind were vulnerable to it."

Father Anselm leaned in, squinting at the cramped, archaic script. His eyes suddenly widened in recognition. "This... this is written in the old tongue," he breathed. "The language of our most ancient texts. I can scarcely make it out, but..."

He traced a gnarled finger over the page, mouthing the words silently as he translated. His face grew more and more troubled with each line.

"It speaks of a great council," he murmured, "held in secret by the Order. They debated how best to protect themselves from the 'scourge of iron.'" His finger stopped, hovering over a particular passage. "Here! They speak of 'seeding' our holy books with warnings against delving too greedily into the earth. Calling it a sin against the gods. This phrase, *Netrikdykite senovės žemės kaulų*. It translates roughly as..." His lips moved silently for a moment. "Disturb not the ancient bones of the earth." He looked up. "That's the very phrasing

our holiest texts use. It's been the basis of the restrictions on iron mining."

"Yes," Nordon said. "It's why we've only mined where the ore is readily available on the surface. A 'gift from the god,' we've always called it."

Father Doran shook his head in disbelief. "But that stricture has been a cornerstone of our faith for centuries! I remember when the church rediscovered those ancient texts in the vaults beneath the cathedral in Carvendam. The Holy Writ of Vaska the Ascetic, it was called. An account of the saint's visions and revelations, including dire warnings about delving too deep into the bones of the earth."

He began to pace, his sandaled feet scuffing against the worn flagstones. "It caused quite the stir at the time. The four Eparchies convened an emergency conclave to debate the meaning of the text. In the end, they declared it a lost work of one of our holiest figures, and its prohibitions against mining were enshrined into canon law."

Father Anselm nodded slowly, his face deeply lined with troubled thought. "I remember it well. The deep mines of the Ironspine Hills, which had been the lifeblood of the region for generations, were closed almost overnight. Hundreds of miners were suddenly without work, whole towns emptied as families sought new livelihoods. It was a time of great upheaval." He frowned. "It wasn't even all that long ago."

"And now you're telling us it was all a farce?" Father Joaquin asked incredulously. "That this saint's holy writ was nothing more than a fabrication by these witches to protect themselves?"

Nordon nodded grimly. "So it would seem. And not just the mining prohibitions. Look here." He flipped to another page, the parchment so thin it was nearly translucent. "This passage speaks of how the Order manipulated the doctrine around the

prayer boxes. Encouraging the belief that they were sacred, providing a direct channel to the god, that disturbing them was a grievous sin. Because they use them for their own purposes!"

Father Anselm took the book with trembling hands, his eyes widening as they scanned the faded script. "Merciful god," he breathed. "It's all here. The Revelation of the Soul, the Parable of the Shattered Tomb... texts we've held as sacred and inviolable. But this... this claims they were deliberate insertions by the Order. Lies couched as holy writ."

Father Doran sank heavily onto a nearby pew, his expression furious. "You want to reopen the deep mines, don't you? And you want our permission."

"Yes," Nordon said. "We need to. The shallow mines don't produce enough ore, and nowhere near as quickly. But without the church's blessing, no miners will go near the place."

"We'll have to explain this to the bishop," Father Anselm pointed out. "We're expecting him any day, now."

"Which is why we brought this to you now," Everard said. "But the sooner we can get workers into that mine..."

Father Doran nodded. "The sooner we can begin producing more weapons against these witches." He looked at his colleagues. "We have much to discuss, but I think we have enough to convince the bishop." He turned back to Nordon. "May we keep this book?"

"Keep it safe," Nordon warned. "In an iron box, by preference. The... one who provided it suggested it was... protected. From alteration. By magic. But... my trust is limited."

Doran frowned. "Exactly where did this come from?"

Nordon's jaw tightened. "A witch. One from the very Order that made the books. One of the ones who has helped suppress our innovations. Who may have even modified our holy texts."

The three priests stared, their jaws slowly falling open.

"We can't assume he's trustworthy," Nordon continued. "But... I do believe him. At least this far. They have... factions. Not all of them want to subjugate us, I think."

The priests took that in, and slowly nodded agreement. "Open the mine," Father Doran said firmly. "We will have a writ for you after the morning service is concluded. We will take this up with the bishop when he arrives. There will, I think, be something of a larger discussion around this." He looked at the heavy book and sighed. "We will need to rediscover how many of our beliefs are true and how many are false. This will not, I think, be an easy journey."

The Miner's Guildhall bustled with activity under the midday sun as Everard strode through the heavy oak doors, the priest's writ clutched tightly in his weathered hand. Dust motes danced in the warm shafts of light filtering through the leaded glass windows, illuminating the cavernous chamber within. The tang of sweat and smoke lingered in the air, mingling with the earthen scent of the miners gathered around the long trestle tables.

Everard approached the raised dais at the far end of the hall where the guild elders sat in their high-backed chairs, their faces lined with years spent toiling deep beneath the earth. The eldest among them, a stout man with a snowy beard and piercing blue eyes, stood to greet him.

"Everard, my boy," he said warmly, clasping his shoulder. "What news from the priests?"

With a solemn nod, Everard presented the writ. "They've given their blessing for the Ironspine mine to be reopened. But

there are concerns, Elder Brom. The witches may not let this go easily."

A murmur rippled through the assembled miners, some making holy signs while others gripped the hilts of their bronze blades. Brom raised a gnarled hand for silence.

"Aye, we've heard the whispers," he said gravely. "The calls for the Hunts. And no few of our miners had family in Nek. And Lakewood. Dark times are upon us. But clearly, the need for iron has never been greater. The forges of the nearby towns run low as well."

He turned to address the room, his voice booming. "We will act swiftly to reopen the mine and to protect those of you who will labor there. Set traps, and keep a wary eye for any sign of unnatural malfeasance. This is a vital task that will require the strength and courage of our stoutest miners."

A chorus of "ayes" echoed through the hall as the miners thumped their fists on the tables in solidarity. Everard felt a swell of pride and purpose rising in his chest.

Elder Brom placed a firm hand on the shoulder of a stout, middle-aged man whose skin was permanently stained with the dirt and ore of the mines. "Abram, you'll lead this charge. Choose your teams well and make ready. We've not a moment to lose if the iron ore is to flow again."

With a resolute nod, Abram turned to face his fellow miners, their eyes glinting with determination in the flickering torchlight. Together they would brave the depths of Ironspine mine, despite the dangers that lurked in the shadows.

As the miners began gathering and making plans to depart the next morning, Brom leaned closer to Everard. "What preparations can we make to protect them against magic?"

Everard took a moment to consider it. "Within the mine itself, the iron should keep them safe. It's proof against magic.

They might even do well to make an encampment within the mine, rather than reopening the old dormitories.”

Brom shrugged. “Those buildings weren’t well-built in the first place, and I imagine they’ve not fared well after all the years of neglect. The mines will provide better shelter.”

Then Everard remembered Nordon’s words. “But... we will need to exercise extreme caution. Iron is proof against the witches’ magic, but the wood supports, and I assume any of the ground not laced with ore... those will be targets.”

Brom’s eyes narrowed. “Clever. But we can be more clever. There’s a small forge on the site, and we can quickly make crude strapping to reinforce the wooden supports. There’s a small stream nearby, but we’ll send men to raise its banks against flooding.”

“We’ll spare crossbows for your men,” Everard said. “And help arrange for guards.”

Elder Brom stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Aye, crossbows will serve us well. But we’ll need more than just weapons. The witches are obviously cunning and their magic is clearly potent. I... had a cousin in Lakewood. Alive, but his home is destroyed.” He began to pace, his heavy boots thudding against the wooden floorboards.

“We’ll line the entrance to the mine with iron rods,” he said decisively. “And we’ll hang iron spikes from all the supports, both wood and stone. Every man will carry a piece of cold iron on him at all times.”

Everard nodded, his mind racing with possibilities. “What about the air in the mine? Could they not poison it with some foul sorcery?”

Brom’s face darkened. “It’s a risk we’ll have to take. But we can set up bellows to keep the air moving and fresh. And we’ll post sentries with keen noses to sniff out any unnatural odors.”

He stopped pacing and faced Everard squarely. “But there

are threats we cannot foresee or guard against. These witches have had centuries to hone their arts. They may well have spells and curses beyond our reckoning."

He looked out over the hall, watching as the miners gathered their gear. Men clasped forearms, embraced, or shared a solemn nod, the gravity of their undertaking etched on every face. "We will send word to the other Guildhalls, as well. There are more deep mines than the Ironspine that can be reopened. Perhaps we can give the witches more to worry about than they're capable of handling."

"If we can get enough ore," Everard said in a low, confident voice, "I'm certain we can."

A fortnight had passed, and the Ironspine mine hummed with activity as Everard guided his empty wagon up the winding, rutted track. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of pine and the faint, metallic tang of freshly unearthed ore. Bird-song mingled with the rhythmic clink and thud of pickaxes, the creak of winches, and the rumble of laden carts.

As he crested the final rise, the mine's entrance came into view, a yawning maw carved into the mountainside. The stone around the entrance was stained with orange streaks, a testament to the rich iron veins that snaked through the rock. A sturdy palisade of iron-tipped logs ringed the clearing, with sentries posted at regular intervals, their iron-reinforced cross-bows at the ready.

Everard guided his wagon into the line forming near the entrance. Miners, their faces streaked with sweat and dust, emerged from the depths pushing small, heavy carts laden with chunks of raw ore. The iron glinted dully in the sunlight, each piece a promise of weapons and tools to come.

He spotted Abram directing the flow of traffic, his voice booming over the din. The stout miner was in his element, his movements sure and efficient as he oversaw the loading of the ore onto the waiting wagons.

As Everard drew closer, he could see the intricate lattice of iron rods and spikes adorning the mine's entrance, a silent ward against magical intrusion. Miners ducked and wove around the metal as they went about their work, the iron becoming as much a part of the mine's fabric as the stone and timber.

Abram caught sight of Everard and waved him forward, a grin splitting his dirt-streaked face. "Ho there, Everard!" he called. "You're a welcome sight. We've got a fine load ready for you."

Everard brought his wagon to a halt and leapt down, clasping forearms with the mine foreman. "How goes the digging?" he asked, eyeing the bustling activity.

"Better than we could have hoped," Abram replied, pride evident in his voice. "The vein is rich and runs deep. We've already doubled our output from the old days."

He gestured to a group of miners who were carefully arranging the ore in Everard's wagon, packing it tightly to maximize the load. "And not a sign of trouble from the witches," he added, his voice lowering. "Though we remain vigilant. The lads don't go anywhere without their cold iron, and we've got the bellows running day and night to keep the air fresh."

Everard nodded, his eyes drifting to the tree line that bordered the clearing. Even in the bright sunlight, the forest seemed to hold a watchful stillness, as if the very trees were holding their breath. The air suddenly smelled sharp and acrid, as if—

With a crack that shook the miners' very bones, an impossibly bright bolt of lightning tore down from the sky, crashing against the mine's entrance.

The lightning bolt seared the air, a blinding lance of white-hot energy that crackled and hissed as it descended from the heavens. It struck the iron-laced entrance of the mine with a deafening boom, the sheer force of the impact sending a shock-wave rippling outward. The ground heaved and shuddered, as if the very earth itself recoiled from the strike.

Sparks erupted in a dazzling cascade, skittering and dancing across the intricate lattice of iron rods and spikes that adorned the mine's mouth. The metal glowed red-hot, the heat so intense that the air around it shimmered and wavered. Miners staggered back, shielding their eyes from the searing brilliance, their faces awash in the pulsing, flickering light.

A few unlucky souls, those closest to the entrance, were flung backward by the concussive blast, their bodies ragdolling through the air before crashing to the ground in crumpled heaps. They lay stunned and groaning, their ears ringing and their vision swimming with afterimages of the blinding flash.

The iron at the entrance hissed and sputtered, the metal contracting and warping under the onslaught of heat and energy. Rivulets of molten ore dripped and oozed down the rock face, leaving glowing trails that cooled and hardened into twisted, abstract patterns. The very stone around the entrance seemed to vibrate and thrum, as if the lightning had imbued it with a strange, resonant energy.

Acrid smoke billowed from the scorched earth, carrying with it the sharp tang of ozone and the bitter smell of charred rock. Sparks continued to dance and whirl in the aftermath of the strike, drifting on the breeze like fiery snowflakes. They settled on the miners' clothes and skin, leaving tiny pinprick burns and smoldering holes.

Abram was the first to recover, staggering to his feet with a grunt of pain. His hair stood on end, crackling with static electricity, and his skin tingled as if a thousand ants were crawling

beneath it. He blinked away the spots dancing before his eyes and surveyed the scene, his expression a mix of awe and grim determination.

"By the gods," he breathed, his voice hoarse and shaky. "What manner of sorcery is this?"

Everard, who had been knocked to the ground beside his wagon, clambered up and rushed to Abram's side. His face was pale and sweat-streaked, his eyes wide with a fear he fought to control. "The witches," he said, his voice tight. "It has to be. They've found a way to strike at us, even through the iron."

"Look!" someone cried.

Everard and Abram whirled.

There, a hundred paces away from the mine's stockade and just a few paces off the well-used road, stood a man. He was as stocky as a miner, and dressed in simple, sturdy black clothing, but it was immediately apparent that this was no human. Purple-white energy crackled around him, and even at that distance, the men could see the madness flashing in his eyes.

This was the enemy, come for them.

"In!" Abram cried, as two men began swinging the iron-laced gate of the stockade shut. The men with crossbows fired their bolts, quickly winding their crossbows for another round.

The witch unleashed a torrent of fire from his hands, burning away the wood crossbow bolts, sending their iron tips spinning off in random directions. He sneered as the flames died, then called another bolt of lightning from the skies.

The second bolt of lightning struck the stockade with a thunderous crack, the searing white energy racing along the iron-tipped logs like a ravenous beast. The air sizzled and popped, filled with the acrid scent of burning wood and super-heated metal. Logs exploded into showers of splinters and ash, the iron tips melting and deforming under the onslaught, dripping like molten tears.

The guards, their faces grim and determined, unleashed another volley of crossbow bolts through the gaps in the ruined palisade. The iron-tipped shafts whistled through the air, glinting in the sun like deadly needles. Most of the bolts were incinerated mid-flight by the witch's fiery shield, but one found its mark, piercing his arm just below the shoulder.

The witch let out a roar of pain and rage, the sound seeming to shake the very ground beneath their feet. He reached over and ripped the bolt free, dark blood oozing from the wound and sizzling as it dripped onto the scorched earth. For a moment, the sorcerer's face contorted into a mask of pure hatred, his eyes blazing with an infernal light. Then, with a gesture and a word that made the air tremble, he vanished in a gout of crimson flame that left a scorch mark on the ground.

In the sudden, ringing silence that followed, the miners and guards stood stunned, blinking away the afterimages of the fiery display. The stockade was in ruins, more than a third of it reduced to charred, smoking debris. The ground around the entrance was cratered and blackened, studded with rapidly cooling puddles of melted iron. The air reeked of smoke, burnt flesh, and the ozone tang of spent magic.

Abram was the first to shake off the shock, his voice booming out across the stunned assembly. "To the mine! Everyone inside, now! We don't know if or when he'll return, and we're vulnerable out here!"

His words galvanized the miners into action. They rushed for the gaping maw of the mine entrance, hastily gathering what ore and tools they could along the way. The wounded were helped or carried by their comrades, leaving trails of blood on the blasted ground. Everard joined the flow, his heart pounding and his mind racing with the implications of what he had just witnessed.

Inside the mine, the air was cool and damp, the silence

broken only by the drip of water and the labored breathing of the gathered miners. The iron veins in the walls glistened in the light of the hastily lit torches, a reminder of the precious resource they were risking so much to obtain.

Abram organized a quick headcount, his face grim as he tallied the wounded and the missing. "We were lucky," he said, his voice echoing in the confined space.

"Aye," Everard agreed. "Abram, I need to borrow a horse. The fastest you've got. I need to get back to Farreach."

"And he just left?" Nordon asked.

Everard snorted. "Left in a pillar of flame. But yes."

"Casualties?"

"Two miners badly burned, but alive. One dead of her injuries."

"And the mine?"

"Still operating. We've put a heavier guard on the caravans."

Nordon thought for a moment. "You feel he could have done more damage."

"Of course. Perhaps the crossbow bolt did more damage than we thought, but... yes. If he can call lightning on command, then yes. He could have done far more damage."

Nordon recalled the witch's words. And most humans, and most of witchkind, are simply caught in the middle. "So he throws rocks at the hive. We come boiling out in anger. We become dangerous, and the witches grow fearful. In their fear, they allow more attacks." He shook his head. "The witch was right. We are all caught between those hungry for power."

Everard's brow wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"This one witch, if Finley is to be believed, provokes us. We respond in exactly the way his masters desire."

"Do we stop, then?" Everard asked, still confused.

Nordon shook his head. "I don't see how we can. But... perhaps our anger can be more directed."

"How so?"

"Perhaps we can focus on the actual threat. Again, if the witch who visited me is to be believed, we focus on the one who attacked the mine. Not all of them—just him."

"We're preparing for attack," Everard said. "If he's the one attacking, he's the only one we would be focused on. It's not like we're actively hunting them."

"Not yet," Nordon said darkly. "We may need to see that it doesn't come to that." He sighed. "We need to go speak to the priests again."

The sanctuary of the church was again awash in the warm glow of candlelight as Nordon and Everard strode in, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The three priests, Father Anselm, Father Doran, and Father Joaquin, awaited them by the altar, their faces etched with a mixture of curiosity and concern. The air was heavy with the scent of incense and the weight of the impending discussion.

Nordon wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter. "Fathers," he began, his voice resonating through the sacred space, "we come to you with a grave proposition. The witch who attacked the Ironspine mine must be brought to justice, and we believe the time has come for a formal Hunt."

Father Anselm's eyebrows shot up, his wizened face creasing with surprise. "A Hunt? But Nordon, you know as well as I that only a bishop has the authority to commission such a thing. And our own bishop is, well..."

"Overdue," Father Doran finished, his tone grim. "We've

had no word from him in weeks. The roads are treacherous, and with the witches growing bolder..."

Nordon held up a hand. "I understand your hesitation, Fathers. But we cannot afford to wait any longer. This witch, this... Landon, as I believe he is called, has proven himself a clear and present danger to our people. He must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. And... we have reason to believe he is the only witch behind these attacks. If we can draw him out, capture him, possibly even kill him... we may be able to put an end to this. At least for now."

Father Joaquin, the youngest of the three, leaned forward, his eyes bright with a mix of excitement and trepidation. "What exactly are you proposing, Nordon?"

A smile touched Nordon's lips, but it held no warmth. "A trial," he said simply. "A grand, elaborate affair that will draw Landon out of hiding. We'll make a show of accusing him, of gathering evidence and testimonies. We'll let it be known far and wide that we intend to bring him to justice."

Father Doran frowned, his bushy eyebrows knitting together. "But without a bishop to preside..."

"It will be a sham," Nordon said, his voice low and intense. "A ruse to lure Landon into the open. Once he shows himself, we'll have him."

"He seemed... arrogant," Everard said. "Power-mad. Posting an Accusation may be enough, if we can get it far and wide. Ensure he can see it, or that other witches will, who'll carry the word."

A heavy silence settled over the room as the priests considered Nordon's words. The candles flickered, casting dancing shadows on the walls, as if the very building itself was weighing the gravity of the proposal.

Finally, Father Anselm spoke, his voice heavy with the weight of decision. "It is... unorthodox," he said slowly. "But

these are unorthodox times. If this Landon is truly as dangerous as you say, then perhaps unorthodox measures are called for."

Father Doran nodded, his expression grim. "I agree. We cannot sit idly by while this witch terrorizes our people. If a trial, even a sham one, can draw him out, then I say we proceed. But we must be cautious. This witch has already proven himself to be powerful."

Father Joaquin leaned forward, his youthful face alight with determination. "I volunteer to help spread word of the trial. I can travel to the nearby villages, post the Accusation in the town squares. If we cast a wide enough net, Landon will have nowhere to hide. And the riders will spread the word even further from there."

Nordon clapped the young priest on the shoulder, a genuine smile touching his lips. "Thank you, Father Joaquin. Your courage and dedication do you credit." He turned back to the other two priests. "We'll need to make this convincing. Gather testimonies from those who witnessed the attack on the mine. Describe the destruction, the injuries, the death. Paint Landon as the monster he is. Gather testimony from those who survived Nek, too. Eira will testify. She saw as much as I did."

Father Anselm nodded slowly, his aged hands clasped before him. "It will be done. We will make it known that the church seeks justice for these crimes against our people. That no witch, no matter how powerful, is beyond the reach of the god's law."

"And when Landon shows himself?" Father Doran asked, his voice low and intense.

Everard's hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. "We'll be ready for him. I'll handpick our best fighters, outfit them with cold iron. We've set traps, prepared our ambushes. And when he comes, we'll spring the jaws of our trap and hopefully end this."

Until they find another to send after us, Nordon thought dourly. "It's a risk, I know. But it's one we must take. For the safety of our people. We cannot let fear rule us any longer."

The priests exchanged glances, a silent conversation passing between them. Finally, Father Anselm spoke, his voice ringing with finality. "Then it is decided. We will set this plan in motion. May the god guide our steps and strengthen our resolve."

With that, the meeting adjourned, each man departing to play his role in the grand deception. Nordon and Everard strode from the church, their faces set with purpose, their hearts steeled for the battle to come. The die had been cast, the game set in motion. Now all that remained was to see how the pieces would fall.

As they walked, Nordon turned to Everard, his voice low and urgent. "We must tread carefully, my friend. This is a dangerous game we're playing. Not just for us, but for all involved."

Everard nodded, his eyes hard. "I know. But what choice do we have?"

We hand power to the church to try and wrest it from the witches, Nordon thought sadly. Let us hope we can take that power back.

And as the church door closed shut behind them, he added, assuming we all survive.

A Dangerous Mission

“Finley, look at this.”

“Kelden!” Finley said with surprise. “I didn’t realize you were back!” He took the piece of paper than Kelden has holding out, and frowned. “That... looks like Landon.” The center of the paper held a fairly accurate sketch of Landon. Finley’s frown deepened as he read the words above and below the sketch. “An Accusation? From the church?”

“Of witchcraft, yes,” Landon said. “Signed by three priests in Farreach in the South.”

“I need to find Mila. And Arcadia.”

Finley and Kelden made their way through the bustling courtyard of the Farm, the headquarters of the Order. The recent renovation and expansion of the central farmhouse building had transformed it into an impressive structure, its sturdy wooden beams and freshly painted walls gleaming in the sunlight. The air buzzed with the chatter and activity of more people than Finley had ever seen gathered here.

New recruits milled about, their faces reflecting a mix of excitement and nervousness as they awaited their assignments.

The Order's decision to drop its veil of secrecy and actively recruit operatives and agents had clearly paid off, as evidenced by the diverse crowd representing various backgrounds and skillsets, and likely every possible combination of magical affinities and alignments.

Finley scanned the sea of unfamiliar faces, searching for Mila amidst the bustling throng. Urgency lent a purposeful stride to his steps as he and Kelden wove through the clusters of people. They passed by the newly constructed training grounds where novice agents practiced combat magics—something the Order had only rarely seen the need to use, before now. The tang of magic in the air left a bitter scent in Finley's nose, and he frowned. They're truly building us into their army.

As they approached the rebuilt entrance of the farmhouse, Finley couldn't help but marvel at the transformation. Gone were the days of the rustic, unassuming exterior. Now, the building exuded an air of strength and purpose, its expanded wings stretching out to accommodate the growing ranks of the Order. The new second story contained working space for the Order's leadership, along with their precious archives.

Pushing open the heavy wooden front doors, Finley and Kelden stepped into the busy interior. The main hall had been transformed into a hub of activity, with agents hurrying to and fro, carrying scrolls, maps, and various artifacts. The walls were lined with bookshelves filled with tomes and treatises on magic, history, and strategy. Glowing orbs of light floated near the high ceiling, casting a warm and inviting ambiance.

As they made their way deeper into the farmhouse, Finley couldn't shake the sense of panic that gripped him. Every passing moment felt precious, and the weight of the accusation against Landon hung heavy in his mind. He needed to find Mila to understand what this meant. The fact that it had come from Farreach in the South, not even a full moon since Finley's

visit to the human cabal agent there, laced Finley's sense of panic with a cold, certain dread.

Turning a corner, they finally spotted Mila engaged in a heated discussion with a group of senior agents. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she gestured emphatically, her words carrying the weight of authority and determination. Finley and Kelden exchanged a worried glance. As they approached, Mila looked up, her eyes widening with recognition. She excused herself from the group and strode towards them, rolling her eyes as she did so. "Argumentative lot, is what they've sent us," she complained quietly. "What can I do for you?"

"This," Finley said, holding out the paper with Landon's face.

Mila took it and frowned. "This isn't right, though."

"What do you mean?" Kelden asked.

"This is signed by the town priests in Farreach. But that isn't how it works. Only a bishop can commission a Hunt or post an Accusation." She looked up. "Where did you get this?"

"It came in with a dispatch from Harbsmouth," Kelden answered.

Mila's frown deepened. "So they're going wide with this. How do they know his name?"

"I, ah... spoke with one of them. Almost a moon ago," Finley said.

One of Mila's eyebrows arched. "I'll assume that was part of a plan and not pursue it." Then she looked back at the paper. "This is serious."

"How so?" Kelden asked. "It's not like they can do anything to Landon."

She shook her head slowly, and handed the paper back to Finley. "They're trying to bait him. They're asserting that, if they find him, they'll put him on trial and execute him as a

witch. You know Landon's ego better than I. How's he going to take that, if word of this gets to him?"

Finley thought about it. "The old Landon... I don't know. Landon from school? He'd show up just to make them try. When he joined the Order... he was different. Calmer. Better. He'd ignore it. But now..."

"He'd dare them to try and then lay waste to the town," Kelden said.

"About that," Finley admitted.

"Finley, what did you tell them about Landon?" Mila asked.

Finley's stomach clenched. "That all of witchkind wasn't behind the attacks. That it was all Landon. That we'd been hurt by them, too. Runes and ruin, Mila. That's why. They're trying to take him out."

Kelden's jaw tightened. "They'll have traps. Weapons."

She nodded slowly, considering. "What was the last major attack?"

"The demon constructs in Nek, then Lakewood," Finley replied. "It's been a while since—"

"There was the mine," Kelden corrected him. "Just a few days ago."

"Mine?" Finley asked, his brow wrinkling. "Where?"

"The old Ironspine deep mine."

Finley's eyes widened in alarm. "That's a day's ride from Farreach in the South. Since when did they start reopening the deep mines? We'd given the churches a stricture, it was a few years ago—"

"Report is that this one opened about a fortnight ago. A bit longer. They're supplying iron ore to everywhere within a two-day ride."

"The humans are arming themselves," Mila said glumly.

"And Landon attacked the mine?" Finley asked.

