Adherents of the Axes

BOOKS 1-3

STORIES OF WITCHKIND

DON JONES

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Adherents of the Axes

Collecting the first three books of *stories of witchkind: Daniel Scratch, Master of the Tower,* and *The Fifth Axis.*

The world's greatest powers are collected into six Axes: Sky, Earth, Flame, Sea, Beginnings, and Endings. Daniel Scratch, a solitary young orphan of witchkind, is Chosen on this thirteenth birthday to be the sole Adherent of the Sixth Axis, and becomes the living personification of Death and Endings. Join Daniel as he learns to use his new powers, and as he decides what kind of Adherent he will be. He'll face conspiracies from within witchkind itself, and threats that risk unVeiling all of witchkind, exposing them to the humans they live alongside.

You can extend your visit to the world of witchkind with *short stories of witchkind,* available as a free ebook by joining the author's newsletter at DonJones.com.

And don't miss the second trilogy of witchkind, beginning with *The Order of Some.*

Praise for Witchkind

"...Jones has created something new, compelling, beautifully written, and somewhat reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea (1968)...An engrossing, well-written, and original story; readers will be eager for the next installment."

— KIRKUS REVIEWS (STARRED REVIEW)

"Adult and teenage fans of thoughtful fantasy will love exploring this beautifully described world of arcane powers. This meditative look at power will engage readers who like their fantasy with a side of philosophy. Great for fans of Ursula K. Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea, Neil Gaiman's The Graveyard Book."

— PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY / BOOKLIFE

"This book is delightful! It's tickling my inner nerd somewhere at the intersection of 'Harry Potter,' 'Avatar: The Last Airbender,' and 'Skyrim,' all while being its own unique story and world."

— AMAZON REVIEW

Also by Don Jones

stories of witchkind

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Master of the Tower

The Fifth Axis

The Order of Some

Clara Thorn

Clara Thorn, the witch that was found

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for Meghan Riley

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Great Northern Wood
Soloton
Northsea
Brynsi
Rushford
Farreach
Chiton
Lastpointe
Evermore
Duncastella's
Landshire
Westhead
Fyngershire
Taliesin
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The Tower of Endings
Lakewood
Spurham
Withring
Little Bay
Cuppton
Disemstoke's
Carvendam
Meadowside
Hook
Baythwaite
Nworlons
Nek
Pease
Harbsmouth
Wisding
Thornwaith's
Soussex
Farreach

Daniel Scratch

BOOK ONE

Prologue

No, I'm quite real. Perhaps not in the way you're used to, but I'm real.

Well, that's because I don't talk to very many people. You're special that way.

Mostly because they can't hear me. Or don't want to.

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.

No, I guess you do have the time. What's that?

Yes, I could skip the boring parts. I feel like I skipped them myself sometimes.

You're quite sure?

Well, then let's begin.

CHAPTER 1

The Test

"Here you go, Master Daniel," Abbygail said, sliding a plate of eggs and sausage onto the rickety table before clambering back down her worn wooden step stool. The house's formal dining room table was far grander—and sturdier—but the room was also dark and foreboding. I preferred the little servant's nook in the kitchen. It couldn't exactly be called *sunnier,* given the grimed-over condition of the thick, warped windows, but it felt less like a mausoleum.

And yes, I know what a mausoleum feels like.

The whole house, in fact, had something of a mausoleum feel. To begin with, it was *old.* Two centuries old, at least, and very probably more. The walls told its history, with wallpaper layered over paint, layered over plaster, layered over the old wood lath. The current wallpaper—probably not the first these walls had seen—was faded and peeling in places. The stout wooden floorboards were time-worn, with the nicks and scratches that are earned only through decades of service. The threadbare round rug that lay under the table—the only floor covering in the kitchen, and one of very few rugs in the entire house—had probably been around since before my parents were born. Probably before *their* parents had been born.

I picked up a fork, smiled, and nodded, careful not to offer

thanks. Abbygail was a brownie, and the knee-high, white-haired, blue-skinned little creature had been with the family for decades. After Mother and Father died, more brownies had arrived. Abbygail said her kind simply sensed the need and showed up. They were the house's only servants now, cleaning up what they could and keeping me fed. They were also, frankly, my only friends. But a single word of thanks to any of them would see them all vanish before nightfall, never to return. Mother had taught me that much before... well. Before.

I quickly finished my breakfast as Abbygail bustled quietly about the ancient kitchen, climbing up to the sink to wipe the heavy cast-iron skillet, scurrying down to bank the fire in the ancient wood-burning stove, and then peering through the pantry cabinets, scratching one of her long, pointed ears and trying to decide what she'd make for lunch. The pantry was never full, but also never empty, through some magic of the house itself. It made for a lot of repetitive meals, but at least nobody starved. Mother had always supplemented the pantry's unvarying stock with fresh produce and treats that she conjured from the market in the village.

I especially missed the crisp, tart obuolys-fruit, but I'd never quite caught the runes Mother had used to summon the food, and I wasn't even sure how she paid for it. I supposed she could have sent coins the same way she brought the food.

I was just starting to wonder what I'd do with myself all day. Even before my parents had gone, I'd been a solitary boy, keeping to myself and largely keeping myself amused all day. With no siblings, I had turned to the many books in the house for companionship. With no school—I would learn later that I was unusual in that respect—those books were also my education. If I grew bored of reading and the weather seemed nice, our expansive estate gave me plenty of room to wander. I could visit the dilapidated outbuildings, throw pebbles into the pond, or walk through the abandoned and overgrown horse pastures. If the weather was poor, I might even help the brownies keep the house clean.

I'd almost decided it would be a reading day when an insistent, loud clanging rang from the attic, echoing down through the walls

and plumbing. Abbygail froze, looking anxiously at me. "I'm going," I said, resignation coloring my voice.

Great-Great-Grandmother had called.

The house itself was devoid of any living beings other than myself, the brownies, and the kobolds who dropped by almost weekly to handle heavier tasks, like the seemingly continual repairs the creaking old building required. I'd never even seen a spider, although I'd read about them and seen a few sketches of them in some of my books. Great-Great-Grandmother was something... else. Certainly not a "living being." She'd grown up in this house, following at least half a dozen generations before her. But unlike her forebears she'd declined to leave the house simply because she'd died. Instead she'd moved into the attic and made it her domain. When she wanted something from the living—meaning me—she'd make a racket until someone showed up. I always showed up quickly, too: I'd once made her wait almost ten minutes and it had put her in an even colder mood than usual.

I hadn't known about her when Mother and Father were alive; they'd simply forbidden me to wander higher than the second floor where our bedrooms were. It wasn't until Mother was gone that Great-Great-Grandmother had first summoned me, banging and scratching until I'd finally overcome my fear and ascended to discover her. As far as I knew, she never left the attic, although I had no idea what she did up there to while away the days.

But she had called, so I once again trudged up the four flights of massive, creaking stairs, running my hand along the smooth, worn handrails all the way. I'd learned early on that the stairs liked to play tricks. Not so much with the family, although with no other opportunities they'd occasionally get bored and try to trip me up. The handrails never tried such things though, and were always firm and steady under my grip. The handrails were yet another sign of the house's grand past, carved into a comfortable shape and featuring intricate, delicate engravings of flowers, birds, and woodland creatures along the sides. When I was younger, I'd spent hours looking at the little carvings, running my fingers over them and inventing stories about the animals' lives.

As I passed the landing for the second floor, I brushed my fingers

over the portrait of Mother that hung there. She'd been much younger when the painting had been made, still unmarried, with the rare, pale skin that she'd gifted me, and the straight, honey-colored hair that she'd always kept in braids when I knew her. My eyes were my father's though, gray and sharp; Mother's were the bright, lush purple that was so common amongst the women in her family. I didn't linger any longer over her picture, though: one didn't keep the matriarch waiting.

Great-Great-Grandmother always heard me coming of course, and the stout wooden attic door flew open as soon as I'd stepped onto the landing in front of it, swinging silently despite its obvious weight. The room beyond the door was dark and murky, and Great-Great-Grandmother sort of *oozed* out of that darkness. She was every inch a witch from human stories: a long, full dress of embroidered black material, including a black knitted shawl that she clutched around her thin, bony torso. Her back was hunched with age. Even her nose, a bit bulbous, attempted a slight hook at its end. Her face was at least not colored green, although it was deeply lined, especially around her eyes. Those still retained their purple color, although they'd darkened and faded to a dull, dim shade. A black mole, complete with two stiff bristles of pure white hair, decorated one cheek. She smelled horrific, an aged combination of butterscotch and rotten flowers. I held my ground on the landing: she'd never once let a single part of her body extend beyond the attic doorframe, and so I kept a good three feet between us.

It goes without saying that I'd never ventured beyond the doorframe into the attic itself. In my imagination, the attic wasn't even a room. It was another dimension, one inhabited solely by Great-Great-Grandmother and whoever or whatever she'd captured.

She sniffed. "You're thirteen today," she said, as if there was a particular odor associated with that age. Her raspy voice was like two pieces of thick, worn leather twisting around each other. "You're to go and be Tested," she added. That last word was uttered with such weight that I knew at once I was to be *Tested,* not merely *tested.* Whatever that meant.

But then I blinked. Thirteen?

I'd been alone in the house since Mother had been dragged off to Witchhold—two years ago? Three?—to be tried and interned. The prison had sent word scant months later that she'd died, still screaming the curses and epithets of whatever madness had taken her. The official letter expressed regret at failing to discover a cure for her ailment, let alone identifying its cause.

It didn't matter, Great-Great-Grandmother had said. *She served her purpose.*

I'd remained in the house, the last living member of a once-proud family. Looking back, I wonder that nobody thought to do *something.* I mean, even the Proctors who'd taken Mother must have known they were leaving a ten year-old alone in the house. *Must* have known, no? And yet I'd been undisturbed for three years. I'm sure now that Great-Great-Grandmother had something to do with it. But with no living adults around to remind me, I'd quite given up on observing birthdays and was mildly surprised to learn I was now a teenager.

I nodded to Great-Great-Grandmother because once she'd made a proclamation, it was far easier, and safer, to go along with it. I'd left the great house only a handful of times since my parents' passing, every time at Great-Great-Grandmother's whim on some errand or another. "Where do I go?"

She extended a frail, bony finger toward me, holding it just short of the doorframe that bounded her world. I stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and leaned my head into the doorframe. Her long, thick yellow fingernail brushed my forehead, she muttered an arcane phrase, and I suddenly *knew* where I was to go. I stepped back quickly, and she retreated back into the inky darkness just as fast. The attic door flew shut, *clicking* closed with surprising gentleness given the force of its swing.

"Abbygail," I called as I trudged down the stairs. "Could you fetch my coat?" I was to go into the village, but I didn't ask if the brownie wanted me to fetch anything for her or the house. When one was on one of Great-Great-Grandmother's errands, one didn't deviate for any creature or reason.

But a short delay wouldn't be noticed. I stopped on the third floor, where the tiny, empty bedrooms intended for the house's staff

nestled closely together, lining both sides of a short, narrow hallway. I stepped into the hallway and placed my back against the wall next to the first door. That door had stopped closing properly decades ago, and even now its warped surface leaned slightly inward. Dim sunlight crept through the opening, but there was no reason for me to go in. Instead, I slid down the wall and came to rest on the battered wooden floor.

"Father," I said quietly. "Grandmother says I'm to be Tested."

I waited. Father had died in the vast basement three levels down, but for some reason his restless spirit had taken up residence here. I sometimes told myself that he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his only child alone in this enormous, empty house, but it was just as likely that death had held no more interest for him than his family had. All my life, he'd been more interested in tinkering with his experiments and machines than in engaging with my mother and me.

A scratching sound came from inside the wall. "Don't eat the food," a gruff, hollow voice said, echoing behind the plaster and lathing. The scratching faded, and I stood.

Don't eat the food.

Our old house sat on the very outskirts of town, mandating an hour-long walk to make it into the center of our little village. Mother had made the trip with me in just a few minutes by using her magic, but she'd never shown me the trick of it, so I was stuck doing it the slow way.

A wrought-iron gate—surprisingly sturdy for its age—provided egress from the estate. A single dusty road stretched from that gate through empty meadows and little copses of trees. There were no other houses on this side of the village; Mother had said the family had once owned all the land leading up the village itself. I didn't know if that land was now all mine or not, but even if the family had sold it, nobody had bothered to build any closer. There was only the house, overgrown remains of farmlands, quiet meadows, and the village. The occasional bird would let out a soft *cheep,* but I'd never

seen one. I'd never seen *any* other creatures on the land, for that matter.

It was a clear day, the second moon still stubbornly clinging to its place in the sky even as the sun threatened to blot it out. The weather was mild, as it was for much of the year, and the breeze blew gently through the leafy branches of the trees that lined the road.

As I neared the village, the packed-earth lane gained a cover of fine gravel. This is where the humans' buildings began, starting with rickety wooden farm-cottages and slowly improving into sturdy homes. I passed chicken-coops full of clucking, pecking hens. There were small vegetable gardens, tended by sturdy-looking men and women in simple, homespun clothes. There were children frolicking in front of their homes, dogs running around and barking, and adults' voices calling to each other across their properties. Notably, this far from the house, there were even birds and the occasional insect, all flitting through the air.

The road then transitioned to tightly placed cobblestones as the old stone buildings of the village proper began. These buildings were worn and crumbling around the edges, but the remained sturdy, hunkered closely to one another as if for protection from the outside world.

The villagers ignored me: I was just one more child dressed in black slacks, sturdy (if dusty) black shoes, and a long black coat. I seemed to warrant no special attention on their part, although it couldn't have been common for a child my age to be wandering into the village alone. I cast sidelong glances at them: I'd had few opportunities to see humans up close, but as far as I could tell they were physically indistinguishable from witchkind. Perhaps they dressed a bit plainer, and perhaps they moved with a bit more of a trudge in their step, but then again perhaps that was simply this village's way of doing things.

The village wasn't especially bustling, but it wasn't empty either. I passed the market where Mother had somehow summoned her groceries from, and a small banker's office where two or three people waited to conduct their business. Further down the cobbled street, I knew, was a tiny smithy, a spacious courthouse, and the village's

ancient church. I could hear the rattling, clanking sounds of a carriage rolling over the uneven streets, likely carrying goods to some shop or other. This village was far removed from the humans' iron roadway, Father had told me, and relied on carts and carriages to haul in whatever goods the villagers might need.

I made my way to the narrow alleyway that ran between a busy general store and the sleepy post office. Two steps into the alleyway led me to the ancient lead pipe that carried rainwater down from the rooftop gutters. I'd never seen it before, but Great-Great-Grandmother's magic had placed its location and image firmly into my mind.

Witchkind couldn't afford to live cheek-to-jowl with humanity; we'd learned that ages and ages ago. And so when we couldn't have a secluded place to ourselves far from the humans, we crept around in the nooks and crannies they ignored. My heart pounding lightly in anticipation, and my nerves giving a slight jitter to my hand, I gave the old pipe two gentle knocks with my knuckles, on the exact spot where a small rune was carved into the soft metal. It echoed ringingly for a moment, and then fell silent. Then with a *pop,* a small section of the pipe swung open, like a tiny lead door, and I was sucked inside.

I emerged into a small, crowded office. Great-Great-Grandmother had sent me on a few errands into the village before, and if there was one common attribute of witchkind, it was that we seemed to enjoy clutter. The walls of the office were lined with shelves and cubbies, and each was precariously overstuffed with books, knick-knacks, trinkets, piles of paper, and more. Glistening little sprites flitted between it all, stirring up eddies of dust that then meandered independently around the room. Presiding over it all was a prim, matronly woman whose pewter hair had been gathered into an elaborately coiffed up-do. Her burgundy-colored dress reminded me of Great-Great-Grandmother's: a slim bodice, high collar, and a dress that presumably descended to within a scant whisk of the floor. She even had a knitted ivory shawl wrapped round her shoulders. Her face was less lined than Great-Great-Grandmother's, and she appeared to be fully alive. Oh, she also

lacked Great-Great-Grandmother's distinguishing wart. She sat at an imposing oaken desk that easily occupied three-quarters of the room's floor space. The desk was a stark contrast to the rest of the room, its uncluttered top occupied by a broad leather blotter, two neat piles of paper, and a large, well-worn wooden box full of small, neatly stacked cards.

She looked up as I appeared, peering over half-rimmed glasses that were secured to her neck by a thin gold chain. "May I help you, dear?" she asked, her voice absolutely neutral and devoid of interest or emotion.

"Yes," I answered hesitantly. "I'm here to be tested. *Tested,"* I amended, emphasizing the word the way Great-Great-Grandmother had.

Her eyebrows rose. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by the *ding* of a bell. She immediately swiveled her chair around to face the wall as a small wooden panel slid upward, revealing a nook of some kind. She reached in and pulled something out, and then swiveled back to me. "Lunchtime," she said with a tight smile, setting her burden down on her immense wooden desk. "Be just a tic."

The panel behind her slid closed. I looked down at her desk, and saw a large china bowl filled with broth and what appeared to be some kind of cooked shellfish. Incongruously balanced atop it all was a cheeseburger. I *loved* cheeseburgers, although I hadn't had one since Mother had been taken away. The house's pantry didn't ordinarily stock ground meat. The woman smiled at me and said, "Meal selection number two." She licked her lips, revealing teeth that were perfectly white and straight. "My favorite. Just a quick bite and I'll be with you, dear." With that, she wrapped her hands around the cheeseburger, and the shellfish immediately started moving about in their broth. As she lifted the sandwich clear, I saw that several of the shellfish had clamped their shells to the bottom bun, as if in a race to see whether they could devour the burger faster than the woman could. The other shellfish were snapping their shells and attempting to jump clear of the broth and get their own hold on the burger.

The woman took a small, tidy bite of the burger and, closing her

eyes, chewed slowly. "Mmmm." Her voice at last betrayed some kind of emotion. Swallowing, she opened her eyes, replaced the burger and its attendant shellfish in the bowl, and once again leveled her gaze at me. "What's your name, dear?" she asked, her voice again flat. One hand poised over the wooden box and it's little cards.

"Daniel Scratch." Not my real surname, of course; my family's True name was so old, so infamous, and so powerful, Great-Great-Grandmother said I must never use it with outsiders. I had faith that whatever arcane mechanisms witchkind used for keeping track of each other would be fine with the alias, though.

Never taking her eyes off me, the woman nimbly flipped through the stack of cards as if her fingers had a mind of their own. She stopped suddenly on a particular card and, without breaking eye contact recited, "Mother Beatrice and father Neville." Her eyebrows rose again. "Both deceased. No guardian of record listed." *Interesting,* I thought. Not that Great-Great-Grandmother would permit herself to be *listed* as anything so mundane. "There's a fee, dear."

My own eyebrows rose, as Great-Great-Grandmother hadn't mentioned anything of the sort. Then again... I dipped my hand into my coat-pocket, and found two coins lying there. I pulled them out and held them out over the woman's desk. She presented her hand —*never place your coin anywhere but in the hand you mean to have it,* Great-Great-Grandmother always insisted—and I dropped the coins gently into her palm. Not once breaking eye contact with me, she laid the coins on her desk, letting them *clink* softly, one atop the other.

"A meal is included, of course," she said. She tapped a small button that was embedded into her desk-top. "Another number two, I should think." Within seconds, the bell dinged again, and the woman swiveled around to retrieve another burger-and-shellfish lunch from the nook behind her. She laid it gently on her desk, in front of her own meal. "Join me?" she asked, once again reaching for her cheeseburger.

Don't eat the food, Father's words echoed in my mind. "No thank you," I said as graciously as possible. I hardly needed Father's warning to avoid this particular dish.

The woman froze, her eyebrows beetling down and almost

meeting in the middle of her brow. She abandoned her cheeseburger, picked up the plate that had been intended for me, and unceremoniously dumped it in a bin next to her chair. I listened carefully, but didn't ever hear it hit bottom. "The kitchen isn't pleased," she said, voice still flat and void of emotion. "You've failed their test." She leaned back a bit in her chair, folded her hands on her lap, and stared at me. "You may go."

Shopkeepers had tried to dismiss me on past errands, and I knew to hold my ground. My family's coin couldn't be accepted without obligation, Great-Great-Grandmother had taught me. "I've paid for the Test," I reminded her, once again emphasizing the last word.

She lowered one hand to her desk, covering the two coins that still sat there. She made to push them toward me, but they wouldn't budge from their position. Looking confused, she finally broke eye contact with me and looked down at her hand. She once again attempted to push the coins, and they once again remained stubbornly in place. She lifted her hand and, for the first time, looked closely at the coins. Her eyebrows climbed nearly to her hairline, and her head snapped up as she skewered me with a a sharp gaze. "I see," she said carefully, her voice no longer flat but instead tinged with a mix of curiosity and respect. "Then the Test you shall have, young Mr. Scratch."

Once again holding my gaze, she reached down and opened a desk drawer. From it, she plucked a thin piece of ash-colored wood, perhaps the size of a playing card. "Take this." She gripped it by one corner and held it out to me.

I reached for the small piece of wood, but as soon as my fingers touched it, it began to blacken and dissolve. Within moments, it had transformed into a fine dust, joining the rest of the office's ample supply. The woman had never released it and now held, pinched between her fingers, what looked like a slim glass rod, no more than two inches long. With a twitch of her fingers, the rod flipped upright, pointing toward the office's moldy ceiling. She leaned forward, extending the rod closer to me. "Blow gently across it," she instructed, her voice growing soft. "Like blowing out a candle."

I bent down slightly until my lips were just a few inches from the

rod's tip, and blew gently. The rod-end immediately erupted into an inch-long hot blue flame that blew away from me and toward the woman. I pulled back instinctively, but the flame continued to burn, flickering away from me as if I were still blowing on it. Tilting her head slightly, the woman stared at it for a moment, and then dipped the flaming end of the rod into her broth. The shellfish immediately started tossing themselves furiously around, only the weight of the cheeseburger keeping them in the bowl. Within seconds, the broth itself was boiling, and within a few more seconds, the shellfish had stopped moving. *Finally cooked,* I thought to myself.

"Well." She released the end of the rod she'd been holding and stared forlornly at the sandwich. "Number two, as I said." She pushed the entire bowl off the side of her desk and into her trash-bin. Like the one meant for me, this dish seemed to fall endlessly, never striking the bottom.

Then, in what seemed like a single sudden movement, she swiveled ninety degrees to her right and stood, reaching for one of the many boxes on the office's walls. The box she pulled down was a lacquered black cube, perhaps four inches to a side, with a key-hole occupying almost the entirety of one side. She withdrew a large bronze key from her dress-pocket, inserted it into the key-hole, and twisted. With a *click,* the box's lid snapped open. Releasing the key, she withdrew a small, irregularly shaped glass medallion that was suspended on a length of green ribbon. She flicked her wrist and the box-lid snapped shut again. She replaced the box on its shelf, extracted the key, and dropped the key back into her pocket. Then she turned to me.

"Lean forward," she instructed. I did so. She draped the ribbon over my head, sliding it so that the glass medallion hung over my sternum, then stepped back and resumed her place in her chair. "I shall tell my sisters of this strange and eventful day," she said.

I looked down at the medallion, and saw the green ribbon slowly turning to black before my eyes. Small threads frayed away at the edges, but once the entire ribbon was a dark, glossy black, the change seemed to stop. The medallion itself changed next, turning from a

crystal-clear, irregularly shaped shard into a flat diamond shape swirled throughout with deep red.

I looked up at her, and she made a flicking motion toward me with her fingers. I felt a rushing wind, and found myself back in the alley.

I knew enough to head directly to Great-Great-Grandmother's attic when I got home—there was no way she'd send me to be Tested and then take no interest in the results. Once again, I trudged up the four flights and stood on the landing as the attic door swung open. She drifted forward out of her darkness, and I saw her eyes immediately widen. She sniffed at the air—a short, sharp inhalation first, followed by a longer, deeper draught. Never taking her eyes from me, she nodded slowly. "Finally," she whispered in her rough, grating voice.

Her hand stretched out to me, but rather than extending a finger toward my forehead, this time her bony claws clutched a thick book by one corner. She held it out to me, spine down, the book never protruding past the doorframe. It looked to be quite heavy, but her old arm didn't waver.

I stepped forward hesitantly: Great-Great-Grandmother had never handed me anything tangible before. The book was easily three inches thick, bound in sturdy covers whose cloth was faded, but not frayed. I held a hand out, palm up, extending it almost past the doorframe and into the attic—the furthest any part of me had ever ventured into her domain. She dropped the book into my hand, her mouth quirking in—a smile? Impossible. I caught it, my arm drooping slightly from its heft. It felt like a box of rocks, and I couldn't understand how Great-Great Grandmother had held it so easily.

Suddenly, the house vanished from around me.

CHAPTER 2

A Lesson

I was on a small rocky prominence, surrounded by fog, as if I stood on the top of a narrow, lonely peak that was just pushing through the clouds. A fierce wind roared all around me, pulling at my coat and hair. I still held the book in one hand, its spine resting in my palm and my fingers holding it closed. It seemed almost weightless compared to just a split second earlier, and the wind seemed to flow more gently around the book, barely fluttering my sleeve. It was as if the air itself was helping to support the massive tome.

A horrendous screech from above drew my attention. My head snapped up, and I saw an immense red dragon hurtling toward me out of the sky. I made to step back, but there was nowhere to go—only the rock-tip I was perched on and, as far as I could see, bottomless fog. The dragon pulled up short not thirty yards before me and hovered in place, its wings battering the air.

It was a massive beast, dozens of times my size. The howling wind didn't seem to bother it at all as its enormous wings stroked up and down, holding it in place. Its chest was broader than four doors placed side by side, its long, sinuous neck more than double my height. Four powerful-looking legs hung easily, each ending in a wicked-looking set of claws.

Suddenly, its head reared back, its mouth opened, and it lunged forward as a stream of black fire spewed between its jaws.

I closed my eyes as the fire washed over me. I screamed, the pain immense and all-consuming. My immolation lasted for perhaps two seconds, but it felt like an eternity, searing my skin, boiling my blood, and melting my hair and clothes. When it ended, I was somehow still alive. I opened my eyes, expecting to see little more than a charred husk, but to my disbelief I was fine. My clothes were intact. *I* was intact.

I looked at the book, which had also somehow withstood the dragon's fire. My arm was beginning to shake, the book's weight slowly returning, and my weakening grip allowed the covers to fall open. The pages it revealed were covered in deeply colored illustrations of fire, surrounded by magical runes rendered in thick, black ink. I moved it a bit closer to my chest, looking for any characters I could recognize and read. Both Mother and Father had taught me some of the more elementary runes that even a child could use, like the one that would cast a dim light in the darkness, or the one that would sound a great alarm if you were in trouble. But these runes looked nothing like those: these were twisty and intertwined, runes that only an accomplished witch might understand and use.

Another roar tore my attention from the book. Still hovering before me, the dragon drew its head back again, preparing to bathe me in more black fire. Without thinking, I held my free hand in front of me, palm out as if to somehow shield myself from another round of searing pain, and clutched the book to my chest. I looked away and again clamped my eyes closed in fear.

And the fire came. But this time, though I felt the heat, it was nothing more uncomfortable than the coal stove in my own kitchen. I cracked one eye open, and saw the fire flowing around me, as if I were encased in a bubble of magic. I relaxed slightly, letting the book settle into the crook of my arm.

The wind fluttered at the book, turning the page. This new page's runes were all sharp angles and spikes, centered around an illustration that was clearly meant to be a human hand. Almost of its own accord, my free hand clenched into a fist like the one depicted in the book, my

index finger extended and pointing toward the dragon. The dragon started to ease itself backwards, its mouth slowly closing, no longer threatening me with fire.

Then, with a sudden sharp *crack,* a hole appeared in the dragon's mighty chest. I blinked in surprise, and I think the dragon must have done so too, for I could clearly see the sky and clouds behind it. I looked with amazement at my own finger, which had briefly become a sharp, elongated black spike, like a lance of pure ebony. The spike was now withdrawing, turning back into the finger I'd always known. In the blink of an eye, it had stretched from my finger to impale the dragon. When I looked back up, the dragon was already falling out of the sky, its wings twisting around it as it plunged into the clouds and vanished.

And I was back on the attic landing. Great-Great-Grandmother's mouth twitched approvingly, withdrawing into her darkness and closing the attic door before me without another word.

CHAPTER 3

A Visitor

The sun had just tipped past noon, the afternoon light trying gamely to push its way through the house's dusty windows, when I made it back downstairs. Abbygail was in the kitchen with three others of her kind, happily scrubbing the kitchen's sturdy tile floor for what must have been the fourth time that month. Her eyes opened wide when she caught sight of me, and without a word, she waved one arm, directing me to the small nook-table, where she'd already set out a cold sandwich and a mug of warm tea. I nodded acknowledgement, and felt all four of the brownies' eyes on me as I sat down, placing Great-Great-Grandmother's book carefully on the table next to my sandwich.

It wasn't a cheeseburger, but at least there were no shellfish.

I ate slowly, the morning's odd events rolling around in my mind. Neither Mother nor Father had, in my short memory, ever worn a medallion like the one I'd been given. Great-Great-Grandmother didn't wear one, either—at least, not that I had ever been able to see. Chewing a mouthful of thinly sliced bread and savory, salty ham, I again looked down at the medallion, lifting it away from my chest to get a better view. The whorls of deep red seemed to move and flow as it caught the weary sunlight that managed to push through the

kitchen windows. Letting it go, I hooked my fingers under the now-black ribbon and tried to pull it off over my head.

It didn't budge. It's not so much that it resisted me, in the way my coins had resisted the testing-woman's attempts to push them back. It was more as if my fingers simply... *slid* off the ribbon every time I tried to lift it. I appeared to be stuck with it, and found myself wondering if it would be damaged when I took my next bath. Doubtful. Father had often spoken of Artifacts—had, in fact, been obsessed with them—and how unnaturally durable they could be. This medallion was clearly an Artifact, or at least similar to one.

I wondered what it did.

I noticed that all but Abbygail had quietly left the kitchen, and as I looked up, she gave me an odd stare. I saw her tiny, silvery eyes briefly fall to the medallion before she shook her head and scurried out of the room.

I resolved to spend some time searching through the family's books that afternoon for an answer. This time, I would ignore the adventures that I normally preferred, and instead try to find one of Father's books on Artifacts. Perhaps something in one of those volumes could tell me what the medallion was, or even what it did. I sat up a little straighter, and at a little faster in anticipation. I loved little more than browsing through books, and it promised to be a satisfying afternoon.

My reverie—and my lunch—was interrupted by the door-bell. It was so loud and sudden that I almost jumped out of my skin. Even the brownies were startled—the bell hadn't been rung since my parents had died, and even when they'd been alive, visitors to our remote home were rare. Should I even answer the door? I looked at Abbygail for guidance, but she simply shrugged and went back to her floor-scrubbing.

I waited another moment, and the bell rang again. There were no sounds from the attic, though. I suspected—or at least hoped—that Great-Great-Grandmother would be giving some kind of indication if I *wasn't* to open the door. I took her silence as assent, stood up from the table, and moved to the front foyer.

Our house had been built for a large family of witchkind, back

when witchkind *had* large families. It had also been built to entertain and impress, as befitted what was once one of witchkind's wealthiest families in this part of the world. Ironically, as far as I knew our family had always been somewhat small, and I'd never known my parents to entertain at all.

A dozen ample bedrooms were spread across the second floor, and between the smaller rooms in basement and on the third floor, easily a score servants could have been accommodated. The kitchen occupied more than half of the back of the house, leading to narrow corridors that bracketed a formal dining room capable of seating a dozen or more. The dining room opened to a larger hallway leading to the drawing room and study, each stationed in one of the ground floor's opposing wings. In front of them was the main foyer, with its coat-racks and hat-stands, curio cabinets and occasional tables, and the grand, double doors that led to the front porch.

Though the doors' heavy leaded glass, I could see the shadow of a single figure but could make out no details. I glanced to the side of the doors, where the security runes had been etched into the richly colored wood of the door-frame. A single stroke of those runes, Mother had told me, would seal the house and summon help. Where that help would come from *these* days was hard to imagine, but the runes' presence offered me some comfort.

I opened the left door. "Hello?"

That the man on the porch was witchkind went without saying: no human would have seen anything but an empty field on our property, and even if they'd been of a mind to wander in it, the old magic of the land would have gently guided them back to the road, not to my doorstep. He was in almost all other ways utterly unremarkable: his face was lean, but not too thin; his clothes were plain, like mine, and of neither too good, nor too poor, a quality. His black leather briefcase was, to all appearances, perfectly ordinary. He was the type of man you could pass on the street without acknowledging and almost immediately forget you had even seen.

"Good day," he said, his voice neither high nor low but somewhere firmly in between. "I am Alistair Nash. I am a solicitor-witch, and I

have a letter for you. I presume you are Daniel Scratch, son of Beatrice and Neville? Grandson to Constance?"

I nodded. In thirteen years, I had never heard my grandmother's given name spoken aloud, although I knew it from the family tree, written in a thin ledger that sat on a table in the study. Simply hearing the name made me nervous. Grandmother had been almost as intimidating as Great-Great-Grandmother.

"Excellent," he said, offering a watery smile. Then he frowned, and swallowed heavily. "And, ah, I see you've been Tested. Very... very prompt." I realized he was staring at the medallion around my neck. He reached into his jacket-pocket, withdrawing a cream-colored envelope that he then handed to me. "You'll, ah... you'll want to read this." He seemed enraptured by the medallion. I hesitated for a moment, and then reached to accept the envelope. It was very high quality, made from heavy linen paper. The front had my name engraved in elegant script; on the back, its flap was sealed shut with a thick wax seal. I peered at the seal more closely. It contained a single rune that I couldn't identify. "I should warn you," he said sternly, drawing my attention back to him, "that if you are not the Daniel I have described, you would do well not to break that seal." He lifted his eyes slightly to meet mine for a moment, before flicking them back down at the medallion.

I looked back at the envelope. Placing a thumb on either side of the seal, I gently bent it until, without fanfare, it cracked. I opened the envelope's flap, and withdrew the single sheet of heavy, pure-white linen paper that was neatly folded inside. Unfolding it, I read the gently flowing script:

Daniel,

I am sure this will come as a great surprise to you, and at a terrible time, for our solicitor has been instructed to deliver this only upon our deaths. This means that we have passed before we could see you grow into a young adult, and for that we are deeply sorry.

Mr. Nash, or another member of his firm, has been given instructions and funds regarding your education and introduction to the broad society of witchkind. They will ensure that you are able to take up a trade

that suits you, and grow into the wonderful man we know you will become.

With all of our love,

Mother and Father

I looked up at Mr. Nash, the question obvious in my eyes.

"Yes, well." He seemed somewhat nervous, pulling slightly at his collar. "It seems that the... unusual circumstances around your parents' passings caused us to, um... lose track of you, so to speak."

"For several years."

"It seems, yes," he admitted. "You sort of just popped back onto the radar today. The Test, I presume," he said, nodding his head toward my medallion. "Once we knew where to find you, I set out immediately to deliver this. They just ah... they didn't mention. You know." He tilted his head at my chest again.

"What does it mean?" I asked, looking back at the short note.

"The... what does what mean?" he asked nervously. I rustled the letter. "Ah. Of course. My firm was retained to ensure you were given a proper education. We were to act as your legal guardians while you completed your education, and ensure you are able to move successfully into a trade. I, ah..." he paused, and looked up at the house. "Have you lived here all alone, all this time?"

"There are brownies," I said, "and a kobold will drop in now and again. Also... Great-Great Grandmother is in the attic." I'd never been *told* not to discuss her presence, but I didn't want to say too much either.

"Great-Great..." he started, and trailed off. "Powers that be," he muttered. "Well. Ah, if I might come in, we could discuss our next steps?" His voice regained a measure of confidence. "That," he added, lifting one hand to point at the medallion, "will necessitate a somewhat... hmm, less usual approach."

"Oh?"

"That ridiculous woman told you nothing, I assume? When you were Tested?"

I shook my head.

"Public servants." The disdain in his voice couldn't have been clearer. "Well, nothing for it, and I suppose on the bright side, I'll be

able to give you all the information you need. *Correctly."* He gestured inside. "May I?"

I looked back at the letter. The front of the house faced due west, and the sun was just now cresting toward the horizon. As I looked at the page, the light caught it at a bit of an angle, and I saw an odd discoloration on the page, just below Father and Mother's signature. I peered more closely, tilting the page a bit, until I saw what had caught my eye: there was an impression of sorts in the paper. Not deep enough to be called an embossing, but definitely a deliberate marring of the otherwise-perfect surface. It was a single rune: the rune to bring a dim light into a dark place.



Yesssss, the house seemed to whisper, the cloying scent of butterscotch briefly wrapping around my nostrils.

I looked up at Mr. Nash. "Yes, please. Come in." I stood aside to let him enter.

"Ah, thank you," Mr. Nash said as Abbygail handed him a steaming cup of tea. His eyebrows immediately flew up, and he quickly stared at me and added, "–Daniel, for your hospitality." He offered a weak smile. I saw Abbygail roll her eyes as she stalked away; the prohibition on thanking brownies didn't apply to houseguests, but the lawyer must not have known that. He blew on his tea to cool it, and continued, "Do you understand how witchkind are educated, Daniel?"

I shook my head.

He leaned back in the rickety old chair—I'd led him to the kitchen out of habit, as I still couldn't picture myself in the cavernous, dimly lit dining room no matter the circumstances—and sighed. "Most of

witchkind, and I include myself in this, receive our education in one of three Great Schools spread across the world. Your parents, for example, attended Disemstoke's, just a few villages from here. I believe your grandparents did as well." They had: I'd seen Great-Great-Grandmother's diploma hanging on the wall in what had once been her workshop, out on the back of the property. "Your parents assumed you would as well, and I have instructions to enroll you, should your Test have directed you there. But that," he said slowly, again pointing to the medallion around my neck, "changes things."

"Changes things how?"

"Our schools are intended to teach your average run-of-the-mill student. All of us have approximately the same abilities, and the same level of power, and so even though we all choose our own specialties, schooling starts the same for us all. And witchkind's schools presume a basic level of education, either from a private preparatory school, through home schooling, or something else. I assume you haven't had much education in the last few years?"

I shook my head again.

He heaved another sigh. "So you'd be woefully underprepared for Disemstoke's, even if it wasn't for the medallion."

I fingered the chunk of warm glass, suspended from its inky ribbon. "But I do have the medallion," I said softly. And I still didn't know what it meant.

"You do," Mr. Nash said heavily. "And so that will necessitate a different approach."

I waited for a moment to see if he'd continue, but he simply stared at me. "Different how?" I finally asked.

He sipped his tea before he answered. "The medallion indicates that you are of a different order of witchkind, Daniel. Above ordinary individuals like myself as much as I am, in terms of power and ability, above a human. Disemstoke's wouldn't know what to do with you, and frankly you'd be a danger to your teachers and to your fellow students. Witchkind's schools are forbidden from enrolling students who wear a medallion."

"I can't take it off."

"No, you can't. You're to be apprenticed to a Master, another

more experienced practitioner, for personal education. When your Master deems you ready, he or she will remove the medallion."

"So I'll still be educated?"

"Well." He paused. "I mean, you have to be educated, of course. The problem is... well." He took a moment to gather himself. "If ordinary witchkind consists of generalists who choose to focus in a particular magical topic, those who receive medallions are born with a specialization, so to speak." I found myself growing nervous. I also got the distinct impression he wasn't telling me everything.

"They are *not* generalists," he continued. They are born into one of five Axes of Power, and the medallion bestowed at their Testing identifies which Axis. Once a medallion is laid upon a child, all of witchkind are bound to deliver them to a Master of the corresponding Axis. Unless they're a public servant, apparently," he added with a mutter. "And so that is what I must do. That is what I *will* do," he finished with a nod. He seemed to be trying to convince himself. "We should leave *now,"* he added.

"Now... right now?" I stammered.

"Yes. Now that you are of age, your powers are at risk of manifesting without control. It is essential we—I—deliver you to a Master who can protect us—I mean, you—and teach you." He paused. "*Essential."* I noticed beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead. He seemed just as agitated as I was becoming.

I clamped my jaw shut. "Excuse me," I said between my teeth, trying to remember my manners. I left the kitchen, dashing up the four flights to Great-Great-Grandmother's attic. This time, I didn't wait quietly on the landing as her door swung open: I stepped forward and rapped sharply on the door. "Grandmother!" I called loudly. "Grandmother, I need to speak with you! There's a man–"

The door swung open sharply, catching me off-guard and almost sending me tripped backwards into the stairs. Great-Great-Grandmother was there, her wrinkled skin tight around her eyes and mouth. "Foretold," she croaked, shaking her head ever so softly. "Predestined." Her eyes widened slightly, and her withered breast expanded as she inhaled deeply and intoned:

Sky and Earth, Flame and Sea

Cast adrift, their center lost
Until a Sixth might come to be
To join them all, or pay the cost

This complete, her eyes seemed to sink further into her ancient skull, and her shoulders drooped. "Go," she whispered roughly. "Go and never return." She stepped back into her never-ending darkness, muttering softly. The attic door swung shut. A fog seemed to settle over my mind. I needed to go with Mr. Nash, I realized, and I needed to go immediately. She'd placed a directive on me, her magic pushing away my trepidation. Honestly, I'm glad she did it. I suspect I would have dithered for as long as possible rather than leaving the only home I'd ever known.

I turned and made my way down the stairs in a magically powered daze. I stopped briefly on the third floor and whispered, "Goodbye, Father." I listened for a moment, but didn't hear any of the scratching-in-the-wall that presaged his attention. I sighed and continued my descent.

I stepped back into the kitchen, and saw that Mr. Nash had risen to his feet. Next to him stood Abbygail, a quizzical look on her little face.

"Are you all right?" Mr. Nash asked. "You look a bit ashen, my boy."

I nodded, my head still spinning. "Abbygail," I said, "would you please pack a case for me? I'll be gone for... for some time. I..." I stopped and swallowed heavily. "I may not be coming back."

She gave me a sad smile, a tear rolling down her face. She made a gesture, and two other brownies—both ones that had been with me for some time, although they'd never shared their names—dragged a satchel in from the opposite hallway. "We knew you'd be leaving us some day, Master Daniel," she said softly, her small voice filled with emotion.

"Yes." This all felt... perfunctory. Normal, even. Why did this seem normal? Some small part of my mind wanted to object, but then I'd been a child living in a massive house by myself for three years. What *was* normal? I tugged the satchel open and slid Great-Great-Grandmother's book into it. Whatever magic she'd cast over me wasn't

letting me leave the book behind. Mr. Nash cocked his head slightly at the book but said nothing as I re-cinched the bag shut. "Goodbye, Abbygail."

She looked deep into my eyes then, and her voice took on a heavy new layer of meaning. "It will be lonely here without you."

I blinked. Of course. I'd been so caught up in my own bewildering day that I hadn't even thought about it. If I left, she and the other brownies would be here with nothing but Great-Great-Grandmother's spirit to care for—and spirits didn't require the kind of care a brownie could offer. That wasn't fair. I looked into the others' dark, brown eyes, and then looked back to Abbygail. "Abbygail," I said firmly, "I thank you, and your friends, for your service."

She gave me another small smile, and clasped her hands in front of her. A wisp of wind rolled through the kitchen, and they were gone.

"That was well done, Daniel," Mr. Nash offered quietly. "Well done indeed." He motioned toward the kitchen exit. "Shall we?"

Silently, I shouldered the satchel and led the way to the front door. I opened it, allowing Mr. Nash to step through, and then joined him on the porch. I pulled the door shut behind me. We descended the short flight of stone stairs to the front path, where I stopped and turned to look back. I had never known a home other than this one, which had been in my family for generations. It seemed a shame to leave it here on its own, with nobody to care for it. As I looked at it, the house itself seemed to exhale softly, a breeze picking up a few dry leaves from the ground and flipping them 'round and 'round in the air. I tilted my head to the side for a moment, and then, very softly, said, "And thank you for your service as well."

"Daniel?" Mr. Nash called.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that he'd made it to the front gate. I followed him through it and turned to close the gate behind me — more out of habit, I admit, than any concern about trespassers. As I did so, another soft gust of wind rolled around me. I looked up at the house.

The house was gone. My hand, which had been resting on the gate, was now hovering over empty air.

CHAPTER 4

The Tower of Endings

Before Father had died, and before Mother lost her mind and was taken from me, they'd had occasion to take me out of the house a handful of times. None of those trips were, in retrospect, especially momentous, although for a young boy they'd been grand events. We'd taken a picnic in a country field, or a short trip into the village, or off to see a distant relative in their home. What stood out to me on all of those trips is how quickly the traveling itself passed. Although as a powerless child I'd always taken the hour-long walk into the nearby village, adults of witchkind traveled much more efficiently.

Mr. Nash was no exception. He took my hand in a somewhat firmer grip than I thought would have been necessary, and we stepped along the same dirt lane I'd walked before. But now each of our steps seemed to carry us leagues, the scenery blurring gently as we rushed along. A handful of steps took us to the village, and a few more took us clear to the coast—a journey I knew would have taken me many days. I remember thinking how powerful a magic it was, although of course that was simply because, at the time, I knew so little of what ordinary witchkind could do with such little effort.

At one point I clearly remember "walking" over the sea, Mr. Nash

never once slowing or faltering in his miles-eating strides. When we came to a halt, it was sudden enough to take my breath away.

He'd brought me to a small, rocky islet, well off the coast. Far enough away, in fact, that I couldn't see anything on the horizon but the choppy gray sea. The water crashed indifferently into the islet's rocky shore, *hissing* down the sides of boulders that were black with age. The islet itself was little more than a hard mound rounding itself out of the water. There were no trees, and no life at all that I could see. Instead, the entire landscape seemed to consist solely of tall, sharp, jagged spires of rock that jutted up from the ground and thrust angrily toward the islet's one feature: a soaring, dark Tower positioned precisely at the land's tablet rise, in the dead middle of the isle. I thought it odd that the spires all tilted *toward* the Tower, as if they were meant to keep something *in* it, rather than keeping enemies *out.* Those spires even continued out into the sea, pushing out of the ocean and toward the Tower like bony, grasping fingers.

Mr. Nash and I stood at the foot of a smooth earthen path that started at the shore and gently wound its way through the crags to the base of the Tower. From where we stood, the Tower appeared to have been carved directly from a column of native rock: its base blended easily into the ground, and at this distance I couldn't make out the individual blocks of stone that *must* have formed the structure.

The Tower was capped by two small turrets. About halfway down from their caps, a third, somewhat larger turret was affixed to the side of the Tower, as if it had grown up and latched on like some parasitic fungus on the bark of a tree. There were a few small windows that I could see, although none of them displayed any sign of light or life.

"This is where my Master lives? This is where I'm to be apprenticed?"

"I'm so sorry, Daniel," Mr. Nash said quietly. "But the Law is the Law, and... well. I'm sorry." I turned to ask him a question, but with a small gust of wind, he'd stepped off and away.

I was alone.

You may think it odd that I was taking all the day's events with such aplomb. Obviously, looking back over such a span as I am now robs some of the urgency and emotion from that day. I also strongly suspect that Great-Great-Grandmother had done something to soften and ease my mind. Then too, so much had already happened to me so young: my Father's death, my Mother's incarceration, discovering Great-Great-Grandmother in her attic—it is possible that, even at such a young age, I simply wasn't easily shaken.

Being left alone on a strange, forbidding island was certainly stretching things a bit, though. But at that point, there seemed little to do other than walk the path to the Tower. Mr. Nash had mentioned a Master; surely this was what he'd meant. I had expected an introduction of sorts, but perhaps this was how these things were done. The fog around my mind had started to fade at that point, and I *was* growing a bit concerned about basic necessities like food and shelter. So I hoisted my satchel and began trudging toward the Tower.

I kept my eyes on the path for a while. Although it was smooth and firm, the islet had an inexplicable feeling of *age* about it, and I didn't want to step into a pot-hole or something and turn an ankle. After several minutes though, I looked up to gauge my progress. I was startled. The Tower didn't seem much closer than when I'd stepped off the shore. I looked back over my shoulder, and saw that I'd only taken a few steps. Odd. I returned my gaze to the Tower, and took another step. I *felt* my legs moving under me. I *felt* my feet press against the ground and push me forward. Yet the rocky spikes around me seem to *slide*, leaving me in exactly the same place.

I frowned. I might not have had the formal education a witchkind school would expect, but I'd spent years in the house with little to do except read. I'd picked up a *few* things. Father had maintained an excellent library in his study, and although I tended to ignore the more technical books on Craft, I'd read plenty of the adventures and fictions I'd found. This seemed like a classical test of some kind, something that I, as a presumptive apprentice, would need to solve.

I set my jaw, and stepped forward more firmly, keeping the Tower firmly in my sight and *willing* it to grow closer. I felt a kind of liquid resistance pushing against me, as if the air had grown thick. My medal-

lion suddenly flashed hot against my chest, and I smelled a pungent, burning, sulfurous stench. It cleared as quickly as it had come, though, and I'd taken an *actual* step forward.

Encouraged, I tried it again. This time, the smell and flash of heat were accompanied by a pop of light, momentarily blinding me. When my vision cleared, I'd not take a step—I'd taken *all* of the steps. I was a nose-length away from the tower's only door, a sturdy-looking wooden slab banded and bound in black iron straps. I blinked, took a step back, and—having nothing to lose—reached out to knock on the door.

My small knuckles made a quiet tapping noise, no more. But a moment later, they seemed to echo inside the Tower. The echo repeated and grew, until it was the sound of a battering ram against an iron door, clanging and pounding. I dropped my satchel, and made to cover my ears with my hands, when the racket abruptly ended. I slowly lowered my hands, stooping over slightly to reclaim my satchel, and the door swung open.

The inside was dark, the only light that which streamed hesitatingly through the open door. Whatever room was past that door was empty of any furniture I could see, the walls barren stone, the floor devoid of carpet or ornamentation. It appeared, from my limited vantage, to be completely empty. It felt both sinister and... somehow, welcoming. A place where few belonged, except...

Except that I was one of those few.

I stepped inside, and it swung shut behind me.

It was pitch-black inside, so dark I couldn't even see the hand that I raised in front of my face. I stood quietly for a moment, listening carefully, but heard nothing—even the noise of the sea-winds was completely cut off.

"Lengvas," I intoned, naming the rune Mother had taught me, picturing the rune in my mind as she'd told me to do, the same rune that had been on the letter Mr. Nash had given me. A soft yellow glow appeared around me. I could now see the stone floor I stood upon—

eerily smooth and seamless—but little else. Outside the small circle of light I'd cast, there was still nothing but impenetrable darkness.

I stepped forward, and my circle of light followed me. I could, I supposed, walk forward until I found a wall, or a door, or even a chair or something. Perhaps—

"Ho," a voice said. It was a woman's voice, deep and husky. It didn't so much *echo* as it did *flow* around me. That single syllable seemed to have substance of some kind, and I turned quickly to one side, hoping to catch sight of the speaker. "What have we," the voice said, seemingly from behind me, causing me to quickly pivot toward it. "a boy-child with a toy rune to bring–" the voice continued, once again from behind me. I whirled again just as the voice cut off.

"Ah," it purred. I could almost feel the speaker's lips brushing against one ear, and I twitched away from it. "I wondered if I'd be the one," it said quietly in my other ear. This time I held my ground. "Here I'd thought the defenses were finally failing." It was farther away this time, perhaps a handful of steps, and it no longer seemed to be moving around me. "But you're meant to be here, aren't you, boy?"

"I was brought here." My voice sounded flat to me, without the slightest trace of echo. "I was Tested this morning."

"And disposed of as quickly as possible," the voice said, now seeming to carry a note of humor. "Must have given your Tester a right start. Did they feed you?"

As if on cue, my stomach growled. "Father said not to eat the food."

A sense of wry approval wafted over me. "What's your name, boy?" the voice asked, its tone kinder now.

"Daniel Scratch."

There was a long moment of silence, and I could feel the voice's owner regarding me carefully. "That's a lie," it said at last. "Though I begin to suspect why you'd tell it. I'll ask once more, boy: *What is your name?"*

I swallowed. I'd been cautioned for as long as I remembered that our name was not to be said aloud. But this was clearly not a situation my parents, or even Great-Great-Grandmother, had foreseen. Well, perhaps Great-Great-Grandmother had. I swallowed again, and

inhaled deeply. "Daniel Teisejas," I whispered, still afraid to give my full voice to my true name. "Daniel Drake Teisejas."