Kelden nodded. "I've been helping with dispatches. Arcadia's been so busy—"

"That's where they saw him, then," Finley realized. "For this sketch. And now they're trying to draw him out, and they're going to be killed if he actually shows up." He snarled in frustration. "And we can't track him, and—"

"And, someone in Farreach has been going around spiking runes," Mila said. "I sent someone a few days ago to look into it."

"Nordon. The agent of the human cabal. I told everyone of witchkind in Farreach—all of eight of them—to get out. But he must have gone around looking for runes."

"Well, it also means we've lost our ability to listen in. I'll contact the agents I sent, ask them to see what's happening."

I have an idea, Finley's talent whispered. Give them this.

[[[RUNE An alarm for magic]]]

"Mila, I'm going to give you a rune. One of my new ones," Finley said quickly. "Have your agents carve it wherever they can. It doesn't look a thing like New Runic, so maybe the humans will miss it. These ones are easier to pass off as decorative."

"What will this new rune do?"

Finley examined the rune, still glowing in his mind. He felt the taste and smell of it, listened to its resonance. "It'll alert me if any magic is used within a decent-sized radius of it. Since all of witchkind, except your agents, are out of Farreach, that would mean—"

"Landon," Kelden finished, nodding with approval. "That's probably the best way for us to know it's happening."

“And maybe it’ll give us enough time to save these fools from themselves,” Finley added.

“You’ve spoken to them once,” Mila said. “Couldn’t you speak to them again? Talk them off of this path?”

Finley thought about it, and then shook his head. “We spoke. There’s no trust there. I’m... actually...” Something occurred to him. “This could work to our advantage.”

“How could—” Kelden started, but Finley saw the comprehension slide over his features. “Oh.”

“Want to fill me in?” Mila asked.

“The humans are baiting Landon,” Kelden said slowly, looking to Finley for confirmation. “And we’re going to use them as bait for Landon.”

“Exactly,” Finley nodded. “We can’t trace Landon, and by the time we get word of an attack, he vanishes before we can confront him. But now we know a potential target. You have your agents get this rune in place, as many places as they can. Ones that are out of the way, where they won’t be easily spotted. When the alarm goes off, we show up in force and try to take Landon down. Or at the least, contain him.”

“I’m going to get a team on standby,” Kelden said, turning to walk away.

“Use my name,” Mila called after him. Then, more quietly, “This is dangerous. We all now how powerful he’s gotten.”

Finley’s lips thinned. “He doesn’t know who he’s dealing with, now. Where’s Arcadia?”

Mila rolled her eyes. “Off arguing with the idiots in the Taryba, of course. I’ll send word.”

Finley glanced around and lowered his voice. “Mila, they’re building an army. Their army.”

Mila’s eyes twinkled. “That’s what they think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Arcadia interviews every new recruit. Personally. Checks

their background, speaks to their family. It's why she's so exhausted, but nobody here supports human subjugation. They're all bought into her idea that we need to live openly and in peace."

"Surely the Taryba has sent their own people."

"Of course they do," Mila snorted. "But Arcadia always finds a reason why they're not suitable. Not physically fit enough. Not mentally firm. Wrong alignments. Whatever."

"But," Finley objected, "you're still teaching combat magics."

"Ah, you noticed that," Mila said, a mischievous grin slipping across her features. "But did you notice what specific combat magics?"

Finley's brow wrinkled. "No."

"They're for fighting against other witchkind, Finley," she said softly.

Kelden inhaled sharply.

"It won't come to that, we hope," Mila said firmly. "But still."

"Actually," Finley said slowly as everything began to come together in his mind, "it is going to come to that. Let's start putting together a team. Quickly."

The immense dining room buzzed with hushed conversations as dozens of members of the Order gathered, their faces etched with a mix of concern and determination. The space, expanded through the ingenious application of witchkind's space-manipulation magic, seemed to stretch on endlessly, its high ceilings adorned with intricate wooden beams and floating orbs of soft, golden light. The room's grandeur stood in stark contrast to the somber atmosphere that permeated the air.

Long wooden tables, polished to a rich, warm sheen, filled the room, their surfaces laden with maps, scrolls, and various arcane artifacts. Agents huddled around these tables in small groups, their voices low and urgent as they discussed the latest developments regarding Landon. The gravity of the situation hung heavy in the air, a palpable weight that seemed to press down upon everyone present.

Arcadia, Finley, Kelden, and Mila sat at the head of the central table, their expressions grim as they surveyed those nearest them. Finley's gaze swept across the sea of faces, taking in the determined set of jaws and the steely glints in eyes. These were some of the best and brightest of the Order, individuals who had dedicated their lives to protecting witchkind and maintaining the delicate balance between the magical and non-magical worlds.

"Thank you for calling me," Arcadia murmured. "I'd far rather be here than in Evermore arguing with the Taryba."

"You may not thank me if this doesn't go as we hope," Finley muttered back. "But let's get everyone on the same page."

As Finley opened his mouth to address the assembled agents, a sudden, piercing alarm tore through the room, its shrill cry reverberating off the walls and causing everyone to freeze in place. The magical alarm from Farreach had been triggered, signaling that Landon had made his move.

In an instant, the room erupted into a flurry of activity. Agents leapt to their feet, their fingers already twitching through the motions that helped prepare their travel magics. The air crackled with the tang of magic as protective wards and enhancement spells were hastily cast. Maps were unfurled, and hurried discussions broke out as teams quickly formed and strategies were finalized.

Mila's voice rose above the din, her tone commanding and

urgent. "Team One, you're with me. We'll take the northern approach. Team Two, Kelden will lead you from the south."

As the teams prepared to depart, Finley couldn't shake the sense of unease that gripped him. Landon had grown immensely powerful, and the Order had never faced a threat quite like him before, had never even needed to prepare itself for a threat from within witchkind. The weight of responsibility settled heavily upon Finley's shoulders, knowing that the lives of countless innocents, both witchkind and human, lay on his shoulders.

With a deep breath, he wrapped his magic around himself.
To Farreach.

As Arcadia, Finley, Kelden, and Mila materialized on the outskirts of Farreach in the South, they were greeted by an ominous sight. The sky above the town roiled with angry, churning clouds, their underbellies tinged an unnatural shade of violet. Jagged streaks of lightning crackled within the storm's depths, illuminating the gathering dusk with eerie, pulsating flashes. The air hung heavy with a palpable sense of dread, thick with the acrid tang of dark magic.

They quickly used their magic to take them into the center of the town.

The town square, usually a bustling hub of activity, now stood eerily silent. The cobblestone streets were deserted, save for a small gathering near the church steps. The imposing stone edifice of the church loomed over the square, its bell tower reaching skyward as if to challenge the roiling storm above. The church's stained-glass windows, normally a source of comfort and inspiration, now seemed to glow with an unsettling, other-worldly light.

At the foot of the church steps, a makeshift stage had been erected, its rough-hewn boards a stark contrast to the church's refined architecture. Upon this stage stood a lone wooden post, its surface smooth and new. A length of heavy iron chain lay coiled at the post's base, its links glinting menacingly in the fading light. It was clear that this stage had been prepared for one purpose: a witch trial.

To one side of the church steps, a small jury had been assembled. A dozen men and women, their faces etched with a mixture of fear and grim determination, huddled together, their eyes darting nervously between the storm above and the empty stage before them. They clutched tightly to their cloaks, as if the flimsy fabric could shield them from the malevolent energy that permeated the air.

A priest stood on the stage, his hands clasped in front of him. Finley imagined his calm demeanor was entirely feigned.

As Finley and his companions approached the square, they couldn't help but marvel at the sheer power that radiated from the storm above. The magical energy was so dense, so palpable, that it seemed to press down upon them like a physical weight. Each breath felt heavy, laden with the cloying scent of ozone and something darker, more sinister.

Despite the storm's fury and the ominous setup in the town square, Landon was nowhere to be seen. The emptiness of the stage, the absence of the accused, only served to heighten the sense of unease that gripped the town. It was as if the very air itself held its breath, waiting for the inevitable moment when all hell would break loose.

Finley and his team exchanged worried glances, their fingers twitching with barely restrained magic. They knew that Landon's arrival was imminent, and they steeled themselves for the confrontation to come. The fate of Farreach, and perhaps all of witchkind and humanity, hung in the balance.

Finley's keen eyes darted around the town square, taking in every detail of the scene before him with a mix of apprehension and grudging respect for the humans' preparations. Despite their lack of magical abilities, they had clearly put thought and effort into readying themselves for Landon's anticipated arrival.

Along the rooftops surrounding the square, Finley spotted the glint of iron-tipped crossbows, their wielders crouched low behind chimneys and gables. The hunters were strategically positioned to provide overlapping fields of fire, ensuring that no corner of the square would be left undefended. Their postures were tense, coiled like springs ready to unleash their deadly bolts at a moment's notice.

At ground level, Finley noticed groups of armed men and women lurking in the shadows of alleyways and doorways. They clutched an assortment of weapons—swords, axes, and heavy clubs, all bearing the telltale sheen of cold iron. Some wore bits of iron armor as well, their breastplates and helmets adorned with holy symbols etched into the metal. Their faces were grim, eyes hardened with a mix of fear and determination.

Finley's gaze was drawn to a group of robed figures near the base of the church steps, their heads bowed in fervent prayer. Priests, he realized, likely beseeching their god for protection and victory against the dark forces they believed threatened their flock. Their low chanting filled the air, a somber counterpoint to the ominous rumble of the storm above.

Barricades of iron-banded oak had been erected at the entrances to the square, their sturdy forms blocking the main thoroughfares. Finley couldn't help but admire the craftsmanship, even as he noted the deadly intent behind their placement. It was clear the humans meant to trap Landon within the confines of the square, to cut off any avenue of escape once the confrontation began.

They don't understand what someone with Earth affinity

can do, Finley's talent muttered. Let alone with the other affinities he's inherited.

Then, with a blast of power, Landon arrived.

It was an appearance so theatrical, so absolutely unlike the usual simplicity of witchkind travel, that Finley almost laughed. But he sobered quickly, realizing that the pageantry was a sign of Landon's increasing mastery over the powers he'd gained.

A cascade of light blasted down from the roiling black clouds above, less a lightning strike and more a divine Arrival. It brushed the ground and sent motes of pink light scattering in every direction—no few of which, Finley noted, were quickly absorbed by some kind of iron structure hidden beneath the hard-packed earth of the square. The column of light pulsed blue, then green, and then a purple-black, before exploding with a peal of thunder so loud that Finley's chest thrummed. The lights vanished almost instantly, and there was Landon.

He was clad like something from a child's tale: A shimmering black tunic over finely woven black trousers, with a silver-chased black cape settling behind him. His calf-high boots were of thick black leather, and on this brow—

Finley narrowed his eyes. Was Landon wearing some kind of crown?

It was a black circlet, resting just on the crown of his head, shining with a dim, coruscating purple light.

"You're kidding me," Arcadia said flatly.

"Behold, humans!" Landon's voice boomed throughout the square. He was using magic to amplify his voice, enhancing it in a way that made the buildings' windows vibrate. "You have accused me of crimes, but I have come to you to offer you mercy!"

"Mercy?" Kelden whispered.

"Mercy?" the priest on the stage barked. "We will hear of

your crimes and punish you for them! Suffer not a witch to live!”

Landon barked a laugh. “I am to be your king, mortals! I will be the one hearing of crimes, and meting out your punishments!” His statement was accompanied by a magically induced roll of thunder from above.

“Finley,” Mila whispered quickly, “everyone’s in place.”

The priest on the stage had roused himself in an impressive display of righteous anger. “A king? You are nothing but a foul thug! You seek to rule? Then come here, come before me and make me bow!”

Finley frowned. “That doesn’t—what’s he doing?” he asked, half to himself. His eyes quickly scanned the square again. The people on the roofs weren’t going to get a better shooting angle than the one they had, and it wasn’t like the priest was actually going to—

Ah, he thought as he spied the traces of a trap door in the dust of the square, just paces in front of the hastily erected stage. I see what they’re doing. That would explain the iron under the ground: they’d gone with a tried-and-true trap, likely a pit lined with iron bars. Something Finley had more than a little experience with. “Hold a bit,” he told Mila.

Landon floated forward, showing a level of mastery with Sky magic that Finley himself struggled with.

“Finley,” Arcadia said, pointing to the trap door.

“I see it,” he replied, beginning to pull magic from his reserves into his mind. “Mila, tell everyone to be at the ready.”

“We’ve never practiced this,” she warned.

“No time like the present.”

Landon was now standing directly over the trap door—but it didn’t open. He’s holding himself just off the ground, Finley realized. They didn’t plan for that. He began assembling his magic, calling up a rune that, with any luck, would push

Landon down, which would hopefully trigger the humans' trap. Having Landon surrounded by iron would make this a safer endeavor for everyone.

Then something strange happened.

It was as if a veil had been lifted in Finley's mind, revealing a new level of clarity and perception he had never before experienced. The once seamless connection between Finley and his conscious talent seemed to fracture, a sharp line of demarcation forming between his own thoughts and the whispered insights of what he'd thought of as his gift.

Finley's inner landscape shifted, his mental space expanding and reshaping itself to accommodate this newfound separation. Where before his talent's voice had been an integral part of his being, intertwined with his every thought and action, it now appeared as a distinct entity, observing from a distance. The change was both unsettling and exhilarating, a rush of independence and self-discovery that left Finley reeling.

As he grappled with this internal shift, Finley became acutely aware of the magic swirling in the air around him. The energy was palpable, a tangible force that danced across his skin and thrummed through his veins. He could sense the ebb and flow of power, the intricate weave of magical currents that surrounded Landon and permeated the town square. It was as if he had suddenly developed a sixth sense, a heightened perception of the arcane that required no input from his talent.

Amidst this newfound awareness, an idea began to take shape in Finley's mind. A new rune, born of his own creativity and intuition, blossomed within his thoughts. He focused intently on the design, carefully crafting each line and curve, imbuing it with purpose and power. The process was both familiar and foreign, a testament to his own innate magical abilities rather than the guidance of his talent.

As Finley worked, he could feel his talent observing from the sidelines, a silent spectator to his creative process. It offered no suggestions or insights, content to simply bear witness to Finley's independent endeavor. The absence of its input was both unnerving and liberating, a challenge to Finley's self-reliance and a confirmation of his own magical prowess.

The rune took shape, a complex array of interlocking symbols and glyphs that pulsed with latent energy. Finley could sense its potential, the raw power waiting to be unleashed upon the world. He marveled at his own handiwork, a creation born entirely of his own mind and will. It resembled the most recent type of rune his talent had created, but somehow felt more... right.

[[[RUNE Entrapment]]]

As he finished the design, Finley's attention snapped back to the unfolding scene before him. Landon still hovered above the trap, his presence a looming threat that demanded immediate action. Armed with his new rune and his heightened perception of the magical currents, Finley prepared to face the challenge head-on.

He empowered the rune.

A sudden shift occurred in Finley's perception. The world around him transformed, the veil of mundane reality peeling away to reveal a dazzling tapestry of magic woven into the very fabric of existence. Streams of rainbow-colored letters,

numbers, and symbols danced before his eyes, their forms distended and constantly shifting in a mesmerizing display of arcane energy.

The magical currents that had once been a mere sensation now took on a tangible, almost physical presence. They swirled and eddied around Finley, their vibrant hues painting the air with a kaleidoscope of colors. Each stream carried its own unique signature, a complex arrangement of glyphs and equations that held the secrets of the universe within their ever-changing patterns.

Finley marveled at the intricate balance that existed within this newly revealed world. The streams of magic intertwined and interacted in a delicate dance, their movements governed by an unseen logic that seemed to hold everything in perfect harmony. It was a symphony of power, a cosmic ballet that played out on a scale beyond human comprehension.

As he focused on his newly crafted rune, Finley witnessed its effect on the magical landscape. The rune pulsed with an intense, radiant energy, its light cutting through the swirling streams like a beacon in the night. Where once the magical currents flowed in a seemingly random pattern, they now began to converge upon the rune, drawn to its power like moths to a flame.

The rune's influence spread outward, its energy rippling through the magical fabric and reshaping the very laws that governed it. The once chaotic streams of letters, numbers, and symbols began to realign themselves, their distended forms straightening and condensing into new configurations. It was as if the rune had become the center of a new cosmic order, dictating the flow and balance of magic within its sphere of influence.

Finley watched in awe as the magical currents responded to

his creation, their colors shifting and blending in ways he had never before witnessed. Reds and blues merged into vibrant purples, while greens and yellows danced together in a dazzling display of emerald and gold. The air hummed with power, the very essence of magic made manifest before his eyes.

As the rune's effect continued to spread, Finley could sense the change in the local magic. The once familiar currents had been transformed, their logic rewritten by the power of his creation. It was a fundamental shift in the nature of magic itself, a testament to the incredible potential that lay within Finley's newfound abilities.

The iridescent streams of magic coalesced over Landon's head.

Finley's perspective snapped back to the ordinary world, and several things happened almost at once as time slowed to a crawl.

A wave of power, unexpectedly gentle and subtle, shoved Landon down.

Multiple thwacks accompanied the release of a dozen crossbow bolts.

A kerchunk echoed through the square as the trapdoor beneath Landon fell open.

Two long iron chains, arranged in an "X," snapped up from where they'd been buried just below the surface of the square.

Finley's magic was disrupted.

Six people of witchkind materialized in the square. Four of them were caught mid-chest by the iron chains, and they fell, screaming in agony.

Landon lashed out with a blasphemous combination of

Flame and Sky magic, sending a ring of blazing green flames rushing outward from his body.

Kelden threw Finley to the ground.

It's just another affinity, like all the others. Flame, Sea, Sky and Earth. Beginnings and Endings. They're each fragments of a former whole, colorings on a greater painting. Remember, they don't come from the Origin. They're merely given color by it.

The voice of Finley's talent was dim and distant in his mind.

I can't do this for you, it said. You have to look within yourself.

As the world erupted into chaos around him, Finley found himself retreating inward, seeking solace in the depths of his own mind. The screams of the injured, the roar of Landon's flames, and the frantic shouts of his allies faded into the background as he focused on the voice of his talent, now a mere whisper amidst the turmoil.

Finley's consciousness drifted, guided by an unseen force, until he found himself standing in a vast, ethereal space. The ground beneath his feet was a shimmering expanse of iridescent mist, swirling and eddying with each step he took. The air around him thrummed with energy, a palpable presence that seemed to pulse in time with the beating of his heart.

Before him, six towering pillars of light rose from the misty ground, each one a different hue. Crimson, azure, emerald, amber, amethyst, and a shimmering silver-white stood in a circle, their bases lost in the swirling vapors below. The pillars seemed to sway and dance, their colors bleeding into one another at the edges, creating a mesmerizing display of light and shadow.

Finley approached the pillars, drawn by an inexplicable force. As he drew closer, he could feel the distinct energies emanating from each one. The crimson pillar radiated the searing heat of Flame, while the azure pillar exuded the cool, refreshing essence of Sea. The emerald pillar pulsed with the sturdy, grounding energy of Earth, and the amber pillar crackled with the electrifying power of Sky. The amethyst pillar seemed to hum with the cyclic, transformative energies of Beginnings and Endings, while the silver-white pillar shone with a pure, untainted light that defied description.

As Finley stood at the center of the circle, he could feel the pillars' energies converging upon him, swirling and intermingling in a dizzying dance. The boundaries between the different forms of magic began to blur, their distinct hues merging into a kaleidoscope of color that filled his vision. He could feel the power building within him, a crescendo of energy that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

And then, in a moment of perfect clarity, Finley understood. These pillars, these fragments of magic, were not meant to be separate. They were pieces of a greater whole, facets of a single, all-encompassing truth. With a deep breath, he reached out with his mind, grasping at the strands of power that swirled around him.

As he did so, the pillars began to unravel, their light and energy spiraling inward towards Finley's core. He could feel the magic of Flame, Sea, Sky, Earth, Beginnings, and Endings flowing into him, filling every fiber of his being with their combined power.

Finley rose to his feet with no conscious effort, with no assistance from the muscles of his body. With a thought,

Landon's eerie green flames, still expanding and sparking against the iron chains, was snuffed. With another thought, the threads of Sky magic holding Landon off the ground, and the threads of Flame-colored travel magic the man was starting to summon, were severed. With a gentle tap, Landon was shoved down into the iron-lined pit. And with a quick flick of pure power, the iron-bar cover of the pit was pulled up into place, clanging as its latches clicked home.

I pulled iron with magic, some distant part of Finley's brain observed.

The iron-tipped crossbow bolts, still flying slowly through the air, clattered to the ground, the energy of their launches stolen by a wisp of silvery energy. And the iron chains cross the square dissolved instantly into harmless rust, their normal life-span accelerated and compressed by a thousand times.

Another detached part of Finley's mind continued to observe Landon. He's used to much magic that wasn't his own. He's burning out his mind, his personality. It was entirely possible the iron bars wouldn't hold Landon for long, and entirely likely Finley was going to have to do something... more final.

Time resumed its normal speed.

An eerie silence descended upon the town square. The once roiling storm clouds above dissipated, revealing a clear, star-studded sky that seemed to mock the chaos that had just unfolded. The townsfolk, hunters, witchkind, and priests alike seemed frozen in place, their eyes wide with a mixture of awe and terror as they struggled to comprehend the incredible display of magic they had just witnessed.

Finley stood at the center of the square, his body thrumming with an otherworldly energy that crackled and danced across his skin. His eyes, once a warm, earthy tone, now glowed with an iridescent light that shifted and changed like the facets

of a kaleidoscope. The very air around him seemed to shimmer and warp, as if reality itself was bending to his will.

Mila, Kelden, and Arcadia, along with the other members of the Order who had materialized in the square, slowly picked themselves up from the ground, their expressions a mix of amazement and concern. They had never seen Finley wield such raw, unbridled power before, and the implications of his newfound abilities were both exhilarating and terrifying.

The four members of witchkind who had been caught by the iron chains lay motionless on the ground, their bodies wracked with the lingering pain of the metal's touch. Finley's gaze fell upon them, and with a gentle wave of his hand, the rust that had once been the chains dissolved into a fine, glittering powder that swirled around the fallen figures. As the powder settled upon their skin, their wounds began to heal, the angry red welts fading into smooth, unblemished flesh.

The townsfolk, still gripped by a mixture of fear and uncertainty, began to whisper among themselves, their voices a low, buzzing hum that filled the square. Some pointed to the pit where Landon now lay trapped, while others cast furtive glances at Finley, their eyes wide with a newfound reverence.

Finley's mind raced as he grappled with the implications of his actions. He had tapped into a wellspring of power that he had never before imagined, a force that transcended the boundaries of the known affinities. The very fabric of magic itself had bent to his will, and the responsibility that came with such power weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

But the thrumming in his chest was starting to become discordant. It was as if a great orchestra had, for one incredible, perfect moment, managed to strike the same exact note on a hundred instruments at once, but almost immediately their separate frequencies began to depart from that singular point. Finley felt himself vibrating, felt his magic rubbing against

itself, felt the warm, coalesced affinities struggling to reassert their individual identities.

“Finley,” Arcadia said, taking his arm in her hand. “Are you... okay?”

“I’m—” he managed before passing out.

A New Path

Can you feel it? the voice asked in his mind.

It was different, now. Its timber was richer, and although Finley felt he could hear it better and more fully than ever, it was also distinct. It wasn't within him anymore, despite the fact that it filled his mind. Feel what?

The Veil.

Finley reached out with his senses, trying to grasp what the voice meant. At first, he felt nothing—the world seemed the same as always, the bustle of civilization distant but still audible beyond wherever he lay. But then, ever so faintly, he began to perceive it. Or rather, the absence of it.

The Veil had been a constant, detectable presence, even if he had never consciously known it until recently. It was like a thin gauze that lay over the world, softening edges, blurring lines, cloaking the arcane and ineffable from human perception. But that gossamer barrier had been torn away. All that remained were a few ancient threads, drifting this way and that on the eldritch wind of the world's magic.

I saw magic, he thought.

You did, the voice said, and Finley thought it sounded impressed. More purely than I've been able to, much as I've been trying.

I couldn't hold it.

The voice seemed to shrug. You'll try again. It's a lot. Believe me, I know, and I only held it for a few scant seconds. But it's in you, now. The... harmony.

Is this what Landon has?

No. The voice sounded utterly certain. He's been given new affinities, is all. The Earth he was born with. Flame, obviously. Sky, probably. I can't sense Sea in him, and he certainly hasn't touched on Endings or Beginnings. And he's all brute force. Very little in the way of subtlety. He's never bothered even trying to master the Control alignment, for example.

No. Even in school, Landon had struggled with precise magics. He leaned heavily into the Destruction alignment and little else.

But that trap of theirs won't hold him for long, I don't think.

No. His mind is... being burned away.

Which, in a way, the voice mused, makes him more dangerous. He'll force his way through something you wouldn't bother trying.

So what now? Finley asked.

Rest a bit longer. You probably need to Gather, to fill yourself, although I suspect in time you won't need to. You'll be able to manipulate ambient magic directly, now that you can see it.

Finley marveled at such a thing being conceivable, let alone available to himself.

When you wake, your friends are going to need you, the voice continued. The Veil is gone, and witchkind, and magic, are out. How you let that play out amongst the humans is very much up to you.

So either we let the Taryba subjugate them, or we convince them to live alongside us?

Oh, the voice said, its tone tinged with wry humor, I think the humans may have a thought or two as well.

The Council Chambers of the Taryba were a study in imposing grandeur, and to Finley it seemed as if someone must have been using magic to reshape the room pretty often. It barely resembled the already-impressive chamber he remembered from his last visit.

The Chambers soared to towering heights, the vaulted ceiling adorned with an intricate mosaic depicting the history and triumphs of witchkind. Tiny tiles gleamed in hues of gold, emerald, and sapphire, each tiny piece painstakingly shaped and placed by masterful, magical hands. From the domed expanse hung an enormous chandelier, its countless crystals refracting the light into a dazzling array of colors that danced across the polished marble floor.

Thirteen ornate chairs—thrones in all but name—were arranged in a sweeping semi-circle, elevated on a raised dais that commanded attention from all who entered. Each seat was crafted from rare woods and precious metals, inlaid with glittering gemstones that seemed to pulse with an inner light. The central chair, reserved for the Taryba's leader, was the grandest of all, its high back carved with arcane symbols that shifted and flowed as one's gaze lingered upon them. It was a profligate use of magic, entirely for display, and clearly meant to convey the message that the Taryba had magic to burn.

Towering windows lined the walls, their panes not of mere glass, but of shimmering, translucent energy that cast an ethereal glow throughout the chamber. The ever-changing hues of

the magical windows responded to the emotions and intentions of those within, shifting from soothing blues to fiery reds as debates grew heated. On his last visit, that trick had been limited to a few orbs spread in front of the council's broad desk, but again, this iteration of the Taryba wanted to emphasize that they had plenty of power to spare.

At the center of the chamber, a great circular table stood, its surface a swirling pool of liquid silver. Maps and images could be conjured from its depths, allowing the Council to view any corner of the world with a thought—and yet more magic. Runes etched along the table's edge pulsed with a steady rhythm, a heartbeat of power that resonated through the very stones of the room.

The air itself was alive with energy, currents of magic flowing like invisible rivers, intertwining and separating in an intricate dance. With each breath, Finley could taste the heady mix of power and potential, the remnants of countless spells and incantations that had been cast within these walls over the centuries.

The grandeur was, in part, spoiled by the smug expressions on the councilors' faces.

High Councilor Jankauskas occupied the center seat, and the positioning of the other councilors was a transparent show of their position within the Taryba's complex and ever-shifting web of alliances and arrangements. To her right was Degutis, Abebe, Ohanian, Conteh, Okoro, and Perich, all staunch supporters of the subjugation strategy. To her left sat Bartosz, Dvořák, Kovalchuk, their smug, condescending expressions making it obvious where their loyalties lay. In sharp contrast were the last three councilors: Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken, who Finley knew were staunchly opposed to subjugation.

They were a sad minority in the room.

"Arcadia," Degutis said, his oil-slick voice immediately

causing bile to rise in Finley's throat, "you've come with a report?"

"We both have," Finley said. "The Veil is gone. Landon's displays—"

"When you say gone," Degutis interrupted smoothly, "what do you mean, exactly? We've no proof that it ever existed, for example, and so I feel as if—"

Finley and Arcadia had discussed this, and decided it was time to put everything in the open. "I'm a Rune Smith," Finley snapped. And with barely a thought, he summoned a rune to mind:

[[[RUNE Carving]]]

It is vaguely unsatisfying, Finley thought idly as he filled the rune with power. The thought of manipulating magic directly, without the intermediary of a rune to shape the intent in his mind was... compelling.

But the rune's effect was no less impressive, despite the immense protections already laid on the chambers.

In Finley's mind, the rune pulsed with a blinding white light, and that radiance spread outward, flooding the chamber and causing the councilors to shield their eyes. In an instant, the very fabric of the room began to unravel. The intricate mosaic on the ceiling shimmered and distorted, the tiny tiles cascading downward like a shower of shattered dreams. They clattered against the floor and vanished, now nothing more than packed dirt strewn with straw.

The grand thrones of the councilors shrunk and warped, their precious metals and gemstones melting away to reveal simple wooden chairs, worn and weathered. The once-

imposing dais now stood as a humble raised platform, its grandeur reduced to mere scaffolding.

The shimmering windows dissolved, their magical energy dissipating into the air like wisps of forgotten enchantments. In their place, rough-hewn shutters appeared, hanging crookedly on rusted hinges. Sunlight streamed through the gaps, casting moted beams across the transformed space.

The great circular table at the center of the room rippled and churned, the liquid silver evaporating into a fine mist. As the haze cleared, a sturdy but plain wooden table emerged, its surface marred by countless nicks and scratches from years of use.

The very air seemed to change, the once-palpable currents of magic now nothing more than stale, musty drafts that carried the scent of ale and smoke. The runes etched into the table's edge faded and disappeared, their power extinguished like snuffed candles.

In mere moments, the grand Council Chambers had been reduced to a space reminiscent of a common tavern. The councilors blinked in disbelief, their expressions of smug superiority replaced by shock and confusion. They found themselves seated around the weathered table, their resplendent robes now appearing as simple, homespun garments.

Finley stood amidst the transformation, his hand still outstretched, the rune's power emanating from his fingertips. A smile played at the corners of his mouth as he surveyed the scene before him. The once-grand chamber, stripped of its illusions and pretenses, now reflected the true nature of the Taryba—a group of individuals no more impressive or powerful than the common folk they sought to subjugate.

Councilor Jankauskas fingers twitched, and Finley had to stop himself from grinning. He felt her magic stab into the room, attempting to reverse a portion of what Finley had trans-

formed. But his own magic was far stronger, and it held firm as he watched her shoulders droop. "Rune Smiths are something more than you might imagine," he said quietly as he slowly lowered his hand. Next to him, Arcadia was all but vibrating with barely repressed glee.

"The Veil was real," he continued, "but that's moot, now. It's gone. I know this, understand? I can see it. Or could, before Landon's flagrant displays shredded it. One of the most ancient magics in our world, and you destroyed it in just days." He shook his head sadly. "Now, the slightest display of magic will be visible to the humans. They'll question where their neighbors have been living all this time. They'll wonder why strange symbols have been carved into their buildings, their boats, everything around them. Magic can no longer be concealed." He stepped forward, sweeping his gaze across the councilors' dumbfounded faces. "Evermore will no longer be a secret. It was always the Veil that led all but the most determined humans away. They'll find the Farm, and every other place where witchkind has taken shelter."

"Some of witchkind have remained in their homes," Arcadia said quietly, stepping next to Finley. "We will suggest that the rest return. Not all at once, as they'll need to find actual, physical places to live, in most cases. But we must return. Openly. Let's show the humans how we've helped support them over the centuries. Let's show them magic as a partner, as a tool, and not a danger. Let's give them back their inventions, their innovations. Let them stand on their own, and let witchkind stand next to them."

Bit of a foregone conclusion on that one, Finley thought wryly. He had little doubt that Nordon was already duplicating the Order's books, and doing his best to ensure humans wouldn't lose the information again.

“Ridiculous,” Councilor Okoro stammered. “The humans will never accept magic as anything but a threat. We’ve—”

“Yes, you’ve tried to see to that, haven’t you?” Finley barked. “Sending Landon around to conjure ‘demons,’ to burn down their towns. But he’s gotten away from you a bit, hasn’t he?” Okoro opened her mouth, but hesitated. “Yes, I know everything. The entire Order of Some knows now, as well, and we won’t keep the informations secret. You are responsible for the destruction in Lakewood, including the property and lives of the witchkind who lived there.” He shook his head. “Landon never had a strong mind. Never had a grip on the Control alignment. And all he wanted was the approval of others, and if he couldn’t have that, then he wanted power over them. And Dmitry, what, gifted him two entirely new affinities? You have to suspect it’s burning out his mind, his personality. Well, suspect no more. It has.”

“You’ve seen him?” Councilor Baltakis rasped.

Arcadia nodded. “We helped a group of humans trap him, in fact. We’re not confident it’ll hold him long, but they’re being careful. Industrious. Clever.”

“So that’s where he’s been,” someone muttered. Finley didn’t see who.

But Councilor Degutis had flushed almost purple with anger. “You helped humans against one of your own? How—”

“Landon,” Finley said, his voice low, cold, and irresistible, “is not one of our own. He is mad. Broken. Sick. Probably beyond help, probably beyond mending, thanks to all of you and your scheming.”

“You can’t—” Councilor Jankauskas began.

“Let me clarify something,” Arcadia said coolly. “We did not come here to request something of you. We came here to inform you. Your collusion, your direction in the deaths and injuries of witchkind is now known. We are advising all of

witchkind to present themselves to humans. Openly, as friends and partners. We will help keep them safe as they do so. The Order of Some, despite your intentions, is not your private army with which to subjugate the humans and put them under your rule. You may retain your seats on this council,” she added with a shrug, “but I frankly don’t think this council is going to matter much longer if you don’t change your approach.”

“You arrogant, stupid children,” Councilor Perich snapped. “You spread lies and deceit! You can’t possibly—”

“Let me reiterate, Perich,” Finley broke in, his tone hard and uncompromising, “I am a Rune Smith. You’re known as something of a scholar, yes?” In his mind, he summoned one of the Middle Runic runes his talent—the voice in his head—had shown him.

[[[RUNE Forced Truth]]]

He concentrated for a moment, bringing his six affinities together into one for a brief moment of harmony. He fed this power to the rune, and laid it over the entire Taryba.

Impressive, the voice said. I don’t think I ever managed to do that to more than two people at once.

“You are perhaps familiar, from your studies, of the different Forms of magic that the Adherents of the Axes could practice. This is one from the Sixth Axis, from its Form of Mind, I believe. Tell me, Councilors: Are you responsible for the destruction in the human cities? For the death of some of your own people? Have you been holding Landon’s leash as he wreaked havoc across the continent?”

“Aš tai įrašinėju,” Arcadia whispered, invoking a rune that would capture everything that was seen or said in the room. She

held out a palm, displaying a small crystal orb, into which the sounds and images would be captured and retained.

The Councilors squirmed in their seats, their faces contorting as they fought against the irresistible demand of Finley's magic. Beads of sweat formed on their brows, and their eyes darted about the room, seeking escape from the inescapable truth that now demanded to be spoken.

Councilor Degutis was the first to succumb, his words spilling forth in a torrent of confession. "Yes," he gasped, his voice strained and trembling. "We are responsible. We orchestrated the destruction, the chaos. We saw an opportunity to seize control, to assert our dominance over the humans once and for all."

His admission hung in the air, heavy and damning. The other Councilors looked on in horror, their own secrets bubbling up within them, ready to burst forth.

Councilor Jankauskas spoke next, her words laced with a mix of defiance and defeat. "Landon was our instrument," she said, her eyes flickering with a fading ember of pride. "We knew he had been gifted with new affinities, we knew it would make him more powerful, more volatile. We needed a weapon, and he was all too eager to be wielded."

The confessions continued, each of Jankauskas' allies revealing their part in the grand scheme. They spoke of manipulating Landon's mind, of directing his attacks, of callously sacrificing the lives of their own people to further their agenda. The words poured out of them, unstoppable and undeniable, captured forever in the crystal orb Arcadia held.

Councilor Perich, once so haughty and self-assured, now slumped in her seat, her voice a broken whisper. "We thought we could control him," she murmured, his gaze distant and haunted. "We believed we could harness his power."

As the confessions wound to a close, the chamber fell silent,

the weight of the truth settling upon them all like a suffocating blanket. The Councilors, stripped of their illusions and machinations, sat exposed and vulnerable, their grand designs laid bare for all to see.

Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken looked triumphant. The magic hadn't compelled them to say a thing, but everything they'd known about their colleagues, everything they'd suspected, had finally been brought into the open. "You're monsters," Baltakis rasped.

Finley surveyed the room, his expression a mixture of triumph and sorrow. He had known the depths of their deceit, but hearing it spoken aloud, seeing the resignation and shame etched upon their faces, made it all the more real, all the more tragic.

Arcadia stepped forward, her voice ringing clear and strong in the hushed chamber. "Your words have been saved," she declared, holding up the crystal orb, its surface swirling with the captured confessions. "The truth of your actions will be known to all of witchkind, and even to the humans you sought to subjugate. You have brought this upon yourselves, and now you must face the consequences."

The Councilors seemed to shrink in their seats, the weight of their misdeeds bearing down on them.

"I think," Councilor Baltakis said in his rough voice, "some new Council elections may soon be in order."

Finley and Arcadia exchange a satisfied glance before Arcadia's magic swept them up and carried them away.

The salty sea breeze whipped through Finley's hair as he walked alongside Kelden and his parents towards the bustling heart of Sowsee. The quaint fishing village, nestled against the rugged

coastline, was a picturesque tableau of weathered wooden houses, their painted facades faded by the sun and the brine. Narrow, winding streets were lined with colorful buoys and fishing nets hung out to dry, their intricate knots and patterns a testament to the generations of skilled hands that had woven them.

As they approached the central square, the distant crash of waves against the rocky shore mingled with the lively chatter of the villagers going about their daily routines. Fishermen, their skin tanned and leathery from countless hours under the sun, hauled in their catches from the docks, their nets brimming with silvery fish that glinted in the morning light. The air was thick with the pungent aroma of the sea, mixed with the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the village bakery.

In the heart of the square stood a towering statue of a legendary fisherman, his bronze features etched with the determination and resilience that had made Sowsee famous. The statue's outstretched arm pointed towards the vast expanse of the ocean, a silent reminder of the village's lifeblood and the challenges its people faced every day.

As they walked, Finley couldn't help but feel a surge of nostalgia wash over him. The cobblestone streets beneath his feet, worn smooth by the passage of time and countless footsteps, held memories of his childhood spent exploring every nook and cranny of the village whenever his parents brought him on a visit. He remembered the laughter and the stories shared around the crackling bonfires on the beach, the taste of salt on his lips and the warmth of the community that had embraced him.

Now, as they approached the gathering crowd in the square, Finley felt a sense of purpose and determination settle over him. His parents, walking slightly ahead, exchanged glances filled

with a mix of nervousness and resolve. They had come to Sowsee to reveal their true nature, to show the villagers that magic was not something to be feared, but rather a tool that could be used in harmony with the human world.

As they reached the center of the square, Finley's father stepped forward, his voice ringing out clear and strong above the murmur of the crowd. "People of Sowsee," he began, his eyes sweeping over the gathered faces, "we come to you today not as strangers, but as friends. As neighbors who have lived and worked alongside you for years, sharing in your joys and your hardships."

The crowd fell silent, their attention focused on the man before them. Finley watched as his father took a deep breath, his shoulders squared and his chin held high. "We have a truth to share with you," he continued, his voice steady and unwavering. "A truth that has been hidden for generations, but one that can no longer be kept in the shadows. We are witchkind, blessed with the ability to wield magic."

A ripple of surprise and confusion ran through the crowd. Finley saw faces etched with fear—but also a hint of curiosity. His mother stepped forward, her gentle smile a beacon of reassurance.

"Magic is not something to be feared," she said, her voice soft yet filled with conviction. "It is a gift, one that we have used to help and support this community for as long as we have been a part of it. The nets that never seem to break, the boats that weather even the fiercest storms—these are the subtle ways in which we have woven our magic into the fabric of Sowsee."

Finley watched as realization dawned on the faces of the villagers. Whispers turned to murmurs of understanding, and the tension in the air began to dissipate.

"Magic has been sent against you, recently," Finley said. "But against us, as well. A single madman, given more power

than he could handle, directed by more madmen who wanted to use him to seize power. Our people, witchkind, suffered from his attacks, just as you did. Those madmen wanted to rule not just you, but us as well. The terrors in Nek and Lakewood killed as many of us, destroyed as many of our homes, as you and yours." The villagers' faces were pensive now, waiting for his next words. "I have stopped them. The madmen who sought power. As for the man who attacked us all... he is in custody. Human custody, and those humans are free to work their justice against him." He lowered his voice, and the villagers leaned in a bit to hear. "And if they leave anything of him, we will take ours."

"We do not seek to rule or dominate," Finley's father continued. "We simply wish to live openly and honestly, to share our gifts and work alongside you as equals. The world is changing, and the time for secrets is over."

An elderly fisherman, his face weathered by the sea and the sun, stepped forward from the crowd. "I've known ye for years," he said, his voice gruff but not unkind. "Ye've always been there, lending a hand when times were tough. If what ye say is true, then I see no reason why we can't continue as we always have—as friends and neighbors."

"But," a woman called from the crowd, "what if we say no? What if we want no magic here? We're an honest people, a holy people. Nekęsk ragana gyventi," she said, and again Finley felt an odd dissonance at those old words, the True Language of magic, spilling from human lips. "Suffer not a witch to live! What if we say no?"

A low, urgent murmur spread through the crowd. Finley and his parents had discussed this before coming, and they'd immediately agreed on the right answer.

"Then we will leave," his mother said sadly, spreading her

hands in acceptance. "If we cannot earn your trust, if you would not have us as neighbors, then we will go."

"Where?" someone else shouted.

"To someplace that accepts us openly," Finley's father called back. "And if there is no such place, then we will make our own. Away from you, as far as we may. I will miss the sea," he admitted, "but if you all bid it, then we will go."

The muttering of the crowd was mixed now, as some of the villagers seemed to argue for them to remain, while others insisted they go.

A middle-aged man wearing a mayor's chain of office stepped forward. "We will need time. To discuss. To decide."

"Of course," Finley's mother said soothingly. She took a tentative step forward and held out a hand. In it were two clay discs, one colored a rusty red, the other dyed a cobalt blue. She offered them to the mayor, who looked at them for a long moment before hesitantly accepting them. "When you decide, break one of these. Break the red one, and we'll know we are welcome. Break the blue, and we know to never return."

"How many of you?" someone called.

"A few," Finley's father assured them. "And perhaps you will decide on a number. Some ratio you can be comfortable with. I will tell you this: you outnumber us more than ten to one across the world. We are few, compared to you. We live longer, we have fewer children. It has always been so. In our home village, there were ten of witchkind to more than a thousand humans."

The crowd's murmurs were more subdued now, carrying a note of surprise and... confidence?

"Where will you live?" someone wanted to know.

This was the subject they'd known would come up, if they weren't attacked immediately, and the one likely to cause the

most consternation and fear. They'd agreed that the truth remained the best path. "One of our magics," his mother explained slowly, stepping back, "creates spaces within spaces. Entire homes, hidden in the eaves of a house. An inn, concealed in the spaces between walls. This is where many of us lived. But going forward, if you invite us back, we will build our own homes, just as you have. We will be seen. We will not skulk in the shadows, will not hide ourselves from you. No longer. But if that magic can benefit us all—create safe shelters during storms, create cool rooms in which to store the day's catch, create warm spaces in the deep of winter—then we will offer it to you. Freely. Our magic costs us little. We can use it to benefit us all."

The crowd's murmurs were thoughtful now, Finley thought.

"I would say something."

The crowd parted as their old priest stepped gently to the fore. This was a discussion they hadn't wanted to leave to chance, and they'd approached the man the day prior. He'd been responsible for bringing the crowd together here, and he offered their best chance at being accepted.

"Speak, Father," the mayor offered.

"You spoke the words well," the priest said to the old woman. "Nekęsk ragana gyventi. But I will tell you—not everything in our oldest books is true and honest. This past fortnight, I was visited by our bishop of the Southern Eparchy. He had much to say about our holiest texts." The man paused, turned, and surveyed the crowd before him. "But he used those words. He would have us turn out our own mayor, and our Aldermen. He would have us grant full authority over our lives to him. He brought stories of magic—not the attacks we have all heard of, but tales that were patently false, of babes stolen from their cribs, of kraken summoned from the sea." He shook his head. "My point is that our texts, and the god's words, have

been, and will be, used against us. I would argue that it is actions we should examine. The actions of those who would seize power for their own gain, and the actions of those that would live in peace." Again, he slowly surveyed the crowd, which had fallen into a contemplative silence. "That is all I have to say." He turned, nodded to the four people of witchkind, and then retreated back into the crowd.

"We will go now," Finley's mother said softly. "And await your decision."

And then, in a move they had deliberated for longer than any other, they wrapped themselves in magic and vanished.

Across the continent, similar scenes unfolded as witchkind stepped forward to reveal themselves to the human communities they had long lived alongside in secret. In the bustling port city of Landshire, a trio of witchkind approached the town square, their steps measured and their expressions a mix of hope and trepidation. The cobblestone streets echoed with the clatter of horse-drawn carts and the shouts of street vendors hawking their wares, while the salty sea breeze carried the tangy scent of fish and brine.

As they reached the center of the square, the people of witchkind exchanged glances before the eldest among them, a woman with silver-streaked hair and kind eyes, raised her hands to gather the attention of the passing townsfolk. "People of Landshire," she called out, her voice clear and resonant, "we come to you today with open hearts and a desire for understanding."

Curious faces turned towards them, some etched with suspicion, others with genuine interest. The woman continued, "We have lived among you for generations, using our magic to

subtly aid and support this community. The ships that always find safe harbor, the crops that flourish even in the harshest seasons—these are the fruits of our labors, the ways in which we have woven our magic into the fabric of Landshire."

Murmurs rippled through the growing crowd, a mix of surprise and skepticism. A burly dock worker stepped forward, his brow furrowed. "Magic, you say? And you've been using it on us all this time?"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes, but never to harm or control. Only to help and protect. We seek only to live openly and honestly, to share our gifts and work alongside you as equals."

As the crowd processed this revelation, a young woman with a baby in her arms spoke up, her voice hesitant. "But what of the stories we've heard? Of witches stealing children and summoning monsters from the depths?"

The second person of witchkind, a man with a neatly trimmed beard and gentle eyes, shook his head. "Those are lies and misconceptions, spread by those who fear what they do not understand. We are not the monsters of legend, but rather your neighbors and friends."

The third, a young woman with fiery red hair, stepped forward. "We understand your concerns and your doubts. But we ask only for a chance to prove ourselves, to show you that magic can be a force for good when wielded with wisdom and compassion."

The crowd exchanged glances, their expressions ranging from cautious acceptance to outright hostility. The dock worker crossed his arms, his stance defensive. "And what if we refuse? What if we want no part of your magic in our lives?"

The eldest of witchkind smiled sadly. "Then we will leave, as much as it pains us. We will not force our presence upon you. But we hope that, in time, you will come to see us as we truly are—not as threats, but as allies. And until you decide, we will

go.” A set of clay tokens was provided, and the three took themselves away by magic.

In the charred ruins of Lakewood, a very different scene unfolded. The once-thriving town lay in smoldering shambles, its buildings reduced to piles of blackened timber and scorched stone. The acrid stench of smoke and ash hung heavy in the air, a suffocating reminder of the magical onslaught that had ravaged the community just a moon before.

Amidst the rubble, two figures picked their way carefully through the debris-strewn streets. They were emissaries of witchkind, a man and a woman, their faces etched with a mix of sorrow and determination. They had come to Lakewood with the same message of peace and coexistence that their brethren were sharing across the continent, hoping to bridge the gap between their people and the humans who had suffered so greatly at the hands of magic gone awry.

But as they approached the makeshift gathering place at the heart of the ruined town, it became clear that their words would find no welcome here. A crowd had assembled, their faces haggard and their eyes haunted by the horrors they had witnessed. They clutched makeshift weapons in their hands—iron pokers, rusty shovels, and fire-hardened sticks—their knuckles white with the force of their grip.

The emissaries stopped a safe distance away, their hands raised in a gesture of peace. The man, his dark hair flecked with grey, stepped forward, his voice steady despite the tension that crackled in the air. “People of Lakewood,” he began, “we come to you in a spirit of reconciliation and—”

“Spare us your pretty words, witch!” a grizzled man snarled, brandishing a jagged piece of iron like a sword. “Your kind brought nothing but death and destruction to our town. We want no part of your magic or your lies!”

The crowd surged forward, their faces contorted with rage

and fear. The woman, her chestnut hair braided down her back, tried to reason with them. "Please, listen to us. We are not the ones who attacked you. We want only to help, to rebuild what was lost and—"

"Lies!" a woman shrieked, her voice raw with grief. "My husband died in the fires your magic started. My children are orphans because of you!" She lunged forward, swinging a heavy iron skillet with a strength born of desperation.

The emissaries leapt back, narrowly avoiding the blow. Around them, the crowd pressed in, their makeshift weapons glinting in the ashen light. Iron pokers thrust forward like spears, rusty shovels swung like clubs, and fire-hardened sticks jabbed like daggers. The air crackled with the energy of their hatred and fear, a palpable force that seemed to smother any hope of reason or understanding.

The man and woman exchanged a glance, their eyes filled with a profound sadness. They had hoped to find common ground, but there was none to be had. They quickly summoned their magic and fled, not bothering to leave behind the two clay tokens they'd optimistically brought.

A Divided World

“Where do we stand so far?” Finley asked, leaning over the map table.

Arcadia tapped the upper-left. “Rushford and Greensea are accepting witchkind.”

“No surprise,” Kelden murmured. “I don’t think the wood-witches would have permitted anything else.”

“True,” she acknowledged. “Most of the northeast, as well. Northsea, Soloton, Chiton, Landshire—Kelden, your mother was one of the three who approached them as she did marvelously. Taliesin, Spurham. Farreach in the North, Twynsits, and Baythwaite, which is a bit of a relief given how close it is to Disemstoke’s.” As she spoke, the towns and villages she named glowed a mild green. “Now, for the bad news, and it’s mostly the west. Lastpointe, Westhead, Fyngershire, Lakewood—unsurprising, and the witchkind who approached them were attacked—and Cuppton. Little Bay, Hook, Harbsmouth, everyone along Southwestern Lake. Nek, again unsurprising. Farreach in the South.”

“Unsurprising,” Finley sighed.

“Bryssi and Withering have held as neutral, so far,” Arcadia continued. “The larger towns—cities, really—are taking longer to commit, and there are some signs that some of them may try and walk both sides of the line. Carvendam and Nworlons, too. Most of the southeast is still on the fence: Meadowside, Pease, Sowsee—that one’s disappointed me as well, Finley—and Wising.

“More importantly, and somewhat worryingly, we’re seeing the smaller settlements pull up their stakes and merge back into the nearest decent-sized village. It’s as if everyone senses something in the wind, and they’re huddling up for protection.”

“Which brings us to the really terrible news,” Kelden said. “Arcadia, you haven’t seen this yet. In fact, from the reports I’ve been reading, I think it’s worth doing a scry. Let me get Nik, he’s best at this.” Kelden stepped out of the room for a moment and returned with a nervous-looking young man. “Go ahead, Nik. Do Westhead.”

Nik nodded silently and closed his eyes. Finley felt for him: scrying was the single most difficult magic he’d ever encountered. A strange mix of Sky and Sea, it provided an invaluable ability to view a scene remotely, but it was notoriously difficult to cast and maintain, let alone control. Sweat immediately broke out on Nik’s forehead, and Finley’s sympathy for the boy doubled.

But he was nothing if not capable: within moments, a mist rose from the map table, and formed itself into a fuzzy picture of the coastal town of Westhead.

The town had changed.

The mist shimmered and rippled, gradually resolving into a crisper, more vivid image of Westhead. But it was a Westhead transformed, a far cry from the quaint fishing village Finley remembered.

A formidable iron-reinforced wooden stockade now encir-

cled the entire town, stretching from the rocky cliffs all the way to the pebbled shore. The stockade's rough-hewn logs, easily twice the height of a man, bristled with vicious iron spikes. Squat, sturdy watchtowers punctuated the perimeter at regular intervals. Atop each tower, grim-faced guards stood sentinel, clutching iron-reinforced crossbows and hefty ballistas loaded with wickedly sharp iron-tipped bolts.

Just inside the completed outer stockade, work was already well underway on a second, even more imposing inner wall. Thick stone blocks, their surfaces still rough from the quarry, were being hoisted into place by teams of laborers. The wall's foundation was deep and broad, promising a barrier that would stand unbreached for centuries. At its top, the first hint of crenellations could be seen taking shape, soon to provide protected vantage points for defending archers.

The air about the town hung heavy with tension, a constant thrum of anxious activity. The cheerful bustle of fish-mongers and net menders near the docks had been replaced by the grim purpose of a settlement girding for war. Where once children played freely in the streets, now only the measured tramp of patrolling guards could be heard.

Finley's heart sank as he absorbed the scene. This was no longer a village where witchkind and humankind lived side-by-side in amiable, if secret, peace. Westhead had become a fortress, an armed camp braced for imminent attack. The transformation was as startling as it was disheartening.

"I don't understand," Finley murmured, half to himself. "Why would they go to such lengths? What are they afraid of?"

Arcadia shook her head grimly. "Not afraid of. Preparing for." She gestured at the image of the reinforced town. "That's not defense. That's offense. Westhead is readying itself to wage war. On us."

"They're calling themselves an Iron City," Kelden said.

"And they're calling on other cities to expel witchkind and fortify themselves similarly. Nik, close in a bit, like we discussed."