My dim little circle of light faded then, but a moment later the entire room was bathed in light. I blinked furiously at the abrupt change, and as my watery eyes cleared, I saw that I was in a round ante-room of sorts, perhaps thirty feet across. A door—the one I'd entered through, I thought from its size—was to my left, and another, smaller door stood exactly opposite it on the far wall. Torches were set into the wall every few feet, blazing with steady blue-orange flames. And *she* was standing directly in front of me.

Her long, straight, gray-and-black hair was gathered into a loose tail, and draped forward over one shoulder. I could not have put an age to her: her face was weathered and hard, but her ebony-colored skin had no wrinkles save for a fine set of webs around her brown eyes. She wore a simple shirt and trousers made of gray homespun, the trousers disappearing into sturdy black boots. Over it all, she wore a heavy cloak of the deepest red. In fact, it reminded me of the red swirls in my medallion. My left hand dropped my satchel on the stone floor as my right hand absently touched the medallion.

She crossed her arms in front of herself. "You'll do well to forget that name for a time," she said. "Here we shall simply call you Daniel. It has been an age and more since anyone needed to name *me,* but for now I think 'Kirmin' will do." She paused and looked me over for a moment.

"An *age,"* she repeated softly, "but here we are now. Welcome to the Tower of Endings, Daniel."

"That contains clothes?" Kirmin asked, pointing at my satchel.

"And my book."

"Book?" She tilted her head curiously. "Show me."

I bent over, tugged the satchel open, and withdrew the immense book Great-Great-Grandmother had given me. Standing, I saw her eyes grow wide. She took a step forward, her arms uncrossing. "Sacred vows," she whispered. She looked like she was ready to rush over to

me, but she pulled herself up short and pointed at the book. "That is impossible. How do you have it?"

I glanced down at the book, taking in its sturdy cover. "Grandmother gave it to me."

"Your grandmother?" she echoed.

"Technically my great-great grandmother," I clarified. "She–"

"Don't say anything more," Kirmin interrupted quickly. "That–well. At least it's *here,* where it can do no harm and not *be* harmed." She crossed her arms again, one finger tapping the opposite elbow. "Leave the satchel," she said at last. "You won't need anything in it. The Book, though." She paused, considering. "Put it in your coat-pocket."

I blinked. The book would barely be covered if I wrapped my entire coat around it. "I don't think–"

"I know," she interrupted again. "That's why you're here. So *don't* think. Just *do.* Put the Book in your pocket."

I stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Now!" she ordered, lunging toward me and reaching for me with both arms.

I backpedaled, almost falling to the ground, then tucked one corner of the massive book into my coat-pocket and pushed. If this crazy woman wanted me to rip my pocket open, so be it. But all at once, my hands were free of the book's weight. I looked down, and saw a tiny, slim version of the book nestled easily in my coat pocket. My coat hung crookedly on my shoulders though, the book's full weight was dragging down at one side despite its diminutive size.

"Good," she said, stepping back and re-crossing her arms. "It should be happy there until we're ready for it. Don't," she continued, looking intently at me, "even think about removing it until I've given you leave, do you understand?"

I nodded rapidly. "What is it?"

"It's a book, obviously."

"Well yes, but–"

"But why am I so agitated about it?" I nodded. "It's *our* Book. Or supposed to be. It should have been here in the Tower, but it was lost. Ages ago." She frowned. "Or taken. I can't remember, and that alone

makes me suspicious. But it's meant to hold our lore, our magic. Everything we've learned about the Axis. Not that we should need a book to hold our memories." She shook her head a bit, as if to clear it. "But it's here now, and you'll keep it in that pocket until I say otherwise."

"I understand."

"Good. Now, do you know why you're here?"

My mouth gaped open for a moment, and I must have looked like a dead fish. The question seemed a bit silly, given all that had happened today. "I was Tested, and given this medallion." I reached up to finger the piece of glass at my chest.

"Mmm, yes, but that's not the entire story. Technically, you were Chosen. The Test merely identifies the Choice. And the Sixth Axis rarely Chooses without a good reason."

"Like... what?"

"Usually a great need. Something it feels is urgent. And you showing up with that book... well. Suffice to say it's probably a *very* great need, although the Axis's sense of urgency isn't always the same as ours."

"What do you mean?" This woman was becoming more confusing by the moment.

"The Axes are eternal. For them, 'urgent' could be something on the order of millennia. Or it could be something you need to take care of tomorrow. It's hard to tell."

"What was I Chosen for, then?"

She chuckled, and shook her head at my naïveté. "*That* will take some time to find out. But if it's something you need to do tomorrow, it won't get done. You'll be here for years, learning your way with the Axis and taking your place as its adherent in the world."

"Years?"

"You're thirteen, right?"

"Yes."

"Then yes, years. You'd have spent at least five at any of the Great Schools, and you should expect to spend just as long here. Hopefully the Axis took that into account when it Chose you."

"Five years?"

"You're catching on."

My stomach growled.

She laughed, a rolling, happy sound. "We can probably start by getting you something to eat, if you're hungry."

My stomach growled again in agreement.

"Kitchen usually catches on fast." Turning, she made her way to the smaller interior door. I followed warily.

"Everything else will take a few hours," she added, although I had no idea what she was talking about. "Fresh clothes will likely have to wait until morning, as the driežai won't all venture back until nightfall. Should be a pallet or something somewhere that's not too rotted." She seemed to be talking more to herself than to me now. "No rodents or insects at least, more's the praise for that. Come, boy!" she called, her voice growing louder as she opened the door and stepped through. "Let's get you fed and see what new age is upon us."

I followed her through the door.

She led me down a flight of spiraling stone stairs, and we emerged into a small, cheerfully lit kitchen. A massive hearth occupied most of one wall, a small fire banked to one side. A heavy wooden table took up much of the middle of the room. On one end of that table sat a steaming bowl of stew. A single chair was pushed under the table. At Kirmin's gesture, I pulled the chair out and sat down.

The stew smelled fantastic. Abbygail had often made a rich, herb-scented meal that was one of my favorites, and this smelled almost exactly like it. My mouth began watering in anticipation, and my stomach gave a low growl of demand. "Do you have brownies, too?" I asked.

"No, the Tower... well, I guess you could say that brownies wouldn't feel very welcome here. It takes care of itself. You'll see. Tuck in." She perched on the side of the table and twisted to look at me. "You're going to be full of questions as we always are, and so I'll be doing the answers I suppose."

A simple wooden spoon was already in the bowl, and so I scooped

out a first bite. It was wonderful, some kind of well-cooked game in a thick brown broth, accompanied by chunks of orange and white root vegetables.

"So. How much do you know?" Kirmin asked as I ate.

I swallowed before answering. "I'm to be apprenticed to a Master. That's what Mr. Nash told me. He brought me here."

"And your medallion?"

"It means I'm not normal witchkind."

"*Normal.*" There was scorn in her voice. "Shortsighted cowards, that's 'normal' witchkind. You're no different from any of them, save that you've been granted extra gifts by the universe. Gifts or burdens, you decide. That's why they push us away, make us live apart, just as they all keep their distance from humans. Afraid the humans will burn 'em at the stake, afraid we'll subjugate them or something. So much fear," she finished, shaking her head sadly. "Let me tell you a story," she offered.

When the world was young, *she began,* its energies flowed randomly, without order. The world was still figuring out what it was, you see, and what it wanted to be. Eventually, some of those energies were attached to some of the animals of the world. They grew used to each other, over the centuries. Those animals learned how to use those energies, and the energies learned how those animals could keep them both fresh and alive. That was the beginning of witchkind.

Some of the world's other animals were far more numerous but also far less interested in the energies around them. Instead, they spent their time breeding more of themselves, chasing down other animals to eat, and planting things in the ground. They lived harder, shorter lives, but they were *much* better at the breeding part, so they slowly spread to cover most of the world. Those were the humans.

Humans and witchkind lived side by side in those days. The gentler energies that witchkind had become companions with could

heal a broken leg, bring a gentle rain to a field of crops, or even predict when the weather was about to turn bitter and cold. Witchkind and humans protected each other. They provided for each other.

But some of the world's greatest energies never did settle down. They remained wild, untamed. They weren't interested in lighting a home, or heating a meal, or diverting a storm. They wanted to fly, to dive through the seas, and to crunch their way through the earth. They flitted around the companion-energies of witchkind but never tied themselves to them. There were six of those wilder energies, back then. Four of them were behind the mighty forces of nature, bringing earthquakes, volcanos, the great storms, and the tsunamis of the sea. A fifth was one of the oldest of them, carrying the spark of life itself, but that one had always been elusive, as beginnings often are. That one interacted constantly with humans, and to a lesser degree with witchkind, but only on its own terms. The sixth great energy was its opposite, and just as old: an energy of endings and completions. Death, some would come to call it.

Witchkind could influence those greater energies to some degree or another but could never tame them. And all the world suffered for it, as those wild energies went on random rampages. Even the power of life and creation was a mystery to witchkind, sometimes generous with its gifts, and other times denying them.

At last, one of the greatest of witchkind convinced his brethren to do something about it. They would pool their own smaller energies, he said, and bring the greater, wild energies to heel. They would capture them, imprison them in physical form, and gain command over them. His compatriots agreed, and they created the most powerful magics ever seen before or since: the *suvienijimas.*

It took more than a decade of preparation, and more than half of witchkind died in the attempt, sacrificing their lives to bind those greater, wilder energies to their will. Sadly, almost half of the humans also died in the backlash, forever making them enemies of witchkind. In a way, the *suvienijimas* became the *triuškinantis,* a word that means shattering or sundering. From that time, humans have ever been the enemies of witchkind, seeking to destroy us for daring to tamper with the world's energies. Seeking revenge for our hubris.

But the *suvienijimas* succeeded, after a fashion. The great energies were drawn into physical forms, at least. But not all of witchkind would be able to command them, for the wily, wild energies remained too powerful. And so six of witchkind's greatest, the six who stood at the center of the great working, took some of the wild power into themselves. They bound their minds and sacrificed their bodies, becoming the *šešios ašys,* the Six Axes: One Axis for each of the world's great powers.

By merging their minds and bodies with the greater energies, those six ensured that *some* of witchkind would be able to control the wild powers of the world. Every one of witchkind now carries the *potential* to reach out to their spiritual counterparts. Seeds, if you will, with the promise of communing with them. Directing them. Perhaps not *controlling* them, but influencing them more than witchkind ever could.

But those six seeds, all of that hope and promise, were scattered throughout witchkind, with no way to track where they landed. And so witchkind now Tests its children. Tests them, to see if any of those seeds has taken root, through time and space, and sprouted. In any generation, at least *one* of witchkind would bond with each of the world's greatest magics. And the Tests do more: they help determine which of the Great Schools any child of witchkind might be destined for. But make no mistake: the Tests were first made to find *us.*

The First Axis holds the power of the Sea. It was bound by Jura Sea-Father, forced into the body of the great kraken that roam the deeps. Its shape is the teardrop, its color the green of the deepest oceans.

The Second Axis bonds the power of Flame. It was captured by Liepsna Flame-Mother and forced into the form of the great dragons. Its shape is the triangle, representing flame, and its color the bright orange of fire.

The Third Axis captured the power of Earth. It was brought to heel by Zeme Rock-Brother, embodied as the great Wyrms who can survive the hottest magma. Its shape is a square, and its color the deep gray of bedrock.

The Fourth Axis harnessed the power of the Sky. It was tamed by

Vejas Wind-Sister and given physical form as the Wraith. Its shape is the circle, its color the brightest blue.

Gyvenima Life-Bringer sought to tame the power of Creation and Beginnings, but she failed. That great power, white and hot, was older and more wily than the others, and it refused to be captured. Instead, it dispersed itself through every living creature on the world. It gave up its existence as a greater power, and became millions of small, tiny lights within each of us. To be truthful, it had already left much of its power in us, and some suspect that it was merely bowing to the inevitable. So the Fifth Axis never came to be.

Galas End-Watcher *did* manage to capture the great, wild power of Endings and Completion. But that great, wild power refused to be completely constrained. In the end, Galas bound it only to his own spirit, giving the power more free reign to act in the world as it saw fit. It was connected, but not harnessed. Bound, but not conquered. His sacrifice ensured that witchkind could still direct that power, and he gave the Sixth Axis its shape and color: the diamond shot through with deep red. Unlike its brethren, the Sixth Axis scattered its seeds further, and wider. Many a generation has come and gone with no-one bearing its seed, no-one able to commune with it or direct it. In that way, the world's last great power remained largely wild and free. Humans and witchkind alike came to fear it, and to distrust it. And when its seed does take root, whether by whim or accident, those of witchkind who bear it also bear that fear and distrust.

"And that is why," Kirmin said, "we of the Sixth Axis have always been bound to this islet. Kept and caged, in the belief that doing so will also keep and cage Death itself, and prevent it from running amok."

I blinked. "So... I'm trapped here?" I asked. I'd recognized the reference to the medallion I wore, and I knew I must be one of the ones who'd somehow wound up with some kind of vague connection to Death.

"Oh, of course not," she said with a small laugh. "Not in the long term, at least. Not any more than the idea of death itself can be bound

into a single place. No, the old stories get a lot of it wrong, and people, being people, tend to believe them. They thought... well, they thought that by trapping *us* here, they'd trap death as well, somehow. Or Endings. But no, you're only trapped here until... until you complete your training and decide you don't *want* to be trapped here anymore."

"So... I'll be able to leave eventually?" I ventured.

"Of course. The isle can only hold those who haven't reach their End, yet."

"My End?" I asked. I didn't quite understand the significance, back then.

"All things End, you know. Seasons. Meals. Arguments. Wars. Lives. The Sixth Axis is the power of Endings and Conclusions. That's scary for some people. But Endings, especially ones that are justified and well-planned, aren't anything to be afraid of. The isle can only hold you here until your End. And once your training ends, you'll decide if you want it to hold you here still.

She smiled. "This is probably a good time to get some sleep."

Kirmin had, in fact, found a bedroom with a proper—if tiny—mattress elevated off the stone floor on a proper metal frame. The beds in my family's house had been huge, easily capable of sleeping three adults. I still had fond memories of crawling into my parents' bed in cold nights, snuggling between them. It hadn't been until Father's last year that they'd begun insisting I slept in my own bed. Mother used to joke that it was my restless kicking during the night that gave her bruises along her ribs.

The room was on the same level as the kitchen, just one flight down from the main entry to the Tower. From the kitchen, she'd led me down a short hallway with four bedrooms and a spacious, shared washing-room at the end. She'd assured me that appropriate clothing would be available in the morning, but that I was to keep my coat—my Book still in its pocket—with me at all times. I'd taken her seriously, folding the coat under my pillow before falling asleep. I laid the rest of my clothing on the bare stone floor.

The room was windowless, and the lighting was... interesting. It was lit by one of the torches that seemed to line every wall of the Tower. I'd tried extinguishing it before climbing into bed, but it had stubbornly resisted my huffing and puffing. But as I'd pulled the covers over myself, defeated, it had dimmed, flickered, and eventually died. I'd briefly wondered if I'd sleep forever, with no sign of the sun to rouse me, but my exhaustion had claimed me.

I slept deeply but uneasily, if that makes any sense. I don't remember waking at all during the night, but I had the most vivid and unusual dreams. I don't even know if I can describe them: their intensity, and the urgency of them, remains with me to this day. But at the time they seemed unformed and vague. I remember feeling anxious—I was, after all, trapped here on an island with a strange woman who would be teaching me to become one of the most powerful of witchkind. I also remember feeling curious, for her stories had sparked some of the same feelings that my old adventure-stories had. And oddly, I remember feeling comfortable, somehow. I felt that I belonged here, even more than I ever belonged in my own family's house. There I had felt overlooked, forgotten. Lying here in the Tower, tossing in my small bed, I had the feeling that my life before now had been nothing but a placeholder, a period of waiting for my real life to begin.

CHAPTER 5

Morning

As morning broke, the room was lit by some other magic. Although the torch remained unlit, the light in the room had grown brighter and brighter as I'd blinked my way to wakefulness. Even now, it was getting brighter and whiter, as if the sun had finally crested the horizon. Yet I could still see no openings, not even a slit, though which sunlight might be admitted. It was as if the sunlight were somehow being collected elsewhere and then simply *appearing* in my room. For all I knew, that's exactly what was happening.

I wasn't entirely surprised, when I awoke, to see that my clothes had been replaced by neatly-folded articles of the same gray homespun she'd wore. I dressed myself quickly and made good use of the wash-room, which had gained clean, simple gray towels at some point during the evening. I found it odd that neither of the two water-basins featured a looking-glass, though. I shrugged, ran my fingers through my short hair and figured that was sufficient. My morning ablutions complete, I made my way back to the kitchen.

Breakfast had been laid at the end of the table, the same chair pushed under and awaiting me. Kirmin was there as well, perched cross-legged in the middle of the table just a few feet from the meal.

"Good morning!" she offered brightly, indicating the plate of food with a nod. "How did you sleep?"

"Really good," I said, stifling a yawn. "It feels like I slept for a week!"

"That would just be silly, sleeping for a week." She grinned, and pointed at the food again. "Dig in!"

The plate contained mostly recognizable breakfast foods: a thick chunk of bread, a couple of slices of meat, and a generous pat of butter. But it also contained some things I hadn't seen before. Things that looked suspiciously familiar after my encounter with the Tester. I eyed the plate warily for a moment, an then glanced at Kirmin.

"What?"

"Are these safe to eat?" I picked up my fork and nudged the odd-looking shellfish.

She frowned. "What do you mean? Of course they're safe. They're austrių. Why wouldn't they be safe?"

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to offend her. "They look like... it's just... when I was Tested, she had a bowl of–" I stopped as Kirmin's face broke into a wide smile. "What's funny?"

"Testers." Her voice was full of mirth. "I'm guessing those were druskos moliuskai. The humans call them 'salt clams.' They're popular, but in witchkind eating them live can temporarily suppress magic. Just a little, but many of the women who become Testers are phenomenally overpowered for the job. They eat those to help take the edge off, so they're not buzzing with power all the time."

"She offered me a bowl." I felt my lip curl slightly, remembering the smell of them.

"Nobody said Testers don't have senses of humor." She chuckled, shaking her head. "Seriously, these are fine. You'll love them."

She was right. The austrių were delicious, adding a light, briny note to the meal. A tall glass of cool water helped wash everything down as I ate in my usual fashion of small, neat bites. Kirmin said nothing further while I ate, satisfying herself with gazing curiously at me.

"Interesting hairstyle," she commented wryly.

"There's no looking-glass," I mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Her tone grew dark. "You won't be so eager to see yourself after a few decades here. But," she continued, her voice lightening again, "I'm sure you know a rune or two to create one, even temporarily. No?"

I shook my head.

"How is that?"

I swallowed "My mother didn't know very much magic."

"And your father?"

"He didn't come out of the basement much."

"Ah." She fell silent, watching me continue to eat.

Just as another forkful was on its way to my mouth, I started upright, my head snapping toward the hearth. The fire had been built up a bit since last night, and was now crackling merrily in the hearth. A shadow thrown by that fire must have flickered in the corner of my eye, I thought as I turned back to my meal.

But just then another flick of movement caught my attention, this time from the opposite side of the kitchen where the sinks and cutting-boards sat. I blinked to clear my eyes, and saw—again, just in the corner of my vision—another movement.

Kirmin chuckled. "That would be the driežai. You asked about brownies, yesterday."

"One named Abbygail took care of me after my parents died," I said. "And we always had a few more besides, to help out."

"Driežai are the Tower's brownies. They're shadow-creatures, of a sort."

Of a sort? "You mean spirits?" *Shadow-creatures* was always a euphemism for dark spirits in the adventures I'd read.

"Not in the way you mean, no. They were once living creatures, but they're past their End. Now they're literally formed of shadows given solid form. They're not spirits, and they don't have much of a mind of their own. They..." she paused, thinking for a moment. "They're more like your own arms and hands. Your hands don't think for themselves, they just respond to the will of your mind. In this case, the driežai respond to the will of the Tower itself. You're meant to be

here, and the Tower's meant to see to your needs, and the driežai are its hands in doing so."

I ignored another *flick* of movement and resumed my meal. "Do they always flicker around like that?"

"They'll seem more solid at night," she assured me. "Right now I think the Tower's probably just curious about you. Once it gets to know you, they'll settle down. They did for me."

"But they don't need to care for *you* anymore, do they?" I asked, keeping my tone respectful.

"No," she said with a sad smile. "No, they don't. I'm long past needing their care."

I swallowed a bit harder than was necessary, and said, "So you're dead?"

"Not exactly. I am past my End, to be sure, and for most people that would be close enough to dead as to make no difference. For adherents of the Sixth Axis, it's different."

"My great-great grandmother was dead," I told her, "but she still lived in the attic and helped take care of me. Father was dead too," I added, sorrow coloring my voice, "but he'd sometime speak to me from behind the walls of the house."

"They would have been spirits. UnEnded spirits, but past life. Your grandmother and father would have been truly dead, just not at rest. Not able to let themselves go, for whatever reason. It's a bit different for me. For us."

"How so?"

She thought for a moment. "Not every End is the last word in the story. A season can End, but it brings another season behind it. A married couple can divorce, Ending their relationship, but perhaps a new and different relationship—for good or ill—comes afterwards. Death is a kind of Ending, but it doesn't mean nothing follows it. Like your grandmother. Her life may have Ended, but her spirit clearly felt it had more work to do."

"I think Great-Great-Grandmother felt responsible for me," I said softly.

"May well have. Likely your father did as well," she added kindly.

I shook my head, disagreeing, but said nothing. She merely tilted

her head to one side, watching me finish my breakfast. When I'd swallowed the last bite and pushed my plate back a bit, she sat up straighter.

"Each of the Axes—as far as we know, since the Fifth Axis never came to be—has certain powers in the world, above and beyond those of normal witchkind. Seven powers apiece, to be specific, which we call the Seven Forms."

She paused, and I prepared to memorize what I sensed would be a list.

"They are," she continued, "Communication, Travel, Mind, Defense, Attack, Essence, and Calling. Each of those typically has some variants. There are a few kinds of Defense, for example."

"And my Book lists them all?" I asked.

"*Your* Book? It's no more *your* Book than it is *my* Book. But yes," she allowed, "*the* Book contains them all. But you won't need it. You've got me."

"How did Great-Great-Grandmother get it?"

"I honestly don't know. Once I passed my own Ending... well, it's a bit different for us. Adherents of the Sixth Axis don't need documentation and journals and the like. The Sixth Axis... it takes care of those things for us, in its way." She paused and chewed her lower lip, looking at me. "I suppose I lost track of it," she said at last. "It's not that the Book doesn't have its uses. You'll find them. It's just that after you've used it for a while, you don't need *it* as much anymore."

"So you'll teach me the seven Forms?"

"And more. It will take... time." Her eyes seemed to unfocus then, as if she were looking at something far away. "It's odd that the Archons never thought to tame Time, but I suppose it was never wild and dangerous to begin with."

"The Archons?" She'd never used that word before.

"The ones who sacrificed themselves to tame the great energies and form the Six Axes," she clarified, her eyes refocusing. "Jura, Galas, Vejas, all the rest. They founded the Axes, and we call them the Archons."

"So," I said, nodding slowly. "Where do we begin?"

She held up a finger. "Not just yet. You need to understand something first.

"This is a major undertaking. It will require *years* of your life. It may not... it may not *conclude* the way you want. This isn't just learning some runes and words of power. You have to come to understand the *essence* of the Axis. You have to come to understand *why* the Axes exist. They are the lines our world revolves upon, their shared Origin the place where our world began. The Forms? Pfft. Ordinary witchkind can communicate at great distances, travel at great speeds, cast magics for offense or defense. When *we* do so, we are not just drawing upon the power in ourselves or the latent power that lies dormant in the world, waiting to be tapped. We are commanding some of the most fundamental forces of the world, *directing* them toward beneficial outcomes. The world turns on the Axes, and those Axes bend to our direction.

"We tamper with the basic foundations of our world, and we do so at great risk to ourselves, to all of witchkind, and to the humans that surround us. It's not a journey to be undertaken lightly."

I thought about it for a long moment. "Do I have a choice?"

"Everyone has choices, Daniel. I could End you. End your journey —your life—at this time and place. It might be better and easier than living out your days alone on this isle."

"That seems a little drastic. Can't I just leave?"

"No. Witchkind will not allow an untrained adherent to wander the world, particularly one of the Sixth Axis. You were trapped on the island the moment your man brought you here. I can End you here, but the only way you can leave is to complete your journey."

Again, I thought for several moments before replying. "I have nothing off this isle anyway. No family. No house. So I may as well take this journey and see what comes of it."

She gave me a soft smile, her dark eyes sparkling. "Nothing to lose. I like that attitude. If you can hold on to that, I believe it will serve you well." She swung herself off the table and held out a hand to me. "We begin."

CHAPTER 6

First Lesson

"First, tell me what you know about how witchkind are governed," Kirmin said.

She'd led me back up the flight of stairs to the Tower's main level. Just off the gray circular entryway was a room she called the "public workroom." It too was circular, and maybe thirty feet across, just like the tower's entry foyer. It made me wonder if all the floors on this level were built that way. It would certainly explain the odd-shaped hallway that contained the spiral stone staircase leading down. Idly, I wondered how one reached the upper levels.

We sat on opposite sides of a dust-covered, heavy stone table that dominated the center of the room. A small slit in one wall admitted sunlight—a frankly remarkable amount of it, given the narrowness of the slit itself—revealing complex runes carved into the circular wall, ceiling, floor, and even the door we'd entered through. Small, simple sets of shelves dotted the wall, containing jars whose contents were unknown to me. We occupied the only two chairs in the room, and both were simple, sturdy wooden affairs with no cushions.

"Not much," I admitted. "Mother and Father kept mainly to the house. They told me some of our family history, but not much else."

"I know... or, that is to say, I've done some research on your family. There's not much to know, or at least not much I can

remem– I mean, find. No more powerful than any of ordinary witchkind. Unremarkable. Wealthy, which implies powerful connections, but never part of government. It's unclear where the money came from, as I can't find any mention of a specific trade. Most wealthy families are known for shipping, or farming, or something, but not yours. Not known for lavish spending. They'd attend the right social gatherings, but never host one. It's as if the family wanted to be... secure, in some fashion, but otherwise left alone. Some of your ancestors were nearly hermits. And you seem to be the last of them."

As far as I knew from the family tree, I was. I said as much.

"And that's a thing. That 'family tree,' you call it. Most of witchkind maintain books or journals, but they don't use them for genealogy. They're more like family grimoires, their own versions of the... well, more powerful, *true* grimoires, like the Book in your pocket. Anyway, witchkind is governed by a council. A main Council, the Taryba, for the entire world, and subsidiary councils in each major region where witchkind lives. From there, you might have a senior family whose head holds consensual authority over a village or town or something."

"Seems simple."

"It's meant to be. Witchkind tries to stay out of sight of humans, and these days the councils seem mainly preoccupied with ensuring that."

"What about the... the adherents?" I asked, trying to remember the word she'd used over breakfast.

"Adherents," she confirmed. "We who received medallions at our Testing. Who showed an affinity for one of the Axes. We aren't governed by the Council, or by any council, for that matter. We cooperate with them, of course. If a region is short on rainfall, and they don't have the power to do anything about it, then they'll send a delegate to the nearest adherents of Sea and Sky and apply for an intervention. Otherwise we keep to ourselves in one way or another."

"Do all the Axes have isles like this one?"

"Hah! Hardly. Most adherents live in luxury, smack in the middle of a large town, or in a manor on a huge estate, or whatever they like.

The Sixth Axis isn't as... welcome, I suppose you could say, as the other four."

"Because people don't like death?"

"The Sixth Axis isn't *death,* Daniel," she said firmly. "Oh, it's *attracted* to death, because the Sixth Axis is a wild force built around endings. Death is an ending of course, but there are many kinds of End. Without an End, nothing new can begin or continue. Without an End, why try to accomplish anything?" She sighed. "Yes, as a wild force, before the Archons, what became the Sixth Axis was most destructive, bringing about destructive ends. Entire settlements, usually, if it couldn't manage more. But that's because it was unguided, and it gorged itself on what it loved. That's no different than a child gorging themselves on sweets, though. The child's happy at first, but sick to its stomach later. That's how the wild forces were: as children, lacking guidance, and harming themselves and others. The Sixth Axis would destroy an entire village, savor the Endings it had brought about, and then sleep it off for years." She paused. "It's more nuanced now. More subtle."

"Because we—you, that is—control it?"

"No," she said, even more firmly. "Never *control*. Understand that any of witchkind, or even humans for that matter, can cause death. We're no different in that regard. Where we differ is that we *guide* the Sixth Axis. The great Endings it can create can be useful, beneficial even. Endings *must* be a part of the world. We ensure that they can *help* the world, move it to better places. We use our judgement so that instead of creating great, destructive Endings on a whim every decade or so, the Axis creates smaller, more precise Endings whenever our world needs them. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so."

"It will become clearer as we go on." A grin stole over her dark features. "But that's enough background for now. We focus today on the First Form, that of Communication."

I listened dutifully, ready to learn whatever she would teach me. I had spent the last years alone, my only tutors the books in my family's house. I found that I was eager to learn from a living, breathing teacher.

"Every Axis's Forms reflect its basic essence," Kirmin began. "Adherents of the First Axis communicate by sending songs through the sea, typically only between their fellow adherents of the First. The Second Axis's adherents communicate through wisps of fire, usually only across short distances, I'm given to understand. Those of the Third Axis communicate through rumblings in the earth, again only amongst themselves. Adherents of the Fourth Axis arrange clouds into messages that their fellows can interpret. But we of the Sixth Axis are unique in that our Form lets us communicate between *any* of witchkind, adherents or no. Our First Form is called *šnabždesys* in the True Language: the Whisper.

"I like to think," she said after a moment's pause, "that its power reflects the whispers of those who have gone beyond their End. The whispers our ancestors place in our hearts. The whispers that a restless spirit murmurs into its family's ears." She closed her eyes. *:It sounds like this.:* her voice sounded gently in my ear.

I jumped up, and my chair clattered to the floor behind me. She opened her eyes and grinned. "This is its rune." She traced a simple rune in the dust on the stone table's top.



"Picture that in your mind, held over the image of the one you wish to speak to. Or a group even, once you've become strong enough. It's said," Kirmin added, a gleam in her eye, "that Galas addressed all of witchkind with a single Whisper, once he'd tamed his wild force and created his Axis."

I closed my eyes. I held the rune in my head, its gentle curves and rounded ends superimposed over Kirmin's dark features and black-gray hair. *:Like this?:* I thought, concentrating fiercely.

"It's called the Whisper," she laughed, and I opened my eyes to see her smiling. "Not the Scream. But yes, like that." *:You don't have to concentrate so hard, especially when you're close by and especially when it's me. The Axis already binds us.:* Her voice flowed gently into my mind, her lips remaining still.

:Okay.: I thought to her, focusing on being quieter.

:Better.: "Let's try it when I'm not right in front of you," she suggested.

She vanished.

I inhaled sharply, although it wasn't the oddest thing I'd seen these past few days. I righted my chair and sat down, closing my eyes. Once again, I held the image of the rune in my mind, superimposed over her face. *:Can you hear me?:* I sent.

She replied at once. :If I could hear you, you'd be doing it wrong. Let's try a bit further.:

We continued for some time, and I could tell that she was moving around the isle, further and further from the Tower and close to the shore. As the distance grew, I could feel more energy being spent to reach her. Not *my* energy; I never felt tired or even the slightest bit exerted. But I could sense energy coming from someplace and being directed to the effort. I said as much.

"That's the Axis," she said aloud and she reappeared in the room. "Ordinary witchkind gather their energy from the world around them, but they can only *spend* the energy they've gathered into themselves and made their own. They're limited, although some have learned to gather and hold tremendous amounts. Adherents are different. Even when we work the minor magics of ordinary witchkind, we never spend our own energy to do so. The Axes *are* our energy. Even a minor illusion rune, something most of witchkind could maintain for a few hours at a time, costs us nothing. We could maintain an illusion for all of time and feel none the worse for it, provided we could stay awake."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Hmm. Think of it this way, maybe. Ordinary witchkind are like sponges. You've seen sponges?"

"Abbygail used them in the kitchen."

"Good. Ordinary witchkind are like sponges, then. They soak up magic from the world around them, but can only hold so much. They squeeze themselves to use that magic, and when they're dry, they're out of power. But we aren't like sponges. We don't have our own personal power. Instead, we ask our Axis to act on our behalf. And the Axis *is* power, so it never runs dry, no matter how hard we squeeze. But that squeezing takes effort, and if we're not strong enough, or if we're too tired, then we can't command the Axis until we recover."

"So we have no limits?" I asked.

"Oh, we've limits. They're just much further out for us, and our powers work a bit differently. For example, take the Whisper: any of witchkind could cast a similar runes to speak to someone, and most can do so and respectable distances, say across their village or town.

"You'll be able to cast that magic clear across the world, with practice. And here at the Tower, you can operate the magic in reverse, bringing others' words *to* you without their knowledge."

My eyes widened. "How is that possible?" I asked, awe in my voice.

"It's just a side effect of the prison the isle was built to be. Those stone spires point inward, and they contain you, trapping you here. Were you to attempt to Travel from here, the points of those spires would spear you. They might even kill you, but they'd keep you here regardless. But they also work to funnel energy *in.* They can bring us the words others whisper aloud, whether in conversation or not."

"From what you've told me, I'm surprised the rest of witchkind permits it."

She grinned. "They can't prevent it. As I said, it's a side effect of how the island was built. To do any less would give you the chance of escape, and they'd rather have you spying on them than walking amongst them. Besides, most of them don't know it's a thing. In a way, it fits part of the fundamental essence of the Sixth Axis. Can you tell me how?"

I thought for a moment and then shook my head.

"It's odd.... Your family's last name—don't say it," she cautioned, "do you know what it means?"

Another shake of my head.

"In the True Language, it means *judge.* That's why I find it so odd that your family has never held position or privilege, beyond their wealth. It's almost as if..." Her voice trailed off.

"As if what?" I prompted.

She shook her head. "Never mind. It was just an idle thought. But judging is part of the Sixth Axis's true essence. As a wild energy, it created undisciplined destruction. Bound to the Axis, paired with its adherents, Endings can be put to the greater good. But that means *we* must have the knowledge needed to direct it well. We gain that knowledge in part by listening, rather than speaking. That's why the Tower has always been more than our prison. It has been our base, our center. Here, we gain the knowledge we need to judge when and where our Endings are best applied."

She slapped the table and stood. "And that is enough for today's lesson. You must be hungry," she said, and smiled at my stomach's answering rumble, "and so I will send you to lunch. The rest of the day is your own. Explore the Tower—it will not grant you access to anywhere you shouldn't be."

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I asked.

"You will see me for your next lesson."

And with that, she was gone.

I used the Whisper to call out to Kirmin several times, but to no avail. She'd either vanished or was hiding someplace and ignoring me. And while she didn't seem the type to play such tricks, the end result was the same: I was alone.

It's worth pointing out that even before Mother and Father passed, I had always been a lonely child. As I've mentioned, my parents rarely took me from the house. Father himself almost never left, engrossed as he was by his experiments in his basement workroom. Since a very young age, I'd been quiet and self-sufficient, happy to have a book to read. I realize now how neglected my education was: as Mr. Nash had explained, most parents of witchkind would have enrolled me in a preparatory school or home-schooled me, but Father

ignored me when he could and Mother taught me only a scant few runes.

I decided to explore.

The little isle that the Tower sat on seemed the most appealing, and so I walked outside. The sun was bright overhead, the sky clear, and the smell of the sea fresh and crisp. But I quickly discovered that there wasn't much to explore. The same path led back to the little beach where I'd arrived, although at least this time the Tower didn't try to prevent me from walking up to it as it had yesterday.

But I hadn't noticed how tightly spaced the rocky spikes were. They surrounded the Tower on all sides for as far as I could make out, and they left no more than a hands-breadth at most between each other. They jutted out from a hard, rocky foundation that was itself littered with sharp granite shards in the few thin spaces that the spikes left bare.

The small beach, no more than a ten foot by five foot patch of finely ground rock, was the only clear area on the shoreline that I could see. The four foot wide path leading from the shore to the Tower's entrance, also covered in an inch of the same powdery rock, was the only part of the island free of the huge spikes. The rocky base of the Tower itself merged seamlessly with the spikes in a sheer, cliff-like mass, making it impossible to edge myself more than an arm's length around the structure.

And so I contented myself with sitting cross-legged on my little beach, staring out at the waves that chopped their way along the surface of the sea. I saw no birds, none of the legendary leviathans my adventure books had told tales of, and no ships that might bring company to the island. I remained alone with my thoughts, wondering what Kirmin would teach me next.

About the time the sun was starting to set in earnest, a thought occurred to me. Kirmin had said that the Whisper could work in reverse too, bringing others' voices to me here on the island.

I decided to try it.

I closed my eyes and tried to quiet my mind, unsure of what to expect. I didn't know the rune to bring conversations to me, so I simply held the Whisper rune in my mind, feeling the Axis's energy

trickle into it. My keeping my mind blank, I hoped that the Axis would know I was trying to *hear* rather than to *speak,* but nothing happened.

I tried again, this time picturing Mr. Nash's tired, dour face. I held myself absolutely still and silent, not wanting to accidentally *send* him anything, and instead concentrated on simply listening.

:No, I'm afraid not.: His voice rang in my mind, clear as if I had been sitting next to him. :Well, to begin with, there was no will, and so it would be entirely out of order for me to simply start giving away their possessions. And the boy is the only heir, so anything remaining would be his by law.:

There was a pause, and I realized that I could only hear Mr. Nash's voice.

:Well, it's all moot regardless. The house is gone.:

Another pause.

:Into thin air, yes. You know how they were.:

A longer pause.

:I haven't the slightest idea, and I'm hardly in a position to ask the boy at this point. Nobody is.:

A short pause.

:The Tower of Endings.:

There was nothing more for several long moments, and I opened my eyes, breaking the connection.

He'd been speaking about *me.* But to whom? And why? Who would have wanted anything in the family house? One of Father's relations perhaps, although I'd always understood that he'd renounced them in order to marry Mother. Did I have family somewhere else?

I stood, brushing the fine grains of rock from my pants. While there was nothing I could do now, perhaps I could ask Kirmin about it, or send a message to Mr. Nash.

For now, my stomach was reminding me that I'd sat on the little beach through lunchtime. I trudged back up the walk to the Tower and down into the dining room, where I found a meal already waiting. As I ate, my thoughts churned with the notion of a family I'd never met, and those thoughts stayed with me in my dreams all night.

CHAPTER 7

Exploring the Tower

I awoke the next morning—incredibly well-rested, I should mention—to find a hot breakfast waiting for me, but no Kirmin. Given that the isle had proven so uninteresting, I decided to explore the inside of the Tower. Mr. Nash's words from the day before were still rolling around in my mind, but they simply had nowhere to go. I tried casting the Whisper again with Mr. Nash's image in my mind, but nothing happened. Perhaps he simply wasn't speaking to anyone right then.

A little exploration, I hoped, would prove distraction enough until Kirmin returned.

The Tower's two lower levels were open to me: the kitchen, a small cupboard containing plates and bowls and the like, and the four bedrooms. Mine, or at least the one I assumed was permanently assigned to me, was the only one to feature a complete bed or any other furniture. The other three had worn but serviceable bed frames, but no mattresses. At the end of that hallway was the washing-room.

The level below that, accessed via a narrow staircase hidden behind a tiny closet door next to my bedroom door, was a vast and

empty room that had the feel of a workroom. Broken up only by the pillars that supported the levels above, it was cold, windowless, and stark. It was illuminated by the same magic that lit my bedroom, a diffuse, warm light that seemed to come from nowhere yet lit the entire room evenly. The smooth stone floor showed where furniture had once sat—mainly a quantity of tables, from what I could tell—and one corner featured an alarmingly large scorch-mark that apparently even the driežai had not been able to scrub clean.

The main level was, as I'd suspected, comprised of four large, circular rooms. Kirmin's public workroom and the entry foyer were of course the two I'd already seen. Next was—to my great delight— a library. I was so thrilled to discover it, lined floor-to-ceiling with books of all manner, that I almost closed its door behind me and never emerged. Several comfortably upholstered chairs were scattered throughout the library, along with a few reading pedestals that could hold the larger, heavier books. A finely made table occupied the center of the room, empty save for a fine layer of dust. It would be a comfortable enough place to read, and the light was clear and bright inside. I knew I'd be returning soon, if given half the chance.

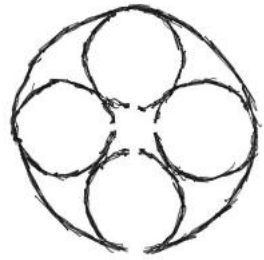
The fourth room was... hard to describe. It was full of oddly shaped machines and contraptions that I couldn't make sense of. One section of the floor was odd as well, as if the stone had been pulled up and replaced with a flat substance of some kind. My memories of Father's machines made me hesitant to touch any of these, and I assumed Kirmin would explain their purpose in due time.

I walked outside the Tower and stood for a bit to gain a clearer idea of the path of the sun during the day. By doing so, I determined that standing outside and facing the Tower was to face as close to north as I could figure. Walking north into the Tower was, of course, the entry foyer. Straight on was the staircase room, and straight on from that was the library. To the west was the oddly equipped room, and to the east was Kirmin's public workroom.

Here is the floorplan of the Tower's main level: draw a large circle on a piece of paper. Within the circle, draw four more circles, all of roughly equal size. Each of these smaller circles touches the larger one, and its two adjacent circles. In the middle of them there will be a large

blank space: this is where the main stairs leading down to the kitchen were located, and where doors provided access to each of the four rooms. Only the foyer had a second door, leading to the outside.

This central space has the look of a star of sorts, although the stone walls had filled in the most extreme parts of the "points," so that the staircase room featured pleasantly rounded edges. But even accounting for the thick lower walls of the Tower, you will notice an immense amount of missing space: four roughly triangle-shaped areas, to which I could locate no access. Now it could be that they were simply solid stone, designed to buttress the walls to support the upper floors. It could be that they were just storage spaces, although again I could find no way to access them. It could be that, for whatever arcane reasons the Tower's original builders might have had, they were left empty.



The Tower's upper levels were apparently off-limits to me as yet, because I could find no stairs leading upward. I assumed that some means of ascending would make itself known once I was ready or Kirmin deemed it allowable.

Kirmin, as it turned out, did not return for almost two weeks, and so the library became my home within the Tower. I left only to eat and sleep, spending all day and much of the night amongst its many books.

I quickly determined that the library lacked the sort of adventure stories that I'd so enjoyed in my family's home. The library's northern wall focused mostly on scholarly pieces, discoursing on advanced magical techniques that were far beyond my understanding. The

western wall consisted mostly of the record-books I mentioned earlier: genealogies, lists of towns and villages, and the like. The eastern wall contained what seemed to be various textbooks of runes and magic. The southern wall, through which one entered, contained histories. Or at least I presumed them to be histories; if what was inside them was true, then that is what they were. They also could have been fabulously dull stories, versions of my adventure-books written by stale and crusty old men and women who had lost their passion for life.

At first, I found myself thoroughly enjoying the process of flipping through book after book to get a feel for what they contained. But after a two weeks of inventorying the library's offerings, I sighed and decided to read one of the books in earnest. I walked to the wall containing textbooks, and began looking for one suitable to my sadly neglected education.

"Perhaps later," Kirmin's voice said from behind me, startling me quite badly. I whirled, my back to the book shelves, my heart pounding. She offered an impish grin. "Shall we continue with your lessons?"

CHAPTER 8

Second Lesson

"Any of witchkind can travel from place to place faster than a human," Kirmin started. We had moved to her workroom, and once again sat opposite each other around the heavy table. "Your Mr. Nash used a magic called *dideliais laipteliais,* roughly translated as 'mighty steps.' For most of witchkind, it's a popular way to travel, and you can learn to use it as well.

"Adherents of the First Axis can travel through and under the water with great speed—far faster than ordinary witchkind could with any magic. The Second Axis is probably the fastest for moving physically from place to place, as its adherents can travel on fiery rays of sunlight—but only during the day. The fire of the moon is too cold for them to move at night. The Third Axis can tunnel through the earth. I don't know exactly how that works," she admitted with a frown, "for they seem to simply sink into the earth in one place and emerge some time later in another. The Fourth Axis adherents fly, of course. We of the Sixth do things a bit differently."

I was getting used to that being the case, as the Sixth Axis seemed to have a unique twist on any concept you could throw at it.

"Our Travel Form is *aplankyti,* the Visitation."

"It lets us leave the island?" I asked.

She smiled. "No, and if you tried, the spires of the isle would catch

you on their tips and hold you here. Initially, you'll be able to send your spirit, not your body, and only for a limited time. As you grow stronger and more used to it, that time will grow longer and longer, but your body will remain here."

"Forever?" I asked softly, disappointed.

"No, not forever. There will come a time when you surpass the isle's ability to hold you here, and then the Visitation will become physical, if you wish it. But for now, it will be traveling in spirit only." She sketched a rune in the dust on the table.



I noticed that the dust had evenly redistributed itself since our last lesson. I memorized the rune. "You'll picture the place you want to visit, and lay the rune over that in your mind. As you begin, I recommend you remain seated," she said with a small grin. "I fell over flat on my face the first time I tried it. You tend to lose track of your body while your spirit is away. Why don't you start by going just outside the Tower, at the entrance?"

I closed my eyes. I'd seen the Tower's entrance enough to picture it clearly in my mind and to superimpose the rune over it. I felt a sensation of sudden movement, and found myself standing outside. It was another dismal gray day, and the wind was blowing strongly enough to lift droplets of sea-mist this far. Neither they nor the wind seemed to touch me, though: they passed through me, and I didn't feel the wet or the chill.

:Release it from your mind to return,: Kirmin sent to me. I relaxed, and opened my eyes in the workroom.

"It works with people as well as places, so long as you have a strong

enough connection to them. Why don't you come find me?" And with that, she vanished.

I closed my eyes again and held her image in my mind, laying the new rune over it. With another rush of wind, I was standing outside with her amongst the jagged spires that angled toward the Tower. She smiled, and vanished. Almost immediately, the wind swept me up and I was again standing in front of her. She cocked her head to one side, and smiled approvingly.

I chased her for an hour or so, and was delighted to learn I could come to rest in places where my physical body couldn't: on the tip of one of the spires, on the roof of the Tower's lower turret, and even right at the shore, where Mr. Nash had left me here.

At last, I opened my eyes back in the workroom, tired but pleased.

"Good. Would you like to try leaving the isle?"

My eyes widened, and I nodded slowly. I closed my eyes and pictured Great-Great-Grandmother's ancient features in my mind, overlaid the rune and—nothing happened. Frowning, I tried again, with Father's face, although I had difficulty filling in all the details of his severe, hard face. Again, nothing. Both times, I felt a sense of... emptiness.

Well, both were dead, so perhaps they were beyond my ability. I tried again, this time picturing the prim woman from the Testing center in the village near my home. I imagined her in her crowded little office, flipping through her card file, and felt a rush of wind. I was *there.* And she was exactly as I'd pictured her, although I'd clearly come at lunchtime again, because she had another odd dish on the desk in front of her. She paused for a moment, and then her head swiveled unerringly to look at me. "Scat," she ordered, flicking her fingers at me. I felt a jolt, and my eyes popped open back in the workroom.

"And?" Kirmin asked.

"I did it. But I couldn't find Great-Great-Grandmother or Father."

"I would expect not."

"But I did go to the Testing center in the village."

"Ah," Kirmin said encouragingly. "And?"

"I got there, just by picturing the woman."

"Excellent. The Tower enhances our ability. When you're here, it can help you use the Visitation on someone you barely know, or even someone you don't know at all. It can usually find them even from a sketch you've seen of them."

"I think she kicked me out."

"She'd be familiar with apparitions, and any well-educated amongst witchkind can end the Visitation if they've a mind to, and if we aren't forcing it. With enough concentration, you could probably have chosen to stay, if you'd wanted. In fact, you can choose to remain unseen when you use the magic, although the most sensitive of witchkind will still be able to tell you're there. "

I thought about that for a moment, and asked, "Could I try once more?"

"Of course."

I closed my eyes and pictured little Abbygail. *Unseen,* I thought intently as a rush of power swept me up. I opened my eyes and there she was.

I was in a kitchen much nicer and more modern than the one in the old house, and Abbygail was standing atop the stove, humming cheerfully to herself as she stirred a steaming pot. I caught sight of another brownie just leaving the room, carrying a tall stack of clean plates. Abbygail reached into her apron and withdrew a handful of bright green herbs, which she sprinkled into the pot as she continued stirring with her other hand.

She was in her element. She looked *happy.* I found myself smiling when she suddenly get very still.

I held my breath—pointlessly, of course, as I wasn't truly there. Her small head turned slowly toward me. Her eyes were unfocused, and I realized that she couldn't actually see me, but she must have sensed a presence of some kind.

"Daniel?" she whispered, so quietly I almost didn't hear.

"Abbygail," I whispered back.

She slowly shook her head, her eyes darting to and fro. "You can't be here," she said softly. She smiled every so slightly. "We were thanked for our service," she said, her voice kind. "We're serving others now."

"I miss you," I breathed.

"And I you. But our time together is done. You thanked us," she repeated. "Go. Go have your adventures, now." Her expression was kind, but firm.

I felt a sudden wrenching in my heart. Abbygail had been like family to me, but of course she *wasn't* family. Or if she was, she was family to whomever owned this bright, sparkling kitchen, and who needed the help her kind offered. *My* family was... gone. Long dead, even Great-Great-Grandmother faded and vanished.

I released the Axis' magic and opened my eyes in the Tower.

"Find what you were looking for?" Kirmin asked, her voice soft.

I nodded, but said nothing for several long moments. She waited patiently until I asked, "Do adherents talk to ordinary witchkind? Or even humans?"

Kirmin tilted her head at the change in subject. "Sometimes. More rarely for us, more often for the others, I suppose.

"I'll tell you a story."

This happened quite some time ago, *she said,* and involved a small fishing village named Harbsmouth. It was a human village, as most are, but it had a good-sized contingent of witchkind who preferred the seaside life, or who had chosen to specialize in aquatic magic. The village survived on the efforts of its fleet of small fishing boats, and exported a good amount of seafood to the larger inland towns.

Now as it happened, this particular village's fishermen weren't too careful with their husbandry of the sea-life they hunted. Prices for bottom-dwelling flat-fish had risen in recent months, and so the fisherman sought to bring in as many of those as they could. They hung great nets from their boats, and weighted them down with chains so that they would drag along the ocean floor. This captured more fish, and more of the bottom-dwelling fish that the inlanders sought, but the heavy chains also devastated the seabed. All manner of fish and crustaceans were hauled into the fisherman's nets, and all the unwanted ones were simply dumped, lifeless and broken, back into

the sea. Within weeks, the fishing boats were coming back less and less full, as they overfished the local populations.

The witchkind in the village did what they could to stop, or at least slow down, the humans' witless greed. They cast runes to inflict minor damage on the fishing boats, keeping them in their docks for repairs. They cast passing sicknesses on the fishermen, keeping them in their beds. But these were little more than delaying actions, and eventually the village council sent word to two adherents of the First Axis, begging for help.

The two adherents lived nowhere near one another, as they—like most adherents of an Axis—preferred solitude for their studies and works. But as it happened, both answered the council's call, arriving at the village on the same day and at near the same time. Both had understood the severity of the humans' actions, and so both traveled swiftly under the sea, stepping onto the shore and seeking out the council.

After coming to understand the emergency, the two conferred. They swam under the sea to inspect the damage, and they looked carefully at the humans' fishing boats and chain-weighted nets. After a day and a night of examining and discussing, they came back to the council with a sad decision: the village would not be saved. The damage was too great, the humans' fishing range too extensive. This area would need to be shut down, left in peace, and allowed to recover. If the village was destroyed, they reasoned, the humans would disperse and leave. They promised to investigate other nearby fishing villages to determine if the same atrocities were being committed, and to resolve whatever ones they could.

The witchkind who lived in and near the village were devastated, and asked the adherents if there was any other way. The two again conferred and offered a compromise: the village would need to be destroyed, they said, or the humans would simply continue destroying the sea as they had been doing. But certain of the homes could be preserved, giving the older, retired humans a place to live in peace, if they desired. That would also give witchkind a way to remain, provided they agreed to be on the watch for more greedy fisherman and to notify the adherents should they find any.

The council agreed, and so it was that on the next day a great wave crashed onto the village, destroying the waterfront harbors, the fishing boats, and most of the village's store-houses and homes—not to mention the majority of the village's human residents. A few homes were spared, seemingly as much by luck as intention, and these homes were all ones that sheltered older, retired humans, or those of witchkind who'd wanted to remain. The fine, sturdy road leading into the village was washed away, reduced to a rubble-filled track through which few humans would bother trudging. The village became a quiet place. Those of witchkind who remained focused on rehabilitating the sea, and creating a peaceful, restful estate for themselves. The area became known for its healing waters, and attracted humans and others of witchkind who were less interested in fishing and more interested in living out their days at peace.

"So adherents *do* work with ordinary witchkind," I said. My heart was still aching with loneliness, but I wasn't in the mood to discuss it. If the Axis was going to be my future, perhaps it was best to focus on that and just... let the past go.

"It's one of our biggest charges, actually. We're free to do what we like with our time, but when we're called upon to help, we do. Well, not always, but we'll get to that in due course."

"Did you know the two adherents?"

"I did. And that's the interesting part of the story."

There was no question, *she continued,* that the village needed to be destroyed. But humans would simply have rebuilt it. The fishermen needed to go as well. Both of those adherents had taken it upon themselves to ensure that most of the fishermen died in that great wave. Their theory was that the remaining humans—the children and the women—would abandon the village once their men and income was gone. And some did, of course. The decision to kill the fishermen was

certainly within the adherents' domain: the wild forces of the sea had long claimed humans and witchkind as victims, and they were directing it with good intent.

But some amongst the village's witchkind objected to the taking of human lives, no matter the intent, and they called upon the Sixth Axis—myself—to judge whether the death and destruction had been justified. I responded; adjudicating for local councils, and the Council, is one of the primary functions of the Sixth Axis. We determine when an End is warranted, and when it is not.

In this case, I judged that the adherents of the First Axis had been justified. The humans of the village were doing their best, even unknowingly, to bring an End not only to the sea life off their shores but to their own way of life. That kind of self-destructiveness can rarely be fixed through education or pleading. No, it was better to End them, or at least some of them. Better to End the greater destruction. It wasn't merely to appease the First Axis adherents, although they were certainly pleased by the outcome. It was simply the *right* thing to do. I should note that we never stand in blind solidarity with the other Axes. We are independent, and we need neither love nor approval from any of them.

Death doesn't *need* to be the End, *she said more quietly,* and an End doesn't need to result in death. But the First Axis's actions brought both to that village, and the End was justified.

"So any of witchkind can summon us?"

"Yes and no. In the old days, yes. These days it's usually a council, if not *the* Council. But in theory any of witchkind can still issue the Summons. It's a simple enough piece of magic, and while I doubt it's taught routinely anymore, it would be easy enough to look up. But nobody can *command* our presence or attention. It's up to us—it will be up to *you*—to decide whether to respond or not. It's something you'll learn more about as we go."

I thought for a moment. "You mentioned two adherents of the First Axis," I said at last. "Do all the Axes have multiple adherents?"

"The others can, but not ours. It's... complicated." She fell silent. Then after a while said, "Sometimes, not even that."

"There isn't... isn't always someone here?" I asked quietly.

"No. I mentioned it earlier, I think. The Axis... hmm. I guess it's more accurate to say that there isn't always someone the Axis would accept. Or maybe that it needed. So even during some dark times, when a judge was sorely needed, there wasn't one."

"Why?" I asked, even more quietly. I could sense her mood growing sober.

"Perhaps I was asleep," she said, and I had the impression she was almost talking to herself. Then her voice grew cold. "Perhaps they didn't deserve it." She looked deep into my eyes and vanished.

Kirmin was gone for longer this time. A *lot* longer, it felt like, although I couldn't say exactly how long. I quickly returned to my usual routine, the days and weeks blending seamlessly into one another as I began making my way through the library's offerings. On the few occasions I ventured outside, the sky was almost always a featureless, even gray, the sea a darker gray. Time passed on the isle, but it didn't pass in seasons or even in the stark contrast of night and day. Gray days faded into black nights, and the library's warm, even lighting remained the same throughout.

It was easy to lose track of time, so was I surprised one evening by a small yet sumptuous feast laid out in the kitchen: a joint of roast meat, a large platter of roasted root vegetables, fresh bread with butter, and more. There was even a mug of spiced wine, which is what tipped me off: it must be Midwinter, and the driežai had prepared a traditional Midwinter Feast. I teared up a bit. Abbygail hadn't had the supplies needed for a proper Midwinter Feast, and so the last one I'd enjoyed had been before my parents died. The little brownie had done her best, though. I remembered plenty of dried vegetables, some salted meat, all combined into a rich, thick stew. She'd made a small loaf of fresh bread, and—as had been our tradition since my parents passed—she and the other brownies joined me

for the meal. It was one of the few times I could pretend I still had family.

I sniffed a bit, shook myself a bit, and sat down to enjoy the meal.

If only the driežai had been able to enjoy it with me. Without even the brownies to join me...

I thought I'd been a boy who was naturally accepting of solitude. Given my family, my parents' death, and everything else, I'd *always* been alone. Or so I'd thought: there'd always been Great-Great-Grandmother, for whatever small comfort she was. There'd been the brownies. There'd even been the occasional errand to run in the village, where I'd at least *seen* other people.

I had none of that here.

It was especially lonely that evening.

After my solitary Midwinter Feast, I decided to experiment with the two Forms I'd already learned. I returned to my little beach near sunset and settled myself into the warm sand. I closed my eyes and invoked the Whisper. This time, I focused on nothing specific, and tried instead to focus on the entire world, holding all of witchkind in my mind.

I felt the Axis's magic pulse dangerously, and then my mind was filled with chaos. Every voice, every utterance, slammed into me with the ferocity of a hurricane.

Too much! I screamed, struggling to hear even my own thoughts above the din.

The noise instantly abated, dying to a dull, rumbling roar that at least left me with room to perceive my own thoughts. I sensed a... curiousness, hovering just on the edge of my perception. I'd seen a human walking a small dog one time, in the village near my family's house. The man had been distracted by another passerby, and had stopped to converse. The dog, anchored to the main by a length of rope, had sat down and looked curiously at its master, waiting for some signal that they'd be on the move again. But it didn't wait patiently: I'd watched for several moments as it shifted its weight from

side to side, looking around at the other people bustling past. *Tell me where to go!* it had seemed to be saying.

That's what I was sensing now. An eagerness to do *something,* anything, if only I would decide *what* and *where.*

But I didn't know anybody. *You decide,* I thought loudly. *What's interesting?*

The rumbling noise in my mind seemed to pause for a moment. For a brief second, maybe less, it became a low, pure tone that thrummed through my body, resonating in my bones. Then it seemed to rush away, growing louder but less chaotic. Within a couple of heartbeats, I was listening to a woman and man arguing.

I don't understand why we can't just corral them. It'd be faster.

I've told you, Shura, that's bound to attract far too much attention. And the idea isn't to kill them, just to drain off a little and let them go.

Still seems like a waste of time, Loran. And there are witchkind in the village, we're putting all of them at risk as well.

We're not. The runes won't target witchkind, only humans.

We already know that's not true.

That wasn't one of ours, Shura. He was a rogue. He renounced us.

So we just let this go on forever?

It won't be forever.

It'll seem like it.

The clan has been on this path for a century, Shura. This is the endgame. It's worth years, a decade or more, to do it right. This is how we take our place.

How a puppet takes a place, you mean.

The first one is set up, Shura. All you need do is monitor it. And protect it. She's the key.

Clever of you to have figured that out. Would her brat have been able to do it too?

Possibly. Maybe. We'll never know. Dorian could never find him, once they'd taken her. Family always had damn peculiar magic.

Pity.

Focus on the now. Focus on the future. We have her, she's the key to the rune, and your job is to begin the task.

As you say, Loran.

The power spun away from me then, and the voices faded away.

What had I just heard? What did it mean? Surely it was the Axis itself that had taken me to that conversation, but why? Was this the 'urgent need' that Kirmin had told me about, the need that had cause the Axis to Choose me?

Shaking, I stood and brushed the sand from my clothes. Dinner would be waiting, and I had much to consider.

When I awoke next morning, I felt so rested and refreshed that the strangeness and urgency of the conversation I'd overheard had diminished somewhat in my mind. That is, it still *felt* urgent to me, but I sensed that urgency coming from somewhere other than myself. The Axis, I assumed, pressing me to accomplish whatever it had in mind. But there was nothing I could do. As Kirmin had said, I was only thirteen, and it would be years—at least five, apparently—before I was equipped to wield the Axis to any real purpose.

Besides, this morning I had my own mission in mind.

After breakfast, I sat at the large table in the workroom, picturing the rune for the Visitation. But I'd never seen the place that I now wanted to go, and so I didn't have a firm image to hold in my mind. Instead, I concentrated on what I thought it must be like: cold and damp. Dark and lonely. Solemn and distant. I knew it was near Witchhold, and I knew—and this I held most firmly in my mind—that it contained the only person I'd ever truly loved, and who I knew had truly loved me.

For a long moment, I felt the magic... *searching*. It was questing about my mind, looking for hints and clues of what I was after. It was darting out into the world and back again, flicking here and there for clues. Then, suddenly, I felt it latch on to something dark, and cold, and solid.

With a quick sensation of movement, I found myself in what I hoped was the mausoleum of witchkind where my mother's body had been laid down.

I immediately saw that a ceremony was in process, a small crowd of mourners standing in a loose circle around a black-garbed officiant.

I felt tendrils of the Axis's magic drift into that circle of people, curling around two of them in particular. I stepped closer to the opposite side of the ring, peering between the mourners so that I could see the two that the Axis was touching.

The first was an older man with pure white hair and dark, deeply lined skin. His mouth was set in a straight line, and his jaw was clenched. He looked more angry than mournful, and I wondered how he'd been related to whomever had died.

The second was a younger woman, with skin just as dark as the man's, but with dark black hair to match. Her face was devoid of emotion, almost bored-looking, as if she'd been forced to attend.

Both of them were dressed in the gray mourning clothes of witchkind, but they were the only two who looked so... emotionless. The other dozen or so mourners looked sad, as you might expect. Some were crying, others clearly holding back their tears.

All of them wore bronze-colored medallions, suspended from their necks on matte black ribbons. The medallions were engraved with a rune:



I had no idea what the rune meant, or what significance the medallions played in the ceremony. I took a step closer to the circle, hoping to get a more detailed look at one of the medallions so that I could describe it to Kirmin, when the older man's eyes locked onto mine. His lips suddenly moved, and I could tell he was saying something under his breath. His eyes never left mine, and now they burned with anger.

A moment later he finished whatever he was saying and a bright red light filled my vision and blasted me backwards, disrupting my own magic. Back in my body, I blinked furiously to clear my eyes, tears suddenly rolling down my cheeks.

Fair enough. I suppose barging in on someone else's funeral ceremony wasn't exactly the height of good manners.

I also supposed I wouldn't tell Kirmin about this.

I spent the rest of the morning in the library, giving the ceremony time to complete, and then returned to the workroom to try again. The return was easier: having seen the place, the magic latched on almost instantly and carried me directly there. This time, the mausoleum was empty, and I took a moment to look around.

I'd read descriptions of witchkind's burial chambers before, and this one corresponded almost exactly with what I'd read. It was a deep warren of dark caverns, lit by torches that flickered with ancient versions of light-magic. That was traditional, I'd read, and preferred over the newer, steadier light-magic that most households would use today. The walls were packed tightly with large plaques, each one covering the burial place of a single person. The bodies were stored with no rhyme or reason, and left for not less than fifty years for remembrances. After that time, unless the person's family paid for additional decades, the crypt was emptied and reused.

"Beatrice Scratch," I whispered.

Just as my books had suggested, a trail of dim blue light appeared in the air, winding off into another cavern. I followed it through several twists and turns, passing through three more burial caverns, before I saw it curving into one of the plaques set low on the wall, just a couple of feet above the smooth, rocky floor.

I approached, and saw Mother's name engraved into the plaque. There were no other words, as I saw there were on some of the surrounding markers. No claims of how beloved she'd been, who she'd left behind, or even the dates of her birth and death. As a prisoner of Witchhold, she rated a proper burial but no more.

"Mother," I whispered, and even that soft word seemed to echo in the high-ceilinged cavern.

I had so few firm memories of her. The two of us laughing in the grass behind the house, an afternoon picnic spoiled by a sudden, warm spring shower. Her bending over me to kiss me goodnight as I lay in bed. The smell of her hair as she held me tightly, protecting me from one of Father's shouting episodes.

I had far more, and clearer, memories of *those.* Father's obsession with his machines had made him single-minded, and whenever he encountered difficulties with them, he would rant and rave for hours. I was to never interrupt him, even to bring him a sandwich or a drink. Even Abbygail politely refused to descend into the basement workshop.

It had slowly driven Mother mad.

She'd become paranoid in the last couple of years before they'd finally taken her. And in her paranoia she'd also become prone to lashing out with random magics. One time, she'd come to me in tears, apologizing for the brightness of the sun and promising to protect my rare, pale white skin from its ravages. The next morning, I'd awoken to find every window in the house covered in a thin layer of grime that no amount of scrubbing could remove.

I knew from her offhand comments that she'd had a few encounters in the village as well. She'd become obsessed with fresh food toward the end, and spent as much of her time as possible in the village to avoid Father. She took me with her sometimes, and more than once I'd seen her cast magic to ascertain the freshness of a piece of fruit. She believed herself to be surreptitious about it, but on several occasions others of witchkind had quietly come up and scolded her for her public displays. When Father... when he died, the Proctors had come, and Mother had raved and threatened them, her mind finally shattered.

"I miss you."

But there was no point in my being here. I'd survived without her for years, and now had my own path. If I wanted to be alone someplace that was isolated and made of rock, I had a perfectly good island to return to.

But it still bothered me that the doctors at Witchhold had never discovered the cause of her ailment. Witchkind simply didn't go mad, according to everything I'd read—and after her death I'd made a point of finding every book I could on the topic from the house's vast library. Humans went mad all the time apparently, and my family had collected several books on the subject. Humans even differentiated between maladies of the body and of the mind. But witchkind? We rarely got sick, and we never lost our minds.

Mother had lost her mind.

I decided then and there that I wanted to learn more.

I'd read several adventure stories featuring Witchhold, the famous—or infamous, depending on your perspective—prison for witchkind. More than a few of those stories had included drawings of the place, and I hoped they were accurate. Holding the most vivid of them in my mind, I re-cast Visitation, and felt the sudden, quick rush of motion that signaled the magic was working.

But unlike my previous trips, this one felt... *thick.* It felt like I was struggling through a series of closely spaced curtains, flailing to push them aside and becoming wound up in them. This lasted for... well, for several moments at least, before the resistance vanished and the magic completed the journey.

I found myself standing at the edge of a dense forest, on a narrow path of packed dirt. That path led out of the forest and up a tall, wide hill. Atop that hill was the imposing stone structure of Witchhold.

According to the stories, the building was said to be almost as old as the world itself. It was the first structure witchkind had ever built for themselves, and had originally housed some of the earliest tribes of witchkind as they came together and formed a society. Originally, it had been intended as the centerpiece in a shining new city. But shortly after its construction, the witchkind who moved in found their access to magic inexplicably reduced. Runes refused to work the way they were meant to, and even trying to empower a rune could tire out all but the strongest of the new tenants. After struggling to find

workarounds to the problem, they eventually gave up and moved several miles east, starting over with the foundations for what became Evermore. When that new society found themselves with their first criminals, it occurred to them that a place of weakened magic might be a perfect place to sequester those malcontents, and Witchhold's life as a prison began.

Witchhold was awesome to behold. It looked as if its four outer walls had thrust directly from the earth, and given the legendary magic of old witchkind, that might well have been the case. Those walls were formed from gray granite, and even from this distance I could see how they'd once been sharp-edged and craggy. All these centuries later, of course, many of the sharp edges had been worn down by the elements, but the building still looked forbidding. It offered few windows, the mostly featureless walls having been conceived more for defense than for aesthetics. In the stories, witchkind had huddled inside this fortress while human Hunters tried to push their way in. Today, the fortress was intended to keep people *in,* not out.

I tried to use the Visitation magic to carry myself to the front door, but the resistance I'd felt earlier renewed itself, and if anything was even more powerful. So I sighed, and trudged my way up the narrow path toward the fortress. Almost an hour must have passed when I found myself at the doorstep, staring at the heavy stone slab that served as the main entrance. A weathered bell-rope hung next to it. Frowning in irritation, I waved my hand through the rope—I couldn't affect anything physical in this form. Then it occurred to me: if I couldn't affect physical things, then perhaps they couldn't affect me either.

Unseen, I thought loudly.

I faced the door, closed my eyes, and stepped forward.

I felt only the faintest sensation when I passed through the heavy wooden door, something like a soft piece of linen brushing against my skin. When I opened my eyes, I was inside a wide, shallow foyer. The ceiling was quite low—I could imagine a taller adult brushing their hair on the stone above—and was made of the same featureless gray stone as the walls and floor. Directly opposite me was another less stout-looking door, flanked by two worn old desks. The desk on the

left was unoccupied, but the one on the right was staffed by a younger woman who was focused intently on whatever document she was writing.

I took a step forward, and a candle on the corner of her desk flared to life.

Her head snapped up and her eyes locked onto mine. "Oh," she said, blinking once or twice in confusion. "Can I... that is, how can I help you?"

"I wanted to talk to someone about a woman who died here, around four years ago." I tried to keep my tone even and calm, but I could hear the tension in my voice. I could accept that she'd seen me, of course, but why didn't she seem more alarmed by it?

"You have to have an appointment." I watched the confusion leave her face, replaced by a firm resolve. She was probably used to brushing people off.

"How do you know I don't?"

"Because you aren't in the appointment book. We have no appointments for today. And..." She fell silent, and blinked at me a few more times.

"What?"

"Well, you can't be here without an appointment."

"I just wanted—"

"No," she said, her tone conveying a bit of panic, "you can't *be* here without an appointment. It's impossible. The entire building is warded against travel magics." Her eyes narrowed. "You're very young. Are you from Duocastella's?"

"I just wanted to talk to someone about my mother," I said quietly. "Please."

Her expression softened. "Your mother... you said she died here?"

"Beatrice Scratch. My name is Daniel."

She bit her lip for a moment, clearly weighing my request. I did my best to look lonely and pitiful. Finally, she sighed and gave a quick nod. "I'll see if I can get the file. Wait here?"

"Okay."

She stood and bustled through the door to her left, closing it carefully and quietly behind her. I took a couple more steps to close the

distance between myself and her desk, and stood patiently. I tried counting to myself to measure the time, and it must have been ten minutes before she returned, once again carefully clicking the door shut before resuming her seat.

"Sorry," she said, placing a thin leather folio on her desk and quickly unwrapping the braided thong that held it shut. "We can't use any of the magical retrieval systems here, of course, and so you have to find everything yourself." She finished unwinding the binding and flipped the folio open. "Beatrice Scratch. Yes, I see. Hmm." Her eyes darted back and forth as she read the first page. "She wasn't here very long. They— oh." Her eyes darted up to mind. "I'm so sorry about her passing."

"Thank you."

"But I'm afraid there's nothing to tell. She passed unexpectedly, it says. She died in her sleep."

"She... she had a condition."

"Yes, I see that here." Her eyes dipped back to the paper and scanned a few more lines. "Her... her mind was 'uneasy,' it says here. But there's nothing more listed about her health." She flipped the folio shut. "I'm sorry. And you really mustn't be here. I'm so sorry about you mother."

Something about the woman's demeanor seemed off, but I didn't know what else to say. "Thank you... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Emma," she offered with a quick smile. "Emma Emerald. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help. Now *really,"* she added, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Danna will be back from her break anytime, and you *mustn't* be here when she returns!"

"Thank you, Emma." I released the Visitation magic from my mind, and found myself back in the Tower.

CHAPTER 9

Third Lesson

I remained lazy about tracking the passing of days, but I reckoned it had already been six or seven weeks since Kirmin had vanished and left me to fend for myself.

I was depressed by the memories of Mother and the lack of information from Witchhold, but something in my mind simply wouldn't let her go. I suppose it could have been my own loneliness that kept me grasping at the one relationship I'd ever had that felt... unresolved.

I decided to try visiting the house again. It had to be *somewhere;* an entire house couldn't simply vanish. I mean, it clearly had done exactly that, but it still had to exist *somewhere,* didn't it?

For half the day, I sat in the workroom, picturing the house, and invoking the Visitation magic. Again and again, nothing happened.

Well... not *nothing.* Not exactly. After several repetitions, I began to be a bit more sensitive to the subtle nuances of the magic. For comparison, I sent my spirit back to the village a few times. Traveling to the village was straightforward: the magic would stretch out, and I could feel it connect itself to whatever I was picturing. It would then wrap itself around me, and sort of *snap* me to my destination. It was as if the magic was a long, stretchy piece of string: I could send it out with my mind, and it would knot itself around whatever I'd visualized. It would then wrap its other end around me, and release me

from the anchor of my body. The tension in the string would haul my spirit to wherever I'd knotted its end.

Trying to travel the house was noticeably different.

When I'd sought out my mother's grave, the magic had taken a while to find something to knot to. I'd never been there before, of course, and so I couldn't picture the destination. It seemed to have searched for the memory of my mother, and connected itself to that. With the house, I felt a similar sense of searching: the magic would flicker about, trying to find what it was I was visualizing so clearly in my mind. The search took only a scant moment, but instead of knotting against my destination, the magic just... fell apart. It's like the string began to fray not the end, the magic losing its direction until it unraveled completely. In fact, the more I tried to reach the house, the faster the magic would almost seem to find it before inevitably unwinding, leaving me back in the Tower.

It was frustrating.

I gave up on the spell for the rest of the day, instead poking aimlessly around the library looking for something that would occupy my mind.

I returned to the magical primers I'd found before my lesson in the Axis's Form of Travel, and found a primer by Albert Disemstoke —the founder of the school I would likely be in right now, had my Test not ended with the medallion being placed around my neck. The book seemed quite entry-level, and it began with the light-bringing rune that Mother had taught me. I worked through it quickly, practicing the runes and words in Kirmin's workroom. I discovered that her great, dusty table was designed to be that way: I could write any rune I wanted in its surface and it would have no effect, and once I turned away, the even layer of dust would return as if I'd never touched anything. I would later discover that the extensive runes on the workroom's walls, floor, and ceiling were designed to protect me. A bit of magic cast slightly wrong could have explosive effects, but the workroom would simply absorb them, keeping me safe.

Over the span of a few more days (weeks? The Tower seemed to make it hard to tell), I taught myself a variety of useful tricks: how to summon a nearby bird (which I tried, but it didn't seem to be able to

reach far enough to actually find any), how to levitate small objects, and how to cut a piece of cloth in a straight line. I even found a rune construct that compensated for the weight of the shrunk-down Book in my coat pocket, finally allowing my coat to hang normally. I'd grown so accustomed to holding the garment in place that it felt odd to no longer have to do so.

But it was the final rune in that first primer that turned out to be my prize: creating a looking-glass over a stone wall. I'd been without one in my washing-room since I'd arrived, and when I first cast my new find, I was shocked at my appearance. My dark hair had grown shaggy, and the fuzz that had begun growing on my chin looked ridiculous. I scoured the Tower—the parts I could access, at least—but could find neither scissors nor razor. I wasn't quite bad-looking enough to risk the cloth-cutting rune on my face or hair, but I immediately found Disemstoke's second-level primer and started looking for hair-cutting runes.

I also began reading some of the many history books in the library, and some of the tales were so familiar that it made me wonder if all of the adventures I'd taken as fiction had been based on real life. Looking around the library, I realized I would have ample time to find out, if Kirmin stayed away for long.

In the records section of the library, I found a handwritten tome whose title, printed in bold black letters on its spine, proclaimed it to be a list of all of the past adherents of the Sixth Axis. I pulled it from its shelf with great excitement, and lugged it to one of the book podiums. Opening the cover, I was disappointed to find it written in a script I couldn't understand—the only book I'd ever run across that wasn't written in the letters Mother had taught me, and that every other book I'd ever seen had been written in. It was obvious enough that it was a list of names, each accompanied by a few words, but that was all I could gather. I flipped through several pages before giving up. I did, however, discover that the book wasn't finished: easily a third of its pages remained blank, waiting to be filled in.

I wondered when someone would write *my* name in it.

I left the book on the podium, vowing to return to it when I could read it, or when it was perhaps time to add my own name to it.

One morning, I decided that I needed to get out again. Not to try and find the house, or even to visit my old village—I had no desire to experience the frustration of the house again, and the village was no longer interesting. Instead, I sent my spirit to Twynsits, a city I'd read of—and, most importantly, seen drawings of—in one of the library's many books. It was a sprawling metropolis, in my mind, straddling a mighty river. The book had described it as a "center of trade, and second only to Evermore in its community of witchkind." It sounded like a wonderful distraction.

I chose to remain unseen for most of my visits. I would duck into a shop and observe the patrons, slip into a tavern to see what people did there, and even sneak into the resident's homes to compare them against each other. The city was densely built, and almost all of witchkind lived and worked in spaces that were hidden from the humans: a knickknack shop was accessible through a mouse-hole in the outside of a farrier's workshop, a tavern could be entered through the mail-slot next to the door of a small bank, and so on. For most of the businesses and public places, simply drawing near to the entrance would suck me in and deposit me inside. For people's homes, I found that I needed to stand very near to them when they activated whatever magic triggered the entrance. Incorporeal as I was, I couldn't actually touch the small runes scratched into the sides of buildings that provided access to these private spaces.

Over the course of many visits, I started to become less interested in the *places* and more interested in the *people.* And not just the people of witchkind, but also the far more numerous humans who populated the place.

I will tell you this: what I saw tore at my young soul.

I had read books for almost as long as I could hold them, and I knew, intellectually, about families, and relationships, and love. I knew that my own situation had been... unusual, to say the least, and that orphans were more often taken in by distant family or by some well-meaning (or not) shelter or other enterprise.

But to *see* it...

Everywhere I looked, people spoke to other people. They laughed, and sometimes they cried. They clapped each other on the back and called one another "friend." They hugged each other and cried together. They sat and ate and drank, they walked, they ran down the streets.

They *touched* each other.

Young men bashfully presented flowers and tokens to young women, who would smile and encourage their attentions. Older women would playfully bat their husbands away, but their eyelashes would flutter at the welcome attention of someone they'd clearly known and loved for years. Even the oldest of them, walking alone down the avenue, seemed to have a satisfied *weight* about them, the heaviness of a life that, if not *well* lived, had at least been lived *with* someone.

I had none of that.

Trapped as I apparently now was in the Tower, I *would* have none of that.

I was no older than the youngest of the boys just trying their first hand at courtship, and I'd never play that game.

Something inside of me began to shift then. Slowly, but deliberately. I *wanted* a life. I wanted the lives I saw, any of them. I wanted to *touch.* I wanted to *be touched.*

Phantom tears welling up in my eyes, I ended the most recent of my visits to Twynsits, returning to my Tower. I curled up in my bedroom, water streaming from my eyes.

I missed Mother so very much.

Years and years later, I learned that some magic of the Tower made it difficult for strong feelings to linger long. All I knew at the time was that my feelings of loneliness and emptiness seemed to settle in to stay, but that they became less immediate, less biting. I spent a few days moping about the place, poking desultorily at my meals and flipping aimlessly through books that scarcely registered in my mind. If I had

to guess, I'd say that within a week the sharp sting of my loneliness dulled, and I found myself merely bored.

Tired of the feelings that were still prowling in my mind, I decided to focus instead on my body. "A strong day's work," I'd once read, "is more than cure for what ails the soul." Fine. I'd try that.

At first, I simply ran from the Tower to the shore and back, over and over and over. *That* became more tedious than simply being bored, and gave me far too much time to *think,* so I started exploring the fourth major room on the Tower's main level.

It turns out the room was an exercising room! By means of trial and error, I slowly discovered what the various odd pieces of equipment did. One section of the floor, which I'd taken to be nothing more than a dark rug woven from some rough, sturdy material, turned out to be a way of walking or running endlessly. Once you stood in the middle of it, you could step in any direction and it would kind of slide under you, keeping you in place even while your legs moved. The first time I used it, I immediately became worried I'd be trapped on it forever, until I tumbled—quite literally, as I tripped over my own feet—to the solution of simply jumping off of it. It wasn't much more interesting than running to the shore and back, but I did use it when the weather outside turned especially poor.

The room contained a pair of metal balls, complete with metal handles atop them. On the side of each ball was a knob that, when turned, made the ball lighter or heavier. It may seem the very height of boredom to simply pick up a heavy ball and then set it back down again, but it got my blood moving, and the physical effort greatly improved my mental outlook.

Another item in the room seemed specifically designed to increase strength. It was a small square of differently textured stone on the floor, perhaps three feet to a side, with a complex rune carved into it. I stood in the middle and pictured the rune in my mind to invoke it. Immediately, it became harder to move, as if I were standing in a thick paste of some kind. Breathing remained easy, but moving any of my limbs in any direction was significantly more difficult. The effect continued so long as I held the rune in my mind: once I dropped it, my movement returned to normal. It seemed to adjust itself, so that I

always had approximately the same level of difficulty, even though I could feel myself slowly growing stronger and stronger as the weeks rolled by.

Between my magical primers and my exercise, I kept myself well-occupied, even if my days did start to blur one into the other. But I did have one other activity to keep me occupied, and it was the one I knew Kirmin would have approved of: practicing.

I guessed that it had now been at least four months since I'd last seen Kirmin, and in that time my mood settled even further, and I began to think more about Kirmin's lessons and my place in the Tower. My interest in Shura and Loran returned, probably reinforced—if not prodded—by the Axis's own interest in them.

I began to spend at least two hours per day practicing the Visitation rune. I held off on further visits to Twynsits for the time, having no desire to bring on another wave of sadness for my solitary condition. So I instead tended to experiment, and to focus my efforts on the village I'd been Tested in. Mother had taken me into the village on several occasions, and I'd run many errands for Great-Great-Grandmother, so I had plenty of familiar sights that the Visitation magic could latch onto. I would take myself to the edge of the village and walk in from there, directing the Axis to leave me unseen. I noticed that moving around in my spirit-form was easier than physically walking, and discovered that I could almost drift effortlessly in whatever direction I wanted. Over time, I explored the meadows and abandoned farmlands along the lane, but for a long time I resisted going all the way to the where the house had been. Eventually, of course, I gave in, and was unsurprised to see that the house was still gone. And not only gone: There was no sign of it whatsoever, although I was sure I'd gone far enough—and even a bit further, just to be sure. The gate, the path leading from the road to the gate, even the small outbuildings that had been out back—all were gone, without so much as a flattened patch of earth to indicate they'd ever existed. A house that had been there for centuries, that had housed more than ten generations of my

family—all gone. I made several attempts to Visit the house, and each time found the magic flailing and unravelling almost immediately—even when I was already standing in the exact spot where I was certain the house itself had once sat.

After that final attempt to reconnect with my old home, I tended to restrict my Visitations to the village proper. On the few trips I'd taken in person, I'd become accustomed to being ignored by the villagers, all busy with their own lives and concerns. But in this spirit form, I confirmed that *none* of the humans could see me. It wasn't that they were ignoring me as they had; at one point I stood directly in front of a man and he walked *through* me as if I wasn't there. Since I knew that at least some of witchkind would be similarly blind, I crept into the small places where I knew witchkind would be found—a small tavern inside the walls of the village pub, the council chamber in the belfry of the village's courthouse, and so on—and found that even very few of witchkind could sense me when I didn't want to be seen. I never put myself directly in the path of another of witchkind though, fearing that either I or they would come to some harm.

I did try to find Shura and Loran. Knowing their names apparently wasn't enough for the Visitation magic though, and I had obviously never seen them. I tried to use the Whisper, gently suggesting that the Axis reconnect me to them and concentrating on the sounds of their voices, but that also produced no results. I did genuinely worry what they were up to, but I saw nothing I could do about it at this stage in my training. I considered bringing it up with Kirmin when she eventually returned but... I don't know. Something made me want to keep it to myself. Perhaps it was the Axis, perhaps it was something else. Besides, I told myself, what could Kirmin do? And what could I do, even with her advice, until I learned more?

But my skill with the Visitation magic improved nonetheless. One day I decided to see how high I could allow my spirit to drift while using the magic. My half-formed thought was that, if I could rise high enough, I would be able to see another village, giving me more variety in my practices. It turned out that I could only float about as high as I could leap, perhaps a couple of feet off the ground. I could, however, jump from place to place. I discovered that I could appear in the

village at street level, quickly memorize a location higher off the ground—the second floor of the post office, for example—and then switch myself to that new location in an instant.

I used the technique to travel down the lane leading out of the village—in the opposite direction the house had been—more quickly. I would stand in one place, look as far down the lane as possible, and then quickly shift to that location. It worked well for the longer, straighter stretches of road, but became quite tedious on the more common, curvier sections that wound through the forest outside the village. I grew bored before arriving at anyplace new, and returned my consciousness to the Tower and opened my eyes.

"Very nice," Kirmin's voice said, startling me. "Are you ready for your next lesson?"

"How have you been occupying yourself?" Kirmin asked. We'd returned to her workroom, seated in our usual positions across the table from each other. "Other than practicing, which I'm glad to see you doing."

"Exercising. Reading. I've found some primers on basic magic."

She nodded approvingly. "That's good. I'm very pleased to see you taking responsibility for that. Anything else?"

"Exploring what I can. There's not much more to look at."

She groaned. "That's my fault, and I must apologize. There's no need for you to be restricted to only these levels of the Tower, now. Each of the upper levels corresponds to one of your lessons, and after today I'll unlock the first three for you. The rest will come as you advance." My eyes must have lit up, because she chuckled. "Forgetful of me, I know. But after today you'll have three new floors to explore."

"Which takes us to your lesson. Today we will learn the third Form of the Axis, the Form of Mind. This is an unusual Form, in that the other Axes all have the same basic version of it, while ours, once again, has the capability to be much different.

"The other Axes' Form of Mind focuses on control: The First Axis induces calmness in others, the Second incites anger, the Third

enforces surety and confidence, and the Fourth brings forgetfulness. All with variations, of course, depending on the skill and strength of the adherent. These powers are effective against both humans and witchkind, and can even be used to affect large numbers of people—more so with humans than with witchkind.

"I will be clear," she said, looking at me level and a note of warning in her voice. "I regard all of those as abominations. Our own Axis would let us induce fear, for example, and I will have none of it, and neither shall you. To control the mind of another being is an evil, evil work. I focus only on the unique power of our Axis, which in the True language is *išsiaiškinti.* Loosely translated, it means 'to know.' This is its rune." She used her finger to sketch it on the table's dusty surface.



I quickly committed it to memory: an elegant if unexpectedly simple character. "Hold that over the image of a person who is in your presence, and you will know their truths from their lies."

"Like reading their mind?" I asked. That seemed little less invasive than compelling them to fear.

"No, not reading their mind. They will still need to *speak* their mind to you. You will simply know, beyond a doubt, whether they intend their words as truths, as lies, or as something in between. In our role as judges for witchkind, this is a crucial power, and it is what makes the Sixth Axis the ultimate judge. When on our guard, we cannot be deceived."

I understood. "You said I would know whether they *intend* their words as truths or lies."

She smiled. "You're paying close attention." I flushed under her

praise. "That's good. Yes: we *can* hear mistruths and take them as truth, if the person speaking the words *believes* that they are telling the truth. For example, if they have been lied to by another, and accepted those lies as truths, then we will hear them repeated as truths. That is one reason you should rarely base your actions on what one person says another has said or done. We take our evidence from the source, or we risk being led astray."

"Okay." That made sense to me.

"Let me offer you a story."

I was Summoned to adjudicate a suspected murder, *she said.* At this time, I was... well, suffice to say I did not answer Summons often. But in this case, my attention was caught: a man had been killed and a woman in the same community stood accused of his death. She had had both means and opportunity to commit the crime, and while she claimed she was innocent, she seemed resigned to her fate.

Now, you must understand that most councils hear evidence and adjudicate crimes on their own. The Sixth Axis isn't some kind of itinerant judge, wandering from town to town hearing cases. We are a court of last resort, if you will. But in this case, the man and the woman were both highly placed in the society of witchkind: he had *been* a councillor, and one much beloved by the community. She was the head of the village's wealthiest family, one that had been through several arguments with the council over property rights and other issues. The council felt predisposed against her and in favor of their murdered colleague. But they were at least aware of their bias, and so they called upon me to ascertain the truth.

Even though the woman seemed ready to accept their sentence for the crime, the councillors were justifiably concerned about making an error. Murder amongst witchkind is exceedingly rare, and is grounds for death, you see. That is not a sentence one undertakes lightly.

I Traveled to the village, and immediately questioned the woman. "Did you kill him? Or cause him to be killed?" I asked simply. I find that the simplest questions, with simple answers, work best.

"No," she told me. I had already invoked the rune to Know, and immediately knew she was telling the truth.

"She is not guilty of the crime," I said. You will note that I am always deliberate with my wording, especially in these matters. I could not broadly declare her *innocent,* because I knew nothing about the rest of her life. But of *this* crime, I knew she was not guilty.

"Who, then?" the council head demanded. She was the one who had Summoned me, and although I was not responsible for investigating the crime, she knew I could more easily obtain a truthful answer, if an answer existed.

The woman paused, and looked hard at me before she answered, "I do not *know*." She placed an odd emphasis on the word 'know.'

It was a lie, and yet it was not a lie. It was an odd sensation, one that I have never felt before or since. I stared back at her for several moments, before it occurred to me that she was being as deliberate as I with her words. She did not *know.* That is, she did not have personal, irrefutable knowledge or evidence. But she *suspected.* She may have even suspected with some certainty, short of full confidence, and that's what created the odd feeling I'd perceived in her answer.

I felt certain she was protecting someone. She lived alone with her two children, her husband having died in his sleep some years back. I wondered if perhaps one of her children had committed the crime, perhaps without ill intent, perhaps even in an accident. The council would be lenient in that case, I knew. I opened my mouth to ask her another question, to force her into a corner where careful words would not protect her.

But then I stopped.

As I said, it is our place, when called upon, to Judge. The Sixth Axis's Form of Mind gives us the ability to separate truth from fiction, although as you have seen in this story the two can be entangled and hard to pull apart. But it is *not* our role to investigate. It is not our role to ferret out wrongdoers. We ascertain truth. We Judge. We bring an End to matters, when we deem it necessary. But we do not involve ourselves in those matters.

"She is telling the truth," I told the council. "She does not *know.*" I

repeated her emphasis on the word, giving the council the only subtle, sly clue that I was willing to offer.

I left the village that evening, and was never recalled. To this day, I do not know if they found whomever killed the man, nor do I know what befell that woman after I left.

My heart was hammering in my chest as she ended her story. Some of my panic must have shown on my face, for she tilted her head and quietly asked, "What's wrong, Daniel?"

I shook my head, saying nothing.

Her eyes showed a mix of concern and curiosity. "There's something about that story that upset you, isn't there? What is it?"

Again, I shrugged, not trusting myself to speak.

"I should tell you," she said calmly, "that I cannot use the Form of Mind with you, nor can you use it with me. We are both too tightly bound to the Axis now, and it will not differentiate between us in that way. It is one reason," she added, "that our Axis only ever has one adherent." She paused. "So you can tell me whatever you like." Her voice was kind then, inviting me to open up to her.

Still, I remained silent. "Very well," she sighed. "Let's get you practicing the Form. I'm going to show you a sketch of a man, who lives in a village far from here. He is expecting you today. You're to use Visitation to go to him, and then ask him what he had for lunch. You're then to return here and tell me what he had. Understand?"

I nodded, and she pulled a rolled-up piece of parchment from inside her cloak. She unrolled it on the tabletop, holding the edges flat so I could see. It was an excellent sketch, full of detail and closer to a portrait than the word 'sketch' implied. I studied it carefully for several moments, closed my eyes, and invoked the Visitation rune.

The man gave a start as I appeared before him. "I'll never get used to that," he said with a grin. His voice was friendly. I looked around, and we seemed to be in an office of sorts. It was a sparse room, with little more than the table he sat at, the chair he sat in, and a couple of

small paintings hanging on the wall. A plate, empty but for a few breadcrumbs, sat in front of him.

I pictured the rune in my mind, holding it in my vision as I looked evenly at him. "What did you have for lunch?" I asked.

"A salad," he answered promptly. A feeling pulsed through me. It felt... comfortable. Warm. Friendly. I felt safe. I interpreted that as truth, but it didn't line up with the bread crumbs on his plate. Had he *also* had a salad? Were the breadcrumbs a diversion? I was mindful of Kirmin's line between Judging and investigating, but in this case I wasn't actually adjudicating anything was I?

"Did you have anything else?"

He smiled. "I had a sandwich." I felt another pulse of warmth and comfort.

"Anything else?"

"No." This time, the feeling was the exact opposite: cold, uncomfortable, and anxious. A lie.

"What was everything you had other than the salad and sandwich?"

His smile grew. "I also had a bowl of grapes." Warmth and comfort. "That's it." Warmth and comfort.

"Thank you," I said, bowing slightly and dropping the Visitation magic. I opened my eyes in the workroom. "Sandwich, salad, bowl of grapes," I told her.

Kirmin smiled. "Catch him in a lie?"

"One."

"Excellent. Now, if you will excuse me, we have a visitor."

CHAPTER 10

An Interruption

"Stay here," Kirmin instructed before she vanished.

I chewed my lip for a second, and then closed my eyes. I pictured her now-familiar face in my mind, overlaid the rune for Visitation, and felt the rush of wind that carried me to her. I stayed well back: my experiments suggested that while some of witchkind could see me in this spirit form, many could not, and anyone I was not explicitly trying to visit would be very unlikely to see me.

Kirmin was at the shoreline, on the lone path that led from the Tower to the water. Her back was to the Tower, and her formidable form was blocking my view of whomever she was talking to. I saw her head twitch to the right as I arrived: she'd sensed me. She said nothing, though, and so I crept to one side of the path to see who the visitor was.

It was Mr. Nash.

"I hope the boy is well," Mr. Nash was saying.

"Well enough," Kirmin replied.

"Is he... can I see him?"

"No," Kirmin said flatly. "You know how this works."

He frowned. "Yes, but... it's just that his family *did* charge me with his well-being, and of course–"

Kirmin held up a hand and his voice trailed off. "That isn't how

this works," she repeated. "He was Tested. He was given a medallion. From that point, he belonged only to the Axis. He belonged *here.* To me."

Mr. Nash said nothing for a moment. Kirmin waited patiently. "There's a bit more to his story than you may know," he finally offered.

She tilted her head a bit. "I know there's more, but... he's not chosen to share."

"I'm..." Mr. Nash began. He stopped and looked away for a moment. "There's reason to be concerned for his safety," he finished.

"He belongs to the Axis," she repeated. "None of what we do is especially *safe,* but there's no reason to think he's in any special danger, is there?"

Mr. Nash took a small step toward her. "You don't *know,"* he said, his voice low.

"Know *what?"* Kirmin's voice was beginning to show irritation. I felt my own heart slow and grow cold. He *couldn't* know.

Mr. Nash sighed. "Daniel's mother was Beatrice and his father was Neville. When they married, they took *her* family name, not his. Scratch is... an alias, of sorts. It's a family tradition."

"I know that," Kirmin said. I could tell she was growing impatient. "And I know his True family name."

"You don't find it ironic?"

"Of course I do," she snapped. "But irony isn't my business. What of his family?"

"Beatrice's mother was Constance. And *her* mother was Patience." He paused, as if to let that sink in.

I could almost feel Kirmin's sudden confusion. "Patience..." she mused. "Not...?"

"Yes, the one and the same."

"The family? *The* family? Patience, daughter of Pranasa?" That was Great-Great Grandmother's name. "How could I have missed that?"

"What do you mean?"

Kirmin waved a hand. "I... did some cursory research on the boy's family. The Tower has an extensive memory. Library, I mean."

"They were very careful to keep a lot of... hmm, private details out of the official publications," Mr. Nash said. "And many publications don't list the correct lineage, because they insisted on keeping the women's names, not their husbands."

Kirmin thought about that for a moment. "They were hiding something."

"Yes. Neville always resented it. He resented losing his name, but that was the family's tradition. He resented the restrictions the family put on them. One child only, he was told, and Constance took steps to ensure it. I wouldn't put it past her to have ensured the child was male, the first male offspring in six generations. And even after she died, Pranasa was never... *Ended,* you know." Kirmin simply nodded, offering no commentary. "Neville... he found solace in his own works. Experiments. He built a lot of machines, and tried to imbue them with some very specific magics. Nobody's sure what his aim was. He grew... obsessed, I'm told. Reclusive. Quick to anger."

My chest was clenching more tightly about my heart, my limbs growing colder.

"He... beat them. Especially Beatrice."

I imagined I could hear Kirmin's teeth clenching and grinding together. "And she finally lashed out?" she said through her teeth.

Mr. Nash shook his head very, very slowly. "No."

My mind exploded.

Mother stumbled up the stairs from Father's basement workroom, one hand covering the side of her face.

"Mother?" I asked quietly. I knew not to be loud in the house.

"It's fine," she said, looking away from me. But she had to turn back to close the door—gently, so gently—and I saw. There had been bruises before. Cuts, even. But her whole face was bloody, thick red oozing between her fingers, staining the delicate white lace of her sleeve. "I'm fine," she repeated, attempting a smile that was ruined by the blood pooling over her upper lip. She gave one sharp bob of her head and quickly moved toward the kitchen.

My brain felt like it had caught fire.

I opened the basement door—carefully, so carefully—and stepped slowly but evenly down the stairs. He'd hit me before, but he usually took it out on her. I wondered what slight she'd committed this time, to earn his wrath. An offer of dinner? An interest in how his day was going? I'd never heard her raise her voice or use anything but a gentling tone, and yet his hand flew so often.

Father was standing at one of his workbenches, hunched over his latest contraption. Sloppily made runes covered the walls, and the floor space was jammed with the odd metal creations he constantly made, railed at, and then abandoned. My foot must have scuffed the packed-earth floor, because he stood and whirled to me in a single motion, his hand moving up to strike a taller person. Surprised, he looked down at me. "What do *you* want?" he snarled.

I truthfully do not remember what came next. My next memory is in the sitting room, where mother sat on our worn old chaise lounge. I lay next to her, my head in her lap as she stroked my hair and told me that everything was going to be fine.

My eyes cleared as I heard Kirmin say, "The boy killed his father?"

Mr. Nash nodded. "Not officially, of course. It was impossible, after all. The man was fully grown, and the boy not even in his teens. Un-Tested and untaught. But my firm was made to know the truth. Poor Beatrice apparently went quite mad afterwards. The boy knew nothing of magic—I suspect that was a deliberate decision on their part, for some reason—and shouldn't, *couldn't* have had the power to take out a full-grown man hardly past his prime. And yet. It wasn't long before the authorities came for her. She was found incompetent to stand trial and incarcerated in Witchhold. Of course," he added softly, "it wasn't a case deemed worthy of Judgement."

I remembered the white-jacketed Proctors, remembered them wrapping the iron chains around Mother to suppress her magic. Remembered her alternating between shrill laughs and angry screams. Abbygail had ushered me back into the kitchen, then.

Kirmin was quiet for a moment. "No. I suppose I wouldn't have come if they'd Summoned me."

"There were always rumors that Beatrice was innocent, but there was no better explanation. So you see, when he was given the medallion—*that* medallion—I and the others of my firm, we..."

"You wondered if I'd Judge him now," Kirmin said flatly. "I wouldn't have, then. And even now, I will not. He is *of* the Sixth Axis. None of you know what that means, but he will not be Judged. I'm not even sure he *can* be Judged," she said a bit more quietly. "It would be... a contradiction. At best."

"I've also some concerns that Neville's former clan will... desire the boy."

"Desire?"

"There were some... *inquiries,* when Beatrice died. Someone was looking for the boy."

"And they never found him?"

"My own firm failed to find him. That house of theirs prevented it."

"They'll hardly be able to come here," Kirmin pointed out with a smile. "And once he's free of the island, he'll be more than capable of taking care of himself."

Mr. Nash was quiet for a long moment, and then said, "Well. I suppose I must leave it with you, then." He turned to leave.

"I've a question for you, though," Kirmin stopped him. "Daniel's father. What kind of... what kind of man was he?"

Mr. Nash sighed. "Not a good one," he admitted. "He beat his wife, if not the boy. He didn't fit into the family. They were remote, isolated, and they forbade him contact with his former clan. He spent much of his time in the basement with his machines."

Kirmin's head twitched back toward me for a moment. "Machines."

"No idea what their purpose was."

Kirmin spoke slowly. "I see. Well, thank you."

"I'll see myself off."

He turned and *stepped* off the isle, vanishing in an eyeblink. Kirmin turned and looked unerringly toward where she'd known I

was watching. She inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement, her face calm and solemn, and then she too vanished.

I spent the rest of the day and much of the evening in the library. I tried to find something, *anything,* that would tell me more about my family.

Anything to take my mind off of Father.

I scoured the genealogical books that were on the shelves in the section of records, all covering the greatest families of witchkind, but found nothing. Although according to Mother my family had been one of the great families of witchkind, we apparently hadn't been great enough to warrant inclusion in these books. The best I found was a copy of *Occam's Register,* a listing of all the major families of witchkind, providing little more than the names of the current family heads, and the locations where the families were centered. Flipping to the *S* section, I found *Scratch. Pranasa,* it said, *matriarch and head. Only child, Patience. Estate not disclosed.* Other books would only hint at my family—mention a name, usually a man's, or list a birth—but offered no details.

I closed the last book. I sat for more than an hour, staring blankly at the shelves of books that surrounded me. Eventually I gave up and trudged down the spiral staircase for my dinner.

CHAPTER 11

Passing the Time

At first I was glad of Kirmin's absence. After her discussion with Mr. Nash, I wasn't eager to talk to her. At least not right away—the memories he'd rekindled were ones I'd thought safely suppressed. Although I had the upper levels of the Tower to explore... something kept me from it when I awoke the next morning. Call it hollowness in my heart, an empty space that my family should have filled.

I needed to see people.

I decided to return to Twynsits.

I took myself to Kirmin's workroom, made myself comfortable, and cast the Visitation rune. The seasons had changed since I'd last been in the city: it was now cold and blustery, the sky gray and dull. None of that stopped the city's teeming population from scurrying about their day, and I once again set in to watch them.

A young couple of witchkind captured my attention. They couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, and I followed them for most of the morning. They stopped at a small cafe, where the young man bought them both a hot beverage. They huddled together on a small table just outside the shop, hunched over their drinks, chatting softly with each other. The girl was stunningly attractive, her eyes bright violet and her hair—escaping in merry wisps

from her knit cap—a dark, reddish-brown. Her deep, dark skin was flushed with the cold. Every time she smiled—which was often—her bright white teeth caught what little sunlight was filtering through the clouds, lighting up the square.

I was enraptured.

I imagined myself sitting with her, imagined her giggling at whatever jokes and stories I was telling. I could clearly feel the warmth of her breath as she spoke, and almost feel the soft skin of her ear as I whispered into it.

It was maddening.

They frittered away the morning in each other's company, stopping at small shops now and then. I could dimly sense the magic they were using to stay warm, and felt that the boy was powering most of that. It gave them an excuse to stay even closer together as they walked, sharing the small area that he could empower with his magic. When they stopped in a human-owned pub for lunch, I drifted in after them, carelessly sliding through several humans as I did so. They found a small table in a corner and once again sat close to one another, sharing a sandwich and picking at a large bowl of greens.

I found myself growing inexcusably jealous of the boy. How could she have noticed him, and not me? What did he have, that I didn't? I was to be the adherent of one of the most powerful forces in the world, and this boy struggled to warm an area just a few inches larger than his own body!

Another human walked through me, snapping me back to myself. This wasn't helping me feel less alone, it was making me... insane. I shook my head, took one last look at the happy couple, and allowed my magic to dissipate. I sat in Kirmin's workshop for most of an hour, missing my own lunch time, steeping in my own abject misery.