As Nik refocused his scrying magic, the misty image above the map table shimmered and rippled, zooming in on a cluster of buildings near Westhead's central square. Or rather, what remained of those buildings.

Where once stood sturdy stone and timber structures—a tailor's shop, a cobbler's workshop, the town records office—now there were only piles of rubble and splintered wood. The destruction was not the result of age or neglect, but of deliberate and systematic demolition.

Finley leaned in closer, his brow furrowed as he took in the scene of devastation. Amid the debris, the telltale glint of iron caught his eye. Iron spikes, dozens of them, driven deep into the very foundation stones of the ruined buildings. And there, etched into a toppled lintel, the fractured remnants of a protective rune, its power broken by a spike hammered ruthlessly through its center.

"They're not just fortifying," Arcadia said softly, her voice tight with anger and sorrow. "They're erasing us. Obliterating any trace of witchkind's presence."

Nik's magic shifted the view toward the harbor, where Westhead's once-proud fishing fleet bobbed at anchor. But the boats, too, had been transformed. Crews swarmed over the decks, tearing out planks with fervent, almost frenzied energy. As each plank was ripped free, a glimmer of fading magic could be seen, protective runes and wards carved lovingly into the wood by the fleet's fisherwitches, now discarded without a second thought.

In place of the removed planks, the boats' hulls were being hastily reinforced with crude iron straps, pounded into place

with a blacksmith's ruthless efficiency. The message was clear: iron over magic, no matter the cost.

"They're crippling themselves," Kelden murmured, shaking his head. "Those runes kept their boats safe, made their nets heavy with catch. They're throwing away generations of knowledge, of symbiosis, for what? Fear? Hatred?"

Finley tore his gaze away from the heartbreaking scene, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "They're making a choice," he said, his voice low and resolute. "And so must we. If they would see us as enemies, then we must be prepared to defend ourselves. To fight for our right to exist."

Arcadia nodded, her eyes hard as flint. "Agreed. We'll reach out to the towns that stand with us, coordinate our efforts. If Westhead and its allies want a war, then by the stars, we'll give them one."

"So, speaking of that," Kelden said. "Nik, go to Taliesin."

The boy clenched his jaw and nodded, and the image of Westhead faded. It was replaced by Taliesin, which sat at the foot of the southern end of the Great Northern Range.

This village had clearly taken the other approach, welcoming witchkind and their magic—but its residents clearly had few illusions about the future state of the world, for they'd also begun fortifying their home.

The misty image of Taliesin shimmered into focus, revealing a village transformed not by fear and rejection of magic, but by an embrace of its potential. Where Westhead's fortifications were crude and hastily erected, Taliesin's defenses were a marvel of magical engineering, a testament to the power of witchkind and humankind working in harmony.

The village was encircled by a wall that seemed to grow organically from the earth itself, its foundation melding seamlessly with the rocky terrain at the foot of the Great Northern Range. The

wall's surface was a tapestry of intricately carved runes, each one pulsing with a soft, steady glow. The runes were not mere decorations, but living enchantments, weaving together to form a complex web of protective magic. And presented as they were in the open, rather than being furtively carved into an inconspicuous location, these runes seemed even more majestic and alive.

As Finley watched, a team of witchkind and stonemasons worked side by side to raise a new section of the wall. The masons shaped the stones with expert precision, their chisels and hammers guided by steady hands. Beside them, people of witchkind chanted in low, melodic tones, their fingers tracing patterns in the air as their song kept their magic synchronized. As each stone was set in place, it seemed to meld with its neighbors, the seams vanishing as if the wall were a single, unbroken entity.

At regular intervals along the wall, graceful towers rose toward the sky, their spires twisting and curving in ways that defied conventional architecture. The towers were not built of simple stone and mortar, but of living wood, coaxed into shape by the gentle persuasion of the village's Earth-affinity witchkind. The wood was not cut or harvested, but grown in place, the towers rising from the ground like great, twisting trees.

The effect was breathtaking, a perfect fusion of nature and magic. The towers' surfaces were adorned with intricate carvings, each one a masterpiece of woodworking art. But the carvings were more than mere decoration. They, too, were runes, each one imbued with protective magic. The runes glowed with a soft, pulsing light, casting a warm, inviting radiance over the village.

At the base of each tower, great stone doors stood open, their surfaces etched with yet more runes. The doors were not simple barriers, but portals, each one linked to its counterparts

around the village. Through them, defenders could move instantly from one part of the wall to another, responding to threats with preternatural speed and coordination.

“Šokinëti durys,” Arcadia breathed. “I’ve only ever read of them.”

As the view shifted to the village center, Finley saw that the magical fortifications extended beyond the wall. The village’s central square was dominated by a great stone fountain, its waters cascading in a shimmering curtain from a towering sculpture of a great tree. The tree’s branches were spread wide, as if sheltering the village beneath its canopy. And indeed, the sculpture was more than mere art. Its surface, too, was covered in glowing runes, each one a part of a vast enchantment.

“They’re calling themselves an Arcane City,” Kelden said softly, his voice full of pride.

“So now the two sides of the war have names,” Finley said sadly.

“More than two sides,” Kelden said. “Go ahead, Nik.”

The misty image above the map table rippled once more as Nik focused his scrying magic on Evermore, the once-hidden heart of witchkind. The city had always been a closely guarded secret, known only to a select few among humankind. But now, as the specter of war loomed, Evermore had abandoned its secrecy, revealing itself as a bastion of magical might.

The city was nestled in a verdant valley, surrounded on all sides by towering, mist-shrouded hills. The hills themselves seemed to bend and curve around Evermore, as if cradling it in a protective embrace. Their peaks glowed with an ethereal light, the very rock suffused with ancient, powerful enchantments woven by generations of witchkind’s most skilled mages.

As the image clarified, the city’s outermost defenses came into sharp focus. The walls, once a decorative boundary demarcating the edge of the city proper, had been transformed into a

formidable, multi-tiered fortification. The lower sections were constructed of massive blocks of granite, each one etched with a complex lattice of defensive runes. The runes pulsed with a steady, silvery light, their power thrumming through the stone like a heartbeat.

Above the granite base, the walls seamlessly transitioned into gleaming metal, an alloy forged from silver, copper, and rare ores. The metal was not only nigh indestructible but also served as a conduit for the city's protective enchantments, allowing the magic to flow freely through the entire defensive perimeter.

Along the top of the walls, a series of crystalline minarets had been erected, each one housing a contingent of newly trained battlewitches. The minarets were not mere watchtowers, but focal points for the city's magical defenses. Within each one, a team of witchkind maintained a constant vigil, their combined power weaving an invisible, impenetrable shield around Evermore.

The city's skyline, once dominated by graceful spires and soaring towers, had undergone a drastic transformation. The tallest structures had been deliberately dismantled, their materials transformed for the coming war. In their place, a series of low, heavily fortified buildings had been erected, each one a veritable stronghold in its own right.

These squat, unassuming structures belied their true nature. Beneath their reinforced stone exteriors, each building housed a labyrinthine complex of research facilities, artifact vaults, and arcane training grounds. Here, the city's most brilliant minds worked tirelessly to unlock new magical techniques, to devise new spells and enchantments that could turn the tide of the coming war.

Arcadia sighed. "I've known about this one. They've militarized the entire city. A full quarter of the population left imme-

diately, but the rest... well, the people of Evermore have never been fully anchored in reality. The evidence notwithstanding, they probably believe everything the Taryba is telling them. Most of them probably don't ever think it'll come to war, and they certainly can't imagine Evermore being a target."

"Where did all those people go?" Finley wondered.

Arcadia gave him an odd look, and then chuckled. "I forgot, you brought yourself directly here. Let's go outside. Brace yourself."

"That'll do, Nik," Kelden said approvingly. "Go and rest."

The boy nodded and led the way out of the map room.

Kelden and Finley followed Arcadia out, and Finley mentally braced himself for what lay beyond the door. But nothing could have truly prepared him for the sight that greeted his eyes as they stepped into the bright sunlight.

He'd grown accustomed to the massive expansion of the once-modest farmhouse that had served as the Order's headquarters. But it was now dwarfed by the sprawling network of buildings that had sprung up around it, seemingly overnight.

Finley blinked, his mind struggling to process the sheer scale of the change. Where there had once been rolling fields and pastures, there now stood a bustling, impromptu city, its streets teeming with life. The air hummed with the mingled sounds of conversation, laughter, and the steady rhythm of hard work.

The architecture of this new settlement was unlike anything that had once been in Evermore. Rather than the soaring spires and organic curves favored by witchkind's ruling class, the buildings here were low and simple, their lines clean and functional. Sturdy wooden frames were quickly being filled in with wattle and daub, the earthy scent of fresh clay mingling with the tang of sawdust on the breeze.

As they made their way down what was rapidly becoming

the main thoroughfare, Finley marveled at the cobblestone streets taking shape beneath his feet. Teams of workers, both witchkind and human, labored side by side to lay the stones, their faces beaded with sweat but alight with purpose. The sight of humans working openly alongside magic-wielders was almost as startling as the city's sudden appearance.

"Refugees," Arcadia said, answering Finley's unspoken question. "From all over. When word spread of the divisions forming, of the Iron Cities and their stance, those who refused to turn against witchkind began making their way here. Humans and witchkind alike, seeking a place where they could stand together." She smiled. "They're calling it Crafhthold."

Finley nodded, a lump forming in his throat as he watched a human child dart laughing through the crowd, a flickering wisp of conjured light bobbing playfully along in her wake. The easy acceptance, the seamless integration of magic and the mundane, was a balm to his troubled heart.

As they walked, Finley began to pick out the telltale signs of magic at work, though they were subtler than he'd grown accustomed to seeing. A mason, her hands moving in fluid, practiced motions, coaxed a stack of bricks to assemble themselves into a neat, level wall. Nearby, a carpenter's saw danced through a plank of its own accord, following a line only it could see, while its owner conferred with a human colleague over a set of meticulously drawn plans.

Magic was everywhere, but it was a magic tempered by practicality. Finley and Arcadia stopped in front of a large, circular structure that seemed to be the heart of Crafhthold's bustling activity. The building's walls were a patchwork of stone and timber, with wide, open doorways on all sides. Above the central entrance, a freshly painted sign proclaimed: "Crafhthold Assembly Hall".

As they stepped inside, Finley was struck by the air of

purposeful energy that filled the space. The hall was divided into sections, each one dedicated to a different aspect of the burgeoning community's needs.

In one corner, a group of witchkind and human healers huddled around a large table, sorting through piles of herbs and vials, their voices low as they discussed the most effective ways to combine traditional medicine with healing magic. Across the room, a team of craftsmen and Earth-affinity witchkind pored over detailed plans for new buildings, debating the merits of various materials and construction techniques.

At the center of the hall, a large, circular platform had been erected, its surface etched with a complex array of runes. A group of witchkind, their clothes marked with the sigils of the four elemental affinities, stood around the platform, their hands linked as they chanted in soft unison. As their voices rose and fell, the runes began to glow, pulsing with a soft, steady light.

"They call it a heartstone," Arcadia explained, her voice hushed with reverence. "It's to be the core of Crafthold's defenses, a focal point for the combined power of all who call this place home. Cooperative defense. Nothing like what Evermore is doing."

Finley watched, transfixed, as tendrils of energy began to spiral outward from the heartstone, weaving themselves into the very fabric of the building. The walls seemed to pulse with a living warmth, the air humming with the gentle thrum of protective magic. It lulled him, for just a moment, into a near-trance, the sound of the chanters mingling with the soft tingle of magic. And then, for just a moment, his vision... slipped.

The tendrils of magic emanating from the stone were no longer mere wisps of light, but intricate tapestries woven from countless shimmering threads, each one a complex sequence of luminous symbols.

The symbols danced and swirled in mesmerizing patterns,

their colors spanning the entire spectrum of the rainbow and beyond, into hues that defied description. Finley found himself instinctively understanding the meaning behind each symbol, his mind attuned to the intricate language of magic in a way he had never experienced before.

The threads of Sea magic flowed in undulating waves, their symbols fluid and ever-changing, adapting to the ebb and flow of the energies around them. They were a vibrant azure, shot through with glints of silver that reminded Finley of sunlight dancing on the crests of waves. Each Sea symbol found its counterpart in the steadfast, enduring runes of Earth, their rich, deep green intertwined with veins of golden light.

The Sky magic soared overhead in graceful arcs, its symbols a brilliant, ethereal blue that seemed to hold the very essence of the heavens within them. They darted and swooped, playful yet precise, each one perfectly balanced by the grounding presence of the Earth symbols below.

And then there was the Flame magic, its threads a vibrant, pulsing orange shot through with flickering tongues of red and gold. The Flame symbols danced and leaped, their energy wild and untamed, yet never straying from the harmonious pattern of the whole. They were tempered by the soothing, mutable flow of the Sea symbols, the two elements working in perfect synergy.

As Finley watched, he could see the intent of the witchkind shaping and directing the threads of magic, their thoughts and emotions guiding the symbols into ever more complex and beautiful configurations. The heartstone pulsed with the combined power of their focused will, the runes on its surface glowing brighter with each passing moment.

The magic suffused the very stones of the Assembly Hall, weaving itself into the foundation and walls, creating a living, breathing shield that would stand against any threat. Finley

could feel the love and dedication of Craifthold's inhabitants flowing through every thread, their commitment to unity and cooperation manifest in the glorious tapestry of magic before him.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the vision faded, the luminous threads and symbols giving way to the mundane reality of the Assembly Hall once more. Finley blinked, his mind reeling as he tried to process the incredible sight he had just witnessed. The witchkind around the heartstone continued their chant, unaware of the wondrous hidden world their magic had briefly revealed.

You're getting it, the voice in his head whispered.

"A moment," Kelden said, his eyes taking on a faraway look. His jaw tightened as he held out one hand, and an eye blink later, a small sheaf of papers appeared in it. Arcadia moved to stand behind him as they scanned the dispatch. "This is bad," he said.

"Back to the map room," Arcadia ordered in a low voice.

Tension drew Finley's shoulders tight as Arcadia simply took them there using her magic. She stared intently at the map table for a moment, then referred back to the dispatch Kelden still held. "Here," she said, tapping the map.

A glowing yellow line extended from Lakewood. It crawled eastward for the distance of perhaps a day's ride, and then stopped. A yellow dot glowed to life at its end.

"What is it?" Finley asked.

"A small war party, we think," Arcadia said grimly. "Kelden, is there any chance Nik could—"

But Kelden was already shaking his head. "He's a good lad, but that was his limit. It'll be tomorrow before he can try again, and even then it'll give him a terror of a headache."

Arcadia sighed in mild frustration, but acquiesced. "According to the dispatch, it's a small band of humans. Armed

with iron weapons. Not large enough that I'd call them an army, maybe three or four dozen. But they've wagons with iron-reinforced arbalests, and probably more our scouts didn't see."

"And they're marching on... Twynsits?"

"Likely," she said. "Or one of the smaller outlying settlements that hasn't yet abandoned their homes and moved to the bigger town."

"What could they possibly hope to do against Twynsits? It's already pretty well fortified," Finley pointed out.

"I wish we had a dozen more Niks," Arcadia grumbled. "But yes and no. Twynsits has a defensive wall, but it's centuries old, from when the humans fought each other a lot more frequently. Something witchkind put a stop to, by the way, even before the Order was formed. But the town—well, be honest and call it a city, it's big enough—outgrew those walls generations ago. At most, they're relying on stockades designed to keep wildlife out, and even that's only a fraction of their perimeter. We've been expecting something like this, though, and if I have to guess, I'd say Lakewood is trying to see what happens."

"Trying—what do you mean? They'll be crushed!" Finley exclaimed.

"Yes and no," Kelden said. "Keep in mind we spent a lot of time on strategy and tactics at Thornwaithe's. Not that anyone thought this would ever happen, but... our founder was a bit paranoid and a big believer in being prepared, and our faculty took pretty much the same approach. My guess is that Lakewood's going to make a feint. They're going to try their weapons against magical defenses and see what happens. They know there's some risk, but look at the dispatch." He tapped a page.

Finley skimmed it quickly. "They're all mounted?"

“Exactly,” Kelden said. “They’re prepared to abandon their wagons and make a run for it, if needed.”

“But that’s still absurd,” Finley protested. “Has Twynsits’ witchkind been reinforcing their defenses?”

“Not as heavily as Taliesin’s, no,” Arcadia replied. “Not yet.”

“They can deploy a purely magical defense,” Kelden suggested. “Covering the entire perimeter would be difficult, but an arc in front of the Lakewood force would be easy enough.”

“But still—”

“Backed by physical and magical reinforcements,” Arcadia added. “Which unfortunately means a counterattack.”

“Then—”

“It’ll be a few days before they arrive,” Kelden pointed out. “And this dispatch has already been forwarded to Twynsits’ council. They’ll have ample time to prepare. I imagine they’re already sending their own scouts to take a look, and you know that’ll involve Sky-affinity witchkind.”

“But Lakewood has sent a small arsenal of iron,” Arcadia reminded Finley as he again opened his mouth to speak. “They’re probably hoping to be spotted, so they can try their crossbows and those arbalests. And whatever else they’ve come up with.”

“There’s a deep mine not a quarter day’s ride from Lakewood,” Kelden pointed out, tapping a spot on the map. “Every deep mine in the west has been reopened and is working triple shifts to produce more ore.”

“And the blacksmiths are working themselves to the bone,” Arcadia added sadly. “These weapons are mostly crude, slapped together quickly, but against magic—they’re likely to be effective.”

Finley closed his eyes, trying to envision the impending

clash between Lakewood's iron-armed forces and Twynsits' magic-infused defenses. In his mind's eye, he saw the small but determined band of human warriors approaching the city's outskirts, their wagons creaking under the weight of their deadly iron cargo.

The mounted scouts at the vanguard of the force would be the first to spot Twynsits' outer defenses—not the ancient stone walls of generations past, but a shimmering, translucent barrier that seemed to rise from the very earth itself. The barrier pulsed with a soft, ethereal glow, the light dancing and swirling in intricate patterns that spoke of the complex web of protective enchantments woven into its very essence.

As the scouting party drew closer, they would see that the barrier was not a solid wall, but rather a tapestry of living energy, each thread a masterful work of elemental magic. Tendrils of verdant green, the lifeblood of Earth magic, twined seamlessly with the flowing azure currents of Sea, while the brilliant gold of Sky magic darted and wove between them like playful zephyrs. The fiery orange-red of Flame magic pulsed at the heart of it all, a steady, unwavering beat that seemed to lend strength and vitality to the entire structure.

A four-in one, fully integrated magical defense.

Still no proof against cold iron.

The scouts would rein in their mounts, eyes wide with awe and trepidation as they took in the magnitude of the magical fortifications. For a moment, they might question the wisdom of their mission, wondering how their crude iron weapons could possibly stand against such a display of arcane might.

But their orders were clear, and the lure of testing Lakewood's new arsenal against witchkind's defenses too tempting to resist. With a signal from their leader, the wagons would rumble forward, the iron-reinforced arbalests and other strange contrivances glinting with cold menace in the sunlight.

As the main force approached the shimmering barrier, the air would seem to thicken with tension, the very fabric of reality straining against the impending clash of iron and magic. The human warriors would ready their weapons, crossbows and arbalests loaded with iron-tipped bolts, while those with more experimental armaments would take their positions, hands gripping unfamiliar triggers and levers.

On the other side of the barrier, Twynsits' defenders would stand ready, their stances calm but alert. Among them, witchkind of all affinities would be arrayed, their hands already weaving the intricate gestures that would summon forth their elemental powers.

The moment of impact would be unlike anything anyone in living memory had ever seen. The first volley of iron bolts would streak towards the magical barrier. In Finley's mind, the cold, lifeless metal sucked the very light from the air as it hurtled towards its target.

With a discordant, shrieking sound that Finley could imagine all too well, the bolts would strike the shimmering wall of magic. For a heartbeat, the barrier might hold firm, the intricate weave of elemental energies straining against the onslaught. Emerald strands of Earth magic, sapphire threads of Sea, golden filaments of Sky, and crimson cords of Flame would all pulse, as if rallying to repel the attack.

But iron was relentless. Where each bolt struck, the magical tapestry would fray and blacken, the living energies recoiling from the dead metal's touch. Hairline fractures begin to spiderweb outward from the impact points, the cracks glowing an angry, poisonous green as the iron's disruptive influence spread and the tightly woven tapestry unraveled.

In Finley's mind, the watching defenders cried out in dismay and redoubled their efforts, pouring more of their power into the faltering barrier. But with each new volley of

bolts, the damage spread further, the once-vibrant weave of magic unraveling with terrifying speed. Defender after defender would collapse, their magic spent and grounded by the iron bolts.

Through the widening gaps in the failing barrier, Finley could see the grim determination on the faces of Lakewood's warriors. They worked with methodical precision, reloading their arbalests and adjusting their aim for maximum effect. Beside them, the crews of the stranger weapons were engulfed in frenetic activity, swarming over the iron-encased contrivances with wrenches and hammers, making final adjustments before unleashing their untested might. The witchkind of Twynsits, unaccustomed to battle, would lose confidence, which would affect their ability to summon new defenses, let alone a counterattack.

With a final, tortured groan, the magical barrier shattered in Finley's imagination, dissolving into drifting motes of colored light that winked out like dying stars. The way into Twynsits lay open, the city's outer defenses breached.

Shake it off, the voice in his head, distant but firm, warned. You're skirting on the edge of oracular magic, and I don't recommend it.

But the battle wasn't done playing out.

The defender of Twynsits would know iron was being leveled against them, know that a purely magical attack wouldn't, couldn't, hold.

The glimmering shield would have been little more than a holding action. A way of getting the Lakewood attackers to stop. A way for Twyncits to see what had been brought before them. And without time to prepare more complex, physical defenses or counterattacks, the people of Twynsits would rely on witchkind.

Those with Sky affinity would fly high overhead, carrying

compatriots with Flame and Earth affinity, and the attackers from Lakewood would see what true magic was all about.

With grim determination, the Earth witchkind began to weave their magic, their hands twitching through intricate patterns as they drew upon the power of the land itself. The ground beneath the Lakewood attackers began to tremble and heave, the once-solid earth transforming into a treacherous, shifting morass.

Horses stumbled and fell, their riders thrown from their saddles as the very ground beneath their hooves turned against them. The iron-clad wagons, once a symbol of Lakewood's might, now became their undoing. As the earth liquefied, the heavy wagons began to sink, their wheels mired in the sucking mud.

But the Earth witchkind were just getting started. With a concerted effort, they focused their magic on the sunken wagons, their hands clenching into fists as they exerted their will upon the land. Spires of stone stabbed upward, shattering wagons. Sinkholes appeared from nowhere, swallowing both men and horses.

And then those with affinity for Flame joined the fray.

As the Earth wielders immobilized the Lakewood attackers, their Flame-affinity brethren unleashed their own devastating assault from above. With eyes blazing and hands wreathed in shimmering coronas of heat, they called forth the primal power of fire, shaping it to their will with fierce determination.

Searing bolts of crimson flame streaked downward from the sky, leaving trails of shimmering afterimages in their wake. The air crackled and hissed as the superheated projectiles found their marks, exploding amidst the mired Lakewood forces with concussive blasts of light and sound.

Iron-clad wagons erupted into blistering pyres, their reinforced timbers and metalwork no match for the raw, elemental

fury of the Flame witchkind's magic. The screams of panicked horses mingled with the cries of their riders as the conflagration spread, the acrid stench of burning flesh and molten iron choking the air.

Finley, the voice in his mind, now more distant and fuzzy than ever, warned. You go too far. You're tampering with Time, and it will retaliate. Pull yourself back!

Finley physically shook his head to clear it.

"You okay?" Arcadia said with concern, placing a hand on his forearm.

"No," he said, his heart slowing. "It's going to be a massacre on both sides," he said flatly. "How many days did you say we have?"

"Three, probably. Four if the weather doesn't hold," Kelden estimated.

"Then we need a plan."

CHAPTER 13

A Captive

Landon lay on the earthen bottom of the pit, moaning softly. All around him, iron bars sucked greedily at his magic, the hated metal's powers enhanced by its direct contact with the earth itself. Landon tried to protect himself, tried to use Finley's technique for bottling up his magic, but his magic was too much.

His magic churned within him, a maelstrom of raw power that threatened to tear him apart from the inside. The Earth affinity he had always known now warred with the fierce heat of Flame and the wild, untamed energy of Sky. Each element vied for dominance, sending jolts of pain through his body with every surge.

He could feel the magic's consciousness, separate from his own, scheming and strategizing in ways his mind couldn't comprehend. It whispered dark secrets, promising him unimaginable strength if only he would surrender control. But he knew that way lay madness and destruction.

Although perhaps he'd already walked that road.

Landon gritted his teeth, trying desperately to hold the

affinities in balance. Sweat poured down his face as he strained against the onslaught. His vision swam with visions of towering infernos, howling gales, and heaving mountains, each one more vivid and terrifying than the last.

Through the haze of pain, he dimly realized that his mind was fracturing under the immense pressure. Memories slipped away like wisps of smoke, replaced by twisted phantasms that gibbered and shrieked. He could no longer distinguish reality from delusion.

A bitter laugh escaped Landon's cracked lips. To have so much magic at his command, yet be rendered helpless by his own power - there was a cruel irony in that. He had always dreamed of wielding multiple affinities, but never had he imagined it would be like this - a curse rather than a blessing, a harbinger of insanity instead of greatness.

As the iron bars continued to leech away his magic and his sanity, Landon curled in on himself, lost in the tempest of his own abilities. Only the faintest spark of his true self remained, flickering in the chaos, and he clung to it with the desperation of a drowning man. "I'm to be king," he groaned.

Landon latched onto that like a lifeline. He was to be king. The Councilor had promised it!

In his fractured mind, Landon saw himself seated upon a throne of gold and obsidian, resplendent in robes of finest silk. The crown upon his brow pulsed with the combined might of Earth, Flame, and Sky, a trinity of power that made him nigh-invincible.

Before him stretched a vast hall filled with courtiers and supplicants, all bowing low in reverence. Humans and witchkind alike knelt in submission, their petty differences forgotten in the face of his supreme authority. He was their king, their god, and they existed only to serve his every whim. They welcomed his firm, guiding, relentless hand.

"I'm to be king," he whispered miserably.

"Not if I can help it," came a voice from above.

Landon looked up through bleary eyes. It must have been somewhere near midday, for the figure staring down at him through the iron grates was backlit. But Landon remembered the voice: it was the voice of his captor. His tormentor.

A human.

"So what are we going to do with you?" the man asked, almost to himself. "Feed you?"

"Food," Landon whimpered, rolling onto his back. "Water."

"Not just yet," the human said, his voice as cold and unyielding as the iron cage. The dark shape turned aside and called, "Aimery, think we could get a blanket of chain mail through the gaps in the bars?" There was a distant, indistinct reply, and the shape stood and walked away.

Landon let out a single, tortured sob, the pain of his magic leaving him almost unbearable. It had been, what—a day? A fortnight? A century, that he'd lain here? As powerful as he was, as powerful as he'd become, surely it must take decades for the earth to suck away all of his magic.