Eventually, the lure of the Tower's upper levels finally overcame my dejection, and I stood and walked out. When I left Kirmin's workroom, I discovered a major change: the spiral stone staircase that led down to the kitchens also now led *up.* I was still too shaken by reliving Father's death to explore that first day, but after several days had passed and I'd regained a sense of composure, I ventured up to the first level.

Kirmin had said that the levels somehow "corresponded" with my levels of advancement in the Sixth Axis's Forms, and I immediately discovered that she'd meant that quite literally, at least with the first level. It was another library, but this time it was filled with journals. Each was bound in an identical blue leather cover, labeled in silver with a month and a year. Some were quite slim, while others were much thicker. I pulled a thinner one off its shelf at random, and opened it.

It took me some time to understand what I was looking at, but once I did I was awestruck. Apparently, use of the Axis's Form of Communication was recorded in these journals, and this library was a literal record of every discussion the adherents had ever had using the Whisper. I replaced the journal, and looked around with a sense of wonder.

Near the center of the room, next to the staircase, was a heavily built book-podium. It was not unlike the simpler ones in the library below, but this one had a sort of impression in its top, obviously meant to hold a large, heavy book in place. Intrigued, I took one of the larger journals and carried it to the podium. But when I laid it down, it seemed to slip right off, and I barely managed to catch it before it tumbled to the floor. I tried again, and it once again slid right off. Whatever the podium was meant for, it wasn't for reading these journals. I quickly returned the journal to its shelf.

Then a thought occurred to me. "I wonder," I said aloud, "if there's already a journal for me."

I turned slowly, trying to guess where the current month's journal would be. A shadow flickered at the edge of my vision, and my head snapped around. It wasn't one of the driežai this time. Instead, it was a clearer, more solid-looking shadow that resembled a person. Its features weren't clear, but it was definitely a person. It glided over to the far wall, floated a few feet into the air, and reached out and removed a thin journal from a high shelf. It descended back to floor level and began gliding to me. When it reached me, it held the journal out. I took it, marveling at this shadow-librarian. It retreated into the shadows by the stairs, and I opened the journal.

It was mine. Here, I could see the repetitive and dull phrases I'd

recited to Kirmin, along with her replies, as I practiced the Whisper in our first lesson together. It was amazing. I walked to the section where the book had come from, but realized I couldn't reach the proper shelf. "Excuse me," I said aloud, "but I'm done with this and I can't–"

I hadn't even finished before the shadow-librarian slid out from the shadows and glided over to me. It accepted the journal from me, rose to replace it on its shelf, and then glided back into the shadows.

I was still shaking my head in amazement as I made my way to the stairs and up to the second level.

The second level was just as clearly aligned to the Form of Travel as the first level was to Communication. Most of the round room was empty, but one side contained an enormous semicircular table whose top was a map. As I approached it, I could see that it was a map of the very isle on which the Tower stood, surrounded by featureless gray sea. I looked at it for several moments, but didn't see much point in such a large map of such a small place. The detail was amazing, though. I leaned in to look more closely, running my fingers across the finely made image.

As I did so, the map shifted.

I pulled my hand back suddenly, but nothing further happened. I touched the map again, more slowly this time, and slowly dragged my finger across. The point directly under my finger *stayed* under my finger, the rest of the map dragging along with it. *That* was the point of it, then—not to show this small isle, but to presumably show anywhere in the world!

I eventually moved the map far enough to find the shore of the mainland, and was amazed at how far away the Tower actually was. The depiction of the mainland was even more fascinating, with every little village picked out in fine detail.

A flicker out of the corner of my eye made me start, my head once again snapping around. Another shadow-creature, similar in shape and size to the shadow-librarian, stood respectfully at the edge of the map, no longer moving. Maybe it was the same shadow as the one

below—I couldn't tell. Beside it, I saw, was another sturdy book-podium, identical to the one on the level below. I looked around, but saw no books elsewhere in the room.

I looked back to the shadow and said, "Can you show me where my house is? Was?"

It held still for a moment as if thinking, and then placed a single shadowy hand on the map. The image moved so quickly that it almost made my head spin, but it stopped just as quickly. I leaned in, and could see the small village where I'd been Tested. I followed the road out of the village, looking for any sign of the house, but there was nothing. Just as there'd been when I Visited. I took this as final proof that the house was indeed gone forever.

"What about the nearest large town?" I asked.

Again, the shadow-figure touched the map, this time sliding it only a small amount. The nearest town—down the curving road that I'd briefly traveled before growing bored—wasn't all that far away. Peering at the map, I guessed it was maybe a full day's walk. "What is its name?" I asked.

In response, the shadow-being pointed at the town.

"Yes, that one," I confirmed. "What's it called?"

Again, it pointed, slowly and deliberately placing one shadow-finger nearly on the map, but not dragging it to move the image.

Ah. I reached out and touched the town, slowly and deliberately. *Carvendam* popped into my mind. With the name came more information: the town was known for its carved wooden dam, situated just upriver of the town's center. It had a population of around 2,000 humans and a few hundred of witchkind. The specific building I'd touched was a fishmonger's shop, and a clear image of the shopfront was fixed in my mind. It was *amazing*. With this information, I could travel to a place I'd never before seen. "Is there a way to make it bigger?" I asked the shadow.

It pointed to the map with both index fingers, hovering its shadowy fingertips just above the map's surface. It slowly moved the two fingers apart, paused, and then withdrew its hands.

I repeated the motion, actually touching the map with my two index fingers, and then slowly moving my fingertips apart. As I did so,

the town grew larger. Less would fit on the map table now, but what was there was as clear and detailed as if I'd been hovering several hundred feet in the air above it. Repeating the finger-gesture, the town became large enough that I could make out individual people actually walking down its cobbled streets. I reversed the finger-motion, and the town grew smaller again.

My knowledge of the town, including the image of the fishmonger's shop, were already fuzzy and fading in my memory. A short-term effect, I realized, probably meant to ensure one's head didn't fill up with useless facts about faraway places. This would indeed be useful. But I wasn't in the mood to actually Travel right now.

I had one more level to explore: The spiral staircase ended on the third level. I presumed more stairs would appear when I completed future lessons and "unlocked" the upper levels, but for now this is where my explorations would end.

The third of the upper levels was supposedly meant to align to the Form of Mind, but at first glance I did not understand the connection.

The round room, like the two below, was accessed by the staircase that ran directly through its middle, like the hub of a wheel. This room had been divided into two halves. One half was yet another library, with rows and rows of bookshelves. I walked down one row and saw books of law, history, and more. One or two titles seemed to be the same as ones I'd seen in the main library below. I didn't touch any of the books, as I wasn't in the mood for reading right now.

The second half of the room was set up in a very particular fashion, making me believe it had some sort of formal, defined purpose. Against the Tower's curved exterior wall sat a high-backed, severe-looking chair, elevated from there rest of the room on a wide dais that followed the curvature of the wall. Another heavily built book-podium sat on the dais next to the chair, presumably to hold a book for reference purposes. This level's shadow-servant—I'd actively sought it out, this time, rather than waiting for it to surprise me—

stood quietly on the opposite side of the dais. Two narrow tables stood a few feet apart in front of the chair, perhaps ten feet away from it. Behind the two tables, closer to me, were four rows of low benches for seating.

The purpose of the room eluded me. "What is this room for?" I asked, directing my question at the shadow-being. It didn't reply, or even so much as move. I shrugged, and looked around at the rest of the room. I made a mental note to ask Kirmin about this room's purpose, and stepped onto the staircase to head down.

I returned to the upper levels, particularly the map table, often over the next few weeks. But apart from the amazing map table on the second level, there wasn't actually much to do or see, and so much of my time remained occupied by the main library and by my ever-more-vigorous exercising.

I'd found a slim volume on physical health, and it contained recommendations for a number of exercises I could perform in the exercising-room. Some of the movements were difficult at first, but over the days and weeks I became more and more proficient. If nothing else, they gave me something with which to fill my time. Back home, I'd taken breaks from reading by wandering the estate, but here on this isle—with its single, lonely path to the sea—the exercising-room offered more variety.

I'd managed to complete levels two, three, and four of Disemstoke's primers, leaving only the level-five volume. My skills in ordinary witchkind magic had grown considerably, advancing from the simple, single-rune magics of a child to more complex, multi-rune constructs. I'd mastered the rune that would let me travel great distances with a single step, although it wasn't terribly useful on the isle. I'd taken a single step toward the shoreline, a single step back, and decided that rune would need to wait until I could leave. Assuming I even needed it; my Visitation magic was far more flexible and speedy.

I'd learned runes for warming food, preserving food, and even Mother's rune for summoning food. That one had been a bit more

mundane than I'd expected: apparently, unless you were planning to steal something, you needed to have coin in hand when you cast the rune. Basically, the magic just swapped the food for the coin. Whatever magic kept the Tower's pantry full was far more convenient, to my thinking. I knew runes that could summon clothing from a closet —which briefly made me wonder where the driežai obtained my clean clothes every morning, and where the used clothing went—and a rune to clean clothing (which I immediately applied to my coat, as it had become more than a little dusty). There were runes for dispersing rodents and other pests, runes for casting light, and runes for speaking to a loved one across great distances. There was even a rune grandly named *nematomas,* or "invisible" in the True language. I'd eagerly memorized it before I read the accompanying text, and was disappointed to learn that it couldn't truly make something invisible. It simply changed your appearance to blend in with your surroundings, and had to be continually re-cast if you were moving around. I suppose, for a book of runes that was bring read by children, it was wise not to teach them to be invisible.

To my great delight, the fourth of Disemstoke's volumes included a rune construct for grooming, promising to finally tame my hair—which I'd taken to tying back in a tail not unlike Kirmin's, only with less gray—and smoothed away the increasingly rough stubble on my chin and cheeks. I cast the construct while looking into a summoned looking-glass in my washroom, and was pleased to see something of my old countenance return. *Something,* but not all. My cheeks had narrowed since I'd left the house, the skin of my face growing firmer and more taut. The gray eyes that looked back at me from the looking-glass were mine, and yet somehow they were not. I was growing up, and surely my time at the Tower was affecting me as well.

I ran a hand through my now-shorter hair, marveling at how light it felt compared to the unwieldy mop it had been. The grooming rune had even cleaned the shorn hair, saving me from having to use a cleaning charm I'd had ready for that purpose. As I lowered my hand, it caught my eye. I raised my other hand next to it. They too had grown—stronger, certainly, as I continued to gradually turn the dials on the weight-balls upstairs—but somewhat rougher as well. I looked

back in the mirror. It was still *Daniel* who returned my gaze, but it wasn't the Daniel I remembered.

My days progressed in a familiar pattern that I'd settled into some time ago (although in the moment, I honestly couldn't have said how long, as the Tower offered no reliable ways to track the passing of time). I awoke in the morning and broke my fast. I spent an hour practicing my Whisper and Visitation, although I'd grown so proficient at both that neither presented an especial challenge. Visitation was certainly more interesting now, as I had the map-room in the upper levels to find new places to observe. Regardless, wandering around new towns and villages soon lost its appeal, and I mainly kept it up out of a sense of duty to Kirmin.

I made a special point of not following young couples around anymore.

I'd stopped myself, on several occasions, from using my Visitation to look in on Mr. Nash. I wanted to know what he knew about my family, about my Mother. About me. I didn't understand *how* he'd known about me—had Mother somehow managed to tell him, before she was taken? Did Great-Great-Grandmother communicate with him? Had Mother said something to the Proctors in Witchhold, before she'd died? His sudden appearance at my house, and his willingness to simply abandon me on a strange island in the middle of the sea all seemed to point to him *knowing* something, and I wanted to know what it was. Were there more mysteries of my family he could shed light on? How long had his firm known my family? My mind spun with questions. Each time I dwelled on him for too long, I began to picture him in my mind, but always stopped short of calling up the Traveling rune. What good could come of it? And what if he returned—the one person in the world, I suspected, who knew where I was—and told Kirmin? Would she be upset?

One afternoon, I decided I didn't care. I pictured Mr. Nash in my mind, cast the Visitation rune, and let the magic take me. *Unseen,* I ordered as it took me away.

I appeared in what I assumed was his office, standing behind him. He was hunched over a broad wooden desk. I stood between him and a wide window that was covered by heavy blue curtains. He started slightly when I arrived, and I held very still for a moment, worried that he'd sensed me. His posture relaxed almost immediately, and I drifted carefully to one side until I could see what he was working on.

Unintelligible legal paperwork, something to do with parties of a second part doing some kind of drayage work for a party of a first part. His desk was filled almost to overflowing with piles of paperwork, some rolled into tight scrolls and bound by twine, others laying in disorderly stacks, some even spilling over one side onto the floor.

I drifted to the front of the desk. *Let me be seen,* I commanded.

Nash noticed me instantly, pushing himself upright in his chair so quickly that it almost tipped over backwards. His eyes flew open, and I could see at once that he recognized me. His jaw fell open.

"Daniel," he said after taking a moment to collect himself. "What... I should say, *how* are you... that is–"

"It's part of the magic," I said, surprised to find my voice hard and flat.

"What... what, ah, what can I do for you?"

An unexpected rage filled me. "You abandoned me. You came with a letter from my mother, and you abandoned me. Alone, on that island. I'm still there, do you understand? I'm trapped there!"

"Ah." He seemed to deflate at that, his shoulders drooping. "There's no choice, you have to understand. You were Chosen."

"You didn't have to take me."

"No, but... Daniel, if I hadn't, others would have. The Proctors would have come next, assuming they could find you. They'd have been able to, even that house wouldn't have stopped them. The Inquisition, if the Proctors have failed. The other adherents, even." He shook his head sadly. "It's one of the highest, most immutable laws of witchkind, Daniel. When an adherent is Chosen, *especially* one of the Sixth, they're to be delivered immediately."

"Why didn't the woman who Tested me do it, then?"

"Those women have enough to worry about. They mark you, and from there you're known." He nodded toward my chest, and one of

my hands went up almost of its own accord, brushing the medallion that I seldom even thought about anymore. "I'm sorry you're alone," he finished quietly.

"I think you're the only person I know who's alive," I whispered. My rage was abating, and his words were filtering through my brain. "What do you mean about the house stopping them?"

"That house," he growled. "Took me hours to get in. Your family always had... odd magic. The women, at least. I knew your grandmother. Did you know she could talk to animals? Commune with them, almost. She could draw magic from them, too. Kept a whole flock of sky-gulls around her at all times, said they were especially potent. The women's magic... I don't know. Either leaked into the house over the years, or maybe they did something to it. I wouldn't put it past your great-great-grandmother, that woman was a legend in her time. But the house... it had *opinions* about people. When the Proctors finally went for your mother it took them a week just to find the place, and two of them nearly drained themselves forcing their way in."

I hadn't known that. "It's gone, you know."

"The house? It's not gone, it's just hiding."

I perked up at that. "Hiding?"

"You'll never find it. Only the women in your family could order it about. And there are no more of them."

I thought about that for a moment and then switched gears. "How long did you know my mother?"

"Since she was born, the little angel. I handled the paperwork for her marriage to your father." He frowned. "Nasty business that, but it was your family's way. As soon as she and your father moved into the house, they cut him off from his family and your mother off from her hobby. Your grandmother lived in the place for another five or six years, until you'd been born. Then she passed, quite before her time, really."

I wasn't interested in my grandmother. "What was my mother's hobby?"

"She loved humans," he said with a sigh. "Pretended to be one of them, much to your grandmother's embarrassment. Always careful

never to do magic around them of course, but she always seemed to be more comfortable around them, more energetic. The longer she was away from them, in that house, the more lethargic she seemed to become. I stopped meeting her there, in fact. We'd meet every month or so in the village for lunch."

My mind was spinning a bit. That all felt *terribly* important, but I couldn't piece together *why*.

Nash and I spoke for several minutes longer before I thanked him for his time and left. My initial, irrational rage was completely abated by then, my overpowering sense of loneliness dimmed by this new knowledge of my mother.

The next afternoon, I was curled up in one of the library's most comfortable chairs, reading a history of the laws of witchkind. Witchhold featured prominently in the book's accounts of witchkind's greatest criminals, and an entire chapter of the book covered the history of the prison. It provided far more detail—and likely accuracy—than the stories I'd read when I was younger.

That's when it occurred to me, springing into my brain so fully formed that I almost couldn't imagine why I hadn't thought of it sooner. I laid the book on a nearby podium and immediately used the Visitation magic to take me back to the imposing prison. As it resisted letting me in, I concentrated fiercely, pushing aside the veils and curtains that sought to push me out, forcing them to admit me.

I managed to appear within the lobby itself this time. Emma was at her desk. The other desk was empty again, and I had a moment of intense relief—I'd acted so quickly that I hadn't even considered what would happen if her coworker had been present. Once again, the candle on the corner of her desk flared to life.

She looked up sharply "Daniel." Her tone was wary, and I saw her eyes dart to her right as if ensuring her coworker was gone.

"Hello, Emma. I wanted to ask you one more question, please, and then I'll go."

She stared evenly into my eyes and said nothing.

"Did the file on my mother say *nothing* more than what you told me?" As I spoke, I cast *išsiaiškinti,* holding the rune steady in my mind, feeding magic into it.

"No," she said. "I told you—"

"You're lying," I interrupted gently as ice water trickled down my spine.

She froze, her mouth open. But she recovered quickly. "I'm not, Daniel. The—"

More ice water. "Please tell me the truth, Emma."

She looked at me quietly for a long moment. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not what you think I am, Emma. Please, tell me what happened to my mother."

She threw another glance to the empty desk to her left, then her gaze snapped back to mine and her expression softened.

"There was something odd in the file."

"Odd how?"

"The death certificate. It was signed by Warden Domonte himself."

"That's odd?"

She nodded. "Normally, the Head of Healing would have signed it."

"So what does that mean?"

Another furtive glance to her left. "I asked some of the guards. Most of them have been here for decades."

"And?"

"One of them, Gerald, said she hadn't even been taken to the Healing Hall."

"Hadn't—what do you mean?"

"He says they carried her away."

"Carried her... you mean, her body?"

"No, Daniel," Emma said, shaking her head vigorously. "He said she wasn't dead."

The warm feeling of the magic was still trickling down my back. She was telling the truth. Or at least, accurately relaying what the guard had told her.

"He said she looked... tired. Drained. But he says he saw her arms move of her own volition." She swallowed heavily. "I think the certificate may have been faked," Emma whispered.

I nodded, dumbstruck. I believe I may have mumbled a thanks before I let the Visitation end, snapping me back to the Tower. I sat for a moment, Emma's words replaying in my mind. One word in particular kept rolling around and around: *drained.*

I ran for the stairs.

"My journal," I shouted as I ran up the stairs and into the first upper level. The shadow-librarian, as if understanding my urgency, whisked itself up to the shelf where my communications journal sat, trapped the thin volume, and darted down to me.

I quickly flipped through the first pages, finding the passage I needed:

I don't understand why we can't just corral them. It'd be faster.

I've told you, Shura, that's bound to attract far too much attention. And the idea isn't to kill them, just to drain off a little and let them go.

Still seems like a waste of time, Loran. And there are witchkind in the village, we're putting all of them at risk as well.

We're not. The runes won't target witchkind, only humans.

We already know that's not true.

That wasn't one of ours, Shura. He was a rogue. He renounced us.

This. This had something to do with Mother. I just knew it. These people, this Shura and Loran, had done something to drain humans of... of *something*. And there was a concern about it harming witchkind—harm that they'd apparently already seen before. Harm caused by someone who'd renounced them.

My father had renounced his clan. He'd been forced to, in order to marry Mother.

He'd spent almost all his time in his basement workshop, tinkering with machines.

Numbly, I handed the journal back to the shadow-librarian, who returned it to its place. Almost without thinking, I slowly descended the stairs to the dining table. It was far too early for the evening meal, but I just sat there for hours, thinking. Eventually, the shadowy driežai flickered in, laying out my dinner. I stared at it for several minutes,

simply watching the food cool, before I finally picked up a fork and began eating.

"Why so glum?"

My head snapped up. Kirmin was sitting cross-legged on the table, smiling. In her hands, she held a small, frosted cake.

"Happy birthday!"

CHAPTER 12

Fourth Lesson

"Sleep well?" Kirmin asked.

"I slept okay," I lied. I was half-surprised to find her still in the Tower, perched on the table in front of my breakfast. We'd engaged in small talk over my birthday dinner, forcing me to ruthlessly shove my recent discoveries aside in my mind, and she'd vanished when I retired to my bedroom. I'd laid awake most of the night though, trying to understand what I thought I'd pieced together, and struggling to think of something I could *do* about it. Eventually, fatigue had won, and I'd slept like the dead until the lights in the room brightened enough to wake me.

The fact that Kirmin was still here meant that this would be a lesson day.

"You seem distracted," she noted.

"You've been gone for a while, maybe this is how I always am, now."

"Ah." She paused for a moment, watching me eat. "Solitude getting to you?"

"Would it matter if it was?"

"I suppose not. But... you know, you *can* talk to me."

"I'd rather just get on with it."

"Okay," she said with a small frown. I realized at that moment

how much I missed her when she was gone. The Tower *was* a lonely place, and I was starting to understand that being the adherent of the Sixth Axis was a very, *very* lonely occupation. I suspected Kirmin's long absences were meant to prepare me for that solitude, although I deeply resented it. "You sure there's nothing you want to talk about?"

"I'd love to know why there aren't any clocks or calendars here." I kept my tone light, but I wasn't really joking.

"Mmm. Do you know what the average lifespan is for one of witchkind?"

"A century and a half, maybe more," I replied promptly. I'd read as much.

"What about an adherent?"

I was stumped. I'd never even known about adherents until I came here.

"Adherents can live a long time, Daniel. Especially adherents of the Sixth. Some of our predecessors stuck around for *centuries."*

"How could they tell, without any calendars?"

"Hah! Wisecracks before you've even finished breakfast. You're growing bolder. My point is that living that long can be trying. After a bit, you kind of *want* the days and weeks, and even months and years, to blend together a bit. It makes it all more tolerable. You kind of settle into whatever routine sustains you, until some major event happens to add some variety."

I thought about that for a few mouthfuls of food. "So that's why it feels like I've only been here a few months? Instead of a whole year?"

"Correct. But you're making good use of the time, yes?"

"I've finished most of the magic primers in the library."

"And you've been taking care of yourself physically, from the looks of it."

"Did you use the exercise room?"

"Me? A bit at first. Turns out this incredible body requires no maintenance," she joked. Then her expression grew more serious. "So aside from there not being a strong reason to keep track of the hours and days here, was there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

I knew what she meant. She hadn't been gone so long that I'd forgotten her brief conversation with Mr. Nash. "Not really."

"Not even your side project?"

I froze, a forkful of food halfway to my open mouth. "What do you mean?"

"You're welcome to use the magic for whatever you wish, you know. You don't have to tell me. But, if I can, I'm happy to help."

I slipped the food off the fork, chewed slowly, and swallowed before answering. "No thank you."

She nodded, her eyes a little sad. "This is about your Mr. Nash?"

That actually seemed like a safer direction for this conversation to go. "I thought about Visiting him."

"And did you?"

I shook my head, unable to voice the lie. She'd said she couldn't use the Form of Mind to tell if I was bring truthful, but I didn't trust my own voice not to crack and give me away.

"Why not?"

I shrugged.

"There probably isn't any point. At least, not until you can visit him in person and have a proper conversation. Difficult conversations are... well, no less easy, and certainly more difficult, when done by Visitation. When you practiced the Form of Mind that way, you had the Tower supporting you, but you'd have found it difficult to cast all that by yourself, still."

I didn't mention that I'd already done exactly that at Witchhold, and hadn't found it at all difficult. "Will I get stronger? I've been practicing a lot."

"That's good to hear. And yes, of course. You'll get stronger. But... it's different for us, as most things are. The other four Axes strengthen their adherents through practice, but the Sixth Axis isn't about the *doing,* remember. It's about the *Ending."*

"What does that mean?"

She hesitated. "You understand that I'm not truly an adherent anymore, right?"

"You're past your Ending." I'd put that together weeks—months?—ago.

"Yes," she said, drawing the word out and looking away for a moment. "Yes, I am, but that's not what I mean. My time as adherent

was done many, many years ago. There's no adherent now. Not until you're fully trained."

"So where is it you go when you're not here?" I'd assumed she was off doing... whatever it was she did.

"Nowhere. Much like I suspect your great-great-grandmother, and perhaps even your father. I'm not exactly dead, Daniel, but I'm certainly not alive. I'm here... well, for *you.* To pass on what I know and see you take up the mantle."

My mind struggled to piece it all together. "So if practicing doesn't make me stronger, what will? And why are you gone for so *long?"* I asked, coming back to the one point I thought I could comprehend.

"First, practicing makes you quicker. It lets you direct your power more readily. It's good to practice. But there are certain... barriers. Many imposed by the Tower itself, as part of its purpose to keep us here as much as possible. Daniel, the adherents of the Sixth Form weren't *meant* to leave the Tower. This was our base, our home, but also our prison. Once in the Tower, no living adherent of the Sixth Axis can leave. You've seen the third level?"

"Yes. I couldn't figure out what it's for, though."

"That's our court. Even as they sought to imprison us here, the rest of witchkind recognized our value. When we are called to adjudicate, we can summon the parties, their witnesses, everyone, right to that room. We hear their case, we Judge them, and then we send them home again. As for why I'm gone so long... I don't exactly experience the passing of time as you do. I... I'm here when I *need* to be here. I'm here when you're ready for me to be here. I can linger, but frankly I'm a poor companion."

She paused to let that all sink in. *I'm always deliberate with my words,* she'd said on more than one occasion. I felt my eyes widen as I finally made a connection. "You told me 'no living adherent of the Sixth Axis can leave.' Does that mean..." I let my sentence trail off. She'd implied something similar our first couple of days together. I was only now putting it together, realizing it was more than just... mysterious words.

"Ah, you've finally got it. What nobody realized when they

created this place," she said quietly, "is that the Sixth Axis is all about *Endings.* That's how we circumvent the prison. That's how you take up the mantle, and come into your full power. You *End."*

My breath caught in my throat. "But..."

"Not *die."* She held up a hand to forestall me. "*End.* It's different. You know that there can be life... well, beyond life. Your great-great-grandmother. Me. We're different, but we've that in common, in a way. When you're no longer bound by Endings, you will direct them." She paused. "Tell me about your father, Daniel."

I swallowed heavily. "He never seemed to love Mother." It hurt to say it out loud, and so I kept my voice soft. "Or me. Not that I ever knew. He was obsessed by his machines. The entire basement was full of them. He'd magic them to life, but I don't know what they did. He hated being interrupted, even for meals. He..." I stopped.

"He hit you. And her."

"One time—I was ten—he hit her too hard. She was bleeding, but she was still trying to pretend everything was fine. She..." I swallowed again. "I was angry. I *hated* him for it. I went downstairs and... I don't remember it." I closed my eyes. "I never saw his body. But they came, the Proctors. They took her away. She died at Witchhold. They never... I don't know why they left me." I swallowed again, holding back the tears I could feel at the back of my eyes.

"You've been around the edges of Endings your whole life, Daniel," she said, sadness tinging her voice. "I suspect your own guilt kept your father's spirit in the house, past his proper Ending. You may have even had something to do with those Proctors leaving you, although I doubt you could have realized it at the time. The Sixth Axis was coiling around you, just out of your reach, but you managed to touch a small portion of it. You and Endings are connected, and that probably attracted it."

"I... I did all that?"

"Yes. Probably. It's hard to tell, from here and now."

"But I wasn't even trained."

"I know. But that's why children with medallions are taken to an adherent as quickly as possible. It's the Axis's power we use, not our

own. If the Axis is willing, you can direct it without any training. It's just that the results can be a little... unpredictable. Dangerous."

"And you say Father's spirit... that was me?"

"It could have been. Again, it's hard to say for certain. But witchkind are incredibly hard to End properly, Daniel. It's a reason we're tolerated, we of the Sixth Axis. The Council, and even the smaller councils, have the authority to execute others of witchkind. For high crimes, like murder. But it's hard to do it properly, without raising an angry, vengeful spirit. We can guarantee a proper Ending, not only to a life, but to all the angst around it. And we can hold an Ending in abeyance, at need. Such as, perhaps, your father's spirit, or even your great-great-grandmother's." She paused to let that sink in. "You done?"

I looked down at my breakfast plate, surprised to find it empty. Then I looked up at her, something loosening in my chest but not completely vanishing. Mother was already gone. There was no rush to do more right now. Right here, right now, I had work to do.

"I'm done. What's today's lesson?"

We returned to the workroom, where Kirmin drew another rune in the dusty tabletop.



"*Gaubtas.* The Shroud. The Sixth Axis's basic Form of Defense. There's a stronger Form, and that will be in your next lesson, but this is a good one to start with. It basically shields your body, perhaps one other person held close to you as well. No more."

"The other Axes have something similar?" I asked.

"They do, and it's smart of you to ask. First Axis can throw up a shield of water, provided there's sufficient water nearby. Second Axis, a wall of fire. Third, a wall of dirt and rock. Fourth, a wall of solidified air. They're all similar and all are considered basic, at least for adherents. Ordinary witchkind have smaller runes that can deflect or divert, but they're not as strong as a Form of Defense. What's important is that you'll actually be able to borrow their techniques, with some practice, because they're so simple and elemental."

"Can they borrow ours?" I asked.

"Yes and no. In theory, yes. But none ever would. Our Form of Defense isn't a shield like what they can create. It isn't tangible, I mean. It creates a..." she paused to think. "I guess I think of it as an area of Ending. An attack that strikes simply *Ends,* unless it can overwhelm your will to hold that End in place. The other adherents, like the rest of witchkind, fear Endings. They'd never try to use one, even in their own defense, and even if they could. I honestly don't know if they *could*. I'm not sure any have every tried."

"More Endings," I mused.

"That is what we *are* Daniel. I've said before that Endings are more than just death. As an adherent, you'll be able to End an issue simply by stating that it is Ended, and exercising the Axis's power to enforce your statement. Two people having an argument simply *won't* argue any more. Any dispute, any contradiction, you can End them."

I thought for a moment. "Then, why," I asked slowly, "would we need a Form of Defense? If someone attacked, couldn't I just... End the attack?"

She smiled. "You're getting good at this. And yes, you could. But simply Ending an argument doesn't remove the underlying causes for it. Arguments, conflict, disagreements—those are healthy parts of life, when they don't get out of control. They let us examine situations, and *resolve* them. Sometimes, you may simply need to *dissuade* someone, rather than *Ending* them, and the Form of Defense can serve the purpose. Let the conflict play out to a natural conclusion, and keep yourself safe while that happens.

"In the past, the Sixth Axis has declined to offer Judgement on

issues that *needed* to be resolved. Simply Ending them would not have served even the people who were demanding Judgement. And, in the past, the Sixth Axis has been attacked because it sought to End something, or because it refused to End something that someone else wanted Ended. And so we defend ourselves."

"So, just..."

"Wait," she said, chuckling and holding up a hand. "Let's go outside for this. It can get a little... messy."

Kirmin hadn't been joking. She'd instructed me to invoke the Shroud, and then tossed black spikes of shadow-power at me. As she did so, her fingers quickly elongated into sharp black spikes, and I remembered the lesson I'd experienced outside Great-Great-Grandmother's attic when she'd first handed me the Book. For that matter, the Shroud itself reminded me of that same lesson, where the dragon's fire had diverted around my body.

I said as much to Kirmin, and she grew interested. "A waking dream, then?"

"I guess."

"And a dragon. A big one?"

"Huge."

"Interesting. Dragons aren't real, you know."

"I hadn't really thought about it. Does it mean something?"

She chewed her lower lip for a moment before answering. "I don't know much about the Book, you know. It may have been testing you. Or preparing you. Or it might not even have been the book at all. The Axis itself could have been trying to show you something."

"Did it ever do that with you?"

"No. And to my knowledge—which I used to believe was extensive and infallible, although now I am developing doubts—it's never done that with any of us."

"So why me?"

"Why indeed. Let's resume."

I winced the first several times she flung the black spikes at me,

instinct not quite trusting this invisible "Ending" in front of me. But each time, the spikes flew toward me, and then flickered and died a few scant inches from my body. Once I'd grown more confident, she'd had me drop the Shroud, and then invoke it quickly each time she attacked.

That took some practice, and at first I hadn't been quick enough. The little shadow-spikes bounced off my coat, though, shattering against the nearby stone spires. "I'm not making them to hurt you, but they have to hurt *something*, so this is more safely done out here," Kirmin said. The spikes did leave thin, sooty streaks on my coat, which I quickly banished using the cleaning rune I'd learned from my magic primers. Kirmin chuckled the first time I did that, and said, "Well, at least you haven't been idle with your time here." Eventually, I could snap my Shroud into existence fast enough to satisfy her. "That'll do," she approved after I'd flicked it into existence ten times in a row without fail. "Keep practicing that one in particular," she added. She paused for a moment, and spoke as quiet as I'd ever heard her. "I know it's lonely, Daniel. I came here at the same age as you. I *know.* But... someone has to be in this place, when someone's needed. I was sorry it was me, in the beginning. I'm sorry it's you, now."

"In the beginning?"

"What?"

"You said you were sorry in the beginning."

"Yeah. I guess in the end I was sorry, too. Some of the middle wasn't so bad." She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, something I'd never seen her do. Then she shook her head slightly and vanished.

I awoke the next morning fully intending to sink back into my waiting-for-Kirmin routine: practicing, spying on people in whatever town caught my eye, and occasionally trying to convince the Axis to let me hear Shura and Loran again. I'd mix in some library time, some exercise, and between all of it manage to hang on until my next lesson. Most importantly, I wanted to do *something* to learn more about my mother.

Could she still be alive, even now? Was it possible?

I hadn't even sat down to breakfast when an incredibly loud knocking sound rang through the Tower. I started, and just stood for a moment and listened. *Boom, boom, boom!* It sounded like someone was... pounding on wood?

The front door!

I dashed to the door and hauled it open. Before me was an older woman of witchkind. She had near-black skin that contrasted sharply with the pure-white hair that flowed down past her shoulders, and was wearing a flowing, diaphanous garment of light blue and silver. It hung gently from her slim shoulders, spilling down and puddling around her feet. Her eyes were bright silver, and her face was worn and kind.

"Hello," she said with a smile. "I'm Debesi, senior adherent of Sky. I thought it was time I introduced myself."

I nodded, awestruck and entirely uncertain what to say.

"May I come in?" she asked, her smile widening.

"Oh! Yes. Sorry. Please come in." I led her out of the foyer and into the public workroom. "Please, have a seat." My knowledge of social manners came entirely from the books I'd read, but she reacted as if I'd said the right thing. She slid out a chair, settled herself, and leaned her elbows onto the workroom table.

I sat opposite her, and we held each others' eyes for a few silent moments before she smiled again and asked, "May I know your name?"

"Oh!" I said again. How stupid. "I'm Daniel."

"Well-met, Daniel. How long have you been here?"

"I, ah... I'm not actually sure. A year at least. It was my birthday... yesterday?" I had no idea how long Kirmin had been here before leaving me again.

"I'm unfamiliar with how the Sixth's apprentices are trained, but I presume you've been working through the Forms?"

"Yes. I'm through four of them."

"Ah, a bit over halfway then."

"Yes." I then stared silently at her, waiting for her to speak. She

stared right back, that same soft smile on her face, until I finally asked, "What can I do for you?"

"So formal!" she chuckled. "As I said, I mainly just wanted to meet you. We all felt it when you were Chosen of course, and it was indeed about a year ago, I believe. Our own apprentices move through the Forms in a year and start working alongside another adherent, but I suppose... well. The Sixth does things its own way. And with much more gravity, so I suppose it's no surprise you're still working through it all." She paused for a moment before continuing. "It's much too early to ask what kind of adherent you're planning to be, but have you given any thought to it?"

My mouth worked for a few moments as my brain tried to come up with something. Finally, I shook my head and simply said, "No. Not really. I mean... I know I'll be able to do a lot of good. I'm not planning to be a hermit."

"I should hope not. You've been handed a rather... desolate home."

"It's not so bad."

She laughed. "I didn't mean to imply otherwise. It just... well, it must be lonely."

I felt my spirit sink, all my feelings of isolation crashing back into my consciousness. "A little. I grew up alone, though. I guess I'm used to it."

She frowned. "Alone? How so?"

"My parents died when I was younger. They were my only family." No sense bringing up Great-Great-Grandmother.

"You mean to say you... you were completely alone? A child?" Her expression was aghast.

"We had brownies," I offered.

"You had... Axis protect me. You had brownies." She shook her head, incredulous. "And now you're here. Well. I have to say, I wish I could visit more often. I mean, I suppose I could. There's no law against it, no rule. It's just... not done. A courtesy call, certainly, but the tradition has been to... well. Putting it bluntly, I suppose the tradition has been to stay away from the Sixth as much as possible."

"Why?"

"More often than not, the Sixth only involves itself when *involvement* is needed. Meaning there's a problem to be solved. Again more often than not, by Ending something. Or someone. It's just... obviously necessary, but not something one... *courts.* But... Well. If you're ever in the mood for company, I'd be happy to visit with you here."

In my mind, Debesi took on a whole new appearance. She was suddenly a grandmotherly type, someone who'd... in the stories, grandmothers were always making treats, fussing over their grandchildren, making sure they were being raised properly by their parents. I couldn't see regal-looking Debesi *fussing,* so perhaps she was less a grandmotherly type and more... a friend?

"I'd appreciate it," I said.

She stood, offering a firmer smile. "I shall report back that I've met the new adherent-to-be, and that he's a polite, well-mannered young man who's all alone in his lonely, distant Tower. I'm sure my fellow adherents of Sky will be much relieved. In their minds, you know, they're all afraid you're going to be some world-Ending tyrant."

I'd risen from my chair as she spoke, and asked, "Has that ever happened?"

"Not once in all the centuries since the Axes were Forged, no." She laughed again, and it seems that humor was something that came easily to her. "But people will try to imagine the worst, won't they? It's been lovely meeting you, Daniel. I hope to see you again soon."

She led the way to the entrance, opened the door, and stepped through. "Be well," she said over her shoulder, giving me another friendly smile. Then, with a gust of wind, she was gone.

I realized in that moment that I hadn't actually learned how to summon her as she'd suggested.

CHAPTER 13

Quarry

The moment Debesi was gone, I rushed up to the second level, and stood over the map table. "Show me my mother," I ordered.

The map... *jittered.* It slewed sideways, half the continent zipping off to one side. Then it jittered again, as if something was shaking it. Then sideways again, in the opposite direction. Then it zoomed out, showing almost the entire world, before zooming back in just as fast, focusing on a single tree. Then back out, then–

"Stop!"

It stopped.

I very much felt as if something was preventing it from working properly.

I'd promised myself to leave the new upper level unexplored for a while, saving the experience for when I grew truly bored. But now I felt that I needed every resource the Tower could provide, and so I rushed up to the third level, and then up the new flight of stairs that continued to the fourth.

The fourth level was completely empty. *Completely.* I peered into every shadow and didn't even see a shadow-being. The only item in the room was one of the heavy book-podiums, which was pointless because this level didn't even have–.

I stopped.

I was an idiot.

Kirmin had told me not to do this without her say-so, but I was past caring about petty rules.

I reached into my coat pocket and withdrew the Book. As I did, it returned to its original size, and I laid it gently on the podium. I *knew* this would work, but I held myself ready to catch it, in case it slid off as the journal on the first level had done.

It didn't slide off.

Instead, it opened itself, perfectly filling the slight depression in the podium's wooden top. Its pages ruffled as if in a strong wind, coming to rest a bit over halfway through. I looked at the page it had opened to. Everything was written in a neat, bold hand, the ink on the page dark and crisp. The runes and sigils looked to have been quickly copied out by someone who enjoyed a long familiarity with them, the pen-strokes quick and sure. They were not the perfect, almost artistic runes from the Disemstoke books, which had obviously been mass-produced in some fashion. Instead, these runes were... personable. They had character. I could sense the pressure of the pen in the varying widths of the strokes, almost feel the surety with which they'd been inscribed. They felt somewhat more precise than Kirmin's dust-runes, but they were no more formal or stuffy than her fingertip drawings.

On the page the Book had flipped to, I found a rune called *vaiz-das,* the View. It was no more complex than many of the ones Kirmin had showed me to this point, consisting of just a few nested strokes. I studied them for several minutes, and then invoked them in my mind.



The walls came to life.

Where before there had been cold, empty stone, there was now... *everything*. It was as if the walls had simply vanished, leaving a panoramic view of the isle and the sea surrounding it. This high, I could see over and past most of the jagged spires that thrust toward the Tower. I was enchanted, and spent several minutes walking around the room. There was little enough to see, but this was the most breathtaking magic I'd seen yet.

I heard a rustling, and returned to the Book on its podium. It had turned a page, and revealed a section called *pasiskolinti skydai,* the Borrowed Shields. It seemed that my Shroud would become more powerful here, and as Kirmin had suggested, I would be able to invoke more powerful forms of the other Axes' Forms of Defense. Kirmin hadn't mentioned a couple of minor details, which the Book made clear:

On your own, the adherent may invoke the Forms of our brother Axes.

Doing so at length will attract those Axes,

Who will often dispatch their adherents to investigate.

Should your use of their borrowed power be just,

They will join you in your Defense.

So there was something of a cost for using other Axes' power injudiciously, but it could also be a way to summon them to my defense if needed. Interesting. I wondered if etiquette would permit me to summon Debesi for a social visit, but decided not to risk it just now. I flipped through the next few pages, and saw the runes needed to invoke the other Forms of Defense. Little point in practicing it now, I supposed. I was *very* eager to summon a huge wall of seawater, just to

see what it looked like, but was mindful about using the other Axes' power without need.

I will admit that I did give into temptation later that evening, briefly summoning the beginnings of a sea-wall, but I let it crash back into the sea before it was fully formed, terrified of attracting the attention of an unknown adherent of Sea.

But for right then, I removed the Book from the podium. I did not, however, place it back in my coat pocket.

I had two other levels to re-investigate. Surely *one* of them could provide a clue as to Mother's fate.

I descended to the third level, walked to the dais, and placed the Book on the podium. It immediately opened itself and flipped to a page detailing *nuosprendžiu teismas,* the Court of Judgement. Another complex, multi-rune construct, this was the one Kirmin had mentioned. It would let me summon a court of litigants, witnesses, and anyone else I wanted, to conduct a Judgement here in the Tower. Once summoned, all the participants would basically be trapped in this room until I released them. The Tower would suppress most magics except my own. *That* explained the mini-library here, and the duplicate books I'd seen: they might be needed as reference material, and could be accessed conveniently without leaving this level. The Book even noted that the driežai would be able to come and go, to ensure meals and refreshments could be brought as needed.

I couldn't see myself using this court. It seemed so... serious. Formal. Kirmin's stories implied that she'd usually gone to *them,* rather than bringing them *here.* Still... it was useful to know what could be done.

I picked the Book up and walked down to the second level. I placed the Book on its podium, and let it open itself. It flipped to the Visitation rune, which I already knew. The following pages contained other simpler, minor runes: *surasti,* for locating things and people; *fizinis buvimas,* the in-person version of the Visitation rune that I'd

presumably be able to invoke once I could leave the isle. Nothing as mind-shattering as the two levels above, but useful nonetheless.

I moved to the first level, and let the Book open itself. The Whisper was its first rune, followed by the one Kirmin had mentioned, which would let me listen in on other people. It was called *šnabždesys perklausė,* the Whisper Overheard, and it would only work here in the Tower.



This was exactly the magic that the Axis had used on its own, enabling me to overhear Shura and Loran all those months ago! I invoked it, once again holding my memories of their voice in my mind, but like all the other times I'd tried, nothing happened. Even with the rune blazing in my mind's eye, the Axis refused to make the connection. I sighed, and released the magic. Even now that I knew the rune, Shura and Loran remained stubbornly out of my reach.

Still. I couldn't resist trying again, just to see if I could command the magic as the Book described.

I sat in one of the room's comfortable-looking chairs, recalled the woman from the Testing office in my mind, and invoked the rune. Immediately, the room felt... expanded, somehow. Bigger. Not physically, but when I closed my eyes, it *sounded* like I was someplace else.

:I'm afraid not, dear,: the woman's prim voice said. It seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once, fully surrounding me. :Very few Test high enough to bypass First Cohort at Disemstoke's, though, so don't be disappointed.: She paused. :No, ma'am, we don't perform the Test twice. That will be all. Have–: another pause. :No, that will be quite enough. Good day to you all.:

I realized that because I'd only invoked the rune on her, I could

only hear her; anyone she was talking to wasn't audible. I suppose I could have Visited her directly, but she'd seen me before and I didn't want to risk that. Still, it was an amazing piece of magic. I released it, and the room's ambient sound returned to normal.

I closed my eyes, and once again held the rune for the Whisper Overhead in my mind. Beneath it I held the image of my mother, pale-skinned and lovely. I concentrated fiercely, pouring everything I had into the rune.

Suddenly, it felt as if the entire world had upended itself onto my head, and I passed out.

"You'll *have* to tell me what you did." I'd opened my eyes to find Kirmin crouched on the floor, leaning over me. "It's far too soon for me to be back, but I don't know that any adherent in this Tower has managed to pummel themselves with their own magic." She grinned. "What did you do?"

An almost overpowering sense of anxiety overwhelmed me, urging me not to answer. Instead, I asked, "Aren't you basically attached to the Axis? Can't you just tell what I did?"

"Doesn't work like that," she said cheerfully. "I only know what you can tell me. So what'd you do?"

More anxiety. But what possible harm could come of it? It's not like she could tell anyone. She was even more trapped here than I was, wasn't she?

"It's my mother," I said, my voice cracking slightly.

Her eyes grew wide, and she rocked back on her heels. "I'm guessing you don't mean you were just overcome with missing her," she said carefully.

"I think she's alive. I mean, she might be."

"You told me your mother died in Witchhold."

"I went there."

Her eyes grew even wider. "I... wow. I didn't think that would be possible for you. You used the Visitation?" I nodded. "That shouldn't have worked."

"It tried not to."

"I see. And?"

I sighed. "I actually went twice. The second time, I used *iššiaiškinti* on the clerk. Mother's death certificate wasn't signed by their healer, it was signed by the warden. And she said a guard told her that someone carried Mother out. Alive."

"That's a lot."

"I know."

"It's a lot of hearsay, actually," she pointed out. "I can't believe you *voluntarily* went to Witchhold." Her expression... was it *respectful?*

"I'm trying to find out more. The map room... it couldn't find her when I asked. It kind of went crazy, sliding all over the place."

"That table has limitations I can't even begin to explain," Kirmin said, irritation creeping into her voice. "There are probably a hundred ways to hide someone from it. It acts weird if you ask it to focus on someone who's here-but-not, like your great-great-grandmother was. It goes totally bonkers if you send it after something or someone that sets the Axis off somehow."

"Like what?"

"There was a story of a woman who'd never harmed a single living creature. I asked the table to find her, because I wanted to ask her if it was true. It went crazy. Best I can tell, our Axis can't wrap its head around someone who has zero participation in any kind of Ending. I mean, I assume the woman ate plants, but that wouldn't get the Axis' attention. I'm sure she existed, because when you ask the table for someone who doesn't, it just sits there and does nothing."

"So my mother is alive."

"Maybe. Or not-alive, which isn't the same thing as dead. But she's probably not dead, not if the table was doing that."

"So how can I find out more?"

She sighed, and stood. "You can't. Not with what you know now. You're going to have to keep plugging away at this until you... well, until you know more. Until you're ready."

"So let's do the next lesson. Right now."

She shook her head. "Sorry, Daniel," she said quietly, and vanished.

I returned to the main library, frustrated and angry. All I could do now was attempt to continue without her. I decided to try and learn more about the Tower itself, and how it fit in with the rest of witchkind. To think that the Tower could be *attacked,* or that the Sixth Axis adherent—me!—could become embroiled in witchkind politics... it had my mind gently spinning. My role was far more than just the "death and destruction" I'd first thought it, and I needed to understand more. Perhaps, I thought, I could learn more about my abilities, without waiting on Kirmin to reveal them.

I found a history book that contained a long, involved accounting that ended with a session in the court room. I carried the book to the first level, and asked the shadow-librarian to bring me any journals from that time period. It did so, and I settled down to read. The phrasing in the history book was old, almost archaic, and I wound up returning to the main library to look up unfamiliar terms. It made for a long afternoon, but I was able to piece together what I felt was a pretty accurate story, corroborated by the Whispers of the adherent at the time.

It seems that two clans of witchkind were in a dispute over a marriage. A young woman of the Velas clan had fallen in love with a young man of the Troista clan, and they had asked their families' permission to be married. The Velas clan had agreed; from what I could tell, they had something of a reputation for being pretty open, and supported the idea of dual clan membership. The Troista clan was the opposite: highly insular, very exclusive, and very much opposed to the marriage. The Velas clan leaders were insulted by the Troista's rejection, and offered to let the young couple marry and become Velas members. The Troista clan was infuriated, flatly refusing to let their member marry outside the clan, and insulted by the idea of him leaving to join another clan.

Other clans rallied to support one or the other. From what I could piece together, the older and more high-born clans supported the Troista clan's claims, while younger and less wealthy clans supported Velas. Fighting ensued, and some of that fighting spilled over into the

human world. The great Council of witchkind grew alarmed at that, and ordered the clans to stop. Both insisted that they could never stop until the situation was fully resolved: they insisted that witchkind law clearly state whether or not cross-clan marriages would be allowed.

The Council—which seemed to be comprised of representatives from many different clans—had its own internal debates, but could never resolve the question. Rather than allow the situation to continue and potentially result in more fighting, the Council summoned the Sixth Axis to render Judgement and End the dispute.

The adherent of the time, one Ismin Norman, considered the request, and refused.

The Council was infuriated. I will admit that I am reading a lot between the lines here, but the author of the history book gave the distinct impression—without explicitly saying so—that the Council of the time was known to be heavy-handed, impressed with themselves, and demanding. But the Axes do not answer to the Council, and Ismin was within his rights to refuse. The Council didn't see it that way though, and again demanded his Judgement. Again, he refused. They summoned him to appear before them and explain himself; he declined.

And so they attacked the Tower.

Ordinary witchkind have ample means to attack and to defend themselves, but they pale in comparison to the great powers that formed the Axes. The Council sent a fleet of four ships to bombard the Tower with mundane cannons (I had to look up what *those* were), and they launched magical attacks as well. Ismin held the Tower, Reinforcing it (the wording in the text made it clear that was magic of some kind) and shrugged off the attacks. This continued for several hours, apparently, before Ismin finally Ended the attack, crippling the ships and sending them limping for the mainland.

The next day, Ismin invoked the *nuosprendžiu teismas,* summoning the heads of the Velas and Troista clans, the Council members themselves, and the two young lovers to the Tower's court room. According to the history book's author, Ismin listened to both sides for hours, even going so far as to use his shadow-bailiff (which I presumed was what the court room's shadow-being was called) to

force the two sides to politely let each other present their arguments and counter-arguments. After almost a full day of debate, Ismin called a stop. "The Judgement of the Sixth Axis," he told them, "will always bring an End to the issue at hand. But you find yourselves in a case where there is no Judgement I can offer. Neither of you are objectively right. You both hold your opinions strongly, but neither is more worthy that the other. Your differences run deeper than this relationship, or even this marriage. The only way to resolve this is for one of you to change significantly, or both of you to change a little. But something Ended cannot change; there is no change beyond an End. This is why I refused Judgement in the first place, and it is why I refuse Judgement now. If you would stop the disagreement, if you would stop the fighting, then you must find a change that can do so." And with that, he ended his magic, returning them all to where he'd snatched them from.

In the end, the law of witchkind was changed. Any two of witchkind could be married, without their families' blessings if they so chose. But, the clan could decide whether to accept that marriage. If the clan did not, then neither of the couple could be members of that clan. If neither clan accepted them, then they would form their own clan, and be recognized by the Council. It wasn't a perfect solution: I felt sorry for the young couples who must have had to make such difficult and momentous decisions. But it kept the peace, and let the clans retain their power.

An idea sparked in my mind.