Finley would know how to get out, a small, sane portion of his brain suggested. Finley has done this before.

Landon blinked, his pain momentarily diminished. Finley had been through this once before, hadn't he? Trapped in a pit in the ground, trapped like an animal by the foul humans. Surrounded by cold iron. Ah, but Landon was so much stronger than Finley.

He frowned. Had he been the one to free his weak classmate? His shattered mind struggled to remember. It must have happened that way, he told himself. Finley was trapped. Nothing he could do but bottle up his magic. Iron all around him, iron above him, and I told him—

A cube has six sides. I learned that in school. At Disem-stoke's, a detached corner of his mind whispered. Left, right, ahead, behind, up...

And down.

Landon rolled over, his nose pressed into the hard-packed, gritty dirt.

All around him, iron drew on his magic. Left, right, ahead, behind, up...

But not down.

Landon pressed his face deeper into the dirt, ignoring the grit that clung to his sweat-slicked skin. He focused what of his mind he could, pushing past the pain and chaos, reaching for the familiar comfort of his Earth magic. It was there, buried beneath the maelstrom of Flame and Sky, a steady pulse that beat in time with his heart.

He latched onto that connection, pouring all his concentration into strengthening it. The Earth magic responded sluggishly at first, drained by the constant pull of the iron, but Landon refused to relent. He coaxed it forward, whispering promises of freedom and vengeance, until it surged within him like an awakening giant.

With a grunt of effort, Landon began to push himself downward. The earth resisted him, packed hard from countless centuries of compression, but he refused to be deterred. He visualized his body sinking into the soil like a stone into water, slow and inexorable.

Inch by painful inch, he forced his way deeper. The iron bars seemed to scream in protest, redoubling their efforts to steal his magic, but Landon gritted his teeth and pushed onward. Dirt filled his nostrils and mouth, threatening to choke him, but he didn't dare stop for breath. His Earth affinity seemed to kick in automatically, protecting him and providing him with fresh air from... somewhere.

As he descended, memories began to surface through the haze of his fractured mind. He saw himself as a child, playing in the gardens of his family's estate, shaping the earth into blocks. He remembered the pride on his father's face when he'd first manifested his Earth affinity, the knowing smile of the old man as he taught Landon to nurture plants from nothing in just moments.

These memories strengthened Landon, reminding him of who he was beneath the madness and pain. He was Landon, son of a strong family, destined for greatness. He would not be defeated by some crude cage, not when his birthright awaited him. I am to be king.

With a final, herculean effort, Landon pushed himself fully into the earth. The soil closed over his head like a lover's embrace, welcoming him into its depths. For a moment, he simply lay there, reveling in the sudden absence of pain as the iron's influence faded away.

Then, with a thought, he began to move forward, swimming through the earth as easily as a fish through water. His Earth magic propelled him onward, parting the soil before him and closing it behind, leaving no trace of his passage.

I could escape, he thought to himself.

I must punish the humans, himself thought to him.

A king never runs, him told he.

He angled upward.

In the bustling town square, the three humans labored under the harsh midday sun, their brows furrowed with concentration and worry. Aimery grunted as he hauled a heavy coil of iron chains over to the pit where Landon lay trapped. The chains

clinked and rattled, a discordant symphony that set teeth on edge.

Beside him, Eira wiped sweat from her brow. She held a bundle of iron chain mail, the intricate links glinting in the sunlight. The mail was crude and had been made hastily, its links too thick to lend the mail much flexibility. It had been a chore to forge this much, but iron was their only protection against these witches.

Nordon paced around the pit, his boots kicking up small clouds of dust, as he mulled over their options. The iron bars of the cage had seemed sufficient at first, but Landon's agonized cries and the palpable aura of magic emanating from the pit had quickly disabused them of that notion. Every bit of their organization's experience told Nordon that the young madman should have been unconscious, if not dead, yet he lay there, moaning and ranting about being king.

"The chain mail might work as a blanket," Nordon said, his voice tight with tension. "If we can get it through the bars and wrap it around him, it should suppress his magic further. But we'll need to be quick about it—who knows how long those bars will hold?"

Aimery frowned, eyeing the narrow gaps between the bars. "It'll be a tight fit," he rumbled. "And even if we get it in, there's no guarantee he won't just roll out of the way."

"What about the chains?" Eira asked, gesturing to the coil at Aimery's feet. "If we can loop them around the bars, maybe we can create a sort of secondary cage. Even if he gets past the mail, he'll still be trapped."

Nordon considered this, his fingers drumming a restless tattoo against his thigh. "It could work," he said slowly. "But we'd need to anchor the chains deep in the ground, and I don't like the idea of getting that close to the edge. If he manages to grab one of us..."

He left the thought unfinished, but they all knew the risks. Landon was powerful, and more than that, he was unpredictable. And, from what the other witches had said, insane.

For a half-moment, Nordon wished he had some way of summoning those other witches, some way to get them to deal with one of their own. But he killed the thought almost as it was born. They would not owe a favor to "witchkind." It was up to him, here and now, to prove that humans could stand alone against the threat of magic and those who wielded it.

"Let's—" he started to say.

A thunderous crack split the air, cutting off Nordon's words. Across the square, the earth heaved and buckled, sending cobblestones flying like missiles. People screamed and scrambled for cover as a geyser of dirt and rock erupted from the ground, rising higher and higher until it towered over the surrounding buildings.

And there, at the heart of the maelstrom, stood Landon.

He was barely recognizable, caked from head to toe in thick, dark soil that clung to his skin and matted his hair. His once-fine clothes hung in tattered ruins, shredded by his subterranean journey. But his eyes... those blazed with a feverish intensity, twin pools of molten gold that seemed to burn right through to the soul.

Flame magic crackled around his hands, writhing tendrils of orange and red that cast eerie shadows across his dirt-streaked face. The very air around him shimmered with heat, distorting the buildings behind him like a desert mirage. Landon took a step forward, then another, his bare feet leaving charred footprints on the cobblestones.

"Kneel," he commanded, his voice booming across the square with unnatural volume. "Kneel before your king!"

Panic erupted among the townspeople. They ran in all directions, tripping over each other in their haste to escape the

mad witch. Mothers clutched wailing children to their chests, while men brandished pitchforks and shovels in trembling hands. But Landon paid them no heed, his burning gaze fixed solely on Nordon, Aimery, and Eira.

"You dare to imprison me?" he snarled, the flames around his hands flaring brighter. "You insignificant specks of dust? I am your sovereign, ordained by the very elements themselves!"

He thrust out a hand, and a wall of fire roared to life, cutting off the far side of the square. The heat was intense, searing the skin even from a distance. Several people who had been fleeing in that direction skidded to a halt, their faces blanching with terror.

"On your knees," Landon repeated, his tone brooking no argument. "Swear fealty to me, and I may spare your miserable lives."

Nordon stepped forward, his jaw set in a stubborn line. "We kneel to no one," he said firmly, drawing his sword, "least of all a deranged witch drunk on his own power."

Landon's eyes narrowed to slits. "You will learn respect," he hissed.

Thunks sounded from above, and a dozen iron-tipped crossbow bolts flew through the air.

As if I wouldn't take precautions, Nordon thought as he and his companions dove to the ground.

A second, heavier thunk announced the firing of a large arbalest, one fitted to cast a heavy sheet of iron chain mail. More thunks sounded as ground-level crossbows were loosed, sending more iron-tipped quarrels flying.

Landon's eyes widened as he sensed the incoming barrage of iron, the metal's insidious aura sending shudders through his magic-enhanced senses. With a snarl of defiance, he thrust out both hands, calling upon the roiling power of Flame to shield him.

A blistering wall of fire erupted around Landon, the scorching heat so intense that it seemed to melt the very air. The iron-tipped crossbow bolts plunged into this inferno, their deadly points glowing white-hot in an instant. Some were vaporized on the spot, dissolving into ash and smoke, while others were deflected off-course, sent spiraling away like meteors.

The heavy chain mail, propelled by the powerful arbalest, fared slightly better. It punched through the outermost layer of Landon's defenses, the iron links sizzling and warping as they absorbed the brunt of the Flame magic. But even this sturdy barrier could not withstand the full might of Landon's power. The center of the chain mail began to glow a dull red, then a bright orange, as Landon focused his will upon it. In a matter of seconds, the links softened and ran like molten wax, the once-solid sheet of metal deforming and splitting apart.

But Landon's magic, as vast and potent as it was, was not infinite. The constant assault of iron, combined with the effort of maintaining his fiery shield, began to take its toll. Beads of sweat ran down his face, mingling with the dirt and grime, and his breath came in ragged gasps. His control wavered for just a fraction of a second—but it was enough.

Two crossbow bolts, their iron tips still glowing from the heat of Landon's barrier, found their mark. They punctured his defenses as if they were paper, the weakened Flame magic parting before the onslaught of iron. One bolt buried itself deep in Landon's shoulder, while the other found its home in his thigh.

The pain was instantaneous and all-consuming. It was as if the iron was not merely piercing his flesh, but his very soul. The metal's nullifying properties clashed violently with Landon's magic, sending shock waves of agony through every fiber of his being. It felt as though his blood had turned to acid, corroding

him from the inside out. His magic, once a raging tempest within him, now writhed and convulsed like a wounded animal, lashing out in a futile attempt to expel the intrusive iron.

Landon's scream rent the air, a sound of such pure, unadulterated suffering that it seemed to still the very breeze. His legs buckled beneath him, and he crumpled to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut. The flames around him sputtered and died, leaving only wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of burning iron.

Landon blinked.

Landon lay on his back in the grass, staring up at the sky with unfocused eyes. The blades of grass tickled his skin, their soft caress a stark contrast to the searing pain that had consumed him just moments before. Or had it been hours? Days? In this strange, timeless place, it was impossible to tell.

The sky above him was a deep, endless blue, unmarred by even the faintest wisp of cloud. It seemed to stretch on forever, an infinite expanse that made Landon feel infinitesimally small. The sun, a perfect golden orb, hung motionless at its zenith, casting a warm, gentle light that suffused the entire landscape.

As Landon's senses slowly returned, he became aware of the utter silence that enveloped him. There was no rustle of wind through the grass, no chirping of birds or buzzing of insects. Even his own breathing seemed muted, as if the very air was holding its breath. It was a silence so profound that it was almost a presence unto itself, vast and all-encompassing.

"Hello?"

Hmm? Oh. Hello. Didn't expect you here.

The disembodied voice seemed to come from both everywhere and nowhere, all at once. It thrummed in Landon's

chest, filled him, and then emptied him when it was finished speaking.

“Who are you?”

Mmm. Probably doesn’t matter. I’m a little surprised you could touch this place. Let’s have a look... ah. Well, there it is.

“What?”

The Sea affinity you’ve been missing. It’s there. Opened, even. But Dmitry hadn’t mastered it, and so he couldn’t pass it along. And I think... yes, there they are. The Fifth and Sixth. Nascent and latent, but there. That explains it.

“Who are you?” Landon insisted.

No, we’ve done that one. Next, you ask where you are.

“Where am I?”

In the Origin. Or near to it.

“Am I... dead?”

The voice paused for a long moment. Yes. Or near to it. Your mind wasn’t meant for all of this, you know.

Suddenly, Landon’s body was full of anguish, as if a blanket of iron had been laid over him. His magic screamed, and his—

Ah, ah. Let’s not feel all of that right now.

The pain vanished, replaced by a cool, fresh breeze. “What about my mind?” Landon asked as the pain receded.

It isn’t once in a generation, you know. I’d know. I’ve watched. It’s once every few centuries. And it wasn’t you. Even with the inheritance magic, you shouldn’t have gotten this bad. I’m guessing it was done poorly, or that you were even more ill-prepared to receive it than anyone thought.

“Can I go home?” Landon asked in a very small voice.

Mmm. No, I don’t think that’s going to happen.

“What will happen to me?”

Why don’t we just stay here and talk for a bit?

The witch was down, another blanket of chain mail draped across him. The man who'd thrown it was kneeling on the ground, panting from the effort, and Nordon could hear his fighters frantically winding their crossbows for another volley.

"Nordon!" someone shouted.

He turned himself on the ground, rolling quickly to one side as a sharpened iron rod thudded into the ground next to him, vibrating from its impact. He stood quickly, grabbed the spear, and turned to the fallen witch.

"I was never good enough," Landon said softly, sinking to his knees in the grass.

You were fine. You were the only one who thought you weren't.

"I wanted to be powerful."

You were. Earth magic is subtle, but it's amongst the most powerful. And it can last forever.

"I'm not going to last forever."

A long pause, and then, No. You're not.

"Will you stay with me?"

Until the end. Possibly beyond.

"Thank you."

Nordon drove the spear through the fallen witch's chest. The body convulsed once, and then lay still.

Landon's world began to crack and splinter. The meadow fractured, grassy earth flying away in flat shards, leaving behind an empty, inky darkness.

Yet there was no pain in this unmaking, no sense of loss or anguish. Instead, as the last vestiges of Landon's dream crumbled away, a profound sense of peace and belonging washed over him. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, a burden he had carried for so long that he had forgotten what it felt like to be free of it.

As the grass and sky of his imagined landscape faded, Landon found himself floating in a vast, star-strewn expanse. It was the Origin, he realized, but not as he had ever perceived it before. Here, in this place beyond time and space, magic was not an abstract concept or a tool to be wielded. It was a tangible presence, a living, breathing force that suffused every atom of his being.

Around him, great orbs of pure elemental energy drifted and spun, each one a microcosm of the affinities he had known in life. There was the deep, rich green of Earth magic, pulsing with the steady rhythm of growing things. The fiery orange of Flame magic crackled and danced, casting flickering shadows across the void. The pale, ethereal blue of Sky magic swirled and eddied, carrying with it the whisper of wind and the promise of freedom.

And there, intertwined with the others, was a new presence: the shimmering, mercurial silver of Sea magic. It flowed and surged around Landon, its touch cool and soothing against his incorporeal form. He could feel its vast, untapped potential, the power of the tides and the secrets of the deep.

Landon realized now that this was what he had been missing all along. Not power for its own sake, not dominion over others, but a true connection to the source of all magic. Here, in the heart of the Origin, there was no need for thrones

or crowns or grand titles. There was only the pure, unadulterated joy of being one with the fundamental forces of the universe.

As Landon's consciousness began to dissolve, merging with the swirling energies around him, he felt a profound sense of acceptance and understanding. All his struggles, all his pain and confusion, those didn't matter anymore.

He lay back and exhaled gently.

"Is he..." Aimery asked, brushing dirt from his clothes.

Nordon nodded. "We just needed enough iron."

"That was a bloody lot, though."

Nordon looked him in the eyes. "But it was enough. We can defend ourselves, Aimery. We have their notes, and we have ours—we can rebuild. Build more. For the first time in... probably millennia, humans can be human. Do you see it?"

Aimery nodded slowly at first, then emphatically. He lunged forward and embraced his friend. "Nordon, this makes us free."

"It does," Nordon said, slapping his friend on the back. "But," he added, pulling away and again meeting the man's eyes, "it might not be easy."

Aimery frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Some of them will leave us be. They have places they're welcome, now—those so-called Arcane Cities. If we're lucky, they'll leave it at that, leave us... leave the Iron Cities alone. But... remember what that Finley told us."

Aimery considered, and then nodded. "There are factions within the witches."

"Exactly. And we don't know what the others will do. So." He stepped back and looked around the square. "We need to

take the path Westhead took. Build Farreach in the South into an Iron City. Help every other town and village who has rejected the witches do the same. Give them our weapons designs. Tell them what we've accomplished here today." He nodded slowly to himself. "We've work to do. Eira!" he called to the young woman who was just pulling herself upright. "Get the others! We have work to do."

A Clash of Forces

Finley awoke with a start as the farmhouse's alarms went off. Reflexively, his magic spun around him, pulling on clothes and taking him to the second-story map room.

"Finley!" Arcadia said, relief evident in her voice. "They pulled a fast one on us."

"Who?" he asked, blinking sleep from his eyes. "Is it the Lakewood—"

"No, they slowed down—they're still two days out, at least. It's Fyngershire—they've launched an attack on Rushford!"

Finley paled. Rushford sat on the southern border of the Great Northern Wood, a part of the continent that had been all but off-limits to everyone, human and witchkind alike, for time immemorial. Only a handful of hard Woodwitches dared live there, self-appointed guardians and caretakers who were known for having little patience for intrusions. And even in Rushford, witchkind minimized their use of magic to avoid angering the Wood itself. "How could they have—"

"It's my fault," Arcadia said. "We've been spread so thin—"

we didn't think anyone would actually march an iron-armed army toward the Wood! I've had everyone watching the other Iron Cities, trying to infiltrate, and everyone's been so busy building Crafhhold, we—"

"It's fine," Finley said quickly. "Summon whoever you can. Is Kelden—"

"Already gone. Along with two other Thornwaithe's alum."

Finley's spine chilled. "That's not good." Thornwaithe's was the most unusual of witchkind's three Great Schools. Secretive, fascinated with combat strategy and tactics, and possessed of an eerie, mysterious connection with magic itself. Any threat to magic—which would include the Great Northern Wood, Finley imagined—was met with mind-controlled Thornwaithe's alum in possession of vast, brute-force powers. "I'm going now. Get who you can." His magic rushed up and carried him away.

The sky was a deep indigo, the first hints of dawn barely visible on the eastern horizon as Finley materialized on a hilltop overlooking the village of Rushford. The air was still, heavy with the earthy scents of the Great Northern Wood that loomed just beyond, its ancient trees rising like silent sentinels.

Rushford itself was a quaint hamlet of thatched roofs and stone walls, nestled in a shallow valley. Wisps of smoke curled from chimneys as the villagers stirred, just now aware of the threat approaching from the south. Finley's keen eyes picked out the enemy forces immediately.

A line of wagons stretched across the southern approach, widely spaced to avoid presenting a single target. Each was laden with crude iron weapons—pikes, swords, crossbows, even a massive carronade. The dull metal seemed to drink in the torchlight of the accompanying soldiers, armed men who marched alongside with grim purpose.

Finley cursed under his breath.

A glimmer of magic between the village and the approaching army heralded the arrival of another of witchkind, and then Finley spotted them all: A dozen Thornwaithe's alum, ranged out in the field, ready to confront the humans.

He grimaced. This was likely to go poorly, just as it had with the carronade outside Evermore. Iron was iron; the semi-sentient force of magic might control incredible power, might summon every alum who'd ever graduated, but it was still subject to the laws of nature. Those laws demanded that magic be grounded by iron.

Finley quickly called a combination of Earth and Sea magic, softening the ground across the enemy's front, a simple enough tactic that still required more finesse than the alum were likely to exhibit in their current condition. Curses went up from the human soldiers, but they immediately started readying their long-range weapons: arbalests, the carronade, even a small catapult that likely had projectiles laced with iron.

Finley turned and scanned the village. Its witchkind had mustered, and he could sense them already beginning to work magic. But it was too little, accustomed as they were to minimizing their use of magic for fear of disturbing the Wood. And then, just beyond the village, he began to sense the Woodwitches gathering, grimly intent on their mission of safeguarding the forest. Too many people wearing blinders, he thought at once. The Thornwaithe's alum would act on their own, as would the Woodwitches.

He crafted a Sending.

Work together. Protect the village, protect the Wood. We face iron, and they have ranged weapons.

Hopefully that would get everyone—likely not the alum, who had already ceded control to magic itself—to cooperate to greater effect. And then, he saw, it had: several Woodwitches, who tended to be incredibly strong in Earth affinity, had used

magic to carry themselves to the village's southern perimeter. Already, they were unleashing more magic than the environs of the Wood had probably seen in generations, hauling spires of rock from the earth itself, forming a rough stockade to protect the village's approach.

And not a moment too soon.

The carronade belched fire and smoke, its heavy iron projectile hurtling through the predawn gloom. It collided with the newly-formed stone wall with a thunderous crack, sending shards of rock flying. The wall held, but a spiderweb of fissures spread out from the point of impact, weakening the hastily-erected barrier.

Immediately, the gathered witchkind sprang into action. Earth mages thrust their hands forward, pouring their magic into the stone. The cracks began to seal, the rock fusing back together as if it had never been sundered. But even as they worked, a second projectile slammed into the wall, opening fresh wounds.

Finley jumped with alarm. The humans had pulled a tarp from a second carronade!

Behind the beleaguered barricade, more magic was at work. Witchkind with affinities for Sky and Flame stepped forward, weaving their power together. A shimmering dome of force began to take shape, rising up from the ground to arch protectively over the village. It was translucent, shot through with dancing motes of light that sparkled like captured stars.

The dome had barely solidified when it was tested. The catapult on the enemy lines fired, hurling a jagged sphere of iron straight at the heart of Rushford. It struck the magic shield.

That shield must have had a legendary amount of power in it, Finley realized, because while it shattered upon contact with iron, that destruction was more than the iron itself could take.

The projectile shattered as well, drops of molten iron spattering down on the rock wall below. A ragged cheer went up from the defending witchkind.

But Finley, watching from his hilltop vantage, felt no such jubilation. He could see the strain on their faces, the tension in their stances. Maintaining such a working was no easy feat, and against the relentless onslaught of cold iron, even their formidable magic would eventually falter. Witchkind could only use magic they'd gathered into themselves, and with that kind of expenditure, they'd be empty quickly.

Finley began pooling his own magic into his mind.

The Thornwaithe's alum had engaged now, moving forward in eerie unison. They did not waste effort on shielding spells or barricades; their magic was of a more direct sort. With a gesture, one of them set the grass before the iron-laden wagons alight, sending up a wall of hungry flames that were far hotter than their fuel should have made possible. Another made a grasping motion, and purple sparks danced from the iron-reinforced wagons, protecting the wood beneath from whatever magic had attempted.

A noise like a hundred whistles sailed overhead, and Finley realized that Rushford's human defenders had finally come to the fight. Renowned as archers, they let loose a flight of arrows over the rock wall, descending on the heads of the humans. In the pre-dawn dark, the humans would only be able to hear it coming, and Finley suspected their attention was full captured by the still-raging flames in front of them.

He was right.

The cloud of arrows descended upon the human forces like a dark swarm, whistling ominously as they fell. Screams of pain and surprise erupted from the ranks as the shafts found their marks, piercing flesh and felling soldiers. In the flickering light

of the flames, Finley could see bodies crumpling to the ground, blood darkening the earth.

But the humans were quick to retaliate. Their own archers nocked arrows to bowstrings, the iron tips glinting cruelly. With a whoosh of released tension, they let fly, sending a deadly volley arcing toward Rushford's defenders.

The witchkind rallied, pouring their magic into the shimmering dome once more. It sprang back into existence, a gossamer barrier against the incoming missiles. Many of the arrows struck this shield and shattered, unable to pierce the combined power of Sky and Flame, although each contact weakened the shield as well.

Yet iron was iron, and magic could only resist it for so long. Here and there, arrows found the gaps in the reforming shield, slipping through like silver fish darting through a net. They plunged into the village, finding targets both human and witchkind.

A woman screamed as a shaft buried itself in her shoulder, spinning her to the ground. Nearby, a Woodwitch grunted in pain, an arrow protruding from his thigh, the iron tip disrupting his magic. All along the barricade, defenders fell, clutching at wounds, their blood mingling with the dirt.

Finley gritted his teeth as he surveyed the chaos. The shimmering dome was fracturing, the magic of its creators stretched to the breaking point. Each volley of iron-tipped arrows opened new rents, and there was simply not enough power to seal them all.

Still, Rushford's defenders fought on with grim determination. The human archers loosed shaft after shaft, their aim true even in the half-light of dawn. Flame-affinity witchkind hurled fireballs at the wagons, trying to ignite the iron-laced wood. Earth witches raised walls of stone to provide cover, only to see them shattered by the relentless, booming carronade fire.

And always, the Thornwaithe's alum moved forward, their magic a palpable force. One gestured, and a whirlwind sprang up, hurling humans and broken wagons aside like toys. Another stamped her foot, and the ground rippled outward in a shockwave, staggering the front line of soldiers.

But for every human that fell, two more seemed to take their place, pouring from the wagons in a ceaseless tide. They advanced relentlessly, heedless of the flames, the arrows, the very earth that bucked beneath their feet. Their eyes were fixed on Rushford, on the Great Northern Wood beyond, and in those eyes Finley saw a zealous determination that chilled him to his core.

“HURTS!!!”

Finley blinked in confusion.

He was standing in a meadow at night, the grass itself glowing a soft emerald, with yellow motes dancing above its gently waving tips. Underneath, the earth glowed in ominous streaks of orange and red, and the scent of sulphur filled the air.

Before him was the strangest creature he'd ever seen. Its skin was midnight-blue, its long, unbound hair a glossy black. Its ears came to graceful points on either side of its head, and its lean, muscled arms ended in tightly clenched fists.

“HURTS!!!” it screamed again, green spittle flying from its mouth. “HELP US!!!”

“I'm... trying...” Finley said, trying to understand what was happening to him.

The magical dome shattered like a crystal goblet struck by a hammer, shards of iridescent energy dissipating into the dawn air. The witchkind maintaining it staggered back, their faces ashen with exhaustion. Without the protective shield, the village of Rushford lay bare before the relentless onslaught of the human forces.

The arbalests unleashed a storm of iron-tipped bolts, the heavy projectiles whistling over the stone wall like a swarm of enraged hornets. They punched through the thatched roofs and wooden walls of homes and shops with frightening ease, leaving gaping, splintered holes in their wake. Flames blossomed in the bolts' fiery trails, licking hungrily at the dried straw and aged timbers.

Screams of terror rose from the villagers as they cowered behind the meager protection of the stone barricade. Witchkind rushed to and fro, their magic straining to douse the spreading fires and bolster the crumbling wall. Those with Sea-affinity summoned great gouts of liquid from wells and nearby streams, directing them at the burning buildings in sizzling arcs. Earth witches thrust their hands forward, pouring their power into the stone, causing it to flow and reform like molten wax to seal the cracks and grow higher still.

But for every breach mended, every flame extinguished, two more appeared in its place. The arbalests fired with mechanical precision, their iron-armed wielders cranking back the powerful springs with grim efficiency. The bolts they launched were as thick as a man's thumb and twice as long, capable of skewering a draft horse at two hundred paces. Against the village's soft targets, they were brutally effective.

A bolt punched through the wall of the village's small inn, exploding out the back in a shower of splinters and plaster. Inside, patrons screamed and dove for cover as another projec-

tile shattered the heavy oak bar, sending shards of wood and gouts of ale spraying across the room.

In the village square, a trio of bolts struck the ancient stone well at its center, pulverizing the masonry and sending jagged chunks of rock flying like shrapnel. A knot of villagers that had been huddled near the well for shelter scattered in panic, only to be cut down by the razor-sharp fragments.

Finley watched the unfolding devastation with a growing sense of despair. The human forces seemed inexhaustible, their weapons implacable. For every iron-tipped arrow that found its mark in witchkind flesh, for every stone blasted from the barricade, the defenders' strength waned. Even the mighty Thornwaithe's alum, still striding forward through the chaos with single-minded purpose, could not stand indefinitely against the onslaught of cold iron. Their attacks were too brute-force, too focused on smashing, too easily deflected by the immense amount of iron arrayed before them.

"HURTS!!!" the blue creature screamed again.

Finley shook himself, once again disoriented by the sudden change.

Then something deep within him made a suggestion.

"You're magic, aren't you?"

"The land!" it moaned, falling to its knees. "The land and the world!"

"Let them go!" Finley shouted angrily at it, causing it to scabble backwards in the grass. "Let the Thornwaithe's alum go! They're not doing any good this way!"

The creature's lips twisted. "Must smash them!" it snarled. "Must protect—"

“Smashing isn’t working!” Finley hollered back. “Give them to me!”

Finley stood atop a low hill, his heart pounding as he surveyed the unfolding chaos below. The witchkind of Rushford fought with desperate ferocity, hurling everything they had at the relentless human attackers.

With their magical reserves dwindling, they resorted to more primal tactics. Earth-affinity witchkind wrenched massive boulders from the ground, the stone groaning and cracking as it was ripped free. With grunts of exertion, they lobbed these projectiles at the enemy lines, the huge rocks tumbling end over end before crashing into the iron-clad wagons with thunderous impacts.

The boulders smashed through wood and metal alike, sending splinters and shards flying in all directions. Human soldiers scattered, shouting in fear and pain as they were pelted by the debris. Horses reared and whinnied in terror, their eyes rolling white as they strained against their harnesses.

But even this display of raw power was not enough to halt the human advance. For every wagon destroyed, two more seemed to roll forward to take its place, disgorging fresh troops armed with cold iron. They surged towards the village barricades like an inexorable tide, their weapons glinting in the growing light of dawn.

Desperate, the witchkind turned to the wreckage of their own village for ammunition. Flame-affinity witchkind set their power to the broken timbers of collapsed buildings, the wood igniting with searing heat. The air shimmered and wavered as tongues of fire danced along the beams, licking at the splinters and charred edges.

Then, their jaws clenched, those few of Earth-affinity with any remaining power took control of the burning wood. They shaped and molded it with their magic, the timbers flexing and warping like living things. Sharpened points emerged from the ends, honed to wicked edges by the intense heat. In moments, the witchkind had created massive, improvised spears, each one as long as three men laid end to end.

With a synchronized heave, they launched these flaming javelins at the enemy ranks. The oversized spears hurtled through the air, trailing plumes of smoke and sparks, before plunging into the mass of human soldiers. Men screamed as the white-hot points pierced armor and flesh alike, the searing heat cauterizing even as it skewered. The stench of burning hair and charring skin wafted across the battlefield.

Yet even this desperate measure bought the defenders only a brief respite. The human forces were too numerous, their iron too abundant. They trampled over the smoldering corpses of their comrades and pressed forward, their faces set with zealous determination.

Amidst this carnage, the Thornwaithe's alum suddenly faltered. They blinked and shook their heads as if waking from a dream, their previous single-minded purpose evaporating.

Kelden swiftly ran to Finley. "There's too much iron, too many attackers. Even I... I don't know what—"

"I do," Finley said quickly. "You have Sky affinity; we need to get those with Flame into the air to—"

"No!" Kelden barked, causing Finley to take a half-step back. "No," he repeated. "Flying is forbidden here. Flame, too. The witchkind here—"

"Why?" Finley demanded, beginning to summon his own Sky magic.

"We don't know, just that it is," Kelden said. He turned to

face the humans, who'd slowed in firing their heavy artillery. "You have Earth. Make a sinkhole."

Finley shook his head. "Even the ground I softened has firmed up. There's way too much iron. Are you sure we can't—"

Suddenly, the world around him seemed to shimmer and dissolve, the sounds of battle fading into a muted hum.

Finley found himself standing in a strange, ethereal space, a void filled with swirling mists of indigo and violet. Glowing motes drifted lazily through the air, pulsing with inner light.

Before him, a scene unfolded like a living tapestry woven from gossamer threads of magic. He saw a group of Sky-affinity witchkind, their faces set and shoulders squared, rising into the air on currents of wind. Each carried a large bucket in their hands, the contents sloshing and splashing as they ascended.

As they gained altitude, Finley saw that the buckets were filled with oil, the dark liquid gleaming with a greasy sheen. Tongues of flame danced along the rims, casting flickering shadows across the witchkind's features.

Higher and higher they rose, until they were soaring above the battlefield like a flock of avenging angels. With precise movements, they began to tip their buckets, sending cascades of burning oil raining down upon the human forces below.

The flaming liquid splattered across the iron-clad wagons and the tightly packed ranks of soldiers, igniting instantly. Men screamed as the searing oil clung to their skin and hair, the flames hungrily consuming everything they touched. The air filled with the acrid stench of burning flesh and melting metal.

For a moment, it seemed as though the tide of battle might turn in favor of the defenders. The human advance faltered as

soldiers frantically tried to beat out the flames engulfing their comrades. The iron wagons creaked and groaned as the intense heat warped their metal frames.

But then, from the depths of the Great Northern Wood, a new horror emerged. The trees at the forest's edge shook and swayed, their branches cracking and snapping as if lashed by a fierce wind. Dark shapes burst from the foliage, rising into the sky on leathery wings.

They were creatures out of nightmare, twisted amalgamations of bat, serpent, and insect. Their bodies were covered in oily black chitin, glistening in the dawning light. Serrated mandibles clacked and snapped, dripping with viscous ichor. Eyes the color of molten gold glared with malevolent hunger.

The winged monstrosities fell upon the airborne witchkind like a pack of ravenous wolves. Razor-sharp talons slashed and tore, ripping through flesh and bone with sickening ease. Barbed tails lashed out, coiling around limbs and necks, yanking the witchkind from the sky.

Screams of agony followed them to the ground. They—
Fmmly, stpp!

A voice in Finley's head, deeply muffled and far away, shouted for his attention.

The scene shifted.

As the horrific visions faded, Finley found himself once again standing on the hilltop, the battle raging before him. The human forces had rallied, their iron weapons glinting in the growing light as they pressed their attack. The witchkind defenders, exhausted and depleted, fought on with grim determination.

But then, a new vision swam into focus before Finley's eyes,

superimposing itself over the chaos of the battlefield. In this shimmering, ethereal scene, he saw the Flame-affinity witchkind step forward, their faces set with fierce resolve. They raised their hands, calling upon the deep wells of power within them.

Fireballs blossomed from their outstretched palms, swirling orbs of searing heat and light. With sharp, precise gestures, they hurled these flaming spheres at the advancing human ranks, the projectiles streaking through the air like miniature comets.

The fireballs detonated amidst the tightly packed soldiers with thunderous concussions, sending up goutts of flame and smoke. Men screamed as the searing heat washed over them, igniting clothing and hair, blistering skin and melting armor. The stench of charred flesh mingled with the acrid tang of burning metal.

More Flame witchkind joined the fray, weaving intricate patterns in the air with their hands. Ribbons of fire followed their movements, swirling and coalescing into massive, serpentine forms. These fiery constructs lunged forward, engulfing entire wagons in their blazing coils, reducing wood and iron to ash and slag.

For a moment, it again seemed as though the tide was turning. The human advance faltered as soldiers frantically beat at the flames consuming their comrades, their formation breaking apart under the relentless onslaught of magical fire.

But then, something new emerged from the depths of the Great Northern Wood. The trees at the forest's edge trembled and shook, their leaves rustling as if disturbed by a sudden wind. Shapes darted from the shadows of the undergrowth, scuttling forward on clawed feet.

They were lizard-like creatures, their scales glistening in hues of obsidian and emerald. Tongues of flame danced along their sinuous bodies, flickering between the razor-sharp ridges

of their spines. Eyes like smoldering coals glared with primal hunger as they surged onto the battlefield.

To Finley's horror, the creatures seemed drawn to the magical flames, devouring them with ravenous appetite. They leapt into the blazing wagons, bathing in the searing heat, their own bodies igniting with an eerie, greenish fire. They grew larger with each conflagration consumed, swelling in size until they towered over the human soldiers.

Panic spread through the ranks of witchkind as the flaming lizards rampaged through the village, setting small fires to everything their bodies touched. In moments, Rushford was being consumed by flame.

Finley! His voice was shouting now, screaming for attention. You have to stop this! She's too close—

The trees of the forest that were closest to the village caught fire, sparks fountaining from their canopy and spreading... spreading... before long—

Finley! the voice demanded. Please! Shake yourself out of—
“What's this, then?”

Finley's eyes snapped open...

...and time was stopped.

Not slowed; this wasn't the sudden, impossible clarity of a mind working in overdrive, filled with adrenaline and fear. Time was literally stopped.

Finley blinked in astonishment. The battlefield below him was utterly still, as if a painting had sprung to life before his eyes, only to freeze in place once more. Tendrils of smoke hung motionless in the air, curling up from the smoldering wagons and scorched earth like sculpted ribbons of gray. Flames, halted mid-flicker, cast an eerie, unmoving glow across the scene.

Soldiers were caught in a macabre tableau, their faces contorted in silent screams, weapons raised in interrupted strikes. Some were frozen mid-leap, hanging suspended above the ground like marionettes with invisible strings. Others were captured in the act of falling, their bodies tilted at unnatural angles, yet never reaching the blood-soaked soil beneath them.

Finley's gaze drifted to the witchkind defenders, their expressions locked in a mix of determination, fear, and desperation. Hands were thrust outward, fingers splayed, magic halted in the space between heartbeats. Flame-affinity witchkind were encased in cocoons of motionless fire, the heat of their power palpable even in this frozen moment. Those of Earth-affinity were caught with arms raised, rock and soil suspended in mid-air around them, waiting for a command that would never come.

At the edge of the Great Northern Wood, the trees stood in eerie stillness. Leaves, caught in the act of fluttering from branches, hung like delicate green jewels against the sky. Sparks from the encroaching flames were suspended in a glittering array, a deadly constellation that would never find its mark.

In this crystallized second, Finley could see every detail with impossible clarity. The individual links in the soldiers' iron armor, the sweat beading on their brows, the flecks of blood and dirt on their skin. The intricate weave of magic around the witchkind, shimmering threads of power frozen in complex patterns. The facets of the flames, each lick and curl perfectly preserved in a moment of terrible beauty.

It was as if the world itself were holding its breath, waiting for some unseen force to release it from this uncanny paralysis. Finley stood at the center of it all, the only moving thing in a universe of stillness, his heart pounding in his ears like a drum beating against the silence.

"What's this?"

Finley turned—why can I move?—and found himself face to face with a stooped, impossibly old woman. Her short hair was pure white, a stark contrast against her midnight skin. Her eyes were flashing with barely suppressed anger. “You don’t know me, boy, but—”

Call her Aunt.

“Aunt?” Finley said aloud.

One thick finger stopped midway to Finley’s chest as the woman’s eyes narrowed. Then her lips thinned and she gave a shallow nod. “See you in there, boy.” She lowered her hand. “This can’t happen here,” she continued, turning her head to take in the carnage. “Too much magic. Too close.” She waved a hand. “Take it away.”

“I can’t just take it away,” Finley snapped.

Careful, the voice warned.

“And you,” the woman growled leaning toward Finley staring daggers into his eyes. “You stay out of what’s mine!” Her shout thundered across the plain, echoing off the frozen trees and resonating deep within Finley’s chest. Then she peered closer. “You did this to him?” She shook her head and snorted. “No, no. You just showed the way.” She shrugged. “Can’t stop that. But this must go.” Again, she waved a hand, indicating the battlefield. “No magic in the Wood. You’ve seen what happens,” she growled. “Will let you keep it, if this goes away.”

“Who are you?” Finley blurted out.

“Ikwy,” she snapped. “Names don’t matter,” she added as Finley opened his mouth to give her his.

“We can’t stop them,” Finley reiterated. “There’s too much iron. Our magic—”

“Magic,” she muttered. “Can’t you see, boy?” She looked at him again, and Finley had the distinct impression she was looking through more than just his soul, that she could somehow perceive his entire life. “Ah,” she said softly, nodded

slowly, as if she'd just discovered something important. "Can't see yet. Didn't show him the whole way?" she called mockingly, and Finley realized she wasn't talking to him.

Tell her all in good time.

"He—it—that is, he says 'all in good time.'"

"Hah!" Ikwity barked. "No time is good. No time bad. Dithering, is all you do."

Tell her—

Can't you talk to her directly? Finley asked.

And bring her into the Origin? Absolutely not.

Is she... witchkind? Even as he asked it, Finley knew the old woman was not. He had no sense of her in his mind, not even the dim, dull sense that he felt from humans in his presence. She was like a hole in the world.

She's not of magic, the voice said, and Finley sensed a warning in its words. She's just inevitable.

"No chatting," the old woman grumbled. "If he won't show you, Ikwity will."

Finley inhaled sharply as he found himself floating high above the Great Northern Wood. This was no vision, he realized at once—he could still see the bright flames from the battle below, frozen points of light shining bright as the first rays of morning slid across the horizon.

Another, much brighter point of light, glowed from the midst of the forest. It was pure white, a white that can only be obtained by mixing every color imaginable with every color that wasn't. An all-encompassing, all-containing white that represented the all.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

“A source,” Ikwy whispered beside him, causing him to start. He hadn’t realized he wasn’t alone.

It’s one of two sources of magic in the world, his voice explained.

“Pure and wild. Untamed, uncolored,” Ikwy continued, her voice soft on the stilled breeze. As Finley watched, time seemed to come very slightly unstuck, and he could see energy fountaining from the forest. It rose high into the sky, almost to where he and Ikwy were floating, before cascading down and sinking into the earth. The amount of power coming out was immense, and while it seemed to be flowing incredibly fast, a quick glance at the battlefield told Finley that time was barely moving.

It sinks in, his voice said, and Finley definitely shared its obvious sense of wonder. It joins with the steadier flow from the bones of the world. That’s absorbed into the Origin, and colored with the affinities.

“But while it’s here,” Ikwy said, and Finley wasn’t sure if she’d heard his voice or not, “it is easily influenced by your magic. Your affinities. Only the Earth is safe, and only the smallest amounts.” The cadence of the woman’s voice had changed, becoming steadier, and her tone became lighter. Finley turned and saw that she’s somehow de-aged, shedding pounds of weight and what must have been centuries of wrinkles. She was middle-aged now, and reminded him of his own mother—save for her pure-white hair and ebony skin. “Call your Flame magic, and the power responds. Call on Sky, and it plays along.” She shook her now-regal head. “We can’t have magic here.”

“I told you, the iron—” Finley started.

She cut him off with a deep, throaty chuckle. “Look. Look deeply, at the bones of the world.”

That phrase again, Finley thought. He looked down, and

the separation between reality and vision seemed to shiver. He, or his spirit, dove down into the forest.

Finley's spirit plunged through the canopy of the Great Northern Wood, the leaves and branches parting before him like a veil of emerald silk. He descended past the gnarled trunks of ancient oaks and towering evergreens, their bark etched with the intricate patterns of centuries. The scent of rich loam and sweet sap enveloped him as he sank into the earth itself.

Deeper and deeper he went, the soil growing darker, denser. Tree roots wove through the substrate like thick ropes, pulsing with life. Tiny creatures scuttled through the gaps—beetles with carapaces of iridescent blue, centipedes with legs of delicate gold, their movements leaving faint trails of bioluminescence in the subterranean gloom.

The roots gave way to rock, the earth's flesh parting to reveal its skeleton beneath. And there, threading through the stone like glittering filigree, Finley saw them - the bones of the world. Veins of ore, some no thicker than a strand of hair, others as wide as a man's arm, branched and interlaced in a vast, shimmering web. Iron, copper, silver, gold—the metals caught the faint light filtering from above, reflecting it back in a mesmerizing dance.

Finley's spirit followed these gleaming conduits, marveling at their intricacy. They seemed almost alive, their surfaces shivering with subtle energies. As he tracked them deeper, he sensed a palpable presence, a thrumming power that suffused the very bedrock. The veins of metal were like blood vessels, he realized, carrying the lifeblood of the earth itself.

Down, down he went, the pressure of the rock above him an almost physical weight. The air grew warmer, the darkness

more absolute. And still the metallic threads continued, plunging into depths unfathomable. Finley had the dizzying sense that he was sinking not just through earth, but through the very fabric of reality itself.

Flashes of heat and light began to strobe past him—pockets of magma, churning slow and angry red in the deep places of the world. The metal veins wound through these blazing caverns unfazed, the molten rock flowing around them like water parting for a stone. Finley marveled at their resilience, their ancient, unyielding strength.

Deeper still, and the sense of some vast, ineffable presence grew stronger. The metal veins pulsed in time with a rhythm he could feel in his bones, in his soul. They were converging now, the thousands of gleaming strands flowing together like tributaries merging into a great river.

And then he stopped.

Or rather, he was stopped.

Magic—the purest he could ever imagine, flowed along these veins of iron. But it flowed upward, it came from someplace ahead of him. Someplace down. He pushed himself, and felt resistance—something was pushing back. Frowning, he concentrated harder, willing his body to descend, to follow the trail of—

“That way is closed,” Ikwity said.

Finley blinked, and he was back on the ground with her, the battle still frozen around him.

I’ll take it from here, his voice said.

Now Finley was on a broad, grassy plain, standing at the foot of a shallow hill. Atop the hill were four pillars. He climbed the gentle slope of the hill, the soft grass cushioning his footsteps.

As he neared the top, the four pillars came into clearer view, each one a marvel of elemental beauty.

The first pillar was of purest obsidian, its surface as dark and glossy as a moonless night sky. Intricate veins of glittering minerals—quartz, mica, feldspar—ran through the volcanic glass like frozen lightning, forming patterns that seemed to shift and dance as Finley moved around it. The pillar was cool to the touch despite the warm breeze, and he could feel the solid, unshakable strength of the earth itself thrumming within the stone. This was the pillar of Earth, immovable and eternal.

Beside it stood a pillar of living flame, tongues of fire in every shade of red, orange and gold twining around each other in an endless, mesmerizing dance. The heat radiating from it was intense, yet instead of burning, it filled Finley with a sense of energizing warmth, like the first rays of the sun on a cold morning. Sparks drifted up from the ever-shifting surface, winking out like fireflies against the blue sky. At the pillar's heart, the flames burned white-hot, a pure, shimmering radiance. This was the pillar of Flame, vibrant and transformative.

The third pillar seemed woven from the very air, a swirling vortex of mist and wind. Tendrils of cloud spun and eddied, forming delicate patterns that resembled lace, feathers, the branches of trees in winter. As Finley watched, a miniature thunderstorm formed within the pillar, complete with tiny forks of lightning that flickered and danced. A cool, refreshing breeze sighed constantly from the pillar, carrying with it the petrichor scent of rain on dry earth. This was the pillar of Sky, dynamic and elusive.

Last was a pillar that seemed carved from the ocean itself, seawater swirling within an invisible boundary. The water was a blue so deep it bordered on black, shot through with ribbons of turquoise, teal, and foam white. Its surface was in constant motion, waves rising and falling, crashing and reforming

endlessly. The briny scent of the sea filled the air, and Finley could almost hear the distant cries of gulls. As he peered into the pillar's depths, he glimpsed darting silver fish, drifting fronds of kelp, the glint of nacre on a shell tumbling in the currents. This was the pillar of Sea, fluid and fathomless.

Stretched between the pillars, low to the ground and almost obscured by the grass, were small figures of clay. The resembled people, but they were crude, simplistic, little more than bobs with short extensions for legs, arms, and heads. But each was connected to the next, forming a perfect circle that connected the four pillars. He stepped over them and toward whatever was in the center of that circle.

It turned out to be a whirling vortex, a gaping maw in the earth, swirling in shades of gold and silver. Finley looked up and saw lines of energy connecting the four pillars to each other, and at the apex, directly over the vortex, threads of white energy were flowing up and down.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your vision of the Origin," his voice said. Finley turned and saw the young, pale-skinned, dark-haired man standing there, giving him a gentle smile. "I must say, it's very relaxing."

"Earth, Flame, Sky, Sea, I get," Finley said, turning slowly. Then he looked at the swirling maw. "Beginnings and Endings?" The young man nodded. "They were a pillar of their own, last time."

He shrugged. "They're not really magic. They're more... of an inevitability."

Finley blinked. "I'm not sure what I'm meant to—"

"You did it once before, remember?" the man said. "You brought them all together."

"Yes, but only for a—" Finley stopped as the moment replayed itself in his mind. "It was white."

"Yes."

"All of the affinities, combined."

"Yes."

"It's too much, isn't it? That's why the Origin separates it out? Most people can only deal with one, maybe two."

"Not you."

Finley blinked as comprehension dawned. "The iron."

The man smiled. "Yes."

Finley was once again on the battlefield. Aunt Ikwity was nowhere in sight, and time had resumed.

As the sky began to blush with the first rosy hues of dawn, the human forces launched their next assault on Rushford. The carronades belched smoke and fire, hurling their iron payloads with thunderous booms. The massive projectiles arced through the brightening sky, leaving trails of acrid smoke in their wake.

They smashed into the crumbling stone barricade with shattering force, pulverizing rock and mortar, sending jagged shards flying like deadly shrapnel. The wall, already weakened by the relentless bombardment, began to give way, gaping holes appearing as dust and debris rained down.

Through these breaches poured the human soldiers, their iron-clad boots trampling the rubble, their weapons glinting coldly in the growing light. They charged forward with zealous fervor, a tide of steel and determination that crashed against the faltering defenses of Rushford.

The villagers and witchkind rallied for one final stand. The archers of Rushford, their quivers nearly spent, loosed a volley of arrows over the disintegrating wall. The shafts whistled through the dawn air, catching the golden rays of the rising sun as they descended upon the advancing enemy.

Some found their marks, piercing gaps in armor, sinking

into exposed flesh. Soldiers stumbled and fell, clutching at the shafts that sprouted from their bodies. But for each one that fell, two more surged forward, trampling their fallen comrades in their relentless advance.

Behind the crumbling barricade, the witchkind of Rushford pooled the dregs of their power for a last, desperate defense. Those of Earth-affinity poured their magic into the very ground, causing it to buckle and heave beneath the iron-shod feet of the attackers. Soldiers stumbled and staggered as the earth itself seemed to rise up against them.

Sky and Flame witchkind wove their magic together, creating a shimmering dome of force over what remained of Rushford. The air within the dome crackled with energy, motes of light dancing like fireflies. It was a shield born of desperation and defiance, a final bulwark against the iron tide.

But even as the dome solidified, flickering with the waning strength of its creators, the humans brought their final weapon to bear. The catapult, its mighty arm cranked back, launched a massive sphere of cold iron directly at the heart of the magical shield.

The projectile, easily the size of a horse's head, hurtled through the air with a sound like a thousand angry hornets. It struck the dome with a blinding flash and a concussive boom that shook the earth. For a heartbeat, the shield held, the iron star sizzling against its shimmering surface.

Then, with a sound like a thousand mirrors shattering, the dome burst apart. Shards of magical energy rained down.

"Enough," Finley said, and his voice seemed to echo through the ground itself. His chest was thrumming a deep, resonant harmony, and he could feel his affinities weaving themselves together in his mind. He didn't even need runes, anymore. All of magic was simply arrayed before him, strangely

shaped symbols and letters dancing in an elegant ballet of balance and order.

“This Ends.”

It was not a statement.

It was a command.

In that moment, every lick of fire in the field, every spark in the village, was snuffed.

The crumbling of the stone wall ceased, and it drew itself back together before sliding silently into the earth.

Even the breeze stilled.

And then the iron began to flake.

It was as if every weapon, every boot-plate, every ring of mail, every single shard of iron had been made of a light, airy pastry, the kind Finley had enjoyed so much as a child. The kind of pastry that the human baker down the street had made fresh, every morning, the aroma irresistible in the cool, salt-laden morning air. The kind of pastry that flaked when you touched it, got crumbs everywhere, and melted in your mouth.

Flakes of black metal fell to the ground, where they crumbled further into dust and were absorbed into the earth. Iron-shod horses were bare-hoofed. Carts and wagons collapsed as their iron reinforcements trickled away like dust. Even the mighty carronades poured to the ground as if they'd been made of black sand.

It took everyone present a moment to absorb what had happened.

Then the people of Rushford, human and witchkind alike, let out a triumphant cheer.

The attacking humans fled, leaping onto horseback when they could and simply running flat-out when they couldn't, the last flakes of their former weapons tumbling from their hands and belts as they went.

A New Taryba

“I guess it could be have been worse,” Arcadia said dubiously. The sun had risen outside, painting the sky in pleasant, calming pastels that belied the tightness in Finley’s heart.

“Obviously, but... four people died. Three of witchkind, one human,” Finley said sadly. “And I couldn’t even tell you how many of the humans from Fyngershire.”

“Fyngershire never had as many armed men and women as in that attack,” Kelden said darkly. “They were reinforced.”

“So we should expect this again,” Arcadia said. “I’ll make sure the word gets out. We should probably set up some kind of perimeter around the Iron Cities.”

“To catch this kind of thing sooner?” Kelden asked.

She nodded. “Maybe at some point they’ll see that it’s futile.” She looked sidelong at Finley. “Especially now, it seems.”

“Yeah,” Finley sighed.

“Do you... feel any different?” she asked.

“Me? No, not really. I mean, I just feel like I can melt iron

with magic and summon the combined powers of four elements and something that transcends magic itself. The usual." His expression was dour.

"Finley."

"Yeah, I know. If you can set up a perimeter, then I can definitely stop them. Definitively. So that's good. In fact..." he mused. "Do you think it's worth going to back to Farreach in the South?"

Kelden frowned. "To what possible end?"

"To just preemptively put a stop to this. Nordon has a lot of influence—it wouldn't surprise me if the human cabal, or whatever's left of it, was behind the Fyngershire attack. If I can make him see that it's pointless, that I can stop them... maybe they won't try again."

"Maybe," Arcadia said. "We still need a plan. We can't just... divide the continent in half."

"Right down the middle," Kelden joked. "Starting with Evermore."

"Which... is another problem all its own," Arcadia said. "It's getting worse, there. The Taryba has set themselves up as a... dictatorship, really. I've friends there, still. The scholars are fine, so long as they keep to themselves. The wealthy merchants—which is most of the Taryba to begin with—are fine. They're in charge, after all. But a lot of the ordinary people aren't doing well. There are restrictions on using magic, they—"

"What for?" Finley asked.

"I... it's possible the Taryba wants to move against one of the Arcane Cities. See if they can extend their control."

"What?" Kelden asked, aghast.

"They can't attack the Iron Cities. Not without Finley here. I mean, unless they just want to obliterate one, which I guess they could still do. But they're power-mad. They still

want to subjugate humans, and from what I'm hearing, they're not opposed to subjugating witchkind as well."

"Then," Finley said heavily, "I think my next stop isn't going to be Farreach in the South. Let's get our own house in order first."

Arcadia gave him a long, searching look before she nodded solemnly. "I'm coming with you."