I handed the Whisper journals back to the shadow-librarian, bundled the remaining books up in my arms, and dashed down the stairs to the main library. I laid the books in a haphazard pile on a handy table—the driežai seemed to handle re-shelving in this room, and always cleaned up after I left. I walked directly to the section of the library containing record books, and looked at the tall, packed shelves. My spark of an idea began to gutter, then. Where to even start? "I need my mother and father's wedding announcement," I muttered. "I wonder where—" I started, but a flicker of shadow made me stop. The shadow seemed to scurry up the shelves, pulling out a book about halfway up. I pulled it down, opened it, and discovered it

was a social registry of some kind. Estimating the date my parents would have been married, I flipped ahead.

There it was:

Messrs. Aboydne and Scratch,
the former of clan Karal and the latter of no affiliation,
are proud to announce the union of their children,
Beatrice and Neville.
Ceremony at the Village Hall at Noon.
Reception to follow by invitation only.

Aboydne was my father's original surname, then. And Karal his clan, both of which he'd abandoned to wed my mother—a decision he'd apparently come to regret in the decade afterwards.

I finally had a *name.*

I ran up the stairs to the second level. The shadow-servant was standing patiently next to the map table. "Show me Shura of clan Karal," I said.

The image on the map table slewed and steadied, then zoomed in. It focused on a little hamlet named Hook. It was located on the western half of the continent, next to a turn in the major river on that side of the world. The map had zoomed in enough that I could make out the individual buildings of the village, and it had centered on what looked to be an old, dilapidated stable on the outskirts.

Without hesitating, I cast the Visitation magic, adding the mental twist that would let me be unseen.

I appeared outside the building, in a small patch of bushes. My head was pounding, and I felt like I'd been gutted by one of the black spikes that Kirmin hadn't yet taught me to cast. I immediately fell to my knees and started shaking, absolutely certain that if I'd appeared in person I'd have been vomiting. I fell forward onto my elbows, ignoring the sharp branches that were pressing into my sides, heaving and gasping uncontrollably.

I'd meant to appear *inside* the building.

Darting around the inside of my skull was a frustrated, angry

sensation. It was a hot, stabbing feeling of anxiety and hate. I remained still on all fours for several long, almost excruciating minutes, willing my heart to slow and for the pain to subside. Eventually the shaking stopped, and I was able to push myself upright. The burning anger in my mind was still there, but it had cooled to a sullen ember, tinging my vision a deep red-black. I regained some control over my ethereal form, floating myself back to my feet.

The building was indeed an old stable, but it was less dilapidated than the map table had suggested. Someone had recently made some rough repairs, affixing new lumber over old in an attempt to patch holes and make the structure more sound. As the sound of my own heart began to quiet, I could hear soft, low moans coming from inside.

Ever so slowly, I floated myself closer to the building, aiming for a door that looked entirely new. Even the frame had been rebuilt. I intended to float through that door and see what was inside.

But I pulled up short maybe fifteen paces. Try as I might, I couldn't force myself to float further. I lowered myself the inch or two off the ground, but found that I couldn't so much as shuffle my feet forward, let alone take a step. It was as if I'd run into an invisible wall that—

No. No, it wasn't like a wall. As I analyzed what I was feeling, it was clear that there was no force blocking my way. Instead, there was something wrapped around me—wrapped *inside* of me—pulling me back. That something felt... *personal,* in a way. I half-recognized it.

I eased back a couple of feet, and the restriction eased immediately. I stepped forward, and it pulled me back again.

I realized that *my own magic* was holding me back.

"Shura!"

A man's voice, raised in anger, seized my attention. I quickly floated back into the bushes where I'd appeared. Just as I moved into cover, an old man rounded the corner of the building. "Shura!" he shouted again, making for the door I myself had intended to use. He was perhaps two paces away when he stopped cold—much as I'd done, although it seemed from his body language like he'd stopped himself, rather than found himself restrained by his own magic. He

shook himself, took two steps forward, and pounded on the door. "Shura!" he shouted again, and then immediately backpedaled several steps, wrapping his arms around himself as if the air had suddenly turned bitter cold.

The door swung open and a woman stepped out.

The same woman I'd seen at the funeral service at Mother's mausoleum.

"Loran," she said easily. "Been a while."

"I don't know how you can stand it in there Shura, with all that iron," Loran snapped.

"It's not so bad if you can keep your magic within you." Her expression was a kind of superior satisfaction, clearly pleased that she could accomplish something the older man couldn't. "What brings you here after all this time?"

I blinked. In that moment, I realized why I'd never been able to use the Whisper to eavesdrop on them after that first time. I'd always focused on the *two* of them, since otherwise the magic would only let me hear *one* of them. And yet they'd simply never been together.

"We agreed not to do it this way," Loran said, his voice still roiling with anger.

"We didn't *agree* to anything, Elder," Shura snapped back. Her eyes were blazing, and she took another step out of the door, swinging it closed behind her. "You *demanded."*

"We've a dozen machines in operation already," Loran said. "They're working fine. There's no harm to witchkind. There's no need for... for *this,"* he spat, waving one hand at the stable. "What's your plan for when they're dead?"

"I'll burn them. They're only humans."

"And you don't think their absence will be noted?"

"Not for some time. They're not from Hook. They were a trading caravan, and I left ample evidence that they were attacked by road bandits. Once they're missed, there's an easy, familiar explanation for why they're missing."

Loran shook his head, frustrated. "And so you've built an iron cage to keep them in."

Shura took another step forward, holding eye contact with Loran.

I longed to see the older man's face, but his back was still to me. "That's right. And I can drain them far faster, and far more completely, without risking any of witchkind in the area. The magic is contained. I'm producing more than your dozen other villages will produce in a season. Loran," she continued, her tone becoming friendlier, "we can have what we need in a handful of years, not decades! And none of our people will need to be at risk!"

"No," Loran said stubbornly, finally turning away from her.

It was the old man from the funeral.

"No," he repeated. "This isn't the way. I want to complete the plan..." His voice trailed off, and I realized he was looking directly at me. "Again?" he said, almost to himself, as his eyebrows beetled together. He raised one arm then, his palm outstretched and held flat in my direction.

I didn't wait to see what was next. I cancelled the Visitation magic and snapped back to the Tower.

CHAPTER 14

Fifth Lesson

Kirmin was standing over me as I returned to my body.

"You okay?" Her voice was once again full of concern, and I realized that I was covered in slick, cold sweat. Clearly, whatever had affected my spirit-form had also had an effect on my physical one.

"Yeah," I said as casually as possible, my voice scratchy and strained.

She frowned. "Learn anything about your mother?"

I thought quickly before answering. "Sort of," I admitted. "But no, not really."

"Care to talk about it?"

I was roiling with emotion—and I suddenly realized that it wasn't all mine. The fear, certainly—I owned that. But I was also feeling... excitement. Anticipation. Anger. Distrust.

"Daniel?"

No. A clear, unequivocal sense spoke inside me. I didn't care to speak about this. "Not yet. You're back soon," I said, trying to change the subject.

Her frown deepened, but she didn't press it. "Your fifth lesson is closely related to the fourth. I figure we might as well get it over with. You'll probably want some lunch."

I followed her down to the dining area, where lunch had already been laid out. She gestured for me to sit and eat, "I thought it best to get this underway before you got too out of practice with your Shroud." I frowned, and wondered—not for the first time—if she watched me when she was "gone." I had practiced the Shroud only once since she'd left, although it was frankly difficult to practice defending yourself with nothing to defend against. "How've you been?"

"Good," I said, swallowing a forkful of food. I realized I was famished. "I did have a couple of questions for you, though."

"Oh?" Her eyes lit up with curiosity.

"Were you... before you came here, I mean. Were you... lonely?"

"Ah. Hmm." Her eyes unfocused for a moment as she thought. "Yes, I suppose you could say I was. I came from an unusually large family. Six children, and we lived in a very small village, and we were related to half the other witchkind there. We all lived in a giant warren of rooms tucked into the rafters of a human inn. I hated the noise, the crowding, all the bustling. So from the time I was big enough to get away, I did. The village wasn't far from the Great Northern Wood, and so I spent as much of my days as possible on the edge of the Wood. I liked the quiet, the solitude."

"So it wasn't a big change when you came here."

"As an apprentice? No. Not much of a change at all, I guess. Fewer trees," she said with a grin, "but still quiet. And with this whole place to myself, just as you have."

I nodded, chewing while I thought.

"You said you had two questions?"

"Oh. Yeah." I swallowed, and put my fork down. I was famished, but lacked the appetite to finish the meal. "The Book. I used it in the upper levels. I was just wondering—you've never really mentioned it. There are spells in it that you haven't told me about. I realize I can't learn everything at once, but when–" I stopped, as she held up a hand.

"I will admit," she said with a sigh, "that I've never personally read the Book."

My fork dropped to the table and my jaw dropped nears as far. "How is that possible?" I asked.

"It was lost by a previous adherent. My own predecessor had never seen it, although he told me about it. It's probably been lost for, I don't know." She waved a hand vaguely in the air. "Almost two hundred years? More? Obviously we lost track of it. Frankly, I should remember everything in it anyway, but..." she paused for a moment, and then said, "I suppose memories have Endings, too. But," she continued more cheerfully, "I'm glad it's back."

I wondered why she felt she should remember everything in it, and asked as much.

"We'll get to that in due course," she said easily.

"Did... did you want to see it?" I asked, reaching for my coat pocket. I'd been careful to shrink the book back into my pocket whenever I wasn't actively reading it.

"No," she said shaking her head firmly. "I made it through my time as adherent without it. Although... well. Maybe not," she said, getting a faraway look in her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Hmm."

My stomach grumbled a bit, so I pushed another forkful of lunch into my mouth and waited for her to continue.

"It's like this. Your family is... well, was, I suppose, a little remarkable. And yet not remarkable. Almost *deliberately* not remarkable in some ways. They all but hid themselves, practiced some frankly borderline traditions, and finally created you. And then you show up here, with your name, and with the Book. It's all... it's all a bit *purposeful,* if you see what I mean."

I shook my head. I very definitely did not.

"Your family's True name, it means 'judge' in the True language. And your family is one of the only ones in witchkind that is fully matrilineal."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Your Great-Great Grandmother, Pranasa, married, but her husband took *her* name. They had one daughter, Patience, who married. Her husband took the family name too. They had one daughter, your grandmother, named Constance. Again, married, but the man took *her* name. They had one daughter, your mother, who

married—and once again her husband took *her* name. And having only one child in a generation isn't unusual, but when it's in *every* generation... it's worth noting. And their magic was always a little... *odd.* The women, that is. And then for the first time, their only child was a boy. You. Daniel the Judge. And apparently your family has had the grimoire of the Sixth Axis all this time, even though as far as I can tell none of you have ever been adherents or even especially remarkable. Did you know your mother never even finished schooling? I know she married young, and she probably didn't know more than a handful of runes."

I hadn't known that, but it wouldn't have surprised me. Even before her... illness, Mother had always been disinterested in magic. But something Kirmin had said triggered a memory. "Before Mr. Nash brought me here," I said slowly, "I saw her—Great-Great Grandmother—one last time. She said something." Kirmin looked curiously at me, and motioned me to continue. I held up a finger as I tried to remember exactly what the old woman had told me. Fortunately, as I'd come to realize as I worked through the primers on magic, I had an *excellent* memory.

Sky and Earth, Flame and Sea
Cast adrift, their center lost
Until a Sixth might come to be
To join them all, or pay the cost

Kirmin's eyes had grown wide. "That's not possible," she said when I'd finished. "Although obviously it is. You're *certain* you didn't read that in one of the books here?"

"I swear it."

"That's a *very* old prophecy. From the time of—it must have been the second or third adherent, after... after Galas," she said. "It's one of the great mysteries of the Axis."

"What's it mean?"

She chuckled. "Witchkind has little use for prophesies, because they're vague and open to so much interpretation. The general consensus here in the Tower is that an adherent will one day End the separation of the Axes, reuniting them, as part of some great crisis that threatens to destroy us all."

I stared at her. She grinned. "It wouldn't be a prophesy if it wasn't overly dramatic."

"Cast adrift? Pay the cost?" I asked.

She laughed. "Don't take it personally. People who write prophecies like to be dramatic, like I said. And they like words that rhyme. Don't make too much of it."

We stared at each other for a few long moments before she said, "Well, you're not adherent yet, and you won't be if I can't get you trained up. Let's go for your next lesson and let this resolve itself another time."

I still wondered if I should say anything about Loran and Shura, but again something told me to keep it to myself.

We stopped in the workroom long enough for her to show me the runes we'd be using, and then moved outside.

My new spell was *smaigas,* the Spike, the little black thorns that Kirmin had thrown at me during our last lesson.



"I honestly think they're meant to call to mind the spikes around the Tower," she said, waving one hand around her. "Kind of as an ironic twist. I can imagine Galas being bound here the first time, and then deciding he'd make the symbols of his intended imprisonment into his own power."

There are three basic variants of the Spike: I was to start with the

Little Spike, the *mažas smaigalys*, which could be deflected by any sufficiently heavy material. Cast against anything especially sturdy—a rock, Kirmin said, or even a stout table—and they'd simply shatter. Fragile as they were, they were all but useless as weapons, but I learned to produce them quickly and—much more importantly—cast them with a great amount of accuracy. Practicing with the Little Spikes made the next part easier.

That was the *skraidantis smaigalys,* the Flying Spike—the primary form of the attack.



"These will do some damage," Kirmin said. "Your Shroud will stop them. The Form of Defense for any of the other Axes will stop them. Some of witchkind's more powerful rune constructs, which not everyone can wield, will stop them for a *while.* They're good for a couple of hundred feet, once you get proficient at them. Honestly," she said, giving me a lopsided grin, "I've never been a great shot past a couple of dozen feet. We'll see how you do, prophesy-boy." Her grin grew wider. "Look up."

I did, and was surprised to see two shadowy figures descending at me from the air. Neither was as fully formed as the shadow-beings on the upper levels of the Tower: these were wispier, more like flying cloaks than people. "Get them!" Kirmin commanded, startling me into action. Spike after spike flew from my fingertips, and I was proud to see that I *did* have a greater range than she'd said she did. Each spike tore through a shadow, although sometimes it took a couple to shred one to the point that it faded. She kept them coming, creating new ones each time one vanished. After a bit, two more joined the fray,

and then two more, until I was holding off a half-dozen of the creatures, coming from every direction.

"What are these things?" I yelled, breathing heavily. There was no real physical effort here, certainly nothing as difficult as running, but the constant movement had my heart pounding.

"*Atspindžiai,*" she responded, her own breathing a bit heightened as she worked to keep up with me. "They're... shadows, of course. Reflections, I guess is a better translation. They're things that once were, but no longer are. They're not good for much more than target-practice, but we can call them back from the End long enough to serve that purpose. The Axis remembers them from their Ending, and can reflect them for a short while. They don't feel anything, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm more worried about what happens if I miss one," I said.

"Then don't miss," she said, giving me an impish smile. "You can look up the rune for calling them in your Book if you want, although I'm not certain how fun it would be to summon them *and* dispatch them all at once."

I focused harder as she added two more to the mix. We continued for quite some time before she called a halt. "That's enough,"she said at last. "I think you get the idea."

"I think so," I agreed. "You mentioned three variations?"

"*Didesnis smaigalys,*" she said. "Greater spike."



She held two hands together, and raised them to the sky. A huge black spike formed around her arms and hands, covering them both as it rapidly grew to around four feet long. It took a couple of seconds, but then it

launched into the sky and flew out of sight. "Big deal," she said, lowering her arms. "It'll disintegrate once you separate your arms. Takes longer to form, but it can take out a ship, or punch through a building. You have to hold your arms together the entire time, though," she added. "Once you let them go, it'll vanish, even if it hasn't hit anything. Hungry now?"

"Famished." Although I kind of wanted to try the rune myself.

"Then let's go back inside. I'm sure you have some more questions I can try to answer."

Lunch had been replaced with a tray of sliced fruits and cheeses, and this time I dug in with gusto. "How is it that I'm not exhausted after all that?" Hungry, sure, but even my breathing had quieted by the time we'd reached the kitchen.

"The Axis is doing all the work. We're just directing it. Oh, don't get me wrong—you can get into some situations where you're directing it to do complex things for hours on end, and *that* becomes draining, let me assure you. But it's doing all the actual work."

I decided to try and fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge of witchkind. "So," I said between mouthfuls, "what can you tell me about the clans? I know Father had to renounce his, but I don't think I have a clan. Where do they fit in society?"

"Ah, you've been reading," she said approvingly. "And no, as far as I can tell your family kept themselves apart from the clans. I've obviously been out of it a bit, but they'd started to lose some of their importance even when I was out and about in the world. Originally, all of witchkind belonged to one clan or another. Basically not much more than extended families. Each had their own traditions, their own values, and most were entirely contained in whatever town or village they'd come from. You've read about some of the conflicts, I presume?"

"One with Ismin Norman."

"Yeah, I read about that one. Big to-do over a couple of kids who just wanted to get married. Stupid. But the Council of that time, they were big-time stupid. Confronting the adherent of an Axis like that?

They're lucky it was the Sixth—we tend to not hold a grudge. Mess with Second and they'll burn whole villages to the ground just to make a point."

I shuddered just thinking about it. "So how does the Council get chosen?"

"They're meant to represent the different clans, really. Last I checked, the Council has a dozen of witchkind, so obviously not every clan gets a seat. But there've always been family alliances, and geographic proximity, and things like that. Any clan can nominate someone to a seat, but in reality they tend to band up to give their nominee a better chance. Each clan then gets a vote, and the dozen with the most votes sit on the Council for a decade."

"And they can summon us."

"*Summon*, technically. It's a specific magic. *Iškviesti pabaigą* is the rune. 'Summon the End' is a close translation. Any council can use it. Actually, any of witchkind *can,* although I don't know if it's ever done by individuals anymore. Whether we choose to respond or not is up to us. Summoning is a complex ritual and when it happens, you'll know it, and you'll have a good sense of why. The Axis... hmm. The Axis is attracted to certain things. Beginnings, to a degree, because they represent an eventual end. But it's especially attracted to endings. *Endings,"* she corrected herself, and I could hear the capital "E" in her voice. "So if someone casts a Summoning, the Axis starts sniffing around. You'll feel it." She paused for a moment. "And you know, you can kind of... kind of *direct* it as well."

"What do you mean?"

She looked away for a moment, and then turned back to me. "It's curious. I think it somehow feeds on Endings. Or is maybe just satisfied by them. But if you point it in a direction, it'll usually sniff out things that are nearing an End, or seeming to. And you'll be able to pick up details about it. Try it in the map room sometime, if you want."

"I will." I polished off the last of my lunch. "Are you leaving now?"

She grinned. "Not quite. The fifth lesson is a two-for-one. Let's head upstairs."

I followed Kirmin up the five flights to the fourth level. "Do you need me to put the Book down?" I asked, reaching into my pocket.

She thought about it for a moment. "I'll admit that I'm curious about whether it would make a difference. I don't have any memory of it doing so, but still. Personal experience beats a memory any day, right?" I was absolutely confused—if the Book had been missing for so long, how could she have any memories about it? "But no," she continued. "Let's do it the way I always have." She made a gesture, and the stone walls once again showed a panoramic view of the Tower's surroundings. "There's a variation on the Shroud. It's *sustiprinta gaubta,* the Fortified Shroud, or Reinforced Shroud, depending on how you translate the term. You can only cast it here, as far as I'm aware, but it fortifies the entire Tower. The entire isle, actually. It's how Ismin held off those ships for so long."

"Do I... just do it?"

"You do. It's actually the same rune, just behaving differently when you're here. It'll surround the entire Tower, although you can strengthen specific areas just by focusing on them. Go on."

I looked "outside" and saw dozens of shadows floating through the sky, arrowing in on the Tower.

I cast the Shroud in my mind, and *felt* the Tower lock itself down. I felt... sturdier, somehow. Stronger. Rooted in place. The shadows struck the invisible barrier and simply vanished.

"As far as I know, nothing can penetrate that. You need to *be* here to hold it, and you'll get tired if you do it long enough, but when you're here with that magic active, nothing can touch you."

I dropped the magic as the last shadow disappeared from the sky. "As far as you know? You've never used it?"

"Not personally, no. Not in... not in a battle. I've practiced it. I once had a... a colleague. An adherent of the Third Axis. I had him toss a huge boulder at the Tower one time. He agreed because he was curious."

"And?"

"It hit the barrier and instantly turned to dust. Its time as a boulder was Ended."

"Anything else?"

"You know there's not," she chuckled.

"When will I see you again?"

With a twinkle in her eye, she vanished.

It was growing late in the day, and I needed to do something to relax. But at just that moment, I also didn't want to be alone. Whatever Shura and Loran were doing was still roiling through my mind. I could still feel the burning pain from whatever had kept me out of that stable —it being lined with iron, as Loran had implied, was the likely cause. But regardless, I wanted... I wanted to see people, right now.

So I returned to the second of the Tower's upper levels, and walked to the map table. The shadow-being detached itself from the walls and drifted over to stand ready by the table. "Show me... show me someplace I've never visited. Someplace with people." It placed its hand on the map, which obediently swerved and twisted until an unfamiliar village was centered. I touched the map with two fingers, drawing them apart to enlarge the village until I could just make out individual people walking on the streets.

And then I cast the Whisper Overheard and just *listened.* I looked at the tiny people on the map, going about their little lives, and wondered what they were doing. Shopping? Going home from work? The map table gave no indication of time of day; I could be looking at a part of the world that was just at sunset, or just at sunrise, and I wouldn't know the difference. Were these people just waking, or were they heading home to an evening meal?

"Show me my family," I ordered. I'd tried this before, and just like every other time, the map didn't move.

"Show me someone who knew my parents."

The map slid until I was looking at Mr. Nash's office.

"Someone else."

Nothing.

I frowned in frustration. My mother may have left Witchhold alive, but I couldn't track her down. Kirmin had already confirmed that the table's behavior suggested Mother wasn't actually dead. But I could do *nothing*. I could find *nobody* who knew my family.

A cold breeze seemed to waft gently through me just then, cooling my frustration. I looked at the map table, and it zoomed out, showing a map of the entire continent. At this scale, I could barely make out the tiny speck that was my island, all alone in the Southeastern Sea.

"Show me people again. Someplace new."

The map slowly zoomed in on a village near the middle of the continent, closer and closer until I could again see little people scurrying about their day. I stared for several minutes, becoming absorbed in the scene playing out before me. *Here,* something whispered in my mind, and my eyes were drawn to a small cottage on the edge of the village. I touched the map, invoking the Visitation rune. I was in a room with two humans, a man and a woman.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I understand what you mean. I'm just... I'm frustrated."

"I know," the woman said. "I just don't know what to do about it."

They regarded each other for a long moment, and then embraced. "We'll figure it out," the man said.

I dropped the magic and returned to the workroom, sensing the Axis' disappointment that I hadn't lingered a bit longer. But that hadn't been an Ending... it had felt like the Beginning of one.

I wanted something more immediate.

"Show me someplace else," I ordered. "Something... Ending. Show me something... *now."* As far as I knew, the shadow-being was part of my Axis, so why not talk to it that way?

The image on the map table spun and slid, and focused on a new scene.

Over and over again that evening, I visited Endings large and small, traveling unseen each time.

One unhappy human couple finalized their divorce before a magistrate, both of them seeming relieved when the proceedings finished. Both were angry with each other, pained by the good times

they'd enjoyed, by the love that had once filled them before it turned sour and foul. I felt a hundred little Endings all at once: their marriage, their attachment to each other, their sharing of possessions. Yet as both of them left the magistrate's office, I could sense something else: a dimly perceived sense of the future. Both would go on to love others, to form new attachments. Their many little Endings begat tiny Beginnings.

A family of witchkind interred their grandfather, full of mourning but also talking about all the fond memories they had from from their lives with him. The old man's life had Ended some days prior, but now his family's attachment to him, their expectation that he'd be there each morning... that Ended now. Through the Axis, I could feel their pain, their grief, the cracks in their hearts. But at the same time, I could feel the *relief* that the other Endings brought: they'd loved him, and he'd died, and with the ceremony the process was concluded. They would leave here and go about their lives. Hints of Beginnings traipsed through the air: a new great-great-grandchild was humming in her mother's womb, a new business venture might get underway tomorrow, a tiny dust-mite would find a new home and start a tiny family amongst the old man's bones.

A small child finished her first year of school, skipping happily home and whistling at her accomplishment. This was a happy Ending: she'd been anticipating this day for weeks now, and now that it was upon her she was brimming with joy. The air was thick with Beginnings: the things she'd do until school started again, the dinner she planned to help her father make that evening, the book she'd begin reading under her bedcovers that night.

A politician completed his term, satisfied with what he'd done, but frustrated he hadn't accomplished more. A staid Ending, one long expected, filled with joys, regrets, and a grim determination to somehow do more. Beginnings teased at the edges of the man's consciousness: he could seek reelection, he could strike out to try and effect change on his own, he could go home to his wife and try to make the second child they'd been talking about for four years.

Each of them was a unique End. I could feel the Axis's interest in them as each Ending neared and culminated, and then its disinterest

as the End passed. It lingered briefly at small Beginnings, as Kirmin had suggested: the birth of a child, the commencement of a family's dinner. But its interest was fleeting, and it turned quickly away with a sense of, "see you later."

As these scenes played out before me, I felt something *twist* inside of me. A change of some kind. My own loneliness, my own solitude, my frustrated attempts to learn more about Mother, whatever Shura and Loran were up to... it all just merged into a single, unnameable emotion. That connected to the scenes I'd just witnessed, the Axis' fascination with Endings and the tidal waves of emotions that accompanied every End.

I felt cold inside.

No, not *cold.* That carries a negative connotation, doesn't it? This was... a relaxing feeling. Not pleasure, to be sure, but a much-needed *lack* of feeling.

I felt *cool* inside.

It was as if my own emotions had been warming me, and their fires had suddenly guttered and died. I'd seen myself in relation to the rest of the world, and I felt small. But with the Axis curling around me, I also felt *endless. This* is what being an adherent meant: witnessing these Endings, bringing many of them into being, accompanied by a dark, primal power that existed solely to facilitate Endings and... to *appreciate* them, in a way perhaps no-one and nothing else could.

I needed to rest.

I was woken abruptly the next morning, the thudding of the front door—which I was convinced was magically enhanced—booming through the Tower. Sighing, I pulled on fresh clothes and made my way to the door.

"Mesla, senior adherent of Earth," my newest visitor proclaimed. She was a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, brown-haired woman dressed in simple brown homespun clothing. She wore a serious expression, offering none of the small smiles that Debesi had graced me with.

"Daniel, adherent apprentice of... the Sixth Axis," I replied, stepping aside and inviting her in with a wave. I couldn't bring myself to say "of Endings," even if that was the proper form of address.

"I won't stay," she said quickly, taking a step back. I raised one eyebrow and stepped back into the doorway. The soul-numbing cold I'd felt inside last evening had softened to a gentle coolness, and I somehow felt years older and unconcerned about whatever fear she was expressing.

"Then how may I help you?" I asked. The sound of my voice surprised me: it seemed deeper somehow, and more resonant. It was flat, but not emotionless—the voice of someone in full control, although I certainly didn't feel fully in control of *anything*.

"I've come to pay my respects to the new adherent-to-be," she said quickly. "And to ask a question."

"Please."

"Will you be about in the world? Or will you hold here, at the Tower? Will you involve yourself in witchkind, or stay apart?"

"You mean, what kind of adherent will I be?"

She nodded.

"Debesi asked the same question."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I didn't know, but that I didn't think I could stay holed up here until my own Ending."

"Ah."

"Since then, I think my mind has clarified on the matter." Where were these words coming from? I felt like I was lecturing this dun-colored woman. But I felt confident and collected.

"Oh. And now?"

"I believe I'll be out in the world. I believe witchkind deserves the services of an adherent as a moderator between them and the Axis itself."

"Ah," she repeated, looking confused.

"I believe I'll be a bit more of an activist than some of my predecessors," I added.

"Ah. Yes. Of course," she said, growing more flustered. "Well then, I suppose that will do. Thank you for your time." My eyes widened as

she began sinking directly into the earthen pathway that led to the Tower's entrance.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Oh. Yes, yes, of course." She stopped sinking, her feet and ankles embedded in the dirt.

"What kind of adherent are you?"

She blinked several times before answering. "The Axis of Earth serves, above all," she said slowly. "I encourage that service. We... we serve all of witchkind," she said. "However they wish us to."

"I see," I said, nodding gravely. "Thank you for your time."

She stared at me for a long moment before inclining her head in a slight bow and sinking fully into the earth.

What a strange woman.

I decided to pay a visit to Shura—but only if Loran wasn't around. His ability to sense me was uncanny, and I had no desire to discover if he could actually harm me. But the map table refused to focus on him, jittering and sliding about in much the same way it had when I'd asked it to show me Mother's whereabouts. It focused rapidly on Shura though, and so I cast the Visitation rune, taking myself a short distance from her so that I could determine if Loran was with her or not.

That wound up being somewhat more difficult that I'd imagined.

Shura was traveling between towns, riding in an enormous wagon pulled by six large horses. I appeared unseen well behind them, and caught only the cloud of dust that the wagon was raising on the dry roadway. Focusing ahead a bit, I empowered the rune again, appearing in the trees off to the side of the road, a good bit ahead of the wagon. As it passed, I saw Shura sitting on the vehicle's front bench, along with another of witchkind that I didn't recognize. Neither paid the slightest attention to me.

I paced them for a few hours, casting myself well ahead of them and then watching as they passed. I attempted to put myself directly inside the wagon, but the Axis' magic shifted and twisted, either

unwilling or unable to accommodate me. Instead, I satisfied myself with studying Shura on each passing of the wagon.

I could see in her face that she was a confident woman. Her jaw was firmly set, her eyes casting ahead in anticipation of wherever they were going. I thought that I saw something of myself in her: the shape of her nose, perhaps, or the way her cheekbones jutted beneath her eyes. Features I imagined my father must have shared and passed on to me. Her skin was as dark as most other people's, my own rare, pale skin having been a gift from my mother.

Shura was not unattractive.

But she was clearly on unattractive business. I was mindful of her conversations with Loran, and firmly believed she was on her way to another small town to drain the humans their of their vitality and life. I frowned to myself, fully aware that I should continue pacing her and her wagon to wherever she was going. If I returned to the Tower, its way of messing with my sense of time would make it all too likely that I'd miss whatever Shura was about to get up to.

I did in fact pace them for a few more hours, until the sun was just a glimmer on the horizon, barely seen through all of the trees that this road twisted its way through. Then she and her companion stopped, pulled into a clearing off the side of the road, and began making camp. They tended to the horses first, as I crept closer and closer to the wagon. I made to poke my insubstantial head through the wagon's wall to see what I could see.

It was like ramming my head into a tree. Pain lanced through my brain, accompanied by a flash of dark light. My magic was cancelled, and I found myself back in the Tower, nursing a splitting headache.

CHAPTER 15

More Time Passes

I nursed my headache for the rest of the day, all night, and well into the next day. The driežai brought me cup after cup of *skausmo malšintojas,* a powerful, bitter-tasting painkiller, until the pain finally subsided. It was the first night in the Tower where I didn't sleep completely soundly, instead tossing and turning and pressing my aching head into my pillow.

When the headache finally passed, and I had for the hundredth time promised myself I would tread extra carefully where Shura and Loran were involved, I decided to take it easy for a few days. No Visitations.

Fortunately, I had a new level of the Tower to explore.

I immediately started up the stairs to the fifth level, which I knew would now be unlocked. Placing the Book on that level's podium, I looked around.

The room was mostly empty, just like the level below. On a hunch, I activated *vaizdas,* the View, and the walls sprang to life, showing the Tower's surroundings. I looked down at the Book, which had flipped to a new page. It explained that my Shroud would be stronger here than on the level below, surrounding the Tower itself, the isle it stood upon, and even the air surrounding it for a hundred feet out to sea. The rune was different on this level: *gaubiantis gaub-*

tas, the Enclosing Shroud, would cut the Tower off from the rest of the world for however long I held the magic.



Scattered around the room were a few model cannons, carved from wood but cunningly painted to resemble black, battered cast iron. Each had a rune-set carved into the top of the barrel. Consulting the Book, I discovered they were called *galingiausia ietis,* the Mightiest Spear.



I rolled one of the wooden cannons to the wall, pointing it out at the sea. I laid my hand on the carved runes, and activated them in my mind.

The cannon rolled backward slightly as a thick, solid black spike flew from the Tower out toward the sea. My aim had been slightly off: I'd attempted to point at one of the few spire-tips that thrust this high up, but my spear flew past it instead.

The Book explained that these spears could completely destroy

anything from a large dragon to a war-ship. I counted a half-dozen cannons in the room, and hoped that whatever I might be asked to defend the Tower against, they would be sufficient.

I practiced for what must have been two or three hours—certainly long enough for the sun to reach its zenith in the sky. Today the sky was unusually clear, one of the rare days when you could actually *see* time passing by watching the sun arc through the sky.

Irritatingly, I never did manage to hit one of the isle's rocky spires. My spikes always slid past them. So smoothly, in fact, that I knew it must be part of the Tower's magic, keeping me from damaging them.

As I stood and read the Book, I suddenly yawned. As I did so, the Book flipped to a new page. This one explained that the fifth level relied on my own personal energy to a small degree, helping to further direct the great energies of the Sixth Axis. I *did* feel somewhat tired, although the Book suggested that practice would help increase my endurance. That explained the seeming duplication of this level and the one below: I might be less powerful on the fourth level, but I could defend for longer. This level might end a battle more quickly, but it would come at a cost of my personal energy as well. Hopefully there wouldn't come a situation where I had to rapidly run up and down the stairs between the two, because that would *certainly* tire me out more quickly. Just thinking about it, I decided to add stair-running to my fitness routine. I also resolved to spend some time here each day, increasing my endurance as much as possible in the event of need.

For now, I needed to eat something.

As I ate, I tried to come up with better, more accurate ways of tracking my time in the Tower. Perhaps in a decade or so when all for this became routine, I'd welcome a fuzzier perception of time, but right now? I was fourteen, for pity's sake.

At least, I thought I was still fourteen.

I'd already tried a number of tactics that had failed. Attempting to carve notches into the wall of my bedroom had proven difficult, with

several minutes' effort resulting in little more than a barely noticeable nick. The next morning, even that had faded, the stone restored by some magic of the Tower. A simpler version of the same idea—markings on a piece of blank paper I'd had the driežai bring—had lasted only a few days until vanishing. Assuming the driežai had "cleaned it up for me," I started over, voicing explicit instructions not to bother the paper. It lasted four days before vanishing. Using ink to mark the skin of my arm worked for a few days, although I had to be careful not to wash that arm each morning. But the ink itself began to fade far more quickly than I'd imagined possible, the first marks disappearing in just days. Refreshing each mark every day didn't change the speed with which the ink faded.

The Tower, it seemed, was pretty committed to turning the passing of time into an abstract concept.

I think, although I'd run out of ways to try and prove it, that Kirmin was gone for longer than ever after my fifth lesson. Another lonely Midwinter Feast came and went, followed not long after by another small birthday cake, this time presented without fanfare by the driežai. That brought me to fifteen—although it occurred to me that, should the driežai ever fail to bring a cake on a given birthday, the day would pass without notice. I could have been any age, at this point.

I eventually returned to my routines: studying in the library, exercising outside and in the exercising-room, and occasionally exploring the world via the second level's map table and my Visitation rune. I'd used the Overheard Whisper a few more times, but eventually gave up on it. Without a purpose to my spying it seemed... uncomfortable. Dishonest, even.

But spying on Shura and Loran didn't seem at all dishonest, and I visited them often and with great care, trying to understand what they were doing.

I had to be exceedingly cautious with Loran, because his ability to sense me was powerful, and because he seemed to be specifically on guard against me. Though the map table could never pinpoint him,

now that I knew his name and face I could visit him directly. I did so twice, and on each occasion his head had snapped unerringly to me, and I'd returned myself to the Tower almost immediately.

So with the Visitation off the table, I tried the Whisper—which was fortunately undetectable. Its biggest problem was that I had to target *everyone* I intended to listen to, meaning most of the time I only got Loran's side of the conversation, punctuated by gaps where other people spoke. Since I didn't know who he was with, I had no way to add them to the my magical eavesdropping. It made for frustrating listening, sprinkled with half-clues about what was going on.

That's good. That makes what, a dozen villages?

I know, but we can't acquire the raw metal any faster. And you know we need to be cautious. There are... those who watch, you know. I believe I've encountered one of them already, on a few occasions.

Of course not, and it's been a while now.

Yes, but it would be all too easy for them to run across us, especially as spread out as we are now. They may focus on them, but they're not stupid. We stay the course: slow and quiet.

That's fine.

No, the second model is more efficient. All but empowering the rune, which is obviously the bottleneck.

Even so, it makes more sense to make more of those. They're less likely to attract attention. You know how much miasma the first one creates. Anyone more sensitive than a brick can sense it.

They're no more difficult, it's just that she–

No, it's just obtaining the materials.

And yes, obviously that. If we could work out a way to empower the rune without her, then of course we would. But it's a small price to pay for the result we're getting.

No, she's quite secure. I'm sure of it.

That kind of exchange, both tantalizingly rich in clues and completely devoid of useful information. Who was secure? And why was she a bottleneck? And what rune was he referring to? It was all maddening.

And yes, *of course* it occurred to me that "she" was Mother. But what could I do about it? Both she and Loran were untraceable by the

map table, and so I couldn't find their locations. I could visit Loran directly, but he sensed me every time. I tried using Visitation to get to Mother as well, but the magic kept dumping me in the mausoleum. Maybe she *was* there, dead after all, and everything else was just... wishful thinking.

I'd taken to directing my attention to Loran almost daily, even though the majority of his time seemed to be spent alone, or in the kind of mundane conversations about finances, what was for dinner, and so on that became incredibly tedious to listen to.

Shura, on the other hand, was far less sensitive to my presence, and so I visited her still. I was still circumspect, as she'd started gathering more of witchkind to her way of doing things, and I could never tell when one of *them* might be as sensitive as Loran.

That's where I finally witnessed the full horror of what she was doing.

I found her in another hastily repaired building on the outskirts of a small village. I'd chosen to appear some distance away, ever cautious of her profligate use of iron. This location had obviously been in use for some time, because the narrow dirt road leading to the old structure had been well-trampled. In fact, as I arrived a cart was just pulling up to the building. As it rolled to a stop, its team of horses champing and nickering nervously, a heavy wood door flew open. There was Shura, carrying what was likely a dead human over one shoulder. She tromped up to the cart, dumped the body into the open back, and headed back in. Another of witchkind—a man, this time—was the next out. He and Shura went in and out a dozen times apiece, dumping more than a score of bodies in the back of the cart.

"Drive it to the ridge, just like last time," she said wearily after the last body was aboard. The man nodded, and climbed up next to the cart's driver. "Stay until they're burned this time. Last time, Gregor was lazy and the pile started attracting scavengers."

"Aye," the man said tiredly, gesturing for the driver to move on.

As the cart rolled past me, I got a good look at the poor bodies inside.

Men and women, all paler than possible, their normally dark skin drained to a pale, sickly gray. Even their hair had turned an almost

unnatural white. They lay in an heap in the back of the cart, arms and legs sticking out of the pile. One of the bodies on top had been dumped on its back, and I could see its eyes, all color drained of the irises, staring miserably into the sky.

I could feel my Axis swirling around the area, sullen and angry. This wasn't the kind of Ending it wanted, and its fury was a cold, black hole in my stomach.

I shuddered, and took myself back to the Tower.

The sight of Shura's efforts put me off further visitations and eavesdropping for several days. Instead, I tried to understand *why* they were doing what they were. But the books in the Tower proved to be of little help. Nothing discussed anything like "draining" or any other word I could think to connect with what I'd seen. After a few days of looking, it all seemed gradually less and less urgent, a feeling I was starting to recognize as the Tower's way of blending the days together to minimize the sense of passing time.

When I wasn't trying to piece together clan Karal's plan, I spent much of my time in the Tower's library, trying to better understand the Axis and the world at large. I'd been so sheltered as a child, and so focused on adventure stories in my reading, that I found myself incredibly ignorant of witchkind's history.

I had come to realize that the library's section of history books were organized into two groups. The first group were general histories of the world, including notable people and events. The second and much larger group were histories of the adherents of the Sixth Axis. These were written from the perspective of someone outside the Tower commenting upon the adherents' actions, and they detailed most of the major public Judgements that the past adherents had made. Many of these narratives included information on those Judgements' outcomes and aftermaths, which I found especially enlightening.

One of the earliest adherents, Plaktukas by name, had become well-known for one particular Judgement, which the author of the

history had named The Veil. It seems that back then, witchkind and humans mingled more freely. They knew of each other, and humans were aware of witchkind's special powers. Most small human villages had at least one or two families of witchkind, and they worked to ease humans' illnesses, helped to ensure the growth of crops, and so on. Back then, apparently, witchkind and humans got along just fine. But that started to end. The historian wasn't clear on the reasons—and I made a note to research the matter more fully—but humans at some point became jealous of witchkind. Or fearful, perhaps. Or maybe something else. Whatever the reason, they began to find reasons to cast witchkind out of their villages. In some regions, witchkind were hunted and killed. In others, they were shunned. In others, witchkind clearly got the message and made themselves scarce.

But even where witchkind withdrew voluntarily, humans remembered them, and would continue to attack them when they could. No small number of humans were caught up in the violence, either because they had associated too closely with witchkind, or because they were simply accused of being witchkind themselves.

The Council placed a Summons on Plaktukas and asked him to pass Judgement on the situation. This particular historian implied that the Council was really asking Plaktukas to punish the humans, but the adherent took the matter seriously. He spent months considering the issue, and eventually called the Council to the Tower's court to hear his decision.

"I cannot simply End all humans," he said, according to the historian, "and I believe you understand that. However, I can End the relationship between humans and witchkind. I can End humans' memories of us. But I cannot prevent humans from rediscovering us, should some of witchkind be indiscreet and reveal themselves. So I will also End our coexistence with humans. We will no longer live alongside them in their villages. We will no longer pass them in their streets. Instead, we will retreat to the corners and shadows that they ignore. Witchkind will move away from the human settlements, and live in obscurity, or we will hide within the bones of their towns and villages, just as obscurely."

And it was so. The outcome was what the historian had termed

the Veil: the ability for witchkind to live in and around human settlements, but never be seen. Our spaces would be within their walls, in their neglected spaces, and just out of their sight. Plaktukas' Judgement changed the very nature of space for witchkind. Our powers would be diminished in the presence of humans, to maintain the illusion that we were simply human ourselves. Humans would keep their stories of witchkind, but that's all they would be: stories. Over time, those stories would become further separated from the truth, helping to protect witchkind from discovery.

Plaktukas' Judgement was not universally popular, but one does not ask the Sixth Axis for a Judgement and then change one's mind once that Judgement is rendered. The Axis Ended the connections between witchkind and humans, apparently for all time, for the Veil persisted to this day.

Plaktukas' story was the first time I truly began to grasp the reach and power of my Axis. He changed part of the nature of the world, all to create an Ending. It was a terrifying power to consider, and I wondered if Kirmin would ever find *me* worth of wielding such a power.

Another history concerned an adherent named Silpnuma, whom the historian referred to as Silpnuma the Weak. Apparently, Silpnuma had gained a reputation for avoiding Judgements whenever possible. She would refuse to answer Summons, and on the rare occasion she accepted them, she would refuse to render Judgement. The Council of the time had become furious. The historian appeared to take the Council's side, but reading through some of the Summons they'd issued, I felt that they were simply trying to use the Axis to further their own political goals. Amongst the litany of refused Summons and declined Judgements, I found only one or two that—based on the limited information in the book—I'd have acknowledged myself.

The historian even included a quote Silpnuma had made at one of the few Summons she'd answered. "You seek not only to harness one of the most ancient and powerful of the primal, wild forces," she'd scolded the Council. "You seek to saddle it and ride it about to prove your mastery. But my Axis is not your mount, to be made to jump and trot and canter at your whim. It is the one wild force that is

inevitable, that comes to us all, in a time of its own choosing." She'd vanished after making that pronouncement.

Almost as a footnote, the historian acknowledged the one Judgement Silpnuma had apparently conceded to make: a mother had managed to cast the Summons, and had begged Silpnuma to pass Judgement over her sick child. The child had suffered for years it seemed, and the mother wanted to know if her daughter would recover or be resigned to a life of pain. "Neither," Silpnuma had replied. Despite losing her child, the mother had thanked Silpnuma for her mercy. Silpnuma had passed from history shortly afterwards, and the world had lived without an adherent of the Sixth Axis for more than two decades.

I had long since exhausted the primers on magic that the library contained. I had leafed through some of the more specialized texts, but found most of them to be boring and esoteric. Strangely enough, the text that occupied much of my attention at that time was a book on kitchen-magic.

I have already related how the simple pantry in my family's house remained perpetually stocked, albeit with a lack of variety. Although most runes stopped working shortly after they were cast, the pantry magic was perpetual, provided it was given some kind of perpetual anchor. Sunlight upon a roof was a common anchor, from what I'd read. The complexity of the construct—and at a minimum, they often required hundreds of runes and intense concentration—determined the amount and variety of the food the pantry would stock.

The Tower's pantry had obviously been blessed with an incredibly complex replenishment construct. Although the driežai would frequently include favorites—they prepared a purple root vegetable mash that I was especially fond of—I would often go weeks without seeing a repeat of some items. I was especially impressed with the pantry's ability to replenish fresh food like vegetables; everything I'd read in the kitchen-magic book suggested that only non-perishable foods could be included. I decided to investigate. I'd recently taught

myself another rune, *atskleisti pagrindą*, Foundation Disclosed, that would show me the runes underlying any perpetual magic. I was curious to see how the Tower's builders had achieved what they'd done.



Although I caught sight of them most often in the kitchen, the driežai were present all over the Tower. I'd seen them scurrying into my bedroom with fresh clothes, and I'd spotted them darting into the kitchen to clean up my dishes after a meal. A few times, out of sheer boredom, I'd attempted to communicate with them. I fixed my eyes on one—no mean feat, as their shadow-forms seemed to continually flicker in and out of existence—and spoke directly at it. Each time, the one I'd spoken to had paused, and briefly seemed to become more solid. But they'd never answered any of my questions, and I'd never managed to change their behaviors that way. Not that they weren't accommodating; all I had to do was voice a request aloud, and if the Tower could fulfill it, it would. When I'd first realized the Tower's generosity, I'd made myself sick on sweets after dinner one evening. I partook of dessert much less often now.

Today however, I had a goal that didn't require an answer from the shadowy little creatures. I walked into the kitchen, stood at the large table, and said, "I'd like a cup of *arbatos*, please." Kirmin had suggested it one time, and I'd grown immensely fond of the hot, slightly spicy beverage. Within moments, a driežai flickered into the room carrying a stone mug of steaming liquid. "Excuse me," I said to it, fixing it in my vision. It froze, the mug only an inch from the table top. "Could you take me to the pantry, please?" I asked.

For a moment, it flickered intensely, as if I'd asked it to do some-

thing impossible. I was about to retract my request when it lowered the mug to the table. Its form solidified into a deep, intense shadow, shaped almost like a miniature dragon. It moved toward the kitchen exit, gliding through the room more slowly than I'd ever seen one move before.

Just outside the kitchen, the driežai stopped and waited while a section of the stone wall swung open. My eyes widened. I'd always wondered where my food came from of course, but I'd never found anyplace. I'd more or less assumed it was part of the Tower's magic, but I'd never supposed there was a secret passage. Inside the doorway was a stone staircase, spiraling gently downward. Small torches in wall sconces flickered to life as I approached, causing the driežai to briefly vanish in their bright light. But we continued down, the shadow-creature and I, until we came to the bottom of the stairs. It was a substantial descent—I estimated we were descending the equivalent of two levels. I remembered the vast, empty space I'd discovered below the kitchen level. I'd never returned to it, but I imagined we were descending past it even deeper into the base of the Tower.

The stairwell opened into a broad, brightly lit room that... well, it was amazing. Even thinking about it now amazes me. The sheer audacity of the Tower's builders, or whomever had created this... wonder.

The room was more like a wide hallway, eschewing the upper levels' round floorplan for a simple, broad rectangle. It was easily eighty feet across, and probably triple that in length. Along the walls stretched shelves, each reaching to the height of the ten-foot ceiling and neatly packed with non-perishable foods. There was enough food here to feed a small army, and not a single shelf had an inch of empty space that I could see. I spotted salted hams, great wheels of cheese, bushels of dried grains, and stacks of fresh-looking bread. My joy at the hot, buttered toast I had each morning was doubled when I realized that this room must also have some kind of magic to preserve freshness.

But the shelves were not the true wonder of the room. Stretching down its center, aligned in neat rows, were hundreds of feet of rectangular wooden planters, each bursting with vibrant life. I saw

tomatoes, onions, the purple root vegetables that I loved so much, and more. There were herbs, miniature fruit trees, and even the brightly colored squashes that graced my meals during the colder months.

The driežai scurried away, its mission complete, and I wandered through the food-hall in awe for some time. The light was as bright, and of the same quality, as the cheeriest summer day I'd known at my family's house, and seemed to emanate directly from the stone roof of the hall. Powerful magic indeed, and I was hesitant as I cast the *atskleisti pagrindą.* The text I'd learned it from had assured its readers that divining the nature of an active magical construct posed no danger but... well, this was clearly a set of runes out of the ordinary. But with the confidence of my youth, I cast the rune anyway.

The air in front of me flared to life with brightly colored runes, glowing in pinks, purples, blues, and greens. This hall wasn't maintained by a series of carefully made perpetual rune constructs; the *entire* hall was a *single* incredibly complex construct, consisting of *thousands* of distinct runes. My eyes widened in amazement. I stared at them all for several long moments, and then dropped the magic, allowing the runes to fade from the air.

The smells of the hall were so comforting, so... quieting. It occurred to me that there was one smell, one flavor from home that I'd never seen on a plate in all my time here at the Tower. "Do you have *ramunėlių*?" I asked aloud. No driežai appeared, and I had an overwhelming sense of disappointment floating through the room. No, then. But I knew how to obtain the seeds: the book on kitchen-magic had gone on at length about the *sėkla iš tolo* rune, designed to summon seeds from mature plants anywhere in the world. I combined that rune with the one for *ramunėlių*, and a small pile of glossy white seeds appeared in the palm of my hand.

I walked over to the one of the planters. This one contained a miniature kartaus-fruit tree. The driežai had once prepared an after-dinner tart from the fruit, but I'd found it incredibly bitter and asked that they not serve it again. "Can this space be used to plant these seeds instead?" I asked.

Shadow-forms swarmed over the kartaus-fruit trees, and within moments they were gone. All that was left behind was a richly scented

earth. I pressed my seeds into it, pushing each one in no more than an inch. "Thank you," I said. "I hope these do well, and if they do, the leaves of the plant can be steeped to make a calming tea at bedtime. Mother–" I continued, but then stopped. Already, green shoots were pressing up through the dirt, reaching for the gently glowing ceiling. I stared, entranced. Within minutes, the first wet leaves were unfurling themselves from the stem, and within minutes more the first blooms were appearing. The sudden growth—part of the hall's magic, I assumed—slowed and stopped once the plants were fully grown. "Thank you," I whispered. This would be a taste of home.

That brief pleasure was interrupted by the pounding noise of the Tower's front door.

"Greetings! I am Gilioj, senior adherent of Sea. You are Daniel, adherent-to-be of the Sixth. You're not yet sure what kind of adherent you'll be, but you're leaning toward being fairly active." The old man smiled, his brown, bald head wrinkling merrily as he did so. "Figured I'd get that out of the way. How are you doing?"

I blinked several times, trying to assimilate what was happening. "I'm well," I said at last.

"You're looking well," he agreed jovially. "I'd ask you to invite me in, but I'd honestly be more comfortable on the shore. Walk with me?"

I nodded, uncertain of what more to say, and fell in beside him as we walked slowly back toward the island's little beach.

"I know Debesi and Mesla have been here already. You'll have to excuse all of us for popping in on you as we do. It's just that we're mad with curiosity, and of course it's not like you have much of a social calendar where we could meet more casually. You're what, almost seventeen, now? Are you almost done with your apprenticeship?"

I blinked again and almost stumbled, rapidly trying to count birthday cakes in my head, but Gilioj carried on without waiting for a reply.

"It's just that the other four Axes have a... hmm. I guess you could say we have a balance with the rest of the world, humans and witchkind. We help when we can, we do what we need to get by, we have our little systems. The Sixth, on the other hand, is a bit of a wild card. You're all different, you know? No system, no little tribe of fellow adherents, just single, solitary you. Sometimes you just sink back and let the world run itself. But sometimes you *change* the world." He gave a little chuckle. "I think we're all just wondering which you'll be doing."

"I'm not sure I'm planning to change the world," I managed to get in.

"Ah, but plans can change, no? And we all dance to the will of our Axes, in the end. The Sixth especially, and it moves us all, does it not?"

I hesitated for a moment, and realized he was actually waiting for a reply. "How do you mean?"

We arrived at the little beach, and he gestured to the sea. "Take my Axis. Entire communities of witchkind live inland, and know nothing of the sea. They've never tasted fish, never smelled the salt air. Or take the fisherwitch families of the coasts, who spend so much of their lives on the waves that Earth is almost a foreign power to them. Not every Axis affects every person, you see. But the Sixth? We all know of Endings. We all experience death. When the Sixth exerts itself, it gathers up Earth and Sea, and even Flame and Sky, with it.

"I suppose we're all just wondering if the Sixth has taken an interest in anything, or whether it will let us be for another few decades."

"I... I don't know," I stammered. "I'm not even the adherent, yet."

"Of course not, of course not," he mused. "Still, it's unusual for so little to be known of you. Did you know that? Almost nobody knows anything of your family. The world of witchkind is not so large that an entire *family* can go unnoticed. So we know nothing about how you were raised, where you were from, what allegiances you might hold, what biases you might carry. Very unusual indeed." He looked at me gravely, the jolliness gone from his face. "So who *are* you, Daniel?"

I shook my head quietly, unsure of what to say.

"What do you know of the people to whom you will bring judgements and Endings?"

I shook my head again.

"Well, I suppose you've still some time to find out." He nodded firmly, and a broad smile returned to his face. "It was good to meet you."

"I suppose Flame is next?" I asked as Gilioj stepped toward the sea.

"Zmogus? Perhaps. Prickly, that one. He might just stay away."

"Thank you for visiting," I said politely.

He gave me one last smile, and then vanished in a spray of salty water.

Gilioj's words hung with me over the next few days. What *did* I know about the rest of witchkind, let alone the humans we shared our world with? What I'd read in stories, mostly. What little I'd gleaned from Kirmin—over what had apparently been more years that I'd realized. What I'd seen and inferred in my visits to places like Twynsits and the little village near my old home.

I needed to get out more, and not just to spy jealously on happy families and couples.

I took myself to Chiton, the largest Northern city. As the Visitation magic faded and the city resolved itself around me, I almost cast a rune of warming on myself, before chuckling and realizing that the blowing, blustering winds couldn't affect me. Light snow flurried through the streets, and the sky overhead was gray and forbidding. I'd read about the winters in Chiton of course, but *seeing* it was another thing entirely. I was sure I'd get to visit in person one day, and vowed to try and make it during the summer.

I spotted a small witchkind-owned shop hidden in a rain-collection barrel on the corner of an alley. I watched a woman of witchkind gently rub the entry-rune that was carved into the side of the barrel, vanishing inside. I couldn't follow her directly of course, but I'd gotten a good enough look at her face to set the Visitation magic on her, taking me directly inside the shop.

It was a clothing shop, and every inch of space seemed to be stuffed with racks, each rack almost overflowing with clothing. Dresses, shirts, slacks, coats, scarves, and more all seemed to be jammed wherever they would fit, with no thought given to organization. The colors were mostly muted earth tones: deep oranges, browns, grays, dark blues, and the like. The only splashes of color came from the boxes of gloves and mittens, which were stacked in the very few spaces that weren't occupied by the hanging-racks. At the back of the store, stacked haphazardly against the rear wall, were bolts upon bolts of cloth, ready to be made into whatever clothing a customer might desire.

I just stood for a moment, taking it all in, when a voice behind me said, "Too cold to be visiting us in person then, lad?" I turned and saw a wizened old man before me, dressed in a neat suit the color of storm clouds. "Ordering then, I presume?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Can't very well be picking up like this, so I presume you're here to order something?"

"Oh, no—sorry. I was just—I'm new here, so I was just exploring. Seeing what there was."

He frowned, his forehead wrinkling heavily and his eyes going cold. "So awash in magic are you, then? Just pop out and go 'exploring' like this, instead of properly and in person?"

"I—I don't understand," I stammered.

"Don't understand," the old man muttered. "Explore all you like then, can't hardly stop you when you're as you are." He stalked toward the back of the shop, still muttering angrily.

"Don't mind Ebenez," a woman's voice said. I turned again and realized this was the woman I'd followed into the shop. "Only it *is* a bit rude to show off such."

"How am I showing off?"

"How much magic does this spell take, this apparition? Convenient as all, I don't mind telling you, especially given the weather, but at what cost, young man?"

"I—" I could exactly tell her I was the adherent-in-training for the

Sixth Axis and that I wasn't using my own personal magic for this. "It's someone else's magic," I managed.

"Someone quite rich with it, then," she said with a sigh. "I suppose your the boy of some council member or something? Or one of the sea-merchants?"

"Something like that," I lied.

"Well, a word to the wise and keep your extravagance to the richer district. This is a working-class neighborhood, it is, and we spend our magic wisely." She shook her handbag, and I could hear the distinctive rattle of coins against each other. A *few* coins, at most.

"I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to offend anyone. It's just—this is the only way I'm able to leave the house." Close enough to the truth.

Her face softened. "Ah, one of those poor children. I see. Well, never you mind then. Wouldn't be in need of clothing, no matter how simple, then. So what brought you in?"

I had no idea what "poor child" she assumed I was, but if it settled the question of my non corporeal presence, I'd play along. "I was actually just looking for someone to talk to," I said. "I followed you in."

"Ah. Well... Ebenez' shop is probably not the best, might have chosen a cafe or an inn or something. But I have to tell you, much as I have sympathy for your... condition... I'll admit it's a bit eerie to be standing here speaking to you as if you were a ghost. And that beside, I've got to get back to my own shop. Just nicked in to pick up a shawl."

"It's right here," Ebenez' voice growled as he made his way back to the front of the shop. "Ah, you're still here."

"Now, Ebenez, he's no choice in the matter, you know. He's one of—"

"I'm sorry again, sir," I said quickly, before the story could get any more convoluted. "I'll go. Have a good day," I told the woman. I let the Visitation magic return me to the street.

A cafe or an inn *would* be a better idea. I wandered the street for a bit, being very careful to walk and not drift, and finally happened upon a small pub nestled between an apothecary and a trading office. Out in the open as it was, it was obviously a human business, but Gilioj had mentioned how the Sixth impacted them as well. I waited

until another customer left, and then slipped inside as the door was swinging shut.

The room was dimly lit, the main source of light being the windows which were admitting the sullen gray daylight from outside. A few tapers burned in wall-mounted sconces, casting a weak, flickering glow. The place looked clean though, and a number of patrons were sitting at simple, sturdy wooden tables that were closely placed along the walls. A narrow aisle between those tables led to a bar that spanned the back of the shop. A human woman ferried food and drinks from the bar to the tables, while an older man worked behind the bar, pouring tall mugs of beer and shuttling food from the kitchen to the bar top.

I decided to talk to the bartender.

To the humans, I looked like I was physically present. So long as I was careful not to drift along, or to let anyone walk through me, the illusion was perfect. As I passed one table however, a middle-aged man sitting at it glared at me. I felt the soft tinge of magic that told me he was witchkind, not human, and I assumed he—like the old man in the clothing shop—wasn't pleased to see my profligate use of magic.

Ignoring him, I stepped up to the bar and struck up a conversation with the bartender, who turned out to be the proprietor. He kept the conversation going even as he filled more orders, promising that he'd get my order as soon as he caught up. As I obviously couldn't even pick up a mug, let alone drink anything, I told him to take his time.

We talked briefly. Business was good, the weather was poor as always, and his family was doing well. The city fathers' proposed tax on strong drink was concerning, but he doubted it would go through. I let him carry most of the conversational effort, only interjecting simple questions or comments to help keep it going, as I had no idea how to truly engage a human in small talk.

After a few minutes, I started to feel a heat on the back of my neck. When the bartender ducked back into the kitchen to retrieve a food order, I turned around. Two tables' worth of witchkind were glaring at me now, their looks openly hostile. I had a strong sense that it wasn't just my magic that was upsetting them: the fact that I was

talking to a human, beyond the basic interaction needed to order a meal, was alarming them. Indeed, as I looked closer, their anger was layered over a very intense, very immediate fear. One woman looked almost horrified, and seemed ready to bolt from the shop at the slightest additional provocation.

I nodded slowly to them and abandoned the bar. I hurried outside, canceled my magic, and returned to the Tower.

"More exploring?" Kirmin's voice came from behind me. I whirled to face her, startled. She grinned. "Always glad to see you practicing." She laughed at my discomfiture. "I do so enjoy our time together, Daniel."

CHAPTER 16

Sixth Lesson

"So where did your explorations take you this time? Learn anything new about your mother?"

"No," I said with a sigh. "I don't even... I can't think about that all the time. No, Gilioj came to visit."

"I don't know that one."

"Adherent of Sea."

"Ah. You know, it never occurred to me that they'd come visit you. Has he been the only one?"

"No, Debesi and Mesla have already been here. Sky and Earth."

"I know Debesi. Or knew her. She was pretty young. She's senior now?" I nodded. "Interesting. What did they want?"

"Didn't the senior adherents of the time come visit you when you were apprenticing?"

"Hardly. They barely said a word to me the entire time I was adherent."

"Oh. Well, they mainly wanted to know if I was going to be an activist or a recluse."

She barked a laugh. "And what did you tell them?"

"That I don't know yet, but I was leaning toward trying to do some good in the world."

"Good for you. And what did they say to that?"

"Nothing, really. But Gilioj... he asked how much I knew of witchkind. Of humans. Of the people I'd be affecting, with... you know. Endings."

She tilted her head slightly. "You know, I keep forgetting that you grew up so isolated. You really *don't* know witchkind or humans, do you?"

"Not really."

"And so you went to what, meet a few?"

I blushed. "I guess so."

"And?"

I took a moment to find the right words. "They're just... people. They talked about the weather. They didn't like how much magic I was using." Kirmin grinned at that. "They talked about taxes. I don't know... I guess I thought..." I trailed off, uncertain how to finish.

"You thought you'd have some big revelation, some clue that would make all this Axis stuff worthwhile."

I nodded.

She sighed, and gave me a long look before answering. "It *is* worth it. Mostly. The world benefits from firm hands guiding these powers. Bringing reason to chaos. But that doesn't mean the world itself is especially... special. They're just people, as you said. But that... hmm." She thought for a moment more, looking into the distance. "Being *just people* is enough," she said at last. "If you'd had a more normal childhood, this probably wouldn't even be on your mind."

We stood quietly for a long moment. "Did you keep in touch with your family? After?"

"After my ascension? No. Not really. I visited for holidays, at first. But having an adherent around isn't comfortable. *Any* adherent, but especially of the Sixth. It's so much power. And it changes you. Changes *them,* maybe. So no."

"What about... relationships?"

"Meaning?" She raised an eyebrow, her face suddenly cautious.

"Were you ever in love?"

She frowned. "I think we should get on with the lesson."

"What I showed you last time was the Axis's Form of Attack," she said, her voice becoming businesslike and clearly marking an end to our discussion. "What I show you today is not technically an attack, although you can use it that way at need. Today, you're going to learn the Form of Purpose. This is the main expression of the Axis, its primary purpose in the world." She gave me a level, stern look. "You're going to learn to End," she said.

"This isn't a thing we do lightly," she said, her face solemn. "The Sixth Form of each Axis represents their fundamental natures, the powers they exercised most freely as wild energies. The powers that, at their greatest and most uncontrolled heights, triggered the Archons to bind them in the first place. You could argue that these powers are why we, as adherents, exist at all."

She looked intently at me, and I felt the gravity of her words. The air around us actually seemed to become more still, and more serious, as if it was waiting for me to acknowledge... my purpose. "I understand," I said firmly. "This is Ending things."

"Yes," she said, holding my gaze. "This is Ending things. This is why our Axis is feared so much more than the others, and it's ultimately why we were bound to the Tower in the first place. Nobody likes having an Ending forced upon them, whether it's a death or simply Ending an argument."

"I've been reading some of the histories," I told her. "Trying to understand the different Judgements."

"That's good," she said. "Ultimately, you'll come to have a much more personal level of understanding about those, but it's good for you to have that background. Good to have those perspectives.

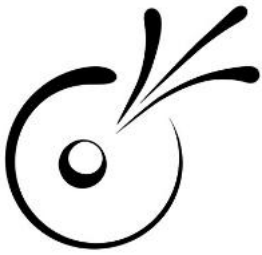
"Are you ready?"

"I think so," I replied carefully.

"Well, let's leave all this then," she said, offering another grin as she gestured around the lush food-hall. I followed her back up the narrow staircase to the kitchen, and then up the spiral stone stairs to the main level. She didn't turn to her workroom, though, and instead continued to the first upper level, then the second. We passed the court-room, the viewing-room on the fourth level, and the fifth-level defense room. It seemed like yesterday that I'd first walked into that

room, but Kirmin kept going. She'd unlocked the sixth level in advance of my actual lesson this time.

As we emerged into the round, almost empty room, she gestured at the book-podium. "You might as well," she said. "I've never seen it in action." I removed the Book from my coat pocket, and placed it on the podium. As always, it flipped itself open, this time landing on a rune that looked similar to the starting runes on the two levels below. I activated the rune in my mind, and a portion of the Tower wall turned into a window, rather than the entire room.



"Interesting," she said. "And convenient. This is *matydamas,* the rune of Seeing. You don't need it to enforce an Ending, but it will let you do so remotely, as you're still bound to the Tower."

"If we were bound to the Tower out of fear of Endings," I asked, "then why was the Tower built to let us perform Endings at all?"

"Back then, witchkind knew that they needed us. But they didn't want us wandering around uncontrolled and unobserved. Their intent was the we would remain here, hold court below, render our Judgements, and come here to execute our Endings. We would be confined."

"Harnessed," I said, echoing Silpnuma's words.

Kirmin tilted her head at me. "Just so. But while the Axes bound the wild energies, the Archons didn't seek to *confine* those powers. Galas himself quickly understood how our restrictions could be bypassed. But by always being careful and diligent with the Axis's power, he and later adherents were able to allay most of witchkind's worst fears. They never really admitted that the Tower didn't confine us like they meant it to, but they didn't pursue the matter either."

She walked over to the magical window, and laid a hand on the wall next to it. The image blurred, taking away its view of the jagged spires and the gray sea outside the Tower, and re-forming to show a human encampment. From my reading, I recognized it as a small army, perhaps five hundred men. It was night wherever they were. "These humans are about to attack a nearby settlement," Kirmin said sadly, "for no reason other than their leaders' desire to control more land and more people. The settlement is poorly defended, but its people are proud. They'll resist. Many of them will die, and they'll be subjugated under their new masters' harsh will."

She turned away from the window and looked at me. "You can End this army. You kill them outright or," she said as I frowned, "you could End their ability to find their way. You could End their loyalty to their master. You could End their master. There are many ways for you to resolve this."

"No," I said without hesitation. I knew this was a test. "It isn't my place. Another leader like this one will arise. This one would send another army. Stopping this battle would make me feel better, but it would not resolve the situation. And I know nothing other than what you've told me. I couldn't render a true Judgement." Plenty of the histories I'd read had included situations like this one, and it was almost always better for the adherent not to act.

She smiled. "It's difficult for us all, in the beginning, not to use the Axis's power to resolve what we see as wrongdoing in the world. But you're right: that isn't our place, and it isn't our power. Too far down that path and we'd become despots ourselves, and finally justify the fear witchkind has had all along." She touched the wall again, and the window once again blurred and formed on a new image. It showed an old man, lying still on a narrow bed. I could tell that his breathing was labored. "He's dying," Kirmin whispered, as if the magic would carry her voice through the image. "And we would not normally interfere with that unless Summoned. His only child, his daughter, spends half her days caring for him. Once he passes, she will grieve, and then likely leave their small village for the larger town nearby. The man was an apothecary, and he passed all his skill and knowledge on to her. There's great demand for her skills in the town, but she's held herself

back here. His disease is a slow, wasting one," Kirmin said, shaking her head slowly. "He's held on for three years longer than anyone might expect." She fell silent.

"I could End him," I said.

"It would probably be a justice. He will die regardless, and you would release him from his pain."

"But I have only your word on all this," I said.

She gestured. "Look at your Book," she said.

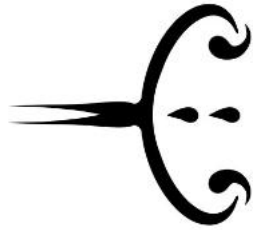
I hadn't moved from the book-podium, but I hadn't noticed the Book flipping to a new rune: *žinodamas*, it said. The Knowing.



"It will only work here, or if you are physically present with the person you are querying. It's actually a variation on our Form of Mind," she said. "It will verify all I've told you. But you must understand its limitations: it will *only* work on someone you're with physically, or that you're viewing through this window—it won't work if you're using the Visitation to be with them in spirit form. It will only work on someone who's End is already around them, who has attracted the Axis's interest. And it will only show you the current facts about their situation as *they* see it. Use it, and you'll see the man's own desire to pass on. You'll see *his* expectations for his daughter but you won't know her feelings on the matter."

I took a couple of steps toward the window, and held the rune in my mind. It confirmed everything Kirmin had said: in my mind, I saw the daughter toiling to care for the old man, struggling to make a living in their tiny village. I saw her, through *his* eyes, finally leaving and setting up a shop of her own in the prosperous town. I *felt* his

pain, continuing and unending. I turned to look back at the book, and it now displayed a single rune: *galas,* the End.



The name of the Axis's most essential power, and the adopted name of the Archon that had bound it. I turned back to the old man, lying in his bed in the window. I held *galas* in my mind. He exhaled softly, and was finally still.

I released all the magic, and the window faded into the stone wall. "So I can just stand here all day and find dying people who need release?" I asked, some bitterness in my tone.

Kirmin shrugged. "You could. Look up Gailest the Merciful in your histories. She was the adherent, oh, four hundred years past or so, at least. That's all she did, all day, every day. But it's not easy. You can't simply direct the window to show you people who are suffering. I had to search out this man myself, so I would be able to show him you. The window can only show you people you command it to. So yes, you could become a hermit, dealing out mercy as she did. How you conduct yourself as adherent is entirely up to you."

I thought about it. "No," I said at last. "I don't want to just be a... killer."

"It's your call." She paused. "I won't be gone as long this time. Your last lessons need to be finished soon." And with that, she vanished.

I sat in the library long into the night after Kirmin left. But for once, I wasn't reading.

I was thinking.

Could I not just End all of clan Karal? Everyone I'd ever seen with Shura wore the same medallion she did, one that I assumed represented the clan itself. Could I not simply seek out everyone who wore such a medallion and methodically end them, one by one? Or, based on some of Kirmin's comments and the histories I'd read, could I simply not End the *entire* clan, all at once, with a single statement? It seemed well within the Axis' power to do so, although I didn't know if—as I was still an apprentice, not the true master of the Tower—it would follow my instructions on something so significant.

I took myself to the second upper level, and stood in front of the map table. "Show me anyone of clan Karal," I ordered. The map lit up, small points of bright light hovering anywhere someone of the clan happened to be. I picked one at random, and used the Visitation to project my consciousness there.

If I'd hoped to come to some kind of definitive conclusion on clan Karal, then it was a long and unfulfilling night.

I saw families, mothers and fathers tucking their children into bed.

I saw a Healer, gently pushing magic into a man who'd been wounded on a fishing boat, reattaching a hand that would otherwise have been lost.

I saw a petty cutpurse using a stealthy magic to insert herself into a crowd, then using more magic to relieve several humans of their coins.

I saw a merchant and his wife, moving new goods from a cart into their shop.

In short, I saw all manner of people, all of clan Karal.

And no few of them completely undeserving of the fate that Shura, at least, was so *richly* deserving.

So what about Shura? I could End her easily, presuming the Axis let me do so without Kirmin's supervision. But that wouldn't stop the problem, would it? I'd already seen her with at least two accomplices, who would surely take up her work if she was dead. I could End them too, of course, but how many were there that I hadn't seen?

No. It was too risky. That was the lesson of all the histories I'd read: Endings must be careful, precise, and well-considered. The unin-

tended consequences of hastily contrived Endings *always* resulted in trouble. If nothing else, it would show that the Sixth Axis was acting without reason or remorse, the exact fear that had caused this very Tower to be erected in the first place. I didn't know if the adherent of the Sixth Axis could, while standing in this Tower fend off all of witchkind, and I didn't intend to be the adherent who discovered the answer to that question.

I needed more information.

I yawned. Apparently I also needed more sleep.

I awoke the next morning feeling completely refreshed and relaxed, a state that existed for approximately one minute and was broken by the thudding sound of someone at the front door. I hastily threw on fresh clothes and took myself to the entry foyer.

The man standing at the door had jet-black hair tinged with red highlights. His eyes were a red so dark as to be almost black, and his ruddy black skin was flushed with deep red. He was dressed entirely in heavy, scarred black leather, as if he was accustomed to working at a forge.

"Senior adherent of Flame?" I asked, after he'd stood staring silently at me for several moments.

"Zmogus," he snapped. "I won't need much of your time. I've spoken to the others"—by which I assumed he meant the other senior adherents—"and I'm not here to quiz you. I'll simply offer you a warning, and then go."

"A warning?" I asked, ire beginning to rise in my back.

"A warning," he repeated. "I know you're to be the all-powerful adherent of the Sixth. Fine. Stay in your Tower, roam the world, do as you will. Nobody can stop you. But restrain yourself from becoming a world figure. You're no emperor. You're no ruler. You've no right to bend the entire world to your will. Refuse the judgements they'll ask you to make—don't be their crutch. Let the world take care of itself. Stay out of it." He clamped his lips shut, as if he had surprised himself by saying so much.

In as polite a voice as I could manage, I said, "I appreciate your warning. I'll definitely think hard about what you've said."

Or rather, a half-wish that's what I'd done. Instead, I found that my manners had deserted me. "And this is the directive from who, the mighty adherent of Flame? Or is this the consensus of the four of you? Because let me be clear: you are on *my* island, standing before *my* Tower. I will do my best to guide the powers of my Axis, as I presume you do with yours. I will bend it to the good of the world as best I can, as I presume you and the others do. I will *not* see myself as a dictator, although you clearly have some work to do in that area. And I will thank you for your visit and bid you good day." And with that, I slammed the Tower door in his face. I waited in the foyer for several long minutes as my nerves reacted to what I'd just done and I began shaking uncontrollably. I forced myself to breath deeply, and eventually settled.

I took myself unseen to the island's little beach and drifted back to the Tower to confirm he'd left.

At least the other three hadn't been jerks.

CHAPTER 17

Seventh Lesson

"I told you I wouldn't be gone long," Kirmin said from her usual perch on the kitchen table the next morning. At least, I think it was the next morning. I had become increasingly convinced that the reason I woke so refreshed every morning is that the Tower was somehow keeping me asleep for days and weeks at a time. It could have been a month since I'd last seen her, and I'd have no way of knowing.

"You did," I said cooly. I wouldn't admit it to her, but I'd become accustomed to the long periods of solitude between her visits, and I'd hoped to spend more time researching the histories in the library. Not to mention investigating the food-hall downstairs to see what other wonders it might hold. And although I did enjoy seeing her, and I was excited for what I assumed would be my final lesson, I still hadn't decided if I actually could be the adherent, be an all-powerful killer. "Is it time for my seventh lesson?"

"After breakfast," she said magnanimously, gesturing to the food that had been laid out. I sat and began to eat. "I want to talk about this one a bit before we actually get into it. There are some... unpleasant memories around it for me, and I've never really had to talk through it before."

"Oh?" I asked around a mouthful of food.

She sighed, thought for a moment, and began.

* * *

I was lucky enough to become the adherent during the reign of the worst, most selfish, most power-hungry Council that I think witchkind has ever seen, *she said.* They'd managed to rig the selection process, packing the Council with a group of truly small-minded, ambitious, un-empathetic bastards. That alone was bad enough, but before long they started ignoring the Council's own long-standing policies and coming down hard on witchkind. Entire families were hauled off to Witchhold on spurious or trumped-up charges, just so the Council members could add the "criminals'" properties to their own personal estates. They dusted off obscure laws that carried the death penalty, and started having their foot-soldiers enforce them. It was an ugly time. They didn't seem to care at all about the survival and protection of witchkind, which was their job. Instead, they seemed intent on amassing as much wealth, property, and power as possible.

One of their most offensive projects aimed to move all of witchkind into larger towns, fully apart from humans. They wanted to rip witchkind out of their traditional homes, even from behind the Veil, and concentrate them into what they called "hidden cities." It was nothing more than a baldfaced attempt to get as many of witchkind as possible under their personal control. They executed it by depriving witchkind of their traditional family homes, shutting down businesses in smaller villages and rural areas, and more. That Council is one reason witchkind tends to prefer to live in smaller, more remote places now—it's a long-standing reaction to that time.

Witchkind in several larger towns tried to put up some resistance, even going so far as to put together a no-confidence petition. Under witchkind law, a sufficient number of signatures would have triggered

a new election, ousting the current Council. But the Council caught wind of it and had most of the organizers either killed or imprisoned. The petition faded away, and everyone who knew of it quickly learned to keep to themselves.

The adherents of the other four Axes, typically considered outside Council law, tried to intervene. One adherent of the First Axis actually tried to destroy a ship that was carrying two Council-members, in an effort to open up at least a couple of seats on the Council. That wouldn't have worked; these people had plenty of like-minded colleagues they'd have filled those seats with, rigging the elections just as they'd rigged their own. Regardless, the attempt didn't succeed: you don't get on the Council, rigged elections or no, without being pretty powerful. The two Councillors simply rescued themselves. Short of unleashing their fill Sixth Form and basically declaring outright war on the Council, there wasn't much the adherents could do. You have to understand that the first four Axes play a crucial role in witchkind society, and they couldn't afford to lose the trust and respect of ordinary people in some kind of coup attempt. They *could* have crushed the Council, especially if all four had aligned themselves to a single plan, but they'd have cast witchkind into chaos. It's honestly doubtful that our people would have survived that kind of plan, and I think they all knew it.

So it fell to the Sixth Axis. Everyone's already afraid of it, and it's pretty much considered the last resort.

I called the entire Council into the court-room. We can't really enforce that power unless there was someone accusing them of something, but I'd found one of the petition-organizers who'd managed to survive, and she was more than willing to level charges against the Council. She stood right here in this Tower, along with all of them, and accused them of... well, basically of everything they'd been doing.

There's no doubt they were guilty. But I don't apply the law; that isn't what the Sixth Axis's Judgements are all about. And I was in a tricky position: I could have Ended them all, but their rise to power wasn't a fluke. Kill them all and more of their faction would have taken their place. It's like you've learned from the histories: you can't solve underlying problems by simply wiping out the current incarna-

tions of them. I needed to do something more forceful. More... dramatic. Something that would demonstrate to *all* of witchkind that the Council's actions wouldn't be tolerated. Something that spoke beyond the law, and touched on the basic truths shared by all of witchkind.

And yes, I see the question on your face: I could have killed this set of Councillors, killed the next set, and kept on going, but the underlying problems—the assumption that the Council could be bought or stolen, or that the Council was above its own laws—would still exist. I had to do something to clearly demonstrate that the *attitude* would not be accepted, and would never be successful. I had to do something... forceful. Something to remind all of witchkind that something more powerful and eternal than themselves existed, and was watching.

The Council's chambers are in Evermore. It's one of the few towns that belong entirely to witchkind. There, our people don't need to hide in the corners, keeping behind the Veil. They can walk in the open, do magic anytime they please, and live however they want. It's an expensive town to live in, which is one reason all of witchkind doesn't simply move in. More importantly, it is the *Council's* town. All of the Council members live in lavish homes at the center of the town, surrounding the actual Council Hall. And they're defended by the Council Arms, the only armed force in all of witchkind. Nominally, the Arms keep order in the city and enforce the Council's edicts. Of course, they'd been completely subverted by the Council—one of their first acts upon being seated, in fact, had been to put their own people in the Arms' ranks of officers.

What I felt I needed to show was that the Council, even with the force of the Arms behind them, couldn't just discard centuries of witchkind law and tradition. So I did something that no adherent since Galas had done: I mustered demons.

The Seventh Form of the Axes let us call up a group of magically constructed creatures, designed to execute the Axis's will *en masse*. It lets us act on a larger scale than we could on our own, and it's a pretty visible sign of our power. It's the closest we come to taking the Axis off its leash and letting it act as a wild power again. The First Axis

summons kraken from the depths, the Second calls up an army of fire-beasts, that kind of thing. In our case, it means calling up a Horde of terrifying creatures whose sole purpose is to End those we've directed. Once the Horde is called into existence, the only thing that can stop them is the completion of their directive. The Axis itself becomes largely unavailable to us during that time as it gorges itself like it did in the old days. It's... it's horrific.

My Horde marched into Evermore, willing to ignore anyone who wasn't on the Council or in the Council Arms' officer's corps. They destroyed most of the Council residences, and almost all of the Arms' barracks and other buildings. They slaughtered the entire Council and all of the Arms' officers, although they all put up a strong fight. The thing about the Horde is that it's literally unending: until it completes its mission, you can kill all the demons you like and more appear to take their place. One Councillor tried to bring down the Council hall itself on the Horde, and succeeding in destroying hundreds of demons. But hundreds more simply appeared in their place and tore the man to pieces.

Once the Council and a quarter of the Arms' men and women were dead, the demons vanished, their mission complete. Witchkind recovered from its collective shock, and new Council elections were held. The old Council's remaining cronies stepped back, afraid that they'd meet the same end. And they would have. Archons help me, I would have done it again.

You won't find this story in any of your histories, Daniel. At least, not the full story. You can certainly read about the demon horde that destroyed the Council of witchkind, but you won't find me or the Tower mentioned. None of witchkind even knew it was me. None of them even know the Sixth Axis can *do* that. As I said, it's been done only once before, and Galas summoned the Horde to stop a grand army of humans bent on destroying witchkind. Even then, he attributed the Horde to something else, saying a group of witchkind must have summoned it. So witchkind feared the Sixth Axis no more than it ever had, and we helped bring a terrible, terrible time to an End.

But at such a price.

* * *

My eyes were wide as Kirmin finished her story. "I hope you never have to use our Seventh Form," she said, her eyes moist. "If our Sixth Form is a precise, surgical way to End strife and suffering, the Seventh is a blunt instrument. Innocent people died under the claws of the Horde," she went on, her eyes taking on a faraway look. "They got in the way. They tried to protect the Council, the same Council that had been standing on their necks. Witchkind came together, forgetting their disputes with the Council for that moment. You would normally be proud of them, right? Putting aside their disagreements to face what they thought was a common foe bent on destroying them all. Those that stayed home, that stayed inside, survived. But plenty didn't." It was several long moments before she looked directly at me again. "Let me take you to the seventh level," she said.

I followed her out of the kitchen and onto the great stone spiral staircase for what I assumed was the final time. As we trudged up the stairs though, something occurred to me. I hadn't used my Visitation rune in a long while, having grown bored with Visiting random villages and towns. I recalled my second lesson with Kirmin:

"It lets us leave the isle?"

She smiled. "No, and if you tried, the spires of the isle would catch you on their tips and hold you here. Initially, you'll be able to send your spirit, not your body, and only for a limited time. As you grow stronger and more used to it, that time will grow longer and longer, but your body will remain here."

But I wasn't leaving the Isle, was I? I was staying right within the Tower. I summoned the rune in my mind, and pictured the sixth level with its wooden model cannons. With a rush of wind, I was there, standing on the staircase that now stretched upward an additional level. I climbed that level, only to find Kirmin waiting for me. "I wondered how long it would take you to try that," she said with a

small grin. "Frankly, I'm surprised it took this long. You must really like climbing stairs."

"Good exercise," I muttered, drawing the Book from my coat pocket and placing it on its podium. This level was completely empty, the only notable attribute a large circle carved into the stone floor, completely surrounding the staircase. A second, larger circle encircled the first one, with about five feet of space between the two.

"The Seventh Form can only be exercised when you're standing in that ring," Kirmin said, pointing at the space between the two circles. I looked closer and saw that the stone there was a slightly different color —rather than the usual gray used everywhere else in the Tower, this stone looked reddish. Stained, even. I swallowed heavily at the implication.

The Book, which seemed to have taken a moment to settle itself this time, finally flipped open. As I'd expected, the rune it showed was *demonų minios,* the Demon Horde.



"If you use that rune," Kirmin cautioned, "make sure you have extremely specific and finite goals in mind. Remember, they won't end their carnage until your directives are fulfilled. You need to set them a clear mission with a clear, objective ending. Otherwise, you run the risk of them continuing forever." I shuddered at the thought.

"There's more," she added, "which I see is not written in the Book." She took a deep breath. "You'll be trapped in the ring until the demons complete their task. The Axis will stop answering to you, and

the Tower itself will stop functioning. You'll be vulnerable—completely defenseless. The driežai won't serve you. If your mission carries on too long, you'll starve." She gave a slight shrug. "That won't matter, of course. You won't die from it, but it isn't pleasant, let me assure you."

I turned a page in the Book. "What's this one?" I asked. The rune was *giltinė,* the Reaper.



"I... I don't know," she said, shaking her head and peering at the page. "And I don't know how that's even possible. This says it's another expression of the Seventh Form, our power to temporarily unleash the Axis. But... I've never heard of this one. I don't remember any other expressions of the Seventh Form. That... that shouldn't be possible. How can I not remember?" She fell silent, still staring at the Book.

Memories have Endings, too, she'd once told me. I turned the page again. Or tried to: the Book firmly refused. It was as if the remaining pages in the Book—perhaps a tenth of its overall thickness—were fused together into a single mass, and could not be separated. "I can't turn the page," I told her.

"There's more, then," she said softly. "More, but not for you. Or perhaps not for me."

I looked again at the Reaper. "A flight of bringers of death, it says," I said. "To simultaneously bring an End to those who deserve it. It says you can assign each Reaper a target. This..." I paused for a

moment, and looked up at her. "This is a more precise way to End several people without unleashing the Horde."

Her eyes were wide in horror as comprehension sank in. "Why?" she asked, her voice thick with emotion. "Why wasn't I told about this? I could have..." she stopped, looking away from me. I understood. This was the tool she should have used, had she known about it. She could have Ended the Council, the officers of the Arms, and spared all the innocents who put themselves in the path of her Horde. "After the Horde," she whispered, "I stayed here. I was so afraid to use my power again. Thirty years... was it forty? I don't remember," she said, shaking her head. "I rarely left the Tower. I... all that time. All those people." She fell silent. Then she looked back at me. "I'm sorry," she said, and vanished.

* * *

I stood in that room for a long time after Kirmin left. This is what it came down to: could I unleash the Horde? Or even the Reapers? The latter would clearly be a way for me to deal with the death clan Karal had been unleashing on the humans all these years. I'd simply need to track down everyone involved, which wouldn't be that hard. I could assign a Reaper to each, and the task would be done. I obviously couldn't do it *now;* the Book was specific that only the actual adherent could access the Seventh Form. But my choice of whether or not to accept the mantle of adherent couldn't be far off.

Was I a killer? A mass murderer, even in the name of a good cause?

I had never missed Mother so much as I did in that moment.

I had never felt so completely and utterly alone.

CHAPTER 18

Final Lesson

Kirmin's story sat heavily in my heart for a day or two. *All those people.*

I had no obligation to the humans that clan Karal was... killing. Draining. Whatever. I technically had no *obligation* to any of witchkind, even: the Sixth Axis' adherents did more or less as they pleased, and the minimum I was required to do was to simply *exist,* to give the Axis a physical form that could be directed.

But all those people.

I needed to see more of what Loran and the rest of clan Karal was doing. I needed to see what their supposedly less-destructive efforts led to.

I focused on one of the villages where I'd tried to visit Loran. I wouldn't try to appear to him, if he was even still there, but I could at least get a sense for what the humans of the village were experiencing.

Farreach in the North was a cold, windy, uninviting town in the summers, but this was the thick of winter, and I had never been more glad that my spirit form wasn't affected by the weather. Everyone bustled through the city bundled in blankets and furs as snow blew nearly sideways through the streets.

I could easily pick out those of witchkind: they wore a bit less clothing, relying instead on small magics to help stave off what was

obviously a biting cold. That much, I could perhaps have expected. What I did not expect was to see how hale those of witchkind seemed to be, compared to the humans all around them.

Those poor souls limped and staggered through the streets, clearly tired. *Drained of energy,* even. I followed one couple, supporting each other as they trudged along the snow-dusted cobbles, until they arrived at a physicker-shop. They managed to push their way in, and I floated through after them.

"You'll have to wait, he's with someone right now," a harried-looking woman was telling the couple. She was standing behind a small desk, guarding a door that doubtless led to the physicker's work area in the back. Her dark hair was frazzled, her long white work coat smudged, and her expression frustrated. The couple merely nodded, shrugging out of their heavy coats and blankets and taking up places on either side of a small fireplace that was set into one wall.

I drifted through the door that led to the back of the shop.

The back room was a cramped affair, the walls lined with shelves and cabinets containing sachets, bottles, boxes, and books. A sturdy bed occupied the center of the room, and a man lay on it. His face was drawn and wan, although not the sickly, unnatural gray of Shura's victims. Two other men stood on either side of the bed, examining the prone man. The first was clearly the physicker, dressed in the same kind of long white coat as the woman out front. The second was an older man, dressed entirely in black, a heavy white chain hung around his neck.

"It's nothing in his humors," the physicker said. "I smudged an entire pot of bane-leaf, and that should have removed any dark humors. But he remains weak."

"Abel, when did you last eat?" the black-clad human asked.

"I've eaten regular, Father," the man on the bed mumbled, his voice hoarse and tired. "Breakfast and lunch today. Three meals yesterday. Three afore that." He shook his head weakly, the heavy bedclothes crinkling slightly at the movement. "Doesn't help. The missus started

feeling it yesterday. The two boys are still fine, but my Davvi was looking tired this morning, despite she having slept well all night."

"It's why I called you, Father," the physicker said. "He's the tenth one this month, and the other shops have had a like share. I spoke to Tunny yesterday and he said this whole neighborhood has come down with it."

"Not unlike the mountainside quarter a month gone," the man in black said.

"Aye," the physicker agreed.

"Vermin then? Those small biting insects? Sheffenton last year had an outbreak—"

"But that would *spread* from one neighborhood to the next," the physicker disagreed. "This *moved.* Mountainside's fine now, almost everyone recovering."

"Recovering?"

"All but the elderly," the physicker said. "Takes a few weeks, but eventually everyone was right as rain. That lets out a sickness of the blood—one doesn't recover from those so readily. And it lets out anything vermin-spread. Even aether-spread, to my thinking."

"So what are you suggesting?"

The physicker looked left and right, as if checking for eavesdroppers, before speaking in a low voice. "Magic, Father."

"Mag– are you mad?" The man in black made an odd hand gesture over his chest, his two hands quickly twisting together then untwisting, a movement I'd never seen before. "I pray to the Three you've not mentioned that to anyone else."

"Wasn't my notion, Father. Tunny brought it up, and said Mullen had brought it to him. We spoke: it's the only answer that fits the symptoms. Nothing else we've done has helped, and yet to see mountainside recover? And lakeside, a hundred people came down with similar symptoms a month ago, and they're all now starting to show the same signs of recovery."

"Which means we can expect the same here, once this runs its course?"

"Likely so, but it'll strike someplace next."

"But *magic."* That last word came out in a hiss. "There's been no

sign of magic in the world for millennia. After the Time of Sundering, the Three put an end to magic." A pause, followed by a firm shake of the head. "No. It can't be. I'll consult the books of course, but no. Continue to treat these people as best you can, and lay to rest your thoughts of magic. It's... it's heresy. And it's *ludicrous."* He fixed the physicker with an even stare. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll speak with Tunny and Mullen as well. Good day."

The man in black saw himself out, pushing past the couple I'd followed in as well as another woman who'd apparently just entered.

I floated outside, following the man for half the block before stopping. I had a sudden feeling of anxiety, of fear. Helplessness, even. Something in the back of my brain was screaming at me to hide, to curl up into a ball in the deepest hole I could find. I shook my head for a moment, wishing for just a second that I could *feel* the freezing winds blowing around me, just to snap me out of it. This was the Axis I was feeling, its emotions again bleeding over into my own.

Then the town vanished.

I was floating hundreds—no, it must have been thousands, *tens* of thousands—of feet above the world. I could see the sharp folds of the mountains, the deep blues of the lakes and rivers, and even the blue-gray of the ocean. I could see forests, villages, and towns.

And laying over all of it was a pale, translucent white gauze.

The world suddenly flew closer, and I descended into a small village near the center of the continent. I found myself standing on a street, humans and witchkind walking about their business of the day. The humans moved freely, unimpeded by the gauzy film that I could still see, laying gently over everything.

But those of witchkind... they were *covered* by the gauze. It draped over them, moving easily with them as they walked along the street. Where the humans seemed to simply walk *through* the gauze, it *hung* on my people.

A small child of witchkind, holding her mother's hand as they

walked along, laughed brightly as she cast a small magic from her free hand. It was little more than a spark, the harmless experiment of a child still delighted by what it had learned to do, but the reaction of the world was instant.

Her mother immediately reached down and clamped both of the child's hands together. The two came to a stop, and the mother crouched down, speaking to the child in a low, urgent voice, their noses nearly touching. The child's expression was hurt, disappointed, and confused, not understanding why she was being scolded.

But the gauze...

It had snarled at the exact moment the child's magic had been unleashed. In that brief moment, the child had been brighter, *clearer* than before, her true colors shining through the twisted, separated fibers of the gauze. Even as I watched, those fibers knitted themselves back together, suppressing the child's bright hues, damping her and her mother back into subtle, gray-tinged normalcy.

This was the Veil, I realized. The great working that had Ended humans' memories of witchkind and magic, and that separated and protected us still. It was delicate, ever so fragile, and it depended entirely on magic being kept *out of humans' minds.*

Except that at least some humans were now proposing magic as the cause for whatever ailment clan Karal's plans were causing.

I withdrew my magic, and let myself return to the Tower.

I stayed up long into the night, the implications of clan Karal's actions, and their possible impact on the Veil, foremost in my mind. Their works, whatever they were for, now stretched beyond making some humans sick, or even killing a few. The Veil itself, the fundamental magic that let humans and witchkind live safely together, was threatened. Something needed to be done.

I slept little that night, napping briefly in my chair in the library, before my stomach finally prompted me to seek out breakfast. As I descended to the dining room, I saw that Kirmin had finally returned.

"Happy eighteenth birthday," she said from her customary spot

on the kitchen table, in front of the small cake the driežai had made for the day.

Eighteen years, I thought. Five years I had been in this Tower. It hadn't felt like... even the birthday cakes didn't add up, did they? That is the moment when the full weight of the Tower's manipulation settled over me. Five years of my life lost, broken only by Kirmin's lessons, my vague memories of studying, exercising, and practicing, the futile attempts to find my mother, and the clearer memories of my encounters with Shura and Loran. This explained why, each time I managed to visit them, their plans had seemed to accelerate more quickly: *they* had been living those years at normal speed, while I'd been skipping through them.

Then I remembered that eighteen, for the young adults of witchkind, was a major milestone. It marked a graduation from schooling and a passing into adulthood.

Was my apprenticeship done, then?

Was I finally ready?

"You look terrible," Kirmin said, shaking me from my thoughts.

I sat at the table. "I feel terrible," I admitted.

"Want to talk about it?"

I hesitated, but decided to finally confide in her. I told her about clan Karal, about Shura, and about Loran. I told her about the dead humans, and the sickly ones in Farreach in the North. I told her about the Veil, and about the Axis' anxiety. I told her about Mother again, and how I'd found nothing to confirm her continued existence.

She said nothing the whole time, listening carefully until I finished. "Well," she said when I'd finally come to the end. "I suppose that explains your side project."

"And it's been going on these past five years? All while I could have been doing something?" I picked up my fork and stabbed the cake in frustration.

"To be fair," Kirmin said quietly, her voice calm, "you couldn't have done *anything.* You are not the adherent, Daniel. Yes, you can direct some of the Axis's smaller powers, but your ability to take action in the world is *very* limited. You can observe, which you have

done. You can plot and plan, which I imagine you'd done. But *doing something?"* She shook her head. "No."

"Am I ready, then? Is that why you're here? Can I do something *now?"*

"You're close," she admitted. "Closer than perhaps I realized. Hmm." She fell silent.

I waited.

"Do you remember the story I told you, the last time I saw you?"

I nodded.

"Do you understand why it upset me so much, to tell that story?"

"I think so. Are you... better?"

"Yes. We never truly understand the Axes, you know. I have to remember that. They reveal themselves slowly, over centuries. And with only one of us at a time, and not even one of us *all* the time, we probably know less of our Axis than the other adherents know of theirs." She paused. "It doesn't make it easier, but it doesn't make it my fault, either."

"That army you showed me," I said, referring back to her sixth lesson. "They were human, but the Axis would still have Ended them, if I'd asked it?"

"Yes. Humans and witchkind are more alike than many would like to admit. We came from the same stock, in the beginning. Witchkind simply surrounded itself with the world's energies, while humans spent their time trying to conquer their environments. But we live much alike, don't we? We live in houses, not caves. We mingle with humans in their villages and towns, although the Veil keeps them from realizing. And like it or not, both humans and witchkind are subject to the wild forces that were bound into the Axes. Humans might not believe the Axes are real, but they can't simply disavow primal forces with such power. Where we see the adherents of the First Axis releasing the earth's tension, humans see an earthquake and a tsunami—natural events, never recognizing our hand in managing those for the good of all.

"In some ways, the Axes are the last common bond between humans and witchkind." She paused. "And that's why it's important

for witchkind, at least, to know of the ascension of a new adherent, particularly to the Sixth Axis."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me for a moment before answering, "Do you remember your grandmother's prophesy?"

I nodded, closed my eyes, and recited it again:

Sky and Earth, Flame and Sea
Cast adrift, their center lost
Until a Sixth might come to be
To join them all, or pay the cost

Kirmin's face grew solemn. "I think there's something coming," she said. "You're young, but I think the Axis senses something. Something that may be an Ending, one larger than any before. One that will need *managing."*

"Meaning what?"

She looked grim. "It's not for me to say. Or even know. But the Axis may have been sniffing at you and your family for longer than either of us think. It Chose you for a reason." She frowned. "It almost feels as if..."

"What?"

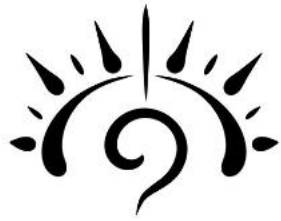
"As if you were *made* to be its Choice." Then she shook her head. "But that's not possible."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Prophecies are stupid. And it's time for your final lesson."

We returned to Kirmin's workroom then. "I thought there were Seven Forms within each Axis," I said. "Wouldn't your last lesson have been... well, the last lesson?"

"That's true." She sat at the dusty work-table. "But the Fifth and Sixth Axes—had the Fifth ever been bound into an Axis—are different, as they are different in so many other respects." She sketched a rune on the table. "*Mantija.* The Mantle. It's a rune you might not even find in your Book, as the tradition has been for it to be passed to each adherent personally. Try it."



I did. I held the rune in my mind, as I'd done for so many others. I could feel its power begin to build, suffusing my limbs with a cool energy. It felt pent-up, something ready for release but being held back. I concentrated more, but nothing happened.

"Stop," Kirmin ordered quietly.

I stopped, and realized I'd closed my eyes. I opened them and looked at her. "It isn't working."

"It isn't ready, yet. Or *you're* not ready, to be more precise. You've a decision to make, and a place in which to do it."

CHAPTER 19

A Truth Come to Light

"Let's do this the hard way this time," she said, and led me out of her workroom. We started climbing the stone staircase, one slow level at a time. I quickly understood why she'd wanted to do it the "hard way:" at each level, she stopped and asked me a question, or made a comment.

"There's a reason our Forms are taught in the order they are," she said. "Communication is the foundation of the direction we provide to the Axis. Asking questions, listening to the answers. Truly *hearing*. Always remember that you probably know less than you think. Be humble, and *listen."*

Second level: "Being there is important. Actually going out and seeing people, grasping the full context of the situation. Yes, you can become more vulnerable on someone else's home turf, but you can see them in their element. You feel *who* they are, not just what they are telling you."

Third level: "Even when you don't bring people here, remember that your position always needs to be neutral. We don't take sides. Our job is to take a powerful, destructive force and direct it to more subtle outcomes that benefit everyone on this world, human and witchkind alike. Our Judgements must reflect that. And Daniel, if you're doing it well, you'll rarely climb higher than this."

Fourth level: "This is where you defend yourself and the Tower, and maintain your independence and neutrality. You *can* be hurt. You *can* be subverted. But here, you have the opportunity to defend while doing the least amount of harm in return."

Fifth level: "This level is where you know things have gone wrong. This level's use of your own personal energy is a message, telling you that things have gone too far. Avoid ever having to climb this high, and if you must anyway, be merciful."

Sixth level: "This is the heart of what we do. Ideally, no End would need to ever come from our hands. But... well, that rarely seems to be the case."

Seventh level: Kirmin said nothing. She just looked at me sadly. I saw that the stairs now went one level higher. We emerged into the topmost room in the Tower, and this level had four real windows, each carved into the wall at the cardinal directions of the compass. Two comfortable-looking chairs faced each other, and Kirmin directed me to sit in one as she seated herself.

"It is time for a Truth," she said evenly, looking deeply into my eyes. "I am not here with you now, and never have been. No," she said, holding up a hand to stop my protest. "I, *Kirmin,* have not been with you. I am simply the last adherent that the Sixth Axis experienced, and so it takes my form to train you." I blinked. "Keep in mind that we rarely have an adherent in the Tower continuously. The Axis... takes breaks, as I've mentioned. But I will leave you soon, leave you alone in this Tower. You have a decision to make. You may stay here as long as you wish, exercising what power you've gained these past five years. You already have the power to do some good, to direct the Axis toward beneficial outcomes. But if you want to leave, if you want to truly become the adherent of the Sixth Axis, then you must become something more than you are.

"There is only ever one adherent of the Sixth Axis," she continued, "because we become *part* of the Axis. It holds our memories and experiences, from the time Galas bound it. It's why we thought we didn't need the Book anymore," she said with a small shrug. "We have all of our memories within us, all the time. That was apparently short-sighted," she said, her eyes once again sad. "But if you would leave the

Tower, if you would assume your full power, if you would take what I believe may actually be your *birthright,* then you must choose to End yourself.

"Not to die; an Ending is so much less, and so much more, than death. But when you are ready to make that decision, if ever you are, then come to this room. Hold that decision in your mind, and cast the Mantle. You will End, and you will join an unEnding line of adherents. You will *become* Galas. You will become *me.* And you will remain yourself. All of witchkind will feel your ascension. Even those humans sensitive enough will feel your power, although they'll likely attribute it to a story or myth they create to explain it. And because you are Ended, past death itself, you will be able to leave the Tower at will. Those great spikes will no longer hold you here."

"I... I'm not sure what I'll decide."

She gave me a sad smile, nodded, and vanished.

I hadn't expected her to disappear, but she'd made this into a solemn moment. It was *my* decision, perhaps best undertaken alone. But I hadn't been truthful with her: I *had* made my decision. Perhaps the first real decision of my life. A decision I'd clearly been *meant* to make.

I held the rune for the Mantle in my mind then, closing my eyes to concentrate. This time, the power flooded me, built up, and then... nothing. Again.

It didn't make sense. I'd made my decision. I was on the eighth level. What was the matter?

I have nothing to lose. I'd said that to Kirmin when I'd first come here. I also had nothing to gain. Aside from the medallion around my neck, I was a nobody, a nothing. A barely-adult with no family, who didn't even have a family name I could publicly lay claim to. Trapped on a tiny island in a stone tower with an imaginary friend.

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the chair. I held the rune for the Mantle in my mind, but didn't try to invoke it. Just as I'd done in the map-room so long ago, I tried to quiet myself and *listen* to the Axis.