Finley, Arcadia, and Kelden approached the gates of Evermore, the once-resplendent city now transformed into a stark stronghold. Where graceful spires of alabaster stone once stretched skyward, embracing the heavens, now stood bulky fortifications of cold grey rock. The elegant curves and soaring arches that had embodied the spirit of witchkind's unity with the natural world were replaced by harsh angles and towering ramparts, projecting an aura of unyielding dominance.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised they're blocking travel magics," Arcadia murmured as they approached. Her magic had refused to take them directly into the city, and Finley had been reluctant to use his own magic to try and force it. Instead, she'd cast about until her magic latched onto an "empty" spot, which turned out to be a flat section of bare earth designated as an arrival zone.

A path of slate stones led to the city's entrance, and as they passed through the heavy bronze portcullis, Finley felt a shiver run down his spine. The streets, once vibrant with life and pulsing with arcane energy, now lay shrouded in a miasma of fear and suspicion. Furtive glances darted from shadowed doorways and narrow alleys as the ordinary folk of Evermore went about their daily lives, shoulders hunched and voices hushed. The refugees, those desperate souls who had sought sanctuary

within the city's walls, huddled in small clusters, their haunted eyes speaking volumes of the horrors they had witnessed.

"There are fewer people living on the streets than last time," Finley murmured as he nodded politely to a woman wrapped in threadbare cloaks. "So I guess that's something."

"Ma'am," Arcadia said boldly, strolling over to the woman. "Can you tell us what's going on here? What's happened?"

The woman's eyes flicked back and forth, scanning the street behind them. "Anyone fit to fight has been conscripted," she coughed. "Magic's been rationed. The fighters are in the new dormitories. At least they're housed, and fed," she added. "My husband and my two boys are with them."

"Conscripted for what?" Arcadia asked.

"To free the others," the woman said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Free—what?" Kelden blurted.

"The Prison Cities," the woman said, shaking her head. "You must come from a very small village indeed, not to know. Cities clad in iron, with witchkind huddled in pits, forced to work their magic for the benefit of the humans. The Taryba says they'll free them."

"This is—ugh," Arcadia said with disgust. "Never mind. Are you getting food, even?"

"A ration, yes," the woman said, bobbing her head. "Refugees get one per day. Workers two. The figures, three, along with the upper class, of course. They get their regular meals, as they have to work so hard to keep us all safe."

"Rations," Kelden said flatly. "We're witchkind. We can summon food. We can create it."

"Ah, but magic is so thin, now, with all the Prison Cities' iron pressing us down," the woman corrected him.

"Have you left Evermore? Seen any of this for yourself?" Finley asked.

The woman drew back in horror. “Of course not! We’re not permitted to leave. It’s dangerous out there! They’re saying even the Great Schools have fallen!”

“Let me assure you,” Arcadia said through gritted teeth, “that these are lies. The Schools stand. Yes, there are Iron Cities—not prisons, as they’ve turned out all of witchkind. But there are Arcane Cities as well. Witchkind are living in the open, side by side with humans. They’re beautiful.” She looked around at the squat, gray stone of Evermore. “They remind me of what Evermore used to look like.”

“And magic isn’t ‘thin’ anywhere,” Finley added. His senses cast about, and he realized it did seem strangely diffuse here. “Except here, for some reason. Outside the city, you’d have as much magic as you’ve ever had.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Then why are they telling us these things?”

“That,” Arcadia said firmly, “is what we’ve come to correct.”

Finley took a moment to summon a large, simple meal for the woman, using his personal pool of magic. He was surprised that, as he reached out to Gather more magic to replace it, even he could feel how reluctant, how wispy, the ambient magic felt.

They’re hoarding it, the voice in his head said. And they’re doing something else to keep it from flowing back in. Finley felt it sniffing at the air. It’s something with this shield they’ve put up, the one that’s interfering with travel magics as well.

Finley briefly probed the shield and then disregarded it. He wouldn’t have any trouble breaking it—Ending it—when they needed to.

The three of them began the slow, winding walk from the city’s entrance to the Taryba’s squat, brutal tower, which sat in the exact middle of the city.

“They’ve reconfigured it,” Arcadia muttered as they went.

And they had: Evermore's streets had once been concentric circles surrounding the Taryba tower. Broad avenues had radiated outward from that tower, providing easy ways for pedestrians and wagons to make their way through and across the city.

That was all gone. Instead, the roads and buildings had been reconfigured through profligate use of magic, into two concentric, winding spirals that led outward from the tower.

Defensive, the voice in his head noted.

"It's defensive," Kelden said in almost the same moment. "Chiton was once laid out this way. You can still see the remnants of it from above. It forces an attacking force to follow the path you want them to. Slows them down. Confuses them. Gives you plenty of opportunity to counterattack from the tops of buildings and from alleys."

As they made their way along the winding road towards the Taryba tower, they took in the changed atmosphere of Evermore. Shops still lined the streets, their doors open and wares still on display, but the once vibrant energy of commerce had been replaced by a subdued, almost furtive air.

In one shop window, bolts of richly dyed fabric in deep crimsons, royal purples, and emerald greens were draped artfully, the shimmering silks and plush velvets a testament to the skill of the city's weavers. Yet the shopkeeper, a thin man with a carefully trimmed beard and watchful eyes, stood in the doorway, his hands clasped tightly before him as he surveyed the passersby with a mixture of hope and apprehension.

Further along, a bakery's shelves were lined with golden loaves of bread, their crusts gleaming with a brush of butter, and flaky pastries dusted with cinnamon and sugar. The rich, warm scent of baking drifted out into the street, a tantalizing reminder of simpler, happier times. But the baker, a plump woman with flour-dusted apron, handed over the precious

loaves to her customers with a quick, almost furtive motion, as if afraid to linger too long in the exchange.

The people of Evermore moved through the streets with purpose, their heads down and their steps quick. Gone were the leisurely strolls and friendly greetings that had once characterized the city's social fabric. Now, neighbors passed each other with barely a nod of acknowledgement, their eyes darting nervously about as if searching for hidden threats.

As they walked, the divisions within the city's population became increasingly apparent. The refugees, with their threadbare cloaks and haunted eyes, huddled in the shadows of buildings, their meager possessions clutched close. They were the bottom rung of Evermore's new social ladder, dependent on the meager rations doled out by the Taryba.

A step above them were the workers, their hands callused with unaccustomed physical labor, their faces lined with weariness. They moved with the steady, plodding pace of those accustomed to long hours of work, whether in the fields that surrounded the city or in the workshops that produced the goods sold in the shops. Their clothing was plain but well-mended, a sign of the small but precious advantage their status afforded them.

The shopkeepers and tradesmen occupied the next tier, their attire more carefully tailored and their bearing more confident. They were the backbone of Evermore's economy, the ones who kept the wheels of commerce turning even in these troubled times. Yet even they were not immune to the pervasive sense of unease that hung over the city like a pall.

"To have changed so much, so quickly," Arcadia said in a low voice.

There's something underneath it, the voice in Finley's head said. Can you feel it?

Finley extended his senses and—there. "The city's trying to

shift itself back,” he said aloud, keeping his voice low as well. “That’s one reason. magic is so thin. They’re spending to force the city to stay this way.”

“It’s making my ears ring,” Kelden muttered.

“That’s not all,” Arcadia said, casting her eyes to the middle of the road.

Above everyone in the new social ranking, literally and figuratively, were the fighters and the upper class. The fighters, conscripted from among the city’s able-bodied men and women, strode through the streets with a grim sense of purpose. They wore uniforms of deep blue, the color of Evermore’s flag, with a silver emblem of the Taryba emblazoned on their chests. Their eyes were hard, their jaws set with determination, and they carried themselves with the coiled tension of those ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

The uppermost class, the wealthy merchants and the members of the Taryba staff, were a study in contrast. They moved through the city with an air of entitlement, their clothing rich and elaborate, adorned with jewels that sparkled in the sunlight. They walked with their heads high, their gazes sweeping over the lesser folk with a mixture of disdain and indifference.

But even their privileged status could not entirely shield them from the new militaristic overlay that had settled over Evermore like a suffocating blanket. On every corner, guards stood at attention, their stances rigid and their eyes constantly moving, scanning the crowds for any sign of trouble. They wore armor of polished black leather, reinforced with plates of gleaming steel, and carried long, wickedly sharp spears. But it was the subtle crackle of combat magic that surrounded them, the barely-perceptible shimmer of defensive spells and offensive enchantments, that truly spoke to their readiness for violence.

Patrols roamed the streets, groups of four to six fighters

moving in tight formation, their boots striking the cobblestones with a rhythmic thud. They eyed everyone they passed with open suspicion, their hands never straying far from the hilts of their swords or the focuses of their magic. The people of Evermore, in turn, lowered their gazes and hurried on their way, desperate to avoid attracting the attention of these grim-faced enforcers.

The very fabric of the city itself seemed to have been altered to reflect this new reality. Shops and homes that had once stood open and inviting now had heavy wooden shutters installed, ready to be slammed closed and barred at the first sign of trouble. The bright, cheerful paint that had once adorned many of the buildings had been replaced with somber shades of gray and brown, as if the city itself was trying to fade into the background, to avoid notice.

There was a sense of menace that hung in the air, a palpable feeling of fear that permeated every interaction, every movement. It was in the way people hurried through the streets, their shoulders hunched and their eyes darting; in the way conversations were conducted in hushed whispers, as if afraid of being overheard; in the way children were kept close to their parents' sides, their innocence and curiosity suppressed by the omnipresent threat of violence.

"This is disgusting," Arcadia grumbled.

"We're here," Kelden said softly.

They'd arrived at the Taryba's tower. Gone were the gentle, flowing lines, the graceful, soaring windows. Like the rest of the city, the tower had been reimagined for wartime.

They stood before the transformed Taryba tower, their eyes tracing its stark, forbidding contours. The once-graceful structure now loomed over them like a monolithic sentinel, its presence as oppressive as the new regime it represented. The tower's exterior had been stripped of all ornamentation, leaving only

the raw, unforgiving stone that seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. The gentle curves and flowing lines that had once characterized the building had been replaced by sharp, heavy angles, giving it a brutalistic appearance that was both intimidating and devoid of warmth.

The windows, once large and inviting, allowing sunlight to stream into the interior and illuminate the vibrant tapestries and artwork within, were now small and narrow, mere slits in the stone that seemed designed to keep the outside world at bay. They were placed at irregular intervals, their placement more strategic than aesthetic, as if the tower's new architects had been more concerned with defense than with beauty.

At the base of the tower, the main entrance had been replaced by a heavy stone door, its surface rough-hewn and unadorned save for the thick brass bands that reinforced its edges. It stood like a silent challenge, daring anyone to attempt to breach its defenses. Before the door, a contingent of guards stood at attention, their stances rigid and their expressions impassive. They wore the same deep blue uniforms as the fighters they had seen patrolling the streets, the silver emblem of the Taryba gleaming on their chests like a badge of authority.

As Finley leaned back, his gaze traveling up the length of the tower, he could make out the glass dome that crowned its summit. Once a marvel of engineering and artistry, its panes had been a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors, casting a mesmerizing play of light into the chamber below. Now, however, the glass had been replaced with panes of somber grays and muted blues, as if even the sky itself had been leached of its vitality.

The dome's bronze framework, once delicate and almost lace-like in its intricacy, had been reinforced with thick, unyielding struts that crisscrossed the surface like the bars of a cage. It was a stark reminder of the Taryba's firm grip on the city, their determination to maintain control at any cost.

As they stood there, taking in the altered visage of the tower, Finley could feel the weight of the magic that permeated the structure. It was a dense, heavy presence, a palpable force that seemed to press down on him from all sides. He could sense the layers of defensive spells woven into the very stones of the tower, the intricate network of wards and enchantments designed to repel any attempt at infiltration or attack.

“How do we do this?” Kelden asked.

Arcadia took a step forward, and two of the guards seemed to straighten ever further, their eyes snapping toward her. “I suppose—”

“We go straight to the top,” Finley said firmly, his eyes still pointed upward. “Take my arms.”

Whatever the Taryba had done to Evermore, it resisted Finley’s travel magic even inside the shield. He clenched his jaw as he concentrated, pushing more and more Earth magic into—

Stop, the voice in his head suggested gently. You don’t need to fight it. Just bypass it.

Bypass—oh.

Finley forced himself to relax, inhaled deeply, and with a quiet, purposeful intent, willed himself and his friends into the Taryba’s chambers.

They vanished from the street without a sound, and appeared inside without so much as a spark.

The councilors had undone the changes Finley had made on his last trip here, restoring their chambers to their former glory. Unlike the dour, blocky new architecture of the city outside, the chambers still had the flowing lines, the graceful arcs, and the decadent trappings of the past. The council was obviously in session, with all but three of the thirteen councilors present: High Councilor Jankauskas, Degutis, Abebe, Ohanian, Conteh, Okoro, Perich, Bartosz, Dvořák, and Kovalchuk.

They froze, Abebe's mouth half-open, as Finley and his friends appeared, but it took them only a moment to recover.

"İstrigti!" Degutis snapped, flinging a hand toward them. Strands of Earth magic shot forth, writing in a complex pattern that sought to bind and entrap them.

Finley simply said, "No," and the attack dissipated into a thin fog. "We've come to talk, but we can fight if you prefer," he added. He could feel Kelden and Arcadia pooling their own magic, preparing for battle.

"What do you want?" Jankauskas snapped, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Where are Councilors Lynch, Baltakis, and Aitken?" Arcadia asked. They were the only three who'd resisted the plan to subjugate the humans.

Degutis sneered as Jankauskas said, "We decided the Taryba needed only ten councilors. They've been... dismissed. Now speak."

"You've made a lot of changes," Finley said quietly. "It's disappointing. Let me tell you what's been happening outside your walls."

"We know—" Kovalchuk started.

"All of witchkind have safely left the Iron Cities, despite what you've told the people here," Finley said, ignoring the woman. "And the Arcane Cities are flourishing. Unlike your people here." His voice became hard. "There was an attack by one of the Iron Cities. On Rushford. That won't happen again. After we're done here, I'll be making sure of that. So there's no need for... whatever you've done here. No need for people to—"

"What do you know of need?" Degutis snarled. "You're the one responsible for this! For Evermore's state of emergency! If you hadn't meddled, if we'd been able to—"

"All right," Arcadia said wearily. "That's enough. If you're

truly down to believing your own lies, then there's nothing more to talk about. I'm pretty clear on what's happened here. You want power. You want to lord it over someone. You couldn't subjugate the humans, so you're subjugating your own kind."

"That stops today," Kelden said coolly.

"CHILD!" Degutis screamed, standing from his chair. This time, his Earth-based attack was reinforced by Sea and Flame magic from Perich and Conteh. A maelstrom of elemental magic surged forth, a dazzling display of raw power that illuminated the chamber with its fearsome brilliance. Tendrils of earthy brown, shot through with veins of glittering gold, snaked outward from his outstretched hands, writhing and twisting like living things as they sought to ensnare Finley and his companions.

These earthen bindings were soon joined by searing ribbons of flame, vibrant oranges and reds that danced and flickered with a wild, untamed energy. They coiled around the earthy strands, infusing them with a blistering heat that seemed to make the very air shimmer and warp. The fiery tendrils lashed out like whips, crackling and hissing as they sliced through the space between the councilors and their intended targets.

And then came the final element, a surging torrent of seawater that burst forth from Councilor Perich's fingertips. The sapphire blue liquid, flecked with frothy white foam, swirled and eddied as it rushed to join its elemental brethren. It flowed smoothly around the intertwined earth and fire, a cool and fluid counterpoint to their solidity and heat. The water seemed to possess a life of its own, forming intricate spirals and eddies as it surged forward, its surface glittering like a malicious jewel.

That's actually... impressive, the voice in Finley's head said admiringly. Pointless, but impressive.

You do have to be at the top of your game to be on the Taryba, Finley acknowledged as he cancelled the attack.

Motes of stray energy drifted gently to the chamber floor as the attack vanished.

Perich's jaw dropped.

Finley's voice was laced with confidence and a hint of superiority as he spoke. "Let me explain something before we go on," he said, his eyes piercing into the other person's soul. "You see, you're not going to win this battle. In fact, there won't even be a battle. You are outmatched beyond your comprehension." A sly smile graced his lips as he continued, "I not only control all four affinities, but I also wield the power of Beginnings and Endings. All six of the legendary Axes of old are under my control. And I possess the ability to bring them together in ways that you cannot even fathom."

His words echoed through the air, and he could see doubt creeping over the councilors' features. Finley's eyes sparkled with an otherworldly glint as he declared with conviction, "I know the source of magic. I know that it is brought into our world in its purest form through the iron bones of the earth." He paused for a moment and closed his eyes, channeling his power.

Suddenly, the tower began to tremble. Dust and debris fell from the ceiling as a deep rumbling filled the air. The ground shook beneath their feet, a physical manifestation of Finley's raw and unparalleled strength.

The councilors looked at each other with a growing sense of unease as the trembling grew into a shudder, then into a shake, and then into a physical roar.

"Guard yourselves," Finley said softly to his friends.

An immense pillar of pure iron, no larger than Finley himself, erupted from the very center of the council chamber's floor. It surged upward with tremendous force, shattering the

dull and lifeless gray dome that covered the building and sending shards of glass flying in all directions. Acting on instinct, Finley quickly threw up a protective shield over himself and his companions, bracing for the impact. The sound of metal grinding against metal filled the air as the powerful shaft continued to rise, like a giant sword piercing through the heart of the chamber. The room was now bathed in natural light, streaming in through the gaping hole in the ceiling. All eyes were fixed on the extraordinary spectacle before them, unable to comprehend the sheer strength and magic behind it. Shards of glass slid over and around Finley and his friends, clattering and shattering on the marble floor.

The councilors weren't so fortunate.

Most of them did try to put up personal shields, Finley noticed idly, but their magic was instantly sucked into the iron pillar. As the shards of glass fell, the councilors abandoned their magic and threw their arms over their heads. Their thick robes protected them fairly well, suffering only a few tears. As the last of the glass fell and the councilors lowered their arms, Finley saw that a few of them had suffered minor lacerations on their faces.

Councilor Jankauskas was the first to recover from the shock of the iron pillar's emergence. With a snarl of rage, she thrust her hands forward, summoning a swirling vortex of wind that howled and shrieked as it raced towards Finley. The miniature cyclone, infused with the raw power of her Sky magic, tore at the chamber's tapestries and sent loose papers fluttering wildly. But as the vortex neared the iron pillar, it seemed to shudder and warp, its form distorting as if pulled by an invisible force. In a heartbeat, the howling winds were sucked into the pillar, vanishing without a trace, their power absorbed by the unyielding metal.

Undeterred by Jankauskas's failure, Councilor Abebe

stepped forward, his eyes blazing with determination. He slammed his palms together, and a crackling sphere of Flame burst forth, arcs of lightning dancing across its surface. The ball of energy hurtled towards Finley, the air sizzling and popping in its wake. Yet, just as with the wind, the lightning was drawn inexorably towards the iron pillar. The moment the sphere made contact, it was absorbed, the pillar glowing briefly with a blinding white light before returning to its impassive state.

Councilors Ohanian and Conteh moved in unison, their hands weaving intricate patterns as they summoned forth their respective magics. From Ohanian's fingertips poured a torrent of water, the liquid shimmering with an otherworldly blue glow as it surged across the chamber floor. Conteh's magic manifested as a wall of roaring flames, the heat so intense that the air around it shimmered and wavered. The two elements raced towards Finley and his companions, the water and fire intertwining in a mesmerizing dance of destruction.

But Finley merely raised an eyebrow, a faint smile playing across his lips. With a casual wave of his hand, he redirected the elemental assault, sending it careening towards the iron pillar. The water and fire collided with the metal surface, the impact creating a deafening hiss as steam billowed outwards, obscuring the chamber in a thick, white mist. When the steam cleared, the pillar stood unscathed, the water and fire nowhere to be seen, absorbed just like the wind and lightning before them.

Councilors Okoro and Perich, desperation etched onto their faces, joined their magic in a final, frantic attempt to overcome Finley. The ground beneath their feet trembled and cracked as they summoned forth the power of the earth, jagged spikes of stone erupting from the chamber floor. At the same time, the air around them grew heavy and oppressive as they wove a spell of crushing gravity, seeking to immobilize their foes. The stone spikes hurtled through the air, their razor-sharp

edges glinting menacingly in the light that streamed through the shattered dome. They were accompanied by an invisible force, a crushing weight that seemed to press down upon Finley and his companions from all sides, threatening to drive them to their knees. The very air itself felt thick and syrupy, each movement requiring a herculean effort as the spell of gravity took hold.

But Finley stood unbowed, his eyes now blazing with an inner fire. With a casual flick of his wrist, he redirected the stone spikes, sending them arcing gracefully through the air to orbit the iron pillar like satellites caught in its inescapable pull. They circled the metal shaft in a dizzying dance, their paths growing tighter and tighter until, with a series of resounding clangs, they collided with the pillar's surface and shattered into a thousand glittering shards.

As for the crushing force of gravity, Finley simply shrugged it off as if it were no more than a gentle breeze. The oppressive weight that sought to drag him down was brushed aside, dissipating like mist before the morning sun.

The councilors stared in disbelief, their faces a mixture of awe, fear, and growing desperation. They had thrown the full might of their combined magic against Finley, and yet he and his friends had emerged unscathed, their attacks not just nullified, but absorbed and dissipated by the iron pillar he had summoned.

Councilor Bartosz, his voice trembling with a combination of rage and fear, cried out, "How is this possible? No one should have this much power!"

Finley fixed him with a piercing gaze, his eyes seeming to bore into the councilor's very soul. "You still don't understand, do you?" he said, his voice calm and measured. "This isn't about power. It's about understanding. About knowing the very nature of magic itself."

He took a step forward, and the councilors instinctively recoiled, their bodies tensing as if preparing for another attack. But Finley merely raised his hand, and the iron pillar began to glow, pulsing with a deep, inner light.

"Magic," he said, his voice resonating through the chamber, "is not a force to be hoarded or controlled. It is a gift, a sacred trust that flows through all things, connecting us to the very heart of creation. And iron, the bones of the earth, is the conduit through which that magic flows in its purest form." He paused to let that sink in. "And I control it now. Just as the Adherents of old—only I'm not hoarding that power for myself, as they did, and as you've done."

The pillar's glow intensified, bathing the chamber in a radiant, silvery light. The councilors squinted against the brightness, their faces etched with a mixture of wonder and fear.

"You sought to use magic as a weapon against your own people," Finley spat. You withheld it—I admit, I don't know how you pulled that off, but it doesn't matter. You're done. In fact, this entire council is done. Finished."

Finley closed his eyes, reaching deep within himself to a place he had never before consciously explored. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a hidden sense, a new way of perceiving the intricate tapestry of magic that wove through all of existence. With this newfound awareness, he could see the threads of magic that connected each councilor to the greater weave, shimmering strands of power that pulsed with the rhythm of their very lives. These were the dancing, rainbow-colored symbols he'd seen before, flowing smoothly through the air, ready to move and reshape themselves under his guidance.

He extended his hand, his fingers moving with a delicate precision as he reached those glimmering threads. The councilors gasped as they felt his touch upon their very essence, a sensation unlike anything they had ever experienced. It was as if

he held their souls in his hand, the very core of their being laid bare before him.

With a gentle but firm twist of his fingers, Finley began to pinch those threads, constricting the flow of magic that sustained each councilor. The effect was immediate and profound. The councilors staggered, their faces draining of color as they felt their power diminish, reduced to a mere trickle of what it had once been.

Councilor Jankauskas clutched at her chest, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she struggled to remain upright. "What... what have you done?" she whispered, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and disbelief.

Finley opened his eyes, his gaze sweeping over the assembled councilors. "I have given you exactly what you deserve," he said, his voice calm but laced with an undercurrent of steel. "You will still have your magic, for to take it away completely would be to rob you of your very lives. But never again will you wield it as a tool of oppression, never again will you use it to subjugate and control those you deem beneath you."

The councilors looked at one another, their expressions a mix of horror and despair. They could feel the truth of Finley's words, could sense the fundamental change that had been wrought upon them. Their magic, once a raging torrent of power, had been reduced to a mere whisper, barely enough to sustain their own existence.

Councilor Degutis fell to his knees, his head bowed in defeat. "We are undone," he murmured, his voice hollow with the realization of their fate. "Our power, our influence... it is all gone."

Finley nodded, a grim satisfaction etched onto his features. "And so it should be," he said. "You have proven yourselves unworthy of the gift of magic, undeserving of the responsibility that comes with wielding such power. From this day forward,

the Taryba will be no more. Evermore will be free, its people no longer bound by your tyranny."

He turned to Arcadia and Kelden, his companions standing tall and resolute by his side. "It is time to set things right."

"Well, that didn't go entirely how I'd expected," Kelden admitted. They'd spent the better part of two days in Evermore, and finally returned to the Farm exhausted but satisfied.

"Putting the city back instantly would have done more harm than good," Finley pointed out. "It'll slowly resume its old shape, I think, and now that the Taryba isn't hoarding all the local magic, the people there can help the city reshape itself."

"But they're already talking about electing a new council!" Kelden said, clearly frustrated.

Arcadia shrugged. "It's what they're used to. And it doesn't hurt to have a group of people guiding things, so long as they're acting for the people, not against them. And whatever new Taryba they create will just be for Evermore. I don't think the Arcane Cities are going to accept anyone ruling them but their own."

"And plenty of people are leaving Evermore," Finley added. "There was a group of over a hundred preparing to leave just as we did."

"Oh?" Kelden said, brightening. "I hadn't noticed. Where are they going?"

"One of the Arcane Cities, I think. Most of them were originally from Farreach in the North, someone said."

"There were other groups leaving for their home towns, and several were coming here to Crafhhold."

"Well, I guess that's good," Kelden allowed.

“And you can understand why the scholars would all stay,” Arcadia said. “Evermore still has the biggest library on the continent.”

“True.” He hesitated. “I still don’t think I understand about the merchant class, though. Everyone’s fine with them staying on?”

Finley shrugged. “They’ll always exist. And... I have a suspicion that trade will actually open up a good bit more. At least, that’s what I’m hoping to achieve.”

Arcadia’s jaw tightened a bit. “You’re going to Farreach in the South?”

Finley nodded. “And... I think it’d be best if I went alone on this one.”

Arcadia and Kelden said nothing, but Finley could see the concerns written into their features.

A Delente

From a hilltop a ways away, Finley looked down at the still-distant city of Farreach in the South, its low skyline now jagged with iron-reinforced ramparts and watchtowers. The sea breeze carried to him the distant clang of hammers on anvils and the acrid scent of forges. It had been just a moon ago when the town had been a tranquil port known for its sun-bleached stones, fragrant lemon groves, and the laughter of fishmongers in its winding cobbled streets. But a shadow had fallen across this part of the world, and like so many others, the once-welcoming gates of the town were now shut tight against the midday sun.