I'd had plenty of practice in being quiet these past five years, and relaxed peacefulness settled over me after a few minutes. I did nothing, and tried to think nothing. I tried to just *be.* And before long, a sense of... *something* wrapped around me. Even now, ages later, it's hard to describe. It was like a... a dragon, or a great snake. Cold, smooth, and considering. *Ancient.* It coiled itself around my body, around my *soul,* and *considered* me.

After what seemed like an eternity, I thought, *Am I the one? Is this what I was born to?*

Maybe, but...

I didn't want this.

I stood up, and started walking back down the stairs.

The feeling of ancient, cold, consideration faded away as I walked.

I trudged slowly back to the second-level map table, Kirmin's words—today, and over the past five years—rolling through my mind. Her stories, and all the stories of former adherents I'd read in the library. The people I'd seen in Twynsits, Chiton, and all the other towns and villages I'd visited over the years. My own solitude, the loneliness I'd felt so keenly so long ago, and that had settled into a constant companion over the years.

I could become the adherent. Become a killer, in effect, an all-powerful judge who could End... anything. An eighteen year-old judge with powers that made him seem omniscient—even though he was still a mere eighteen year-old.

Or... I could ask Kirmin to End me.

Or perhaps I could simply stay in the Tower until I grew old and died, forever an apprentice.

There was much good I could do in the world, guiding the Sixth Axis. According to Kirmin. The senior adherents of the other Axes clearly weren't as confident. And Gilioj...

What did I *know* of witchkind and humans, even now?

I knew they cared about the weather. And taxes. And wasteful uses of magic.

But did they care about Endings? Did *they* feel the Axis could do good in their world? The humans obviously didn't; they didn't even know the Axes existed. Witchkind? I wondered. If adherents never or rarely went home to the families they'd left... how welcome *were* the Axes and their adherents?

I stopped as I reached the second level.

I didn't want this.

But the Axis' powers were my only hope of finding my mother.

I walked to the map table. "Show me my mother." As always, the table slewed and slid, unable to focus. "Stop." I waited for the image to stabilize. "Show me Shura." This time the map slid smoothly to a town called Withring. I pulled the image apart with my fingers, zooming in until I could see Shura. She was at a warehouse on the edge of the town, her death-wagon parked outside. She was speaking to someone older...

Loran.

Without thinking, I cast the Visitation rune, appearing unseen around the corner of the building.

"They were first-generation machines, Loran, due for replacement anyway. They were scarcely better than the ones Neville developed."

Father! I thought excitedly.

"You've no right to them, Shura," Loran said tiredly. "Not after what you've done. A half-dozen villages are closed to us now, thanks to you."

"You know I've stopped draining them to death, Loran. A year ago, more even. They just get sick, blame it on some illness passing through, and we move on. And you know I'm producing more energy than any five other villages put together. With four of the newer machines–"

"And you thought to just come take them."

"I didn't know you'd be here, so I–"

"Exactly. You didn't think to ask, you just thought to take."

Shura was quiet for a moment. "I didn't think–"

"No, you didn't. You *know* the difficulty in empowering the machines' runes. And you know we don't do it here. Not without her."

"No, but you keep the finished ones here. That's all I needed."

Her, I thought, hope blooming in my heart as I heard him say the word. *Does he mean Mother?* But she wasn't *here.*

"We've only one finished machine here," Loran said with a sigh. "Beatrice has taken a turn. We're behind."

Mother! I cried out in my mind.

"How? You must have produced dozens of these over the years."

"They break down," Loran said, frustration in his voice. "They're good for eighteen months, twenty at the most. This entire past year, we've been barely keeping up with replacements. I was hoping to reuse your older machines, in fact. They're... sturdier."

"It was a fierce storm."

"I know, and you were lucky to make it out with what you did. The loss of the machines is regrettable, but I understand. But it's why I don't have the machines to replace the ones you lost."

They were quiet for a moment, and then Shura spoke. "I'd like to see her."

"You know we never let–"

"I know, and I'd like to see her. You know... we have a history."

Another long moment of silence.

"I'll take you," Loran said.

My mind was whirling faster than it ever had before. I returned my consciousness to the Tower, my decision made.

I needed the Axis' full powers.

I would take up the mantle.

I returned to the eighth level, sat in the chair, and reached out again for the cool feeling I'd had before.

It returned slowly, as if it didn't trust me not to leave it again. But then it came in more eagerly, wrapping itself loosely around me again, considering me. It *knew* me, I sensed, knew me from long, long ago somehow.

In my mind, I reached for it.

The feeling reacted. It drew closer around me—not crushingly,

but... lovingly? Possessively? *Bred to this,* it said to me in a wash of old, relaxed emotion. It was the feeling of a power that was never in a hurry, that knew it had all the time in the universe. That *was* all the time in the universe, and just a moment after. That was always hungry, yet always fed just enough. That hated the idea of being chained, but had become endeared to the idea of being guided. *Like few others,* it said. *For reason.*

I suddenly had a great sense of space and time, as if I could see and feel the entire world, for all of its existence past and future. The world was a tapestry, dotted with knots and frayed threads. One knot in particular... it tore the tapestry apart. A knot that pulled on all its adjacent threads, gradually unravelling the entire work. *This,* the power said in my mind. And a sense of a knife, thin and sharp, cutting the knot out. Leaving in its place an empty, yawing gap, but also leaving the rest of the tapestry... damaged. Damaged, but intact. In time, the loose threads could be woven back together. *You,* the power said. I had a sense of fear and unaccustomed urgency. Fear of an Ending of self. Urgency, because the forces arrayed against it were younger, faster, naive. *Us,* it said.

But you are Endings, aren't you? I asked.

If Endings End, what remains? it responded.

I understood. If I accepted its offer, I would not be a normal adherent. I would not live out some number of days until I tired, or grew politically inconvenient, or simply wished a true Ending. Something was coming, something that threatened even the powerful forces of the Axes.

Another vision filled my mind: the Six Axes, each darting in its own direction, but at their center, the common Origin from which the world itself sprang. And around that Origin, a binding, a common desire—but one that was faded and frayed. The Axes' centers strayed from the Origin, permitting the knot that threatened the entire tapestry. Then, a hand, strong and merciless, grasping them all, pulling them back together and re-binding them. *We,* it said, and I had a sense that it meant more than just me and the Axis itself. In my vision, the hand was scarred and burned, yet still it held the Origin in place. *We,* it repeated.

I accept, I thought to it. *I demand it. I* cast the *mantija* rune in my mind.

I Ended, and I Began.

My sense of the Axis uncoiled around me, and dove headfirst into my mind. It remade me, spinning throughout my body. I felt new, and old; incredibly young and indescribably ancient. I felt suffused and empty, my mind parched and overwhelmed, all at once.

In a daze, I opened my eyes, reached up to my neck, and removed my medallion: I was no longer the apprentice of an adherent; I *was* the adherent now. As I pulled it over my head, free of it at last, it disintegrated into a fine mist, and blew away through the Tower's open windows.

Almost instantly, my body convulsed. I lurched forward out of the chair, falling to my knees on the stone floor, retching violently. My head was suddenly pounding with pain, dozens of different voices screaming inside me. I imagine I screamed aloud, because the world felt full of nothing but pain and burning. In the midst of it all, a rune surfaced clearly in my mind, standing out amongst the chaos and pain: *atmintis,* a rune for Memory. I held on to it like an anchor, wrapping myself around it, trying to find *myself* amongst the chaos.



Everything went dark and cool. I was no longer in the Tower, but was instead in an endless darkness that was blessedly free of noise and pain. An old man appeared before me, his face brown and weathered, his long white hair gathered into a tail, much as Kirmin's had been. "Galas?" I asked. I needn't have asked; somehow I *knew*.

"This is a memory construct we developed to help us cope. Suddenly receiving the memories of dozens of adherents, and merging

those with your own original memories, takes some time, and is painful. This helps."

"What is this place?" I asked.

"It isn't a place," he said. "This is your own mind. A quiet corner of it, someplace you can reflect on your memories without pain. This brings some order to the chaos, until your mind fully settles."

"Are you real?"

"I am how you remember me, through the memories you have inherited. I never died, any more than you have or ever will. A quirk of the Sixth Axis is that while it loves Ends, it fears its own End more than anything. When I bound its wild energies into an Axis, I helped ensure that it never *would* end. We, its adherents, help it persist, and we never End either. And that is why there is only ever one of us: we *are* it, in a very real sense, and in a way that is unique amongst the Axes. There is only *room* for one of us. And that is also why it sometimes goes decades without an adherent: when it desires rest, or feels quiescent, it simply declines to raise another of us. It is only when it needs or wants to act more fully in the world that it must anoint a new adherent, giving itself direction and form."

"Kirmin—you, I guess—suggested the Axis had been grooming my family for this moment."

"Something is coming. A Beginning, perhaps, which always teases the Axis's attention. But more likely an End, one the Axis perhaps wishes to hold off. Perhaps something that threatens the Axis itself. But yes, you remember hearing rumors and whispers of a family of witchkind that held themselves apart, that was part of no clan. Wealthy beyond reason, but restrained to having only one child in each generation. Always a daughter. Rumors," he repeated with a shrug, "and whispers. Nothing more, but clearly all true."

"Father always hated that he'd had to take the family name," I said. Thinking of him made me recall his machines, the dark runes etched into the shiny brass surfaces.

"That," Galas said, referring to our shared memory of Father's machines, "is very likely the problem we face."

Galas and I had talked for some while longer. Well, I suppose I technically had spoken to myself in my own mind, but the magic had helped me explore my new memories and past lives. After a time, I sensed it would be safe to return to myself, and I ended the magic. I used the Visitation to return to the library on the Tower's main level, knowing the driežai would clean up the eighth level for me. While there was plenty of work ahead of me, I had one small task that needed doing.

The handwritten book that contained the names of the Sixth Axis's past adherents still lay open on the podium where I'd left it years ago. Flipping through the pages, I found that I could now read them. I knew the language now, the tongue called *Endurian* that was no longer spoken in the world, and had not been for hundreds of years. Past its End, it had become the private language of the Sixth Axis's adherents.

Each page had been written by the adherent themselves, beginning with their name, and containing no more than a few pages of notes and comments. Each was a piece of advice or caution to their successors, and as I read each, I found myself remembering having written them. It was an odd sensation, to be sure.

I turned to a blank page. No ink had touched the pages of this book. Instead, I cast *rašalas,* a rune of Marking, and inscribed my own name onto the top of the page.

Not Daniel Scratch.

The bold, black marks at the top of the page read *Daniel Teisėjas.*

Daniel, the Judge.

CHAPTER 20

The New Adherent

A new sense of power flooding my mind, body, and soul, I used the Axis' magic to take myself to the map table. "Show me my Mother," I ordered. Again, the map table slewed and jittered, but I concentrated, forcing energy into it. Slowly, ever so slowly, it stabilized and zoomed in, showing me the mausoleum where Mother was purportedly buried. "No," I told the table, shaking my head. I looked at the shadow-assistant and said, "Show me my *Mother."*

It flickered and the map table slewed and shook again. Eventually, it came to a stop, zooming out to show the entire continent. The shadow-assistant shook its head, unable to comply.

"Then show me Shura of clan Karal."

This time, the map table complied quickly, eager to obey. Shura was in Withring still, but on the other side of the sprawling town. She seemed to be... yes. It was a section of town given over to warehouses, an area where trade goods came and went. She seemed to be alone, although a section of the building she was in was... blurry. Indistinct.

Good enough.

I cast the Visitation rune, leaving the Tower physically for the first time, and appeared just outside the building.

Its large wooden doors were hanging open, one of them swinging gently back and forth in the subtle breeze that blew through town. I stepped inside, letting my eyes adjust to the dim light. Fortunately, it was a sunny day, and several panes of grimy glass lined the upper portion of the walls, admitting a sickly, grim light.

The large space intended for storage was empty. But it was clear to me it had recently been full and had been rapidly abandoned: small pieces of debris lay everywhere. Chunks of wood from broken transport pallets, short lengths of rope and twine, scattered pieces of broken glass, and more were all cast haphazardly about the room. The dirt floor showed where heavy equipment had recently been dragged about, and thin, parallel ruts showed where carriages and wagons had been brought in, loaded, and rolled back out.

There were two doors on one of the far walls. One sat next to a small glazed window, perhaps an office for a warehouse manager. I checked that one first, and found it as empty as the main area, the only remnant of the former occupants a battered old desk.

The second door led to something more interesting.

As soon as I stepped through, I could feel the Axis hissing in my mind, pulling me back. I stopped in the doorway and cast *apšvietimas,* immediately lighting the room with an intense white glow. The room was fairly large, with another set of large doors on the far side—perhaps this was intended to hold additional merchandise. But whatever it had once been, it was now a prison.

A series of flat iron strips had been folded and bent into a cube perhaps six feet on a side. The strips were as broad as my hand, the spaces between them equally broad. In all, it was an iron latticework clearly designed to contain someone of witchkind. Even at a distance of a dozen feet or more, I could feel the iron tugging greedily at the Axis' power, and feel the Axis glaring and pacing, eager to be away from this threat.

A small pool of dark, dried blood lay in the loose dirt in the center of the cage.

I knew it was Mother's.

An icy fury rose in me. I turned and walked back into the main area, scanning it again for clues. *Anything* that could help lead me to

my mother. I pulled the illumination magic with me, brightly lighting the entire open space. A glint on the floor caught my eye, and I quickly walked over to examine it.

It was a scorched piece of metal. It didn't pull at me as the iron cage had, so I reached down to pick it up. Brass, from the weight and from the color of the one undamaged side. Turning it slowly in my hands, it seemed as if it had been ripped from some larger piece: three sides were jagged and blackened. An explosion, perhaps?

As I turned it in my hands, I saw that a rune had been carved into its surface:



A memory slammed into my mind: I'd seen this before, etched into the medallions of the mourners, whose ceremony I'd interrupted so many years before. The mausoleum where my mother was ostensibly buried, and where I'd first laid eyes on Loran—though I hadn't known it at the time.

But what was the connection to my Mother?

I slipped the fragment into a coat pocket, and continued looking for more clues, anger still pumping through my body. There wasn't much else to see, just pieces of wood, rope, and glass everywhere.

"I see Loran wasn't just being paranoid."

I whirled, hands up and ready to cast magic, and saw Shura standing in the broad, open doorway where one door still creaked lazily back and forth in the breeze. "Shura," I growled.

She raised one eyebrow at that. "You have the advantage of me," she said carefully. Her fingers twitched, and I knew she was preparing magic of her own.

"I do," I agreed, not offering her my name. "You held a woman prisoner here. Where is she?"

Her face registered confusion for a brief moment, before settling back into an even, confident expression. "*That's* what you're worried about?"

"I'll have time to worry about the rest of your crimes after you've returned the woman to me."

Too much. Or at least too much of the wrong thing; I'd never played this role before and the look on Shura's face told me that I'd given her something. "Are you with the Taryba?" asked. "The Council has nothing to worry about here."

"Kidnapping a woman of witchkind? Draining humans in groups until they die, and then burning the bodies? I think the Council had plenty to worry about."

"You said *return.* She's no Council member. She's no relation to a Council member. She's no relation to *anyone.* What do you mean by *return* her to you?"

The anger finally grew hot in my stomach, boiled up through my chest, and burst out of my mouth: "*She is my mother!*"

Shura's eyes grew wide, and her fingers twitched toward me. A lance of hot, burning pain stabbed through my right thigh. I cried out, falling to the ground. Kirmin would have been furious with me, furious that I hadn't spent more time snapping the Shroud into place as quickly as possible. I brought it up now, just in time to watch a second attack splash against it and fade into nothingness.

I cast *smaigas,* three tiny black spikes of power launching from my fingertips. My aim was poor, hindered by the throbbing pain in my leg. All three spikes went wide, missing Shura completely. I laid one hand on my injured thigh and cast *išgyti,* a simple but powerful rune that would begin to slowly stitch my flesh back together. It required an immense amount of magic, but little in the way of concentration or attention, so it was perfect in a case like this.

Shura's expression had turned to guarded surprise at both my defense and subsequent attack. She took a step backwards and muttered something, but she was too far away to hear. I longed to End her, longed to scrub her from the face of the world along with

everyone she was in league with. But I couldn't: the iron cage is clearly what had hid Mother from my map table, and Loran—the only other member of clan Karal I could identify—seemed to be similarly obscured. Shura was my only link to them, and I needed her alive.

She turned and ran back through the doorway into the street.

I roared, dropping the Shroud and taking a step to run after her. But the healing magic hadn't yet had time to do its full job, and with a stab of pain in my leg, I fell to the dirt, bits of glass gouging my hands as I caught myself.

I roared again, and some dark, buried instinct took over, lashing out. But I was no mere eighteen year-old boy: I was the adherent of the Sixth Axis of power, the embodiment of Endings. Another young man my age might have screamed curses, or even hurled a last, futile attack against the fleeing woman. But me? I lashed out with the ancient, bitter power of my Axis.

The building Ended.

Its walls didn't so much crumble as they did blow away in a cloud of dust. In less than a moment, the only thing left was the iron lattice-work cage, now showing a fine layer of orange rust on every surface. I could feel the iron grow hot even at this distance as it pulled some of my magic into the ground, nullifying it.

I felt a... *cracking* in my soul. It was the strangest sensation, and one I've never been able to fully describe. Imagine that you are standing on a thick bed of granite, and a quake comes. The ground roils and shudders, hard enough to crack the very stone upon which you stand. And the crack continues upward, splitting you through the spine, rolling up until your very skull cracks.

That's approximately how I felt. Disoriented and hurting, I looked up, casting my eyes around for any sight of Shura, but the streets surrounding the building were empty.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let my magic whisk me back to the Tower.

My home was in chaos.

Shadowy driežai were flickering everywhere, scurrying around the Tower as if they were a hive of bees who'd had a stick shoved into their hive. The building itself was shaking, and I could dimly sense the sea outside chopping and frothing.

"What's happening?"

A memory smashed into my mind.

I was Baldochowska, an ancient adherent of the Sixth, asked to render judgement on a young couple who wished to marry across clan lines. Jealous of the young man and enraptured with his bride to be, I denied their claim, fully intending to seek the woman's favor for myself.

I was Jeramy Kuziakow, a more recent adherent, asked to End a virulent plague that had all but laid waste to the witchkind of a small inland village. I learned that the plague was spread by humans, who weren't affected by it themselves. Full of arrogance, I simply Ended the entire village, murdering almost five hundred humans and a hundred witchkind, but stopping the plague in its tracks.

I was Duena Salomon, who Ended the family who'd been so mean to her before her Choosing and ascension.

I was Lucerne Zdunowski, who Ended the tenure of an entire Council because they'd refused to let her build a residence away from the Tower.

I was every adherent who'd ever Judged selfishly, every adherent who'd ever taken the Axis' power for themselves, every adherent who'd ever unleashed an Ending without just cause.

As the memories faded and my senses returned, I could feel a throbbing deep, deep below the Tower. Something that cried out in pain and remorse, something that was broken and could never be fully repaired. Wearily, I took up the Visitation magic and took myself deep into the Tower's roots.

I found myself standing in a deep, dark, damp cavern. I could feel the pressure in my ears, telling me I was well below the ocean floor. The sound of gently trickling water surrounded me. It would have been peaceful, had it not been for the sharp keening sound that cut through the space, drilling into my ears and vibrating my teeth.

The space was lit with a dim, diffuse blue light, revealing a soaring

pillar rising high above me and vanishing into the darkness. When I say 'pillar,' you may imagine some decorative structure perhaps four or five feet across, but no. This pillar was as wide as the Tower itself, and it was only because I was standing so far back from it that I could perceive the curve of its surface.

I took several long steps closer.

It was made of what appeared to be utterly seamless black granite, shot through with thin white marbling here and there. It gleamed with wetness, and as I stepped up to it and laid a hand on it, I could feel the cold, salty water coating it.

Something caught my eye. A jagged edge of sorts, an imperfection in the otherwise flawless surface. I ran my hand over it, and could feel the hairline crack.

I was Galas, Archon and First Adherent of the Sixth Axis. I bound the Axis, and then used its power to take revenge on the humans who had killed my family.

I looked up, and realized that the pillar was full of these small imperfections, these tiny cracks, these minuscule monuments to abuses of the Axis' power. A thousand memories teased at the back of my mind, offering to drown me in my predecessors' mistakes, but I pushed them aside as something else caught my eye. It was a faint gleam, a place where newly raw granite caught the dim blue light, reflecting down on me.

The keening sound faded and the cavern grew peacefully quiet, the sound of trickling seawater the only thing breaking the utter silence.

I knew that the new crack far above was mine. My mistake. My moment of rage. My indiscretion.

I stepped back and looked at the pillar with new eyes. Its flawless surface, its implacable strength, was riddled with a web of mistakes and faults, each one a consequence of an all-too-human adherent who, for a brief moment, played the role of a god. In time, with enough such mistakes, this pillar would shatter, and the Tower above come crashing down.

I—we, all of the adherents—could do wrong. And there were consequences for our mistakes.

The need to find my mother, to exact revenge on Karal, still smoldered in my heart. But it was now tempered with the weight of my position, the consequences that would outlive even me. I still needed to find her, needed to End what the clan was doing—but I needed to do it right.

Sobered, I took myself back to the Tower above.

CHAPTER 21

Sins of the Father

I collapsed into a chair in the main workroom, wondering what to do next. A trip to the map table was probably in order, to see where Shura had gotten off to, but for the moment I just felt exhausted.

I felt something digging into my side, and remembered the metal fragment I'd stashed in my coat pocket. I pulled it out, turning it over and over again in my hands, running my fingers through the engraved lines of the rune.

I'd *seen* this before. Not just on the mourners' medallions, but... someplace. Where?

Another memory crashed into my mind.

I must have been five, maybe six years old. My head was just above the doorknob that I was turning, opening the door that led down into Father's basement workshop. That young, Father still tolerated my visits now and again. Barely.

As I carefully climbed down the steep, rickety wooden staircase, I could hear Father's voice. Was he talking to someone? I didn't pay any attention: I was focused entirely on holding the worn wooden

handrail with both hands, easing myself down sideways one step at a time.

In stories, basements are always dark, damp, scary places, full of dust and bugs. Not so in the house: Father had scattered dozens of *amžinai ryškus,* globes of semipermanent magical light, all over the place. His basement was brightly lit, carefully organized, and ruthlessly clean. Through the lens of memory, I could almost smell the *švarus* runes working, eliminating dust and tiny pieces of debris, leaving the basement almost spotless.

To a child's eyes, Father's basement was a wondrous place. His machines were tall, shiny cylinders of brass and bronze, each one sporting a dozen or more elegantly shaped rods and levers. Meticulous engravings picked out the cylinders' curves and indentations, making them seem even more magical and mysterious than they already were. Highlighted on each cylinder, carved deeply into the brass atop each one, was a series of runes. My adult eyes, reviewing the memory as one might review the books of a shipping company, picked out the most prominent rune on each. It sat in the middle of a complex rune construct, and was filled with a shiny black substance, lending it a stark contrast against the brass around it:



The same rune I'd seen on those medallions. The same rune that was on the piece of brass I'd picked up in Withring.

"I'm telling you, it's driving me mad."

Father's voice, coming from a far corner of the basement. My six year-old self rounded a workbench and caught sight of Father's back, but ventured no further. He'd been growing angrier of late, less willing for his son or wife to visit him in his domain. He was hunched

over a smaller bench that was tucked up against the stone wall of the house's foundation, his body mostly blocking a flickering glow that came from whatever sat on the bench in front of him.

"Stick with it, Neville. Your designs are almost perfect. The machine you brought us last month is working perfectly, in fact." Another voice, this one an older man's.

"What do you mean almost perfect?" Father's voice was irritated, now.

"We're having trouble duplicating your work," the other voice said.

"Your clumsy workers, Loran," Father snapped.

"They're as precise as you, Neville, but we can't get the central rune to empower. The entire construct is absolutely lifeless. It refuses to take any energy. We've had a dozen people try, including myself."

Father was quiet for a moment. Then: "It's her."

"What do you mean?"

"The central rune... it's hers. *Her* rune. You know of her... hobby? Her disgusting pastime?"

"The humans?"

"Yes, the humans. They're all twisted, the women in this family. My mother-in-law communes with animals, Loran. Keeps a flock of birds about the place at all times. Says she can draw magic from them, more than she could Gather on her own."

"What's that got to do with your wife?"

"Beatrice *always* loved being around humans. Dressing like them, going out to parties with them. Once we married and they—you!—forced me to come live here though, Beatrice has been... lethargic. Barely stirs herself. Won't even try teaching runes to the boy."

"I'm not following."

"She draws magic from humans, Loran! Don't you understand? I don't know how, don't know how it's even possible, since humans ground magic. But somehow, she does. When she's around them, she's full of energy. Full of *magic.* Not that she knows how to use it, ignorant lazy cow that they raised her to be."

"Sacred vows, Neville, she's still your wife."

"Only because you arranged it. Only because you suspected some-

thing about their magic. The women's magic. Only because you *wanted* it."

"And because *they* wanted *you.* This obsession they have with lineages and matches. Is the boy remarkable in any way?"

"Quiet and bookish. Stays out of my way mostly, thank the powers. She fusses over him constantly, first boy-child the family has had in a dozen generations."

"No sign of... odd magic?"

"He's six, Loran, of course not."

"So the rune is tied to her, then."

"It would seem. I can empower it, but she's just upstairs when I do so."

"So we'll have to have all the machines... made there?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You know that old woman's spirit is still here, and the house obeys her alone. You'd never find the place, and I can't keep lugging them down to the village for you. Besides, I can't produce these things in any kind of quantity, I'm working in a basement."

"I see." Both voices were quiet for a long while. Then: "What are the chances we could get her out of the house?"

"With the old woman still here? Practically zero," Father snorted. "Though I'd welcome the quiet, especially if you could steal the boy away as well."

"No chance?"

"Not without a team of Proctors," Father scoffed.

"Hmm. They'd need a warrant. Has she done anything illegal?"

"*You're* the one who—ah, never mind. No. She's innocent as a child. Just... I'll keep working. Maybe I can modify the rune somehow, come up with a variant that doesn't require her presence to empower."

"Yes." Loran's voice was thoughtful. "You do that. I have... another idea in mind. I'll work on that on my end. Tell me... has she been *stable?"*

"Stable? I suppose. She just cossets the boy, reading him stories, and sleeps all day. She's not dangerous, if that's what you mean."

"I'm going to have Lystia send you a rune construct. It may...

unbalance your wife. She shouldn't become dangerous, but it might be enough to open some other opportunities."

Silence. "Ah," Father's voice said at last. "I see where you're going."

"Keep working on the rune."

"I will."

I shifted my weight, *crunching* on a stray bit of wood that the cleaning magic hadn't yet eliminated. Father turned. "What're you—I'll speak with you later," he snapped. He stood and walked toward me, his face twisted in anger and menace.

The memory ended.

I blinked as the memory faded. Was this always going to happen to me? How had any prior adherent managed to stay sane, with their brains constantly running away from them? I thought about it for a moment, and then cast the Memory rune again. The world faded slowly to black, and Galas appeared before me. He said nothing, looking evenly at me, waiting for me to speak.

"This memory thing... how does it work?" I asked at last.

"The Axis contains the complete memories of every adherent. Well... mostly complete. There are gaps, somehow, but I don't know how. But when you experience something, when you need to remember something, those memories will surface."

"Will it always be so... much?"

He laughed. "No, once the memories have integrated with you in a few days, it'll feel more natural. They'll only be overwhelming if it's something significant or especially strong."

"But what I just did, what I just saw—those weren't the Axis' memories. They were mine."

"Your memories *are* the Axis' memories. It contains all the memories of *every* adherent. Including you."

"*I* don't even remember those things, though!"

"You do. When we're alive, our memories are... difficult. You don't remember being born, right? Don't remember your first tooth falling out, don't remember the first time you fell down. But the Axis does. It

remembers all of it, and it can share those memories with you. Everything Ends, Daniel. Everything except the memories of the Axis. It's a record of us all." He paused for a moment, and then frowned. "Or it should be. We never should have been able to lose track of your Book, for example. So now I... wonder."

His frown deepened, and he faded away. The blackness faded with him, leaving me alone again in the library.

Food. I needed food, and then I needed to find my mother.

CHAPTER 22

A Clan Obsession

My magic took me to the map-room. It had all finally come together: the reason behind Father's constant anger and abuse. The reason for Mother's distractedness and lethargy. The rune that clan Karal had based their entire enterprise around. And the reason they'd somehow arranged for Mother to be taken to Witchhold, where they could abduct her.

Now I just needed to find them all.

Fortunately, I'd just been given the key to doing so.

"Show me everyplace this rune appears on anything larger than a medallion," I ordered, picturing the rune in my mind.

The map table zoomed out, showing the entire continent. Small green motes of light lit up, strung across most of the continent. They followed the trail of the humans' iron roadway, crossing the continent from east to west, designating all of the tiny hamlets and villages along the way. They traced out the coasts, highlighting all the small fishing villages and coastal settlements. Not a single green light appeared over any major city or town, save one: Withring.

They'd been there all along.

A collection of bright green dots were clustered in a single building near the center of the town. As I zoomed in, I could see it

was a human structure, used for some sort of government function. They'd retreated to a hidden space, then.

No matter.

Nothing could stop me from getting to Mother.

I appeared in Withring a block or so away from my target. I came in person; accessing private hidden spaces in my incorporeal form was problematic unless I knew someone specific I could target. Since neither Mother nor Loran qualified, obscured from my magic as they were, I'd have to enter the same way as anyone else would. Besides, the leg still throbbed from where Shura had hit me, and I had a new sense of caution about the whole situation.

The street was busy this time of day, government functionaries and ordinary citizens scurrying to and fro on their business. The building I was after looked to be the offices of several local trade councils, and a steady stream of human guildsmen and merchants streamed in and out. I scanned the building quickly, and spotted the discreet entry-rune carved into a wall, above what looked like a document deposit box of some kind.

I didn't approach the rune immediately, though. Instead, I stood for almost half an hour, watching closely. Two people entered the hidden space in that time, both dressed in simple working-man's garments that blended in perfectly with the crowd around them. Both simply strolled up to the deposit box as if they planned to walk right by it, reached out at the last minute to touch the entry-rune, and vanished.

My heart was pounding. I had no idea where that rune would land me, but I had to assume Shura had already alerted the rest of Karal. Still, I was the adherent of the Sixth, wasn't I? Attacking me certainly felt like a valid reason to aggressively defend myself, if not End my attacker outright. And at this point, with Mother all but in my grasp, I had little reason not to just End everyone who stood in my way.

No *little* reason. I did have a huge reason though, in the pillar that

held up the Tower. I wasn't sure what how much more damage that could weather, or what the consequences would be if I passed that limit. I wasn't especially eager to find out.

Avoid unnecessary Endings, then or at least unjustified ones. I gathered my power around me, prepared to cast my Shroud, and walked across the street. Nobody paid the slightest bit of attention as I strode up to the deposit box, touched the rune, and found myself whisked inside.

I was met by two guards, both of whom launched attacks at me almost immediately, shouting for assistance. Both attacks withered and died against my Shroud, and both attackers went down in screams as black spikes pierced their kneecaps.

They'd live.

The entry foyer led to a single hallway that looked to run the length of the hidden space. I could see doors almost evenly spaced along the right-hand side, with a single door on the entirety of the left-hand side. That door opened and four more people spilled out. They'd apparently practiced for this, because two of them immediately dropped to their knees, casting low attacks, while the other two cast high attacks over the comrades' heads. All died on my Shroud, and I saw four sets of eyes widen in surprise and sudden fear.

They had no idea who they were dealing with.

A single Greater Spike flew down the hallway, filling most of the space and bowling all four of my attackers over. Smears of blood on the walls and floor told me they'd been seriously injured, but I didn't feel the Axis respond to anything like a death. Fine. I lowered my arms and panted—Kirmin hadn't been kidding, the Greater Spike took a bit of effort—and strode down the hallway.

I Ended the first two doors on my right, blowing them away into dust, but they contained only small offices. Next was the door my most recent attackers had come out of. It was a vast, dark space, and so I cast light into it.

It housed a half-dozen of Karal's brass machines, each in various stages of completion. They were circled around another iron lattice-work cage, in which lay a pale, honey-haired woman dressed in a ragged blue frock. Her head rose at my entrance, her expression

quickly changing from dull and tired to hopeful and surprised. As she took me in, her eyes grew wider and wider, seeming to fill half her face. Those dull, purple eyes slowly brightened as Mother recognized her son.

"Daniel," she whispered. She struggled for a moment, and then finally raised herself to her knees. I saw the reason for her struggle: she was missing a hand.

"Your hand," I said slowly, taking a step toward the cage. The Axis moaned and tugged me back, wanting nothing to do with the deadly metal.

"Taken, and buried in a mausoleum," she whispered, her voice cracked and weary. That explained the map table's behavior, and why the Axis had kept taking me there. With Mother obscured by iron, her hand had been the only thing the magic could connect to.

"I'm taking you out of here," I said grimly, dropping the Shroud and focusing my concentration and will. I ordered the Axis to End the iron cage, putting as much determination and intent as I could into my thoughts. The Axis howled, battering itself against the iron. The metal rusted instantly, but it held. Twice more I lashed out, insisting the Axis End this construct of my enemy, and twice more it hurled itself against the bars and drew back, fatigued and afraid.

"You can't, Daniel. It's iron. It draws magic into itself. They have to take me out of here to even use me, but you can't—"

"I am the adherent of the Sixth Axis of Death and Endings," I growled. Her eyes managed to widen more, and her mouth gaped. "I will not be told what I can and cannot do." This time, I smashed at the bars with all my fury, all of the Axis' pain and anger, and everything else I could muster. I screamed as power rushed from me, pouring into the unforgiving iron. I could see the metal glowing red in some places as my magic heated it, and then—

Nothing.

It wasn't enough. I put my hands on my knees, bent over and panting. "Let me–" I started, and then something smashed into my back.

I caught myself, wrenching one wrist painfully, and then rolled onto my back to face my new attacker.

Attackers. Four more had pushed through the door, their hands raised toward me. I could sense their magic building as I again threw up my Shroud for protection. Eight invisible attacks thudded against the Shroud, their kinetic energy Ended by the Axis' power. I half-formed a thought to End them all, when a voice in my head objected.

They've done nothing wrong, you broke into their property.

I panted slightly, the wind still knocked out of me. I looked up at them as they readied their next attack. "Release the woman," I ordered.

"Never!" one of them cried.

I smiled. "Then I judge you guilty of kidnapping her," I said, and unleashed the Axis. All four crumbled to dust in a sudden, cold wind.

I turned back to Mother. "I need to get something to physically break the cage," I said. I reached behind me and with a flick of magic, closed the door leading into the room. Another quick thought Ended the separation between door and wall, sealing the two of us in. "That will hold them for a bit, until they break through," I said. "But–"

"Daniel, no," she said softly. She reached toward me, careful not to touch the iron, but even so it was clear that it was robbing her of her life. "Forget about me. I was dead to you years ago, let me remain that way. But stop them."

"I'm not even sure what they're doing, other than draining humans," I said, levering myself back to my feet. "These machines–"

"The rune that powers them is my soul-rune, Daniel. Something the women of my family, clanless as we are, all possessed. Mine connects me to the humans, somehow. Your father"—and here, both her voice and expression grew bitter—"learned it from me, learned to use it to make his machines. They take power from humans, Daniel. Not sips, but great amounts. They're storing it, hoarding it for some purpose." She shook her head and slumped back onto her heels. "The iron kills me a little more every day, Daniel. This," and she held up the stump where her hand had been, "has been infected for years, taking what magic I could hoard to keep it from killing me. But I'm tired. I can't go on much longer."

"I'll End the building," I promised, although I knew I couldn't. It would kill countless innocent humans at the same time.

"You have to *go,* Daniel," she said. "Those were only the workers they had *here.* They have many, many more. They–"

A sound like the tearing of rock shattered through the air, and I whirled to see the entire wall coming apart. As the dust settled, I saw a dozen or more grim-faced people, all dressed in black leathers, all eyeing me cautiously. I sensed their magic, poised and ready to strike.

"Daniel!" Mother shouted behind me.

I reactivated my Shroud.

Blasts of light burst forth from a dozen pairs of hands, flying—

Past me.

I looked to one side, wondering how they all could have—

A searing pain blasted through my left shoulder. The Shroud didn't surround me! Their attacks had rebounded off the wall behind me, or been steered somehow, to hit me from behind. Even as I realized it, another pierced my right calf, another my left thigh, and a fourth my abdomen. I screamed, collapsing to the ground. I felt the Shroud snap out of existence, my concentration boiled away by the pain that was tearing through me.

I spared one last, agonized look at Mother, and let the Axis take me home.

I collapsed onto the floor of the Tower's entry foyer, the driežai swarming over me in a solid mass of shadow. I could feel them directing the Tower's magic, felt a cool, soothing power flow through my wounds. *Restauravimas,* a memory told me. The Restoration, a magic rarely called upon, but designed to restore an adherent to full physical function. I couldn't be killed exactly, but I could be incapacitated and potentially even kept that way, which was worse.

Rarely used?

Few adherents act so rashly, my memories suggested.

True enough. I'd forgotten that while I had access to effectively unlimited power, I had no experience. No skill. No *ability.* Things my attackers had in abundance, despite their sharply limited access to magic. Experience and skill trumped power every time, a truism I'd

read in tale after tale all my life, but evidently hadn't taken fully to heart.

Well, there'd be no more mistakes like that. As the Tower's magic finished its work, I pushed myself off the floor. The driežai began silently scouring my blood from the pale stones, and I withdrew my Book from my coat pocket. I flipped to the page that covered the Shroud, read the crabbed handwriting that covered the page, and shook my head. I'd thought as much.

I put the Book away and took myself to the very top turret of the Tower.

I needed help.

CHAPTER 23

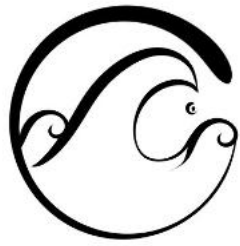
The Conclave

On your own, the adherent may invoke the Forms of our brother Axes.

Doing so at length will attract those Axes,
Who will often dispatch their adherents to investigate.
Should your use of their borrowed power be just,
They will join you in your Defense.

Taken right from my Book, something I'd learned shortly after Kirmin's fourth lesson. I withdrew the Book now, opening it to that passage, and reviewed the runes that invoked the other Axes' minor Forms of Defense.

First, the *potvynio siena,* the shield of Sea that could stunt almost any physical attack. I faced North, and summoned its rune into my mind, feeding it the Axis' power:



The sea roared up before me, forming a wall of water that foamed and sprayed at its edges. Next, *priešgaisrinis skydas,* cast to the east. The Axis of Flame's Form of Defense, it took the form of a cyclone of fire that darted back and forth, ready to intercept any attack.



Next, the defense of Sky, cast to the south: *audra,* the deceptively simple and almost invisible shield of swirling, spinning air. In the event of attack, it would condense into an all-but-impenetrable wall of protection.



Finally, the Axis of Earth: *molinė siena,* cast to the west. Rocky spires jutting up from the ocean floor, braiding through each other to form a literal wall of earth.



My island was now surrounded by raw elemental shields, and the sound of roaring water, rushing air, and crackling flame almost drowned out my own thoughts. They did not, however, drown on the magically amplified sound of four hands hammering at the Tower's front door.

My company had arrived.

I dropped the magic and took myself to the foyer to greet them.

"This is ridiculous. It's exactly the sort of high-handed *meddling* that we all feared the Sixth would engage in!" Zmogus had been largely unsupportive of offering me any help, which I'd expected based on what he'd said during his visit. "This puts every Axis in danger, puts all of witchkind in danger!"

I'd taken a few moments to seat my guests, explained that my concern was quite urgent—I felt certain they'd already moved Mother to another location, and tracking her down again might be difficult—and that I desperately needed their help.

I'd explained the situation with clan Karal, and how they'd created machines that drained power from humans, storing it for some unknown future need, and in at least some cases killing the humans involved. In all cases, making humans sick at the least. I'd explained how my own mother's soul-rune was the key to it all, and how they needed her physical presence to fully empower their machines.

"End your mother," Zmogus had snapped. "Seems simple enough."

I'd held my tongue and my considerable anger in check, and told

him that Karal had been doing this for at least five years, probably closer to eight, and had doubtless amassed incredible stores of magical energy—all for reasons unknown.

"Witchkind store magic against future need all the time," Mesla had informed me, a dour expression on her face. "So one clan got good at it, big deal." This from someone with effectively unlimited magic, who didn't see that the problem wasn't the storing of power, it's where they were getting it, and what they planned to do with it all.

I'd pulled out the last argument I could think to muster, one that had seemed to impress at least Kirmin and Mr. Nash: "Do any of you know anything about my family? Not just me. Not just my mother, Beatrice. My grandmother, Constance. My great-grandmother, Patience. My great-great–"

"Nobody cares who your stupid family–" Zmogus began to interrupt.

"-grandmother Pranasa," I shouted over him.

The room got very quiet.

"You said soul-rune?" Debesi asked softly, the first thing she'd said since arriving.

"She said it had something to do with being clanless," I said. "I don't understand it, but–"

"Clan members identify themselves primarily with a clan rune. It's part of their being, and part of what binds them together deeper than blood ties. But the clanless obviously don't have them. Clanless people of witchkind are—unattached, in a very literal way," Mesla supplied.

"But some identify themselves as... something else. More than themselves, but not part of a clan," Gilioj mused, stroking his chin.

"They have a soul-rune," Debesi finished.

Even Zmogus seemed subdued.

"People said that the women in my family had *odd* magic," I offered.

"I can see that," Debesi said. Then she shook her head. "But I still don't see the need for our involvement. Or even yours, although that's your decision obviously."

"We don't interfere," Zmogus growled, his attitude returning to

normal. "We aren't the Taryba, we aren't the Proctors, we aren't the Inquisition." He slapped the workroom table. "Take this to them."

"There's really nothing we could even do," Gilioj said. "We're not... antagonists. We don't fight battles."

"Especially when *humans* are the only ones being harmed," Zmogus muttered.

"Fine, I'll End them all," I said, my voice cold and flat.

Debesi paled slightly, and said, "That's within your bailiwick, Daniel. But I don't think you will."

She was right. "Gilioj, you asked me what I knew of witchkind, what I knew of humans. If I knew anything about the people I'd be impacting. Right?" He nodded, but refused to meet my eyes. "I know they'd rather not be dead. Rather not be sick. I was in one village where the sick humans were already starting to blame magic." Everyone's heads snapped up at that. Ah, that had their attention? "That's right. One of their *priests* suggested it." The human church had always been one of the driving forces behind the Hunts.

The other four adherents exchanged glances with each other.

"I could see a need to at least understand the potential impact of what Karal is doing," Gilioj said slowly, looking to his colleagues to gauge their reactions to his words.

Zmogus shrugged and frowned even more deeply.

"A threat against the Veil is the domain of the Proctors," Debesi said, although she sounded uncertain.

"A threat against all of witchkind is the domain of us all," Gilioj said softly. "If this suspicion of magic has spread, Thornwaithe's may already be aware."

I pounced on their concern. "Mesla, you could draw the building down into the Earth, draw the iron away from my mother, without even touching it. Zmogus, you could defend us with fire, or Debesi, you with Sky. Any of you could–"

"We're back to your mother, *boy,"* Zmogus barked, startling Debesi enough that she almost tipped her chair over. "So is this about your mother, or about the Veil? About witchkind, or the humans? Hmm?"

I ground my teeth. "I won't End my own mother," I said, my jaw still clenched.

He shrugged. "Your call. It's her soul-rune that caused all this, from what you're telling me."

And my father. And even my grandparents, with their obsession on managing their family tree. And even–.

Wait a minute.

I stood, and gave each of them a hard stare before saying, "Thank you for your time. I apologize for summoning you out of turn. It won't happen again." I turned to leave the room, figuring they could find their own way out.

"Daniel, what are you going to do?" Debesi asked, standing and taking a step toward me.

I turned to face her. "I'm Ending the rune." And with that, I concentrated, ordering the Axis to ensure the thing no longer existed in any form. I felt the Axis spin away with a feeling of... glee? as it removed every trace of the rune from the world. I felt nothing more than a brief shudder.

"That's probably a bad–" Mesla began.

"It's done," I snapped. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to go see to my mother."

CHAPTER 24
Mother

Swift as thought, I returned to Withring, taking myself directly to the room where Mother had been caged. Miraculously, she was still there, although there were four guards around her. My Shroud snapped into place, and I raised one hand to fire spikes at the guards. They reacted more quickly than I'd thought possible, throwing up their own glowing shields and firing bright lances of energy at me. Their attacks died on my defense, but their own defenses managed to deflect my spikes. One of the guards pointed a finger at Mother, and his intention was clear: they couldn't touch me, but she was defenseless.

Something *thumped* me in the back, knocking me forward a step but doing no damage. I turned, and saw two more guards moving through the rubble that had once been a wall. My Book had confirmed that the Shroud could cover me completely, but it required constant visualization on my part to maintain. I'd never practiced that, and with my blood pounding hot in my ears, this wasn't exactly the easiest time to master the skill. I sent more spikes toward these two new attackers, forcing them to dodge and raise their own shields.

A lance of pain burned in my back—insufficient to seriously injure me, but enough to distract me. I'd let the Shroud go thin behind me, and three of the guards near Mother's cage were

advancing slowly, their shields still raised. Snarling, I reached for the Axis' power, holding the rune for Ending in my mind.

Suddenly, a rush of cold wind from behind me blasted the four of them to the floor. A moment later, the rock of the floor itself curled up around their heads, holding them fast.

I turned and saw Mesla and Debesi standing there. "We have mothers too," Debesi said softly. "Even if Zmogus was born of a dying worm," she added in a mutter. Debesi had already turned to the other two attackers, another blast of wind pushing them back through the broken wall and into the hallway.

Mesla gestured toward Mother's cage, a look of intense concentration on her face. "This isn't easy, even at a bit of a distance," she forced out between gritted teeth. Slowly, the stone of the floor reached up and grasped the iron bars, pulling them slowly apart. Then, all at once they finally let go, the cage ripping in half with a fierce clanging noise.

"That'll attract some attention," Debesi said calmly. Mesla nodded, gestured behind her, and rock debris began crawling up to reform the walls. Debesi waved her arms and I felt a wall of solidified air establish itself between us and the reforming wall.

"Thank you," I said softly. Then I turned toward Mother.

"Ah-ah," Debesi said behind me, and a softer gust of wind blew through the remains of the cage, carrying Mother clear of the iron and settling her at my feet.

I knelt beside her. Her face was waxen, her eyes dull, and her breathing shallow. "Mother?"

"Daniel," she whispered, her lips attempting a smile. She coughed, and a mix of blood and spittle was lost in her dirty, torn, stained frock. "You came back."

"I Ended the rune, Mother," I said, tears starting to stream from my face. "They can't use you any more."

"Ah," she said with a small cough. "That explains it. It felt like... it felt like my very center went missing. My magic is gone. The iron... the iron took what was left."

My heart almost stopped and I felt something icy and hard clench at my guts. "Mother..." I choked, my eyes filling with tears. "Have I killed you?"

"No, no, my dear," she said, coughing harder this time. I could see flecks of blood on her lips. "The rune was part of who I am, but not all of me. But... I was already dying, my love. I've been in their cages for years, drugged asleep whenever they needed to move me. Drugged more when they needed me out to empower their machines. Using what little magic the iron left to me to keep the infection at bay." She waved her stump weakly. "Daniel, I've longed for it to end. Ending my rune may have sped it up, but I wasn't long anyway."

"I'm sorry about Father," I sobbed.

She shook her head. "Don't be. The man pretended to be something he wasn't just to get into our family. For our secrets. And Mother—your grandmother—wanted him for what she thought he could bring us." She smiled weakly. "You. Turns out she was right." She coughed again, and this time the blood was a thick gloss that pooled on her lips.

"I missed you," I said softly through the tears.

"And I you, my love. But you've become what you were born to be. The boy I was born to bear."

I cried for a few minutes more, my tears falling onto her face and mingling with her own.

"Daniel," she said eventually, her voice cracked and weaker. "Daniel, it's time."

"I can't, Mother." I was shaking now, and I could sense Debesi behind me starting to push at her air-shield a bit more. Karal was attempting to get back in.

"You can, my dear. For me." She smiled again, and for a moment her face was filled with the gentle, pure beauty I'd remembered. Her eyes glowed again, bright and dancing. "I love you."

I nodded, to choked for words. And, with a nudge to the Axis, I Ended her life. She drew one last ragged breath, smiled gently, and closed her eyes. She was, finally, at peace.

Debesi and Mesla said a short, respectful goodbye, and then left.

I knelt there for several long minutes, looking at my mother's tired, drawn face. Behind me, I could hear more people arriving and beginning to batter at the rock wall that separated us.

A hot, boiling anger began rising in my chest. This clan and their

machines had taken *everything* from me. They'd kept me from having a father who loved his family. They'd taken Mother from me, caged her and ruined her magic. They threatened all of witchkind.

There will be regret, a voice inside me said as I began to picture *demonų minios,* the rune of the Demon Horde. Kirmin's memories flickered through my mind. *Imprecise,* the voice said. It wasn't discouraging me, just reminding me. It was the voice of memory, not of judgement. I had no one to guide me now, no one but myself.

Then I remembered. The rune Kirmin hadn't known, the one I'd found in my book.

Giltinė, the Reaper.



I forced my mind to be clear, ruthlessly pushing aside my fiery hatred and anger. I held the rune firmly in my mind's eye, ensuring it was the only thing in my consciousness. "End the ones who made these machines," I ordered, my voice ringing like the iron that had caged Mother. "End anyone who ever carved her soul rune. End anyone who ever touched her."

The Axis swelled around me, a dark-winged predator and impassionate judge. I could feel sharp, shadowy shapes separate themselves from it, hurtling off to obey my commands. There would be no mindless Horde today. Instead, there would be sharp, precise instruments. Not of death, but of pruning, carefully slicing out a disease from the body of witchkind.

I *felt* them as they set off on their task.

I *felt* them as they sliced through the first of Karal's brass-smiths, one who'd crafted the bodies of the machines.

I *felt* them as they lanced the hearts of the engravers who'd now

forgotten the very rune that they were being punished for once knowing.

I *felt* them as they cut into the mind of a young girl of witchkind, who'd done nothing more than help wash Mother's wounds, who'd brought her food and showed her kindness.

And *touched* her.

I howled in dismay, Mother's lifeless body slumping gently to the battered stone floor as I stood and screamed. *This isn't what I meant!* I roared in my mind.

Precise, a calm, disinterested voice said in my mind. *Targeted.*

The Reapers moved swiftly, spreading across the world in the blink of an eye, bringing Endings to everyone I'd named. Even as I felt those lives stopping, I could feel the shadowy creatures returning to to the Axis, their missions complete.

I howled again, but the passion had drained from me. My cry cut off halfway, ending as a choking sob.

I'd taken up the mantle. I'd become the adherent of the Sixth. I'd exercised the fullest, most terrible of my powers.

But what else had I become?

I gathered up Mother's still form and let the Axis' magic take me away.

CHAPTER 25

Master of the Tower

I returned to the mausoleum where Mother had allegedly been interred, and the witchkind there helped me open her crypt and gently place her body in it, as it was always meant to be. They'd retreated respectfully, leaving me on my knees to pour out my emotions on the ageless, unfeeling stone. I'd stayed for hours uncounted, great wracking sobs alternating with an exhaustion so soul-deep that I'm sure I must have passed out for some time.

Eventually, I'd emptied myself, growing so numb, so tired, that I could actually feel the axis' presence swirling lazily around the hole where my love had once been. *This will pass,* the voice in my mind said. Again, not a voice of reassurance, but a voice of experience. Time and time again, this *had* passed, for untold numbers of adherents before me. It would pass for me as well.

I took myself back to the Tower.

The driežai were even more subdued than normal, sensing my emptiness and giving me space. It was three days—I think; it was hard to tell in the Tower, as always—before I summoned the courage to take myself deep into the Tower's roots again, to look at the damage I knew I must have caused.

The deep new fissure was probably no more visible than any of the others that the Tower's foundation had taken over the millennia,

but it stood out to me. This one was *mine.* My mistake. My overreaction. My untimely Ending of those who'd given no cause. The sensations I'd gotten from the Reapers had come too fast, too hard, but I knew that more than just one innocent, kind young woman had been Ended. It had almost felt like *disappointment* from the Reapers, as if they knew what they'd been asked to do was not wholly right.