Finley's eyes traced the contours of the new, fortified walls encircling Farreach, their pale wooden beams now clad in sheets of hammered iron that glinted harshly under the warm sun. The once-welcoming main gates had been replaced by a portcullis of black iron bars as thick as a man's arm, its pointed ends stabbing down into the dusty earth like the fangs of some great beast. Along the ramparts, soldiers in leather hauberks

patrolled ceaselessly, their crossbows held at the ready and their eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of trouble.

In the forests that blanketed the hills around the town, he could make out the sound of axes and saws rang out as crews of lumberjacks felled towering oaks and elms, their trunks as wide as wagons. The logs were hauled back to Farreach by teams of oxen, the beasts' muscles straining against their yokes as they dragged the timber over the rutted roads. In the town's bustling yards, carpenters and joiners shaped the raw wood into planks, beams, and braces to shore up the walls and towers. Forges fires burned hot, their plumes smoke streaking the blue sky an ominous black.

Farreach in the South had gone from tranquil coastal town to fortress.

With a heavy sigh, Finley started down the hill. This road, once well-traveled by merchants and their caravans, was empty save for a few hardy weeds pushing up through the cracked earth. As he drew closer, the walls of Farreach loomed like iron-clad giants. The iron-covered battlements bristled with spikes and ballistae, their oiled iron chains glinting in the sun. Arrow slits punctured the tall curtain walls at regular intervals, and the iron portcullis stood ready to drop at a moment's notice. Just inside that portcullis was a stout, iron-strapped wooden gate, firmly closed.

Finley approached with a slow, purposeful stride. Up close, the iron-clad doors were massive, easily twice his height and still smelling of fresh-cut lumber. Finley could feel the iron licking at his magic, but now, it felt more like the curious lap of a strange dog. Finley's magic, glowing cool and white within him, didn't respond.

A small, barred window set into the gate cracked open, and a pair of suspicious eyes peered out. "State your business," a gruff voice demanded.

“Finley. I’m here to speak with Nordon. He’ll see me, I suspect.”

There was a long moment of silence. “You a witch?”

“Yes,” he replied calmly. “And I’m happy to stay here and wait for Nordon.”

There was no further challenge, although it took several moments for someone to fetch Nordon. All the while, Finley could hear men moving behind the curtain wall, hear more crossbows being wound tight, hear more iron-tipped spears being rattled into place. He studiously ignored it all, taking several steps back and slowly examining the new fortifications.

It’s odd, the voice in his head observed. I’ve never experienced iron like this.

Finley knew what the voice meant. In his head, every piece of iron—every chain’s link, every crossbow bolt’s tip, every iron nail hammered into the wood, showed as a dimly glowing pinpoint. He let his eyes relax, unfocusing them slightly, and the world’s ambient magic appearing. This close to the town’s masses of iron, the kaleidoscopic letters and symbols, given their hue by the Origin and aligned to one of the four elements, seemed to write uncomfortably. They twisted rather than flowing, jittered and jumped rather than slipping easily through the air. Where they contacted the iron, their shapes fractured and shattered, dimming to darker shades before settling into the iron and vanishing.

But now, Finley could see what happened next. Magic of Sea, Sky, Earth, and Flame, tinted in shades of blue and green, orange and brown, merged within the iron. They combined into the pure magic that seeped up from the bones of the world, an intense white shot through with streaks of pink and light blue-green.

The iron doesn’t drain magic... it just recombines it. Interesting, the voice said.

You've never seen it this way?

No. Not from within the Origin. There, everything has been broken out into the Axes—the different alignments. I knew about the pure magic from the portal in the Great Northern Wood, but I didn't know it seeped up from the ground as well.

And from the humans, Finley pointed out. Although he couldn't see any of them behind their defensive wall, he could clearly see the bright plumes of unaligned magic streaming upward. It's like they're... aligned with iron.

A sudden chunk accompanied the opening of a small man-door within the larger wooden gate, and Nordon stepped out. The door slammed shut behind him, latching with another chunk and the thud of a brace being slid home.

"I'm not sure all this is worth it," Finley said calmly. "You do know, if we wanted to, a large enough group of us could drop a mountain on your town, iron or no."

Nordon frowned. "That's supposed to comfort me?"

"Yes, actually. Because we haven't."

The man considered that. "Why are you here?"

"Fyngershire sent a well-armed group against Rushford, along the edge of the Great Northern Wood. That's to stop. First of all, in the future, any attacks against or near the Wood will be met with absolute annihilation. Please believe me. The Wood is ours. It is... sacred to us, in a way."

"We didn't—"

"I'm not finished. Attacks against the Arcane Cities will also cease. You have your... fortresses," he pointed out, nodding to the iron-clad walls behind Nordon, "and we're happy to leave them to you. But our towns and villages are off-limits to you as well. They're open to anyone who can coexist peacefully with magic, and closed to anyone who can't. Am I clear?"

"What makes you think I—"

“You spread the word. You spread your plans for your weapons, your inventions. The ones I have back to you, remember. Now spread this.”

“Or you’ll drop mountains on us,” Nordon said coldly.

Finley chuckled. “I won’t need to.” He raised his hand, fingers splayed, and focused his gaze on a section of the iron wall. The metal began to tremble, as if sensing his intent. Flakes of rust blossomed across the surface like a spreading plague, the corrosion accelerating with each passing second.

Nordon turned at the first hissing sound, and watched in horror as the iron crumbled away, disintegrating into a fine, reddish powder that swirled in the sea breeze. The once-mighty rampart seemed to age centuries in mere moments, its strength and solidity giving way to the inexorable march of rust and decay.

Finley’s eyes glowed with an otherworldly light, his power pulsing through the air like a tangible force. The metal that the city relied upon for protection was as malleable as clay in his hands.

The iron spikes adorning the battlements twisted and bent, their sharp points curling in on themselves like the withered petals of a dying flower. The ballistae, once poised to rain death upon attackers, slumped forward on their mounts, their chains rusting away to nothing.

Panicked shouts from the human men and women on the now-bare wooden wall told Finley his work had gathered plenty of witnesses.

Nordon stumbled back, his face ashen. The gruff confidence had evaporated, replaced by a dawning realization of his town’s vulnerability. He glanced from the crumbling wall to Finley, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe.

Finley lowered his hand, and the rust’s progress halted. The iron walls now bore a gaping wound, a testament to his new

power. The distant sounds of the city fell silent, as if Farreach itself was holding its breath.

"Do you understand now?" Finley asked softly, his voice carrying an undercurrent of steel. "Your iron is no protection against me. It is only by our choice, our restraint, that Farreach still stands."

Nordon swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. He nodded slowly, unable to tear his gaze away from the ruined section of the once-impregnable wall. "So that's it, then."

"That's it?" Finley asked, confused.

"That's it. We're done. You'll take back the Iron Cities. Rule over us."

Finley sighed. "You're not listening. We won't go where we're not wanted. We don't want to rule over you. I've just..." He stopped and considered. He'd already extended so much trust to this man, to the cabal he represented, and had so much of it thrown back in his face. Still, the balance of power had tilted. "Our city is called Evermore," he continued softly. "That's where our Great Council, our Taryba, used to meet and deliberate. They were the ones—most of them, at least—pushing for subjugation. But not just of your people—of mine as well. I've just come from there. The Taryba is gone. I've taken the magic from them, and Evermore is free again." He tilted his head. "Do you understand? This wasn't all of witchkind set against you. Most of us were happy living alongside you." He held up his hand as Nordon opened his mouth, eyes flashing with anger. "I know it was in secret, and yes, we kept you from advancing yourselves. That's ended as well. If you want to keep your Iron Cities for those sins of the past, fine. But you won't attack us. You won't attack the humans who've chosen to live alongside us."

He sighed. "If you prefer," he added gently, "I can cut you off."

Nordon's brow wrinkled, his face still ashen. "What do you mean?"

"I'm something... more. As you can see. More than other witchkind. If you want, I can carve a channel in the continent. South of Rushford, north of Fyngershire. Probably east of Withring, connecting the two—"

"Why?" Nordon cried.

"If you want," Finley continued, keeping his voice calm, "I can do this. It might give you some... measure of comfort. We can build bridges. You can control who can cross to your side."

Nordon looked at Finley as if the latter man had gone mad. "Your kind can still... fly."

Finley shrugged. "Some can. Not all. About a quarter, perhaps. Although, again, we don't tend to go where we're not wanted."

Nordon stared at him for a long moment, and then shook his head. "No. No channel. Don't cut us off. What you're talking about—we have few enough farms, on this side of the continent. You're talking about carving away most of them."

"True. And... very well. I'd... hoped you wouldn't ask me to, if I'm being honest. Can I ask about your church?"

Nordon blinked at the change in topic. "The church?"

"Yes. I assume it still exists?"

"Very much so," Nordon answered, his brow wrinkling in confusion. "Why do—"

"Tell me about its structure."

Understanding dawned on Nordon's features. "The Western Eparchy is all that's left. It encompasses all the Iron Cities. The others have... dissolved."

Finley nodded. "I suspected as much. And you've given them the power they wanted?"

Nordon hesitated before nodding wearily. "They've taken it, yes. They're the government now, more or less. The Aldermen work under them, now."

"Fine. I hope that's a structure you can all be happy with."

"Father Joaquin is leaving," Nordon blurted out.

Finley tilted his head. "I'm not sure I know him."

"He was one of the priests. Here."

"Ah. And where is he going?"

"To an Arcane City. He didn't say which one."

"Mmm."

"We..." Nordon started to say. He shook his head, unable to finish.

"May have gone too far?" Finley suggested gently.

Nordon exhaled heavily. "Perhaps."

"It isn't irreversible."

"How?"

Finley took a step closer to the man. "Allow trade. We've had... rumors, you know. Of your inventions, in just the past fortnights. The Arcane Cities won't be interested in all of them, of course. With magic used openly now, we can do more for our human friends than ever. And anything of iron, of course, wouldn't be welcome. But you do have something to offer. And more of the continent's farms are surrounded by Arcane Cities, rather than Iron. They'll have produce to trade."

Nordon frowned. "We wouldn't allow—"

"Trade with humans," Finley clarified. "Again, witchkind won't go where we're not wanted. But perhaps, over time, if we can offer each other things of value, perhaps if we can come to trust each other, all this won't be necessary." He nodded to the rotted iron of the town's wall.

"What about the unaligned towns?"

Finley shrugged. "I intend to ensure they have a choice. They can welcome witchkind, or not. I don't think they need to

go through all this,” he added, gesturing again to the rusted iron battlements, where human workers were starting to scurry about and assess the damage. “I can fix that, by the way. If you want.”

“I, ah... don’t think that would help,” Nordon said, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips. “But thank you.”

“So we are agreed? You stay within your Iron Cities, and witchkind will stay within the Arcane Cities. We won’t go where we’re not welcome, and neither will you. When you’re open to trade, send an emissary to whatever town you prefer.” He raised an eyebrow. “You know, Withring is still unaligned. You might approach them about being a... third thing. A Trade City. Perhaps they could welcome witchkind as traders, if not residents.”

“Neutral ground?” Nordon asked.

“If you like.”

The human nodded slowly. “I’ll spread the word.”

“Add that I’m extremely serious,” Finley reiterated. “Any attack will be met with very decisive force. I can go anywhere in the world in an eye blink, and any Arcane City can summon me before your weapons are within range. Iron won’t stop me.”

Nordon swallowed heavily. “I understand. I’ll make sure everyone does. We’ll send riders before the sun sets.”

“Good. I... hope this is temporary.”

Nordon said nothing.

Finley gathered magic about himself and was gone.

In my day, we would have called you an ‘activist adherent,’ the voice in Finley’s head said.

Finley had taken himself to a quiet cove well away from Farreach in the South, one with no human settlements. The

sun-warmed sand welcomed him as he landed softly on the secluded beach. The rhythmic whisper of waves lapping against the shore filled the air, a soothing counterpoint to the distant cries of seagulls wheeling overhead. The water stretched out before him, a vast expanse of shimmering turquoise that melted into the horizon, where sea and sky became one.

He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the briny scent of the ocean mingled with the delicate perfume of blooming sea roses that dotted the dunes. The breeze, warm and gentle, carried with it the promise of a peaceful respite, far from the tensions that gripped the realm.

"I take it that's a good thing?"

It wasn't always. But... it's the path I chose, as well.

Finley walked along the water's edge, his bare feet sinking into the damp sand with each step. The grains, sun-kissed and fine, tickled his skin as the cool water lapped at his ankles. Tiny, iridescent shells littered the shore, their delicate shapes a testament to the artistry of the sea. He stooped to pick one up, marveling at the intricate swirls of color that adorned its surface.

"Do you think it will hold? This... whatever it is?"

Sutartos paliaubos, in the True Language. And yes. I do.

"A... peace from negotiation?"

'Truce' is a better word. It will be tense, for a while. But... I find that people have difficulty staying riled up for long.

As he wandered further down the beach, Finley came upon a small tide pool nestled between two rocky outcroppings. The clear water within was a window into a miniature world teeming with life. Anemones, their tentacles swaying gently in the current, clung to the submerged rocks, while small crabs scuttled about, their shells a kaleidoscope of colors. A tiny starfish, its arms outstretched, rested on the sandy bottom, content in its aquatic haven.

Finley knelt beside the pool, his reflection rippling on the surface. He dipped his hand into the cool water, feeling the soft caress of the sea. A sense of tranquility washed over him, as if the ocean itself was offering a balm for his troubled thoughts.

"I hope you're right," he murmured, watching as a small fish darted between the rocks, its silvery scales catching the sunlight. "I don't want this division to last forever."

No one does, my friend. But change takes time. Patience is key.

Finley nodded, rising to his feet. He cast one last glance at the peaceful tide pool before continuing his walk along the shore. The sand stretched out before him, an endless canvas waiting to be explored.

As he walked, he let his mind wander, imagining a future where the Iron Cities and the Arcane Cities could coexist in harmony. A future where the barriers of fear and mistrust had crumbled away, replaced by understanding and cooperation. It seemed like a distant dream, but one worth fighting for.

The sun began to dip towards the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink. The sea breeze picked up, carrying with it the promise of change on the wind.

A New Era

“**T**hey seem to be behaving themselves,” Arcadia said, tapping the map table. “We’ve had those with Sky affinity patrolling from above, keeping a close eye on the Iron Cities. Not so much as a fighter on horseback has been sent out. That’s where Kelden is right now, in fact. He’s been organizing the patrols.”

“Good,” Finley said, nodding approval. “I’m glad Nordon took me seriously. I’m glad he was able to spread the word.” He turned to a window. “You know, I barely recognize the place.”

Arcadia chuckled. “I know what you mean. Crafhold has gotten huge—it’s going to be as big as Evermore in a generation, I think.”

“I’m a little surprised it hasn’t swallowed the farmhouse.”

Crafhold’s structures, constructed with magic and manual labor, had crept up to the very edge of the farmhouse, and then split and flowed around it. The growing city now surrounded the Order’s original headquarters, although the builders had continued to reflect the simpler construction of the towns and villages they’d left behind. Buildings kept to two stories in most

of the city, three at most, and used the familiar stone-and-wood structures seen all over the world. But the farmhouse had been left intact, a small oasis in the midst of the city.

"There's a bit of a legend growing about this place, I think," Arcadia said, smiling broadly. "The Crafhhold council intends to maintain the Farm—well, at least this much of it—as a remembrance."

"The training grounds?"

"Oh, nobody was comfortable that those being nearly in the middle of the city," she laughed. "They've been banished to the outskirts. Not that I think anyone minded. I mean, it's all shops and taverns right around us, now." She paused, and then added, "Did you know they took you up on our advice? Withring is going to declare itself the first Trade City."

Finley turned back, one corner of his mouth twitching up. "Tell me they're going to charge trade fees."

Arcadia grinned back. "That's the word. Their council is expected to publish a list in the next few days."

"And the humans from the Iron Cities?"

"Already dragging in inventions to sell, and Withring is constructing a produce market on the east side of the town. With help from witchkind, of course," she added, her eyes twinkling with delight. "I've gotten some reports on what the Iron humans are bringing, and I have to tell you, it's pretty impressive."

"I'm sure some of it's familiar."

"Oh, absolutely. Printing presses, to begin with. But beyond those, the humans have brought real marvels," she said, her eyes now sparkling with excitement. "They've developed these incredible devices called 'telescopes'—long brass tubes with polished glass lenses at each end. When you look through them, distant objects appear startlingly close! The humans say they can study the stars and planets in the night sky with stun-

ning clarity. It's more than I've ever been able to do with Sky magic."

Finley raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Interesting. What else have they brought?"

"Well, there are these intricate machines called 'clocks'—made entirely of bronze gears, springs and weights. They keep remarkably accurate time, far more precise than any sundial or water clock. Some are small enough to carry in a pocket! The humans claim they will revolutionize productivity and scheduling."

"Incredible," Finley murmured, stroking his chin. "To think, all this innovation happening without magic. The ingenuity of humans never ceases to amaze me. Especially now that we don't have to actively suppress it all. Were these 'clocks' something we'd seen before?"

She nodded. "Ages ago. They were definitely in the journals you gave Nordon. Ram was probably a field agent when those were suppressed, and they never came up again. Oh, and you should see some of what they're doing with ships. They're building ships with multiple masts and complex rigging systems, allowing them to harness the wind like never before—all without magic. And a navigational tool called a 'sextant.' They won't need fisherwitches to sail anywhere they want."

"A sextant?" Finley asked quizzically.

Arcadia ruffled through a few papers on one side of the map table. "Here," she said, sliding a sheet over. Finley peered at the detailed sketch. "It's a device made of brass and mirrors that lets sailors determine their position based on the positions of celestial bodies, like the two moons. Remarkably clever." Arcadia grinned. "But perhaps the most astonishing to me are the humans' experiments with harnessing the power of steam."

Finley grinned. "You mean the things we spent the most time suppressing?"

"Exactly so. Smaller ones, now, not just the behemoths they use in the iron horses—oh!"

"I was going to ask about the iron roadway."

She nodded. "It's being dismantled."

Finley's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Truly. The majority of the line ran through what are now Arcane Cities, and they can directly see how much damage the iron does. They'd rather have magic. But I gather they plan to replace it with an ordinary road—but one paved with one of the humans' poured-stone inventions." She frowned slightly as she ruffled through a few more pages. "Cementas, it's called. Seems similar to those building blocks you suppressed, but they've apparently found another way to make it."

"I can probably undo what I did," Finley mused. "But to what end?"

"A smooth road that cuts across the entire continent? Imagine wagons powered by magic—we can move goods just as quickly as they did on the iron roadway, without the iron."

"Oh," Finley said, blinking quickly in surprise. "That's... actually amazing. Everyone's working together."

"Exactly."

He thought for a moment, and then asked, "What about the church?"

"In the Arcane Cities, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Dissolved. Well, more or less. The priests are still doing services, but every town is autonomous, now. I'm told," and again she shuffled through a stack of papers until she found the one she wanted, "yes, here. A group of priests, mostly from the old Eastern Eparchy, have gotten together to go through their holy texts."

"Oh?"

"They're determined, this says, to get to the root of their

beliefs. To establish..." She paused and read from the page in front of her. "To establish a new canon for our new world."

Finley's eyes widened slightly. "Does that mean they'll suffer a witch to live?"

Arcadia laughed. "I think that's the plan." She looked up at him and her expression softened. "So what will you do next?"

"Next?" He laughed. "I hadn't even thought about 'next.' Ever since we left school, it's just been..." He trailed off, searching for the right word.

"Chaos?" Arcadia offered. "Constant stress? No rest for the weary, no—"

"Yeah," Finley interrupted with a sad smile. "Something like that. I don't know. I guess... I'll hang out. In case I'm needed. I still can't quite imagine the Iron Cities just... giving up. Maybe... I should go see my parents, actually. They're in Sowsee, now."

"I didn't know."

"Yeah. It's going to go Arcane, Dad said. And they love the sea."

"Wising is expected to declare as a Trade City," Arcadia noted. "Sowsee's so close, your parents will probably be pretty busy."

"That'll make them happy. And... I don't know. If everything settles down, maybe... I guess I will too."

She tilted her head and smiled. "Somehow I can't imagine that."

"Right back at you."

They finished running through the remaining dispatches, and Finley decided to take himself back to the little village where he'd grown up. It was completely abandoned, now, most of the

humans having moved to Harbsmouth, the nearest Iron City, while most of witchkind had either moved to Sowsee or Crafhold.

He walked slowly through the empty streets of his childhood village, his footsteps echoing off the weathered cobblestones. The salty sea breeze carried with it a tinge of nostalgia, as if the very air remembered the laughter and bustle that once filled these lanes.

He paused before the old bakery, its windows shattered and door hanging askew on rusted hinges. Yet the faded paint still hinted at the cheery blue it had once been, and Finley could almost smell the warm, yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread that used to waft from the shop each morning, enticing the villagers awake.

Further down the street, the old tavern stood, its thatched roof now more moss than straw. The raucous laughter and clinking of mugs that once spilled from its doors late into the night had been replaced by a heavy silence. But the worn wooden sign still creaked in the wind, the faded letters spelling out "The Merry Mermaid" as if waiting for patrons who would never return.

Finley turned a corner and found himself facing the village square. The central fountain, once a gathering place for gossiping housewives and playful children, now sat dry and still. Cracks spiderwebbed across the stone basin where a graceful mermaid statue had once presided, now toppled and broken on the ground, a casualty of the riots.

Yet even amidst the ruin, there were signs of the life that had once thrived here. Wildflowers peeked through the cracks in the cobblestones, their delicate petals a defiant splash of color against the grey stone. The old oak tree in the square, its branches gnarled with age, still stood tall and proud, as if

guarding the memories of generations who had sought shade beneath its leafy canopy.

As the sun began to set, casting a warm golden glow across the abandoned village, Finley could almost see the ghosts of the past going about their daily lives. The fishermen, with their nets slung over their shoulders, returning from a day at sea. The children, their laughter ringing out as they chased each other through the streets. The old women, sitting on their stoops and sharing stories over cups of tea.

For a moment, it was as if the village had come alive again, the weight of its history and the echoes of its former inhabitants palpable in the air. Finley closed his eyes, allowing himself to be transported back to a simpler time, before the world had been turned upside down.

When he opened his eyes again, the illusion faded, and he was once more standing alone in the midst of the abandoned village. But somehow, the melancholy that had initially filled him had been replaced by a sense of peace. This place, despite its scars, still held the essence of the community that had once called it home.

Things change, the voice in his head said.

"I know. And I imagine people will come back, one day."
Sometimes they don't.

"Feeling negative today?" Finley teased.

Maybe a bit. I think... it's probably time for me to go.

Finley's shoulders tensed. "Go? Go where?"

Back into the Origin. Back... to sleep. You developed your talent, yourself, into its own thing. I don't think you need me anymore. You're something... more than I was. And... I suspect it's not for the best to have me conscious in the world, all the time.

Finley said nothing. The voice in his head—the voice he'd once thought was his talent—had been with him for what

seemed like forever, at this point. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about being alone in his own head.

You need to find people to talk to who aren't in your head, the voice said gently.

"Yeah. So you'll just... go?"

More or less. Now that things have calmed down, I can almost feel it calling to me.

"So this is goodbye?"

Or something as good as.

"I... thank you. For everything."

You're welcome. A last piece of advice?

"Please."

You hold a lot of magic, now. Power that... I'm not sure the world has ever seen. I know you'll use it wisely. Compassionately. But... if the time should come...

"What?"

Don't let yourself slip into the Origin. Or something else. Take your time, and then go.

Finley was quiet for several long moments. "Yeah."

The voice said nothing more, but Finley knew the exact moment when it withdrew from his mind. As it did so, Finley felt a profound sense of emptiness, as if a part of himself had been gently extracted, leaving behind a space that was not quite a void, but rather a newfound expanse waiting to be explored. It was a feeling akin to stepping out of a cozy, familiar room and into a vast, open landscape—disorienting at first, but filled with the promise of new discoveries and self-reflection.

He realized, with a start, that the presence had been with him for as long as he could remember, a constant companion nestled in the recesses of his consciousness, even when he was a child. It had been a source of comfort, a guiding emotion that had helped him navigate the turbulent waters of his life. But now, as he stood alone in the abandoned village, he understood

that the presence had been something separate from himself, an entity that had shared his mental space but was never truly a part of him.

As the initial shock of the presence's departure began to subside, Finley felt a growing sense of curiosity and anticipation. He was now free to explore the depths of his own mind without the influence of another, to discover the contours and textures of his own thoughts and emotions. It was as if a veil had been lifted, allowing him to see himself in a new light, unfiltered and unencumbered.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, allowing himself to fully inhabit the space within his mind. The gentle sea breeze caressed his skin, carrying with it the scent of salt and the distant cries of seagulls. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore filled his ears, a rhythmic pulse that seemed to echo the beating of his own heart.

As he stood there, immersed in the sensations of the present moment, Finley began to notice the intricate workings of his own consciousness. Thoughts and memories drifted through his mind like wispy clouds, some clear and distinct, others hazy and half-formed. Emotions welled up within him, a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that he had never before had the chance to fully appreciate.

He marveled at the complexity and beauty of his own inner world, a realm that had always been there but had been overshadowed by the presence of another. Now, with the space to himself, he could begin to unravel the mysteries of his own psyche, to explore the hidden corners and secret passages that made him who he was.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, Finley felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over him. The departure of the presence, while bittersweet, had given him a precious gift—the opportu-

nity to truly know himself, to embrace his own identity and chart his own course through life.

He extended his senses outward, feeling the weft and warp of the world. Ambient magic glowed to soft life before him, iridescent letters and symbols dancing gently in the breeze. Here, on the coast, at this time, he could see the aligned magic at its simplest. Blue-green tendrils slipped between the waves lapping gently at the shore. Red-orange symbols cavorted in the last of the sun's rays. Cool blue sparks darted this way and that in the cooling air. And, as always, the steady, green-brown patterns that sank deep into the earth.

And, far to the north, that fountain of white, the combination of them all, splashing pure magic into the world. And far below it, far below everything, the bones of the world slowly brought more magic, spreading it across the land, feeding it into the Origin, which tinted it with the hues of the alignments.

Far below everything...

But that way is closed, a memory reminded him.

Finley's lips twitched into a grin. "We'll see."

Epilogue

I came awake slowly, as always seems to be the case. Everything around me was at peace, and in balance. I quickly realized what had woken me: another bright light, shining in the distance, insistent for my attention.

I reached out.

Are you a dream?

No, I'm quite real. Perhaps not in the way you're used to, but I'm real.

Mother says I made you up. That she's never heard of you.

Well, that's because I don't talk to very many people. You're special that way.

Why don't you talk to them?

Mostly because they can't hear me. Or don't want to.

Can you tell me stories? I like stories.

Stories? Yes, I have quite a few stories. My own story is quite... Well, I suppose it's interesting, but it's also quite long.

I'm not tired. I like long stories.

No, I guess you do have the time. What's that?

I said, can you skip the boring parts?

Yes, I could skip the boring parts. I feel like I skipped them myself sometimes.

Can you start now?

You're quite sure?

Yes, please.

Well, then let's begin.

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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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