I ran my fingers over the fissure, and the sensations returned. More slowly, this time. More deliberate. It gave me time to contemplate every mistake, regret every imprecision.

I will tell you now that I returned to that pillar many times in my life. I ran my fingers over that very fissure again and again. Always, it served to remind me of the terrible, horrific power I directed.

It was a month or more before I ventured forth again.

In that time, a small measure of my soul seemed to return. *This will pass,* the voice had said, and it was correct. Particularly inside the Tower, I could feel even recent events becoming a little fuzzier, a little less present. This was the Axis' magic, its gift to its long-lived, suffering adherents: the gift of distance.

The other adherents contacted me, offering their condolences. Gilioj had reached out to the Taryba, the great Council of witchkind, and filled them in. They'd expressed dismay and fear at Karal's enterprises, and asked all the adherents to help discover what had become of the clan's amassed power, and what they'd intended it for. The others had agreed to hold a monthly conclave at my Tower, and to have all of their fellow adherents keep their eyes and ears open for any clues as to Karal's plans.

I took some time to officially move into the Tower. Now its master and resident, it fell to me to redecorate the large, empty, slightly-charred basement level that would be my private workroom. I created a small sitting area with several bookshelves full of books and a very comfortable chair, but left the rest of the room empty. I had no idea what to do with it.

I'd begun accepting requests for Judgement from the councils of the world, hearing them in the Tower's third-level courtroom. I was rapidly learning more about witchkind society and government, and used the Axis' powers as best I could to benefit everyone.

And I tried to keep track of Loran. It galled me that they were still alive, but apparently they'd never *made* the machines, never actually carved the rune, and never touched Mother. I'd discovered their survival almost by accident: One night, I'd settled in my workroom and idly invoked Whisper Overheard, holding Loran's face and voice in my mind. I'd fully expected the magic to reach out and find nothing, but it had latched on immediately. As it almost always was with the Whisper Overheard, I found myself eavesdropping on a one-sided conversation.

You were right, of course.

No, not a single one. It's clearly an empty spot in the rune sequence, and it's on every machine. And no, nobody remembers anything about that rune. It was clearly... removed. And everyone who'd worked on the machines, everyone who'd cared for her, they're all dead. Across the continent.

No, I don't think anybody knew that was possible. Forgetting, of course. Runes have been forgotten. But taken? Ended? No.

No, I'm aware. I've never heard of the Sixth doing anything like that, have you?

Obviously, yes, a terrible time. But I'm not sure what we could have done to mitigate it. Our guards, those few left alive, swear it was adherents, how were we to expect they'd involve themselves all of a sudden?

Yes, they'll be disappointed. There will be... repercussions.

Yes, well, it's two problems isn't it?

Of course. That's probably the first to deal with.

Well, because it's the only thing in the here and now I think we can deal with. The machines will require a new rune. It took almost a century to stumble across the one we lost, we know that much. Runewrights aren't common, and there was only ever one woman that we know of with that soul-rune, aberrations that she and her family were.

No, he had no idea he was a runewright. That family would never have accepted him if he had known, or if they had found out.

It's hard to say. I wasn't there, but the few survivors—once we chipped them out of the floor—claim it was the new adherent of the Sixth. The black spikes are a tell.

Yes, I know.

It's impossible to say. There isn't–

That's never been successful, but of course. We can try.

Clearly, he understood my role in undoing his clan's work. And just as clearly, they were planning to take some action—likely against me, although in all my memories, ordinary witchkind had never *successfully* countered an Axis in the long term. I toyed with the idea of Ending him, but he was my last link to his clan, and I knew I'd need him to discover their broader plan.

I suspected that Kirmin's distaste for being an investigator was not going to be reflected in my own experience as an adherent. Something was still coming—my Axis had settled somewhat, but I still sensed an anxiety. The disposition of whatever had been taken from the humans, the power collected by Karal's machines. But it all felt as if forces within witchkind were moving to disrupt the world, attempting to shift its very Origin.

I moved myself to one of the Tower's uppermost turrets. They were small, barely more than ten feet across, but they each featured a large, true window. The sea-breeze blew evenly through them as I stood overlooking the sea. I felt the memories of all the adherents before me, who'd shared this same view. I smelled the sea-air for the hundredth time in my life, and for the billionth time, all at once.

I had much ahead of me, and much of that was unknown. But in the past few days I had gained confidence in myself as adherent of the Sixth Axis.

As Master of the Tower.

Epilogue

Yes, well I did tell you that it was quite long.

No, there's a good bit more. But don't you think that's enough for tonight?

Yes, parts of it are sad. But it all worked out.

It's close to dawn, you know. What if we continued tomorrow?

Hah! Yes, I did. Or I thought I did. For a moment, at least.

Yes, I'll tell you about her. Tomorrow.

Of course. I'll see you then.

Master of the Tower

BOOK TWO

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

Foraging

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

The food.

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

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

Abbygail, the brownie leader in my old family home, had been forced to work with a much more limited pantry after Mother had been taken, and at that age, I doubt I'd have appreciated gourmet cooking, even if it had been accessible to us. Those limitations had shaped my culinary world, giving me a fairly stunted food vocabulary and quite a narrow menu of things to ask for: stews, soups, casseroles, the occasional roast, and lots of steamed vegetables. I ate healthily enough, I imagine, but there sure wasn't much variety.

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

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

It just got *boring*.

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

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

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

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

and the human seller was oblivious to it all. He likely thought the shady spot he'd chosen, or some other incidental cause, explained the longevity of his produce.

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

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

My eyebrows twitched. "I don't know that I've ever heard that name for it," I said casually. I had, of course: the True Language of witchkind was our language of history and magic; I'd just never heard its words come from a human's lips.

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

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

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

A Summons.

My mood darkened as the magic swept over me. I could ignore it, of course. Almost any of witchkind could empower the rune that

begged for an audience with the adherent of the Sixth Axis, but they couldn't *compel* my cooperation. Still, I'd gotten into the habit of considering these requests. I let the subtle breeze of the magic gently caress me, drawing in information of the caster's intent.

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

When I first ascended to my full power as an adherent, I answered every Summons that had come my way. I resolved property disputes, political arguments, and more. It had become tiring, especially once I realized how much of witchkind was willing to take the easy way out —the lazy way—and simply ask an Axis to make their decisions for them. As an adherent, that meant *I* decided. They would present their case, I would ask a few questions, and I'd impose Judgment. My Axis enforced my decision, Ending the dispute in a way that no other force in the world could. My petitioners didn't have to negotiate, try to see each other's perspective, or do anything else.

It got boring and more than mildly frustrating.

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

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

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

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

The Axis followed the Summons like a trail, and I appeared outside a small wooden cottage deep in the Great Northern Wood. I'd come here only once before, answering a Summons similar to this one. No humans lived in the Wood; the Woodwitches who called this vast forest home saw to that. They were a quiet, firm lot, living largely solitary lives, as far as I knew. The Wood contained no villages, no towns, not even a small hamlet. The few inhabitants had spread themselves out, building tiny cottages like this one and disturbing as little of the surrounding Wood as possible. They knew, as I did, that the Wood was special. Some said the Wood was where witchkind had originated —where magic had first come into the world.

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

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

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

"I'm eighty," he said gruffly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's magic, this sickness—" He grimaced as a wave of pain seemed to stab into him, and gasped slightly as it subsided. "Not unheard of in these Woods. Incurable, it's sapped my strength. If Jonotan from down the way wasn't stopping by to feed me, I'd already have wasted away." His eyes, clear and intelligent, bored into mine. "I just want to end it."

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

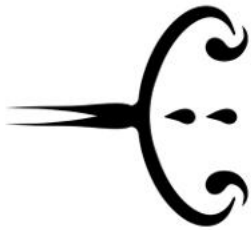
This was the kind of Summons I swore I'd never refuse. People who were dying, who were brushing up against their own Endings but for some reason or another couldn't go further. They suffered, existing in a way they'd never accept as a true life, and were sensible and sane enough to ask for help.

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

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

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

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



The Axis slid forward gently, whirling slowly about the man,

giving him his End.

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

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

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

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

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

They lied.

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

As an apprentice in the Tower, I could only project my spirit beyond the Tower; my physical body was incapable of leaving the little island on which the Tower sat. That was the original purpose of the Tower: to imprison the living adherent of the Sixth. A loophole had been found almost immediately, as an apprentice could fully take up the mantle of the Sixth only if they moved past their own End. Not death, exactly; my own Ending was more metaphorical than anything

else. I was still alive but in a new way. I just wasn't the Daniel that had come to the island. I'd moved past that person, Completed my apprenticeship, and accepted my role as adherent. But I was beyond death—I'd serve until I didn't want to anymore, just as all my predecessors had. And by being beyond death, I was also beyond life, and therefore beyond the Tower's ability to contain me.

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

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

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

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

I walked the last few feet to the Tower and pushed open the enormous door. I wandered into the entry foyer, letting the heavy door sigh shut behind me as the Tower's magic illuminated the broad, round room. I shuffled down to the small dining room, where a small, brightly decorated cake sat waiting for me. My heart clenched.

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

Just bitter, really.

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

Revenge.

CHAPTER 2

A Ritual Hobby

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

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

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

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

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

And remained dark.

The *entire clan* had ceased to exist.

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

I was owed *justice.*

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

Mother had, of course, been central to Clan Karal's plan and operations. All of the women in my family possessed some distinct personal quirk, and Mother's was the ability to effortlessly Gather magic from humans, so long as she was close to them. Mother's unique relationship with humans depended on humans' relationship with magic. While humans grounded magic directed at them—that is, rendered it ineffective—they gave off an ambient aura of magic. They were completely unaware of it and utterly unable to touch or manipulate it in any way, but it was there—and Mother benefited from it.

What made Clan Karal's actions even more personally painful was that my own father had been the one to make their plan possible. Father was originally of Clan Karal—something I hadn't known until, as a teenager, I'd begun studying the clan and its activities. Now, my family was by all accounts a little strange, but when it came to marriage, we were particularly odd. Usually in a witchkind marriage, one person gives up their clan identity and formally joins the clan of

their spouse. It's a big deal, as clan identity is deeply interwoven with personal identity, and it affects how witchkind relate to the world around them. But my family wasn't part of a clan. That in and of itself isn't terribly rare, but my family insisted that Father also become clanless rather than allow Mother to join Karal.

That may have been the beginning of his moral descent.

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

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

Those machines were also an obsession of Clan Karal, and once they learned about Mother's unusual connection with humans—something I presumed they learned through Father—they were determined to make use of it.

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

I'd seen it happen.

Ending Mother's identity rune had seemed like the only way to stop them. I erased the rune from existence, and it could *never* exist again. No living person could even remember the rune or what it looked like, so thoroughly had the Axis and I Ended it. Clan Karal's

machines depended on the rune, and by Ending the rune, I'd hoped they'd never work again and, too, fall from all memory. The cost: Mother's life and my eternal enmity. With her identity rune Ended, she passed from this world. By my hand.

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

Human priests seemed especially willing to blame any unexplained situations on magic. They were, in a way, the keepers of human memories, writing tomes that detailed the ills and harms that magic had caused before the Forging. Many even had grown jealous of witchkind's power and influence and sought our power—or at least the ability to control it—and intiated the Hunts to do so.

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

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

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

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

That brought me to my second concern: I still had no idea what

they'd planned to do with all that stored power. They'd been collecting magic from humans for years, and I couldn't even guess how many machines they'd run simultaneously. They must have gathered enough magic to fuel dozens, if not hundreds, of witchkind for their entire lives.

What could they possibly need all that power for?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'd actually considered doing that, back then. It certainly would have put a stop to their predation on humans and the threat they

posed to the Veil. But again, I'm no monster. I couldn't have known, and didn't imagine, that all of Clan Karal shared in the guilt. I couldn't bring myself to just End an entire clan, despite how easy the Axis would have made it. In the end, relatively few lost their lives: the handful who'd fought me that day, and Mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

The Activist Adherent

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

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

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

My Axis could handle conceptual Endings on a small scale. If I were soaking wet from a downpour, I could End my wetness. I could End cold around myself to stay warm—a handy trick, as I'd long since outgrown the coat I'd worn to the Tower as a thirteen-year-old. But conceptual Endings at larger scales seemed to confuse the Axis. I'd tried to make winters more bearable in a northern town and End a drought in a southern one. Neither attempt had worked, and the Axis had seemed put off and perplexed. It reminded me of when I once considered Ending a powerful businessman who underpaid his work-

ers. I obviously could End him, but that wouldn't necessarily solve the problem. The scope was too large, the real cause (or causes) obscured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If you were not an adherent, your access to magic was limited. Most witchkind trained from childhood to Gather magic while they slept, then carefully husbanded their power throughout the day. Most crawled into bed all but depleted, ready to begin the process anew. But magic's scarcity fell especially hard on the fisherwitches. In Pottenham, they spent their power to reinforce the hulls of the town's ships, secretly scratching runes into the timbers when the boats are reworked each season. They must also burn magic to strengthen fishing nets, push back the waters during floods, and more. They are among the hardest-working witchkind in the world—and also the most stout hearted and uncomplaining.

I very much wanted to help them.

I reviewed my notes about when I'd brought the matter to the attention of Gilioj, the senior adherent of the Axis of Sea. He'd declined to help, saying, "I could command the waters to beat harder against the rock, but breaking it down would still take centuries. My

people work more in the open sea than on these rivers for a reason: the riverbanks constrain the water, and the riverways dictate its behavior more than we could."

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

I'd held my tongue, for Mesla had been one of the only adherents to help me when Mother and I had needed it, but I was angry. Other adherents, all of them gifted with more power than they could possibly use, seemed content to do nothing. They would sit back, wring their hands and shake their heads, and tell me to leave well enough alone.

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

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

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

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

The river was in full churn, bashing itself against the rock formation in question, spraying up a fresh-smelling mist. The bedrock thrust up directly in the middle of the river, leaving two narrow channels to either side where the water passed by swiftly. The nearer channel had been reserved for upstream travel, and the humans had—with stealthy assistance from witchkind—constructed a system of wooden winches and pulleys, all strung with stout rope, to aid in the otherwise impossible passage. Sailors would sail and row as close as they could to the upstream channel, and then land-based crews would toss over ropes for lashing up the ship. Then began the laborious process of cranking pulley systems to lift the boat and guide it through the channel. I'd watched it once—it took *hours*. All the while, witchkind among the crews would subtly feed power to the runes they'd carved on the undersides of those winches, taking more of the weight and making sure nothing shattered in the process.

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

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

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



This rune wasn't intended to End a life but rather remove conflict. It wasn't a rune of destruction so much as a rune of enforced cooperation. My intention wasn't to End the rock itself; the other

adherents might think me young and arrogant, but I knew enough to heed sensible advice. Ending the rock might have consequences far beyond what I intended—the "underlying strata" and all that.

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

The Axis understood.

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

The rock formation crumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fisherwitches' eyes widened, and they said nothing.

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

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

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

upstream. One of the other villages will have that catch from now on."

Fish? "But—" I began to object.

"Navigating the ships is much easier," one of the fisherwitches said. "We don't need to use the winches to return home anymore." He smiled and nodded.

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

"The nets have been a harder to maintain," the other fisherwitch admitted. "The river pulls at them more."

"I—"

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

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

Hated that I'd made such a stupid error.

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

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

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

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

Mesla blinked. "I don't understand."

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

"But—" Gilioj started.

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

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

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

"But these people—" Gilioj tried to interject.

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

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

Housed in a soaring cavern and rising from a floor of heavy, dark bedrock, the Foundation was a tall column of obsidian-colored rock. A dim, magical light barely lit the space, and even that couldn't reach the upper limits of the Foundation. Although I could easily see sixty

or seventy feet up, the Foundation continued up into the darkness. I'd never touched its highest point.

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

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

Those were *our* fault.

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

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

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

And regret.

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

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

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

My mood grew even fouler.

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

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

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

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

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

I had a visitor.

CHAPTER 4

Holding the Line

"Mister . . . that is, uh, sir—"

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Adherent. I mean, Daniel." Again, she stumbled over my name. "That is, my name is Essa. I'm an adherent of Earth. Not a senior one, obviously. I mean, I've been—"

"Come inside, Essa," I said stiffly. I turned and walked inside, not

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

"Thank you," she whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was my turn to blink. "I know that it exists?" It was a major feature of human civilization and one of the humans' most incredible

mechanical achievements. Stretching across the continent from east to west, the roadway consisted of two parallel sets of iron rails. Upon these rails rode enormous iron carriages, the lead carriage belching gray smoke as it hauled a long line of carriages behind it. Loaded with goods, the carriages traveled town to town all along the roadway's expanse.

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

"And do you know what the roadway does to witchkind?"

"I'd never thought about it," I admitted. "I imagine it would be problematic."

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

There was heat in her voice.

"It's purified, concentrated earth. It draws magic to it—siphons it off. Stand near it, and you'll hurt. It breaks our magic and shatters our constructs. And the more of it there is, the wider an area it affects."

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

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

"Are they looking to expand it, then?"

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

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

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

Interesting. How could I help if they'd failed on their own? Was there an opportunity here for me to atone for my error at the river? I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the worktable. "Tell me everything."

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

"Tea," I ordered, not looking away from her.

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

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

"Seed biscuits?" Her eyes darted around the room.

"Seed biscuits," I ordered with a grin.

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

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

She looked up. "Ah. Yes. I hadn't—that is, I'm sorry."

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

"Yes." She sipped the tea and continued. "There are three mines where they bring the iron ore out of the earth. We can do almost nothing to those; the concentration of iron is too much for us to overcome. The ore is smelted nearby and poured into stone molds to form lengths of rail. Those are transported by carriage—normal ones with

horses—to Twynsits. That's where they're trying to start a new line that will run north to south. The rails are all stacked up—we assume until they mold enough of them. That's what we've been trying to stop."

"How?"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "Even though they're of the earth, adherents obviously can't affect the rails directly. It's simply too much iron. So we've been trying to do things *around* them."

"Such as?"

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

"The Veil," I finished, nodding solemnly.

"The Veil," she agreed.

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

"So where do things stand now?"

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

making new molds. We think they're preparing to build new iron carriages."

"Which means they are preparing to lay that rail."

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

I tilted my head. "How so?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wrapped the Axis's power around us, and the world briefly faded to gray. Endings existed everywhere, in ways both massive and minuscule. From my perspective, I wasn't actually traveling as such. I was

simply shifting my position within the world-spanning power of my Axis, traversing the many small Endings it constantly observed and facilitated. As fast as it had faded to gray, the colors of the world reemerged, swimming and twisting as we appeared beyond the river.

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

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

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

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

"The entire building failed." Humans' grasp of architecture and engineering was incredibly primitive. Stone buildings were often little more than squared-off rocks literally stacked atop each other with nothing to hold them together. Mud, at most, and even that was more to keep out the weather. The buildings' stability came from the hidden spaces that witchkind built using the same magic that created our larger-on-the-inside homes and businesses.

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

"And so what would you try now?" I asked.

Essa's jaw clenched for a moment before she answered. "We don't know. We—"

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

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

"You were telling me what comes next?"

"We don't know," she spat, exasperated. "It's why we thought to

come to you. Can't you just . . . make it go away? Iron rusts eventually. Isn't that an Ending?"

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

"But what about the Veil?" Her eyes were bright.

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

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

"I—hmm." I'd never considered that. I prodded the Axis, but it was too focused on the iron to pay much attention. "I'm not sure. I don't think so. We'd still have all of this here," I said, waving toward the piles of iron. "Not to mention the existing roadway. The Veil only works in the absence of evidence, but this is a little hard to overlook. And frankly, I'm not sure how Plaktukas managed to create the Veil, much less ensure it existed in perpetuity. It's not how Endings work—at least not how I understand them."

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

I frowned. "Dramatic how?"

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

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

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

"What does that do?"

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

"Okay." Where was this going?

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

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

Essa's expression grew more serious. "We think it's going to take out a good number of buildings. We'll evacuate those of witchkind, of course, but it'll demonstrate the danger of working with all this iron." I wondered about the logic but nodded so she'd continue. "And we can *shape* the magma when it's at the surface."

"Shape it?"

"Into a dragon."

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

"Humans have stories, myths about dragons."

"I've read a few."

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

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

Essa nodded. "It's going to be pretty obvious, actually. It'll only

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

"You want me to make them forget."

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

I nodded. "Ending a memory isn't difficult. But I worry that this comes close to impinging on the Veil. A dragon is going to seem . . . magical. Isn't it? Isn't the goal to not even put the idea of magic into their minds?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We drew straws," she whispered.

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

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

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

"You've spoken to them, then."

"It's their refrain anytime I've suggested we use the Axes to improve the world."

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

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

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

"And we're meant to just sit back and watch."

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

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

"When?"

"There's a shipment of rails due in tomorrow. We've been tracking the caravan."

"So there'll be plenty of witnesses."

"Two dozen men at least."

"Tomorrow then."

CHAPTER 5

Dragonfire

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

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

"You're sure you can't just turn the iron to rust?" Arun asked hopefully.

I chuckled. "I'm sure. My Axis is just as repelled by it as yours is."

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

"That's how it feels to us as well," Mica agreed.

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

"How strange," Lanna mused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. It sounded like they'd figured it out. Or at least they thought they had; this all hinged on the humans experiencing a living fire-breathing dragon and *not* attributing it to magic. They'd need to be convinced it was—what did they say? —an angry earth god. I nodded again, this time more slowly. With our group this small, I could modify the humans' memories to not include us. Then the only possible explanation would be that the dragon was real. "Okay. You're certain the adherents of Sky can spread stories quickly?" That would be the key: giving the humans an alternate explanation that they'd accept.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For all the good it did them. The incandescent droplets struck the

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

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

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

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

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

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

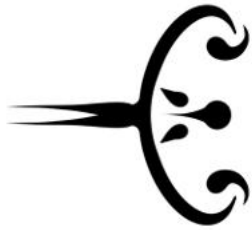
"Lanna, now!" Mica yelled. On that cue, the dragon's head reared back, then jerked forward, its mouth opening into a wide maw, and a ball of flaming magma jetted forth. That incandescent sphere streaked toward the stacked rails, and just before it hit, I felt a surge of Sea magic dart toward it. Fresh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

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

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

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

The dragon complied, sending another sphere of flaming earth toward the ground, where it exploded between us and the humans. Through the resulting smoke, I saw the humans skidding to a halt, then running in the opposite direction. There was no way they hadn't seen us, so I sent the Axis after them, holding the rune for Ending a memory in my mind:



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

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

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

But I found it odd that Essa seemed so drained. I'd never felt tired using my Axis's power. Perhaps it was because they were sharing

the power of an Axis rather than having it all to themselves. Or perhaps their power required much more concentration than my own.

"Four more," Mica growled.

"I'm with you," Lanna said.

"Okay," Essa agreed. Arun simply clenched his fists tighter, beads of sweat dripping down his face as four more bolts of superheated magma shot into the stacked rails, demolishing the last of them.

"Ready, Daniel?" Essa asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She'll see reason, eventually," Essa said. She didn't sound sure.

"But it was worth it regardless." That came out with far more conviction.

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

"Last bit," Essa said.

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

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

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

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

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

"They won't remember a thing. I Ended all their memories of us," I assured them.

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

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

I looked out over the wreckage we'd created, and the still-glowing, smoldering pit of metal that we'd left. *This* was what power was for! For protecting our people, for improving their lot. *This* is what the

adherents—all adherents—should be doing. This is what the Axes' power was meant for. We'd planned, we'd been careful, and we'd achieved exactly the result I'd hoped for. "This was good work," I said. "And the Veil remains safe."

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

CHAPTER 6

A Thinning Veil

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

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

On that first culinary excursion, I had simply chosen a town at random, took myself there using the Axis's magic, and wandered into the first restaurant I came across. It had been a fish house, and I'd treated myself to the waiter's first suggestion: a lightly salted whitefish accompanied by something he'd called sea beans, all dressed with a light, vinegary sauce. The dance of flavors triggered a memory of a prior adherent who'd enjoyed the same dish so much he'd considered investing in the restaurant. It had been one of the fonder recollections

that the Axis had delivered to me from its trove of adherents' memories.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

with disappointment. "We expect impetuousness from the juniors, but from you—"

"I expected nothing less," Zmogus growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I handled that," I said easily. "I Ended their—"

"*You missed some*," Zmogus hissed.

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

Again, Mesla seemed to gather herself before speaking. "Debesi's

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last of the blood in my face drained.

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

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

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

the humans, fragments of the True Language threaded throughout their religious texts, a testament to our shared origins.

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

I cleared my throat. "We can—"

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

That couldn't be true, could it? Surely I could fix this. But Gilioj's demeanor threatened to stamp out my hope. His eyes drooped and his shoulders slumped. He looked defeated. "We've been told a story of a human fruit vendor blaming rotted produce on witchcraft."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I—" I stopped and thought about it. An adherent of the Sixth had created the Veil, after all. If it was weakened, couldn't I fix it?

"Your predecessor created it," Debesi added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then you'll try?" Gilioj implored.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They made me ashamed.

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

I felt a sudden kinship with the ancient structure.

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

I took a moment to regret my actions—or at least regret that I hadn't been more diligent in them. Twice now, I'd made things worse by Ending something. Perhaps some of my predecessors, the ones who'd become hermits and never left the Tower, never engaged with the world. Perhaps they'd been in the right. Maybe nothing was broken. Maybe all I was good for was keeping the Axis chained. Maybe—

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

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

CHAPTER 7

The Threat in Twynsits

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

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

So this is what a faltering Veil felt like.

I quickly had the Axis End their memories of seeing me appear—a viable trick with a small enough group and a stark reminder that I wouldn't be able to do the same to the entire town.

I did try, however, directing the Axis to End all memories of magic and witchkind in the town. As the Axis stretched itself, its awareness grew thinner, and its comprehension of what I wanted also

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

It was a mystery that I desperately needed to solve.

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

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

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

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

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

All of witchkind knew who Plaktukas was and which Axis he'd held, and so I nodded. "I'm going to try." Those in the room relaxed a

bit, and I realized how much tension had been in the air. "What can you tell me?"

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

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

When I'd heard every tale they had to offer, I left, holding the Axis ready to End the memories of any humans who might see me. None did, and I gave a brief sigh of relief as I made my way back into the street.

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

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

I shook my head. Magic had likely been *preventing* problems of that kind, not causing them. Irritated and feeling petty, I Ended the wooden blocks holding up the platform, crumbling them to dust in an instant and causing the stage to collapse. The priest tumbled into

the crowd, quickly righted himself, and began screaming that evil magic was all around them, pointing to the collapsed platform as proof. I ground my teeth and left the square.

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

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

Over the past few years, I'd begun to understand two aspects of my Axis. Always strong was its immediate presence and attention to me. I could feel it wrapping around me or sniffing around my immediate environs, inspecting whatever I directed it to.

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

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

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

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

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

"Looking for company?"

My eyes—which I hadn't even realized I'd closed—flew open. My concentration shattered, and my awareness collapsed back to what I could see around me.

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

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

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

"Please?" she added with a wide smile.

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

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

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

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

"Rude?"

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

Serve. I found it odd that so many of witchkind thought we adherents were leashed to our Axis in some way, while in reality the opposite

was true. Her comment was obviously a query, but I didn't feel like getting into Endings and death. I couldn't imagine anybody wanting to share a glass of wine with the adherent of the Sixth. I answered her first question instead. "I had business in town, and it's been my custom for some years to enjoy a glass and perhaps a meal afterward. I suppose I wasn't considering the current state of affairs. And you?"

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

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

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

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Me? Oh no," she said with a laugh. In spite of the situation that had brought me here, her laugh lightened my heart a bit. It was an honest laugh, bright and full throated. "Running inns doesn't suit my abilities either, I'm afraid. Quite the embarrassment, as I said. No, I'm only back for a visit. I moved to Evermore last season." She lowered her voice as she named the only city of witchkind in all the world. "Living the dream away from all this. And what about your family? Your clan?"

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

She nodded slowly but said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That must have been difficult."

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

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

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

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

"But you said you don't know how."

I sipped my own wine, resisting the urge to bite the glass as I did so. "I don't. Yet."

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

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

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

That got the Axis's attention, and it seemed to sniff gently around her before settling around us. Was it being . . . protective? Of the two of us? It surprised me sometimes how the Axis would occasionally show a sense of intelligence, or at least more than mere awareness.

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

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

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

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

I wasn't alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I simply nodded and smiled, not trusting myself to speak. Gemma turned back to the restaurant, signaling the server, who scurried out. "We'll share a filet of perch," she ordered with a smile, sending the server hustling back inside.

Share.

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

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

The fish was followed by a sweet, rich wine served in tiny glasses that Gemma insisted I try. It was delightful, and as the sun set past the city's low buildings, we continued to chat. I still had no idea what I was going to do about the humans and the Veil, but at that very moment, it seemed somewhat less urgent. I'd never had a casual meal

with another witchkind, let alone a woman. I'd have been happy for it to go on all evening.

Of course, that's when the night had to end. A small group of humans hurried past us, carrying flaming torches and screaming about witches and magics, calling for others to join them on a Hunt that very night. Their faces were ruddy with anger, the postures both frightened and aggressive. "You!" one of them cried, pointing to another human who'd been hustling by with her head down. "Would you join us to scour the town of foul magic?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Gemma whispered, stricken with horror. What the Veil would ordinarily have hidden, what it would have let the humans simply explain away as a trick of the light or something innocent, was instead fully revealed. As I watched, the old woman's hair changed color and lengthened. Her clothes shifted subtly. And the humans *saw* it.

"WITCH!" they cried as they lunged forward.

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



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

I hardly cared. A life was at stake.

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

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

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

"What made them stop? Did you do something?"

I did, I thought bitterly. *I used the power of the most-feared Axis in the world to tear their memories from them. Would you like some more*

wine? I found myself overcome with a desire to make this Gemma like me. Revealing myself as the man who was meant to be imprisoned in a distant tower felt unlikely to achieve that goal. I shrugged, my jaw still tight. "I need to. Do something, that is." The pleasure of the evening was shattered, and my duty to somehow repair the Veil and protect all of witchkind had come smashing back down on my shoulders. "I need to go." No companionship for the adherent of the Sixth, it seemed. At least not tonight.

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

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

"Even so."

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

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

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

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

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

I needed to learn what Plaktukas had contrived.

CHAPTER 8

Plaktukas's Plan

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

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

I'd have to rely on books to solve this mystery. The Tower contained a *massive* library filled with texts on magic and histories of adherents, witchkind, and more. Many histories. My shadow servants had found a sizable stack of books that mentioned the Veil, Plaktukas, or more frequently, both. But they were *all* histories, not firsthand accounts or practical guides written by adherents. These histories contained no details, no step-by-step instructions, and no advice for repairing the Veil should it thin. I spent most of the night searching for even the slightest clue, the barest mention of a solution—and came up empty.

I slept briefly and fitfully, rolling out of my bed just as the sun

peeked above the ocean to the east. No memories. No books. But I had one last resource.

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

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

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

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

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

A few passages in the lone journal did trigger some memories from the Axis. I experienced these as brief flashbacks, almost all of them lacking any meaningful context and all of them devoid of anything useful:

"Will keep us safe, Plaktukas?"

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

"And what if that happens?"

"See that it doesn't."

They were fragmentary—incomplete.

"How will this remain powered?"

"I've arranged for it."

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

"No. As I said, I've arranged for it."

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

"It's a very old technique, one that goes back to the founding of the world."

"It's certainly a marvel. Tell me, can you . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I hated using it.

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

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



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

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

"After my time, obviously," Galas said, the Axis reinforcing the illusion that this was *actually* Galas. "It was the first time the Axis had been given such a conceptual task, something so perpetual."

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

Galas stared for a moment. "They aren't my memories," he said slowly.

"Can I talk to Plaktukas?" I'd never tried asking the Axis to change avatars.

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

I tilted my head. "What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

I blinked. Hadn't expected that.

The book was only about a hundred years old, so I assumed it was still meaningful. Flipping it open, I saw that it was the third edition: the first was apparently more than twelve centuries old and had been written by an entirely different author. Apparently witchkind's aversion to change extended to our funeral traditions.

I began reading.

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

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

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



It was an odd rune, clearly old. I'd seen a few truly ancient runes here and there, and they were all more stylized than our modern ones. This looked to be something in between, marrying the complexity of the oldest runes I'd seen with the bold, purposeful strokes of the runes I'd grown up with.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took the rest of the day, but I finally managed to piece it together. Between the communications journal and an enormous, unwieldy tome—*Adherents of the Second Era: Heroes, Enigmas, Scapegoats, and Sacrifices; Their Stories, Their Failures, and Their Triumphs*

—I learned that Plaktukas had grown up in one of the older parts of a then-small village called Twynsits.

Huh.

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

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

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

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

It was time to meet my predecessor.

CHAPTER 9

Summoning Memories

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

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

I needed someone friendly who knew the—

Ah.

I wasn't used to having friends.

I swiftly took myself back to my Tower, appearing in the map room. "Gemma," I instructed the map table, holding in my mind both her image and her sweet, layered scent. The image on the table—which looked like a hand-drawn paper map of the continent—slid and spun, centering on Twynsits. The town grew larger and larger,

eventually covering the entire table. A mote of green light glowed over a building.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gemma read them with a small frown. "This'll definitely be on

the other side, then," she mused. "You know, I actually think I know where this might be." Her frown deepened. "You might not be happy with this."

My brow creased. "Why not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Except for the iron."

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

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

She nodded. "Sadly, yes. Few of their buildings are built well enough to last for decades, let alone centuries, without m—" She caught herself again. "That is, without us holding them together."

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

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

"Their buildings are stronger in the smaller villages where there are fewer of us secretly adding spaces. But they're more expensive to build. In the larger towns, they just do what they've always done, and we add spaces everywhere we can, which strengthens the physical structures. From their perspective, their building methods have always

been sufficient and long lasting. Why build better when you don't think you have to?"

"I suppose. Couldn't we also just put more of our spaces everywhere?"

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

"Fascinating," I said. I hadn't realized that witchkind involved themselves so directly in human affairs. But it made sense: falling buildings were a danger to everyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her logic seemed sound, yet as I looked around, none of the buildings in this idyllic little square looked at all damaged. I sent the Axis flitting through the building to sense something of its constitution. "It's well built," I told her. "They've used some kind of mortar in the stones, and the wood is held together with thick pegs, not nails. The wood is . . . impregnated with something. It doesn't have any sense of"—I stopped myself from saying *End* and searched for a more suitable phrase. "Of rot," I finally finished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes grew wide, and her face broke into a broad smile. "It is

indeed!" she said, nodding as she spoke. "Our family has given many to the Axes over the ages, but only he to the Sixth. Are you a historian?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

"Adherent?"

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

"You cast the anchoring rune?"

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

"Surely you must have Gathered for days to power it?"

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

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

"I—" I tried to answer, but my stomach heaved.

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

"I think so," I croaked.

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

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

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

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

"Dead?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

She frowned with concern. “I’ll keep an eye on you.”

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

“I’ll fetch her,” Roze said.

I started to stop her, to tell her that Gemma could stay there instead of coming closer to where the iron pulled the magic, but decided I’d rather have Gemma next to me if I blacked out again. But then something occurred to me. “Roze,” I said as she stepped out of the room. She poked her head back in. “How is it that you can stand it? This close to the roadway?”

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

“It does seem a special place.”

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

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

She smiled. "I'll just fetch your friend."

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

"We're doing this a lot these days," Galas said as the darkness formed around us.

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

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

"Plaktukas?"

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

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

"You seem to have tried to ensure it."

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

"The Veil. It's thinning."

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

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

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

"Yes, but now it's thinning."

He snorted and drew himself up. "I told them," he scolded, "to keep their magic quiet and hidden. It's a delicate piece of magic." He took on a lecturing tone, managing to look down at me despite our

similar heights. "The Veil wasn't meant to give us free license to flout our power. I told them all to be secretive. Careful. I was *very* clear."

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

"Mmm," he said, his eyes boring into me. I reminded myself that this was the Axis, channeling the man's memories, and the Axis knew full well what had happened outside the town a few days ago.

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

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

"How?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Because I've never met my successors. They could be monsters.

As long as the Axis's power remains temporally fixed, tied to a place and time, fine. But this? What we're proposing is ongoing. If others discover how to make the Axis's power—any Axis's power—permanent, who knows what they'll do?" I willed my heart to slow. It hadn't been said, and I hadn't seen it; it would still be safe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Politicians were so thick sometimes. "It's meant to separate *worlds*, not peoples. The trick is to keep it awake even when there are no worlds to separate. To End its slumber, if you will." That had been the trick of it, and I still worried about whether my little loophole would hold it down after I . . . retired.

"That's pretty abstract." Now the councilor was back to looking concerned.

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

He frowned. "And you know that the—"

"*Don't* say it," I growled.

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

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

"It was six years, wasn't it?"

"Exactly my point."

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

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

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

"Plaktukas, I think there's a problem with this plan."

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

"I've just been going over the runes one more—"

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

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

"Thank you. I don't see the problem, then."

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

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

"There's . . . a requirement. More than just power."

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

"No, I mean—"

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

"Plaktukas . . ."

"That's enough."

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

"Roze said you'd need help. But yeah, you owe me. I'll never get this taste out of my mouth. What's with depleting yourself and still spending magic?"

"The Axis's magic," I muttered.

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

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

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

Nothing happened.

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

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

"All of which we have at the inn."

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

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

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

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

He messed up.

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

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



CHAPTER 10

Good Morning

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

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

How had I gotten here?

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

The memories all ended the same: in the Tower.

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

I hauled myself to my feet. I seemed to be fine: I was no longer exhausted, the room wasn't spinning, and I could feel all of my extremities—which weren't, upon close inspection, blue tinted

anymore. I could sense the Axis slithering about the Tower, waiting for me to wake. Even now, I could feel its awareness focusing on me without concern.

Something rustled in my pocket as I stood.

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



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

Plaktukas had thought to hide that rune to prevent any of his successors from knowing about it. But he'd failed. I found myself worried for a moment. Now the rune was in *my* memories. What had Plaktukas said? *I've never met my successors. They could be monsters.* Something about this rune construct had worried him, and he'd painstakingly worked to keep it out of the Axis's memories of him. Why, I didn't know. That was a problem for later. For now, I needed this to fix the Veil.

The Veil.

Plaktukas didn't create the Veil, I realized as everything connected

in my mind. *It already existed. He woke it.* But for some reason he'd known it would go back to sleep on its own, and so he'd tied his magic, this rune construct to . . . something. Something perpetual. Something carved into rock?

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

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

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

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

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

She dimpled. "You're very welcome."

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

Now she laughed. "It's a bit late for that. *Kavos* is a morning drink for me, and you've slept until"—she looked up at the timepiece hanging behind me—"well past noon! No wonder you feel refreshed," she teased. "But there's a shop down the road, a witchkind one, that has an all-day breakfast as well as sandwiches and soups. We should both be able to find something there."

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

She flipped the ledger closed and stashed it under the counter. "A girl's got to eat!"

Once again, she came out from behind the counter, linked arms with mine, and led me back to the street. I lurched forward, but she held me back a moment. "A trick some of us are trying," she whispered, leaning so close to my ear that her words tickled. "Rather than

appearing and marching off, we simply stand here for a bit, as if we've been doing so for some time." She drew her head back and laughed a bit, patting my arm as if I'd just told a tremendous joke. "See?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can you share?"

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

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

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

Her eyes grew even wider and some emotion—surprise, perhaps?

—flashed across her face. It was gone in less than an instant, and I decided I'd probably imagined it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, an entire town." I sighed.

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

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

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

"How does that make it different?"

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

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

"Well yes, but the humans believe the stories are real. And to be

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

Zmogus hadn't put much stock in the humans' religious stories. I'd taken that as a general feeling across all of witchkind, but maybe it wasn't. "Not really."

She sighed and took a spoonful of soup before continuing. I signaled our server for another mug of *kavos.* "In a way, their Church sets the tone of their society." Gemma's voice had taken on a lecturing tone, and I wondered for the first time exactly what she studied in Evermore. History? Human society? "The Church is their moral center. The priests hold enormous sway over what humans think is right—and what they think is wrong. The governments—they don't have a worldwide council like we do. All of their governments are strictly local, an individual village or town."

I shook my head. Humans were so disorganized.

"The Church is what binds them all together and creates consistency across local governments. If the Church issues an edict, all the governments move to basically turn the edict into law. It was the Church that originally declared an end to the Hunts. Most scholars think it was because they wanted the manpower put to other uses. But with the Church wound up about magic again . . ."

"They can turn that into law. Into action."

Gemma nodded sadly. "And the Veil *isn't* reasserting itself this time."

"Maybe we just need a distraction. A big one. Something that will take their minds of magic and let the Veil come back into force." I still had no idea how to piece together all the bits I'd learned from Plaktukas's memories.

She frowned. "I don't know. Maybe. Nobody really knows much about how the Veil actually works. I'd have thought the adherent of the Sixth . . . Hey," she said suddenly, her eyes widening. "Has anyone asked him?"

"Him who?"

"The adherent of the Sixth!"

Ugh. Of course she'd suggest that. It made the most sense, didn't it? But I'd have to explain that *I* was the adherent of the Sixth—that I'd been, if not lying to her, then certainly dancing around the truth. And it would come out that I'd *caused* all of this in the first place. No, now wasn't the time. I'd been enjoying her company so much and getting to know her—no. "The . . . senior adherents. That is, they're . . . the ones working on it. From that end. I was . . . I'm following this side of it." That sounded pathetic even to me.

"I know you don't want to tell me which Axis you work for," she said softly.

"It's—complicated being an adherent. I don't have any family, like most of them. It's . . . hard to . . . I wish the Axis wasn't the entirety of my life," I finished in a rush, feeling heat creeping into my neck.

She smiled softly and nodded. "But now you're telling me the Veil isn't even of the Sixth Axis."

I swallowed heavily and nodded, forcing my heart to slow. "I don't think it is. That's what I need—I mean, it's what I need to tell them. Plaktukas did something, but I think all he was doing was . . . reusing something else. His memories spoke of *waking* something."

Her expression dipped back into a frown. "I don't understand."

I hesitated, but I'd allowed enough deceit between us already. I knew I was risking driving her away, that she'd already been so patient. I decided to trust her. "I found this." I withdrew from my pocket the crumpled piece of paper with the sketched rune and slid it toward her. She spread it out and inhaled sharply. "You recognize it?"

"No, not exactly." She smoothed out the paper again and turned it a few times, as if trying to determine which side of the rune was the top. "It's old."

"I figured as much."

"No, *very* old, Daniel. It reminds me a bit of the runes they use to construct new spaces within human buildings. They're finer, like this. More complex. I think it's why they take so much magic. What does this one do?"

I hadn't realized her scholarly pursuits had included rune lore. "I don't know."

"Is this how the Veil was created? Or awakened, or whatever?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure what it does yet."

"Have you tried casting it?"

"Not yet. It needs an anchor, and I don't know what. There's just too much—"

"Daniel." It wasn't Gemma's voice, but a sharp, cutting one. Like a javelin made of—

"Ah. Debesi." I nodded to the senior adherent of Sky.

"You've been an annoying quarry, and now I see you're—" She frowned with disapproval, taking in my empty plate, Gemma, and the shop in general.

"Eating, Debesi. One does." I kept my voice even, trying to project some measure of authority. Gemma looked positively terrified.

Debesi's mouth quirked into something approaching a sneer. "Come with me at once. There's a problem."

CHAPTER 11

The Hunt

Traveling by means of the Sky Axis's Form of Travel was odd. I'd felt strangely diaphanous, drawn into a mist, before reforming as myself in another square in Twynsits. I patted myself to discard any remaining mist, but I seemed to have arrived perfectly dry.

"This is their mother church," Debesi said in a low, hard voice. "I'm using the air around us to mask us from sight, just in case," she added.

"In case what?"

"In case they see us, you dolt." Zmogus stepped beside me. He seemed to ripple slightly as he stepped through Debesi's magic. His expression was even harder than usual, smoldering with anger. I found it more terrifying than if he'd been hurling his usual insults at me.

"Look to the church," Debesi murmured.

I turned. This church was much larger than the last I'd seen, with a grand staircase of white granite leading to a large open patio that spread out before the soaring entry doors. On that patio, the humans had erected a pile of wood. A single tall post rose from the middle of that pile.

"What's happening?" I asked, panic coloring my voice. A middle-aged woman was tied to the post, and I could see that she was

witchkind. Her magic swirled gently around her, and even at this distance, I could sense her fear.

My Axis's attention drifted slowly toward the church. An Ending was nigh, and its interest was piqued.

"She's been accused of being a witch," Debesi said frostily. "They're going to burn her."

"Burn—that's ludicrous," I protested. *Origin defend*, I thought in a panic. *I've killed her*.

"It's the Hunts," Zmogus growled.

Surely something could be done. Between us, we commanded an immense amount of magic. It couldn't come to this! "Your Axis is Flame. Can't you just stop it?"

"Child!" Zmogus spat. "Of course not!" Debesi held up a hand for quiet, likely concerned that whatever she was doing with her Axis wouldn't shelter us if we were yelling. I had my own Axis create a sound-dampening zone around us. Debesi arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Why not?"

"They know how fire works, you simpleton. I can't just stop dry wood from burning. They'd be even more convinced that magic was at work. That priest would further enrage the crowd, starting a riot."

But to just burn a woman on a whim! "Isn't there a trial or something?"

"Likely not, or if their religion demanded one," Debesi said, her full attention on the church. "They accomplished it quickly and only as a show. They're certainly not going to engage in true justice after riling up a mob."

She was right: the square was packed with angry, jeering, and yelling humans—all of them clearly ready for blood. Their fervor could even be heard through my sound-Ending magic as a deep, guttural moan. I could smell their sweat, which was somehow amplified by having this many of them crowded together. I saw nothing but urgent tension. This crowd wanted a death, and if they didn't get it, they would explode.

"This," Zmogus said, his tone an intense and dangerous growl, "is what happens when children don't mind their elders."

My stomach knotted up, and I flushed with anger all at once. I opened my mouth for a retort but quickly thought the better of it. He wasn't wrong.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Fix the Veil, you layabout!" Debesi snapped, turning to glare at me with her gold, piercing eyes. "Not lounge around having leisurely lunches while our people are Hunted and burned!"

"He was doing what?" Zmogus asked, danger cutting an edge into his voice.

"I can End the flames," I offered.

"So can I, fool. We just discussed that." Zmogus was openly contemptuous now.

"I'm *working* on the Veil," I said, and even to my own ears, I sounded like a whining child. "I've recovered Plaktukas's memories. I've found a rune construct, one I believe he used to summon the Veil in the first place. Possibly to make it persistent."

"Then why haven't you fixed it?" Zmogus demanded.

"I only just found it, Zmogus! And I don't know exactly *where* to cast it. But," I said, pointing to the church, "we can't just let her burn." I'd offered mercy Endings before. It's what I'd offered Mother. But this death was perfectly avoidable. Letting her die would be like murder. I wasn't a murderer.

The priest at the top of the stairs was waving his arms and was joined by two more priests from inside the church. Both carried lit torches.

Debesi shrugged. "End her now, then. You can at least save her from suffering." As I had for Mother.

"Won't anything else stop them?" I asked softly, gathering the Axis around myself. Debesi was right: if this was inevitable, then I could at least offer a mercy Ending. Even if the poor woman couldn't directly ask for it.

"Cover the sky in clouds," said a voice behind me. I turned to see a younger adherent who'd stepped inside the sound-deadening zone.

"Cyril, why are you here?" Debesi snapped.

"Just trying to assist," he said in a placating tone.

I ignored Debesi. "Why? The clouds I mean? Why that?"

Cyril gave me an intense look. "It's a sign that their god doesn't want to see what they're doing. A sign of disapproval." Debesi snorted at that. "But I'm an Earth adherent. I can't do it."

"It wouldn't work," Debesi said flatly. "There isn't near enough moisture in the air. And even if we had a brace of Sea adherents, there's not enough time to pull enough from the river. Besides, I've seen how human priests work. They'd find a way to twist its meaning into whatever they wanted. They're experts at manipulating signs and portents. It's practically all they do."

"But you know. . ." She sounded distracted, now, and she was again looking at the church, her eyes slitted in concentration. "You might have another option."

"The officiant," Zmogus said, nodding slowly.

"What about him?" I asked.

He pointed to the trio of priests. "The one in the middle is a senior priest. That's why he's wearing that tall cap and the white robes. This whole ceremony is about calling down their god's wrath, and that's his job. Obviously, when that doesn't happen, when they don't get a pillar of fire blasting down from the sky, they'll save their god the trouble and light the fire themselves. But they can't do that if the officiant dies before actually calling for it."

"Dies?" My heart started beating faster.

"And fairly soon," Debesi said, still sounding distracted. "I think they're wrapping up. Listen."

I dropped the Axis's sound buffer and concentrated on the officiant's words. "We are commanded to seek out those among us who play with evil powers beyond nature's realm!" he shouted. "Our forefathers learned their lesson well! They attempted to control magic, to bring it under their heel, but it always fought back! Always slithered free and sought to subjugate us! Thus the commandment to suffer not a witch to live! Thus the commandment to Hunt them and burn them from this world! And so our forefathers did so, and how were they rewarded?" The crowd roared an incoherent response. "Our Lord saw our efforts and was pleased, and once we had burned out enough of the infection, he took the rest of the witches from this world! We were freed from their power!"

"Blithering idiot," Debesi muttered. "That was Plaktukas's Veil, not your fictional god."

"Evil magic has crept into our world again, and this is our proof!" The priest pointed at the poor woman of witchkind they'd tied to their stake. "She was seen appearing from nowhere, vile power glowing in her hands! Sent by the Beast to torture and enslave!" The crowd roared again, its fury building. "And so we must Hunt, and we must burn—until the Lord sees our efforts and removes the witches once again!"

The priest was truly worked up, spittle flying from his lips as he ranted. But the humans packed into the square didn't think it was mere drama. This was serious to them. Deadly serious. This is what the Hunts must have been like—humans, terrified and worked into a frenzy by the Church, turning on us in a blind, righteous rage.

"We are being tested, my children! Will we prevail?"

The crowd's response was affirmative and overwhelming. The masses began pushing toward the church's stairs.

"If you can End him," Zmogus said, "make it look natural."

"I can handle getting her," Debesi said confidently. "Zmogus, can you create some kind of distraction so they don't see her vanish?"

"I can, but the boy must do his part. End the officiant, Daniel."

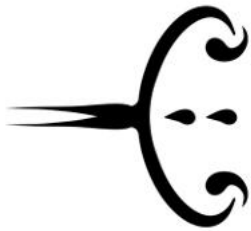
"Or End that poor woman before they set her ablaze." Debisi turned, fixing me with another hard, penetrating stare. "You're the adherent of the Sixth. Endings are your domain. Choose."

I turned back to the scene before us, my throat tightening and my heart slamming against the inside of my chest. The officiant had turned toward the pyre and was shouting something incoherent at it. I didn't want this choice. I didn't want to End *anyone* before their time.

But I'd taken that choice away from myself, hadn't I?

My eyes blurred, and I reached up to rub them. My hand came away wet with tears.

"The priest," I croaked.



I felt the Axis's disapproval. This was an unjust Ending; the man had done nothing in the Axis's eyes to deserve this. It had come for the woman's End, and it resisted conferring that on another. But I was its adherent, and it remained obedient to me, arrowing toward the officiant just as his companions were turning to walk toward the piled wood and their unfortunate, innocent victim. I'd sent the Axis after the man's heart, a complex modification of the basic rune of Ending. He clutched his chest, falling to his knees and gasping for breath.

The Tower's Foundation would have a new crack this day.

The crowd fell silent. Tension hung in a dense, invisible fog over the square, pressing down on us all, waiting for the smallest spark to trigger an explosion.

The other two priests quickly leaned down to help their still-gasping colleague, one of them laying a still-burning torch on the stone patio.

"Idiot," Zmogus said in a smug, satisfied tone.

That torch flared, all of its wood suddenly ablaze. The flames instantly caught the junior priest's robes, leaping from him to the other torchbearer and then to the officiant I'd just Ended, who'd finally collapsed and died. Fire spread out along the patio, searing toward the pile of wood.

"Pity," Zmogus mused. "Hadn't thought about burning them all instead."

"I have the woman," Debesi said, vanishing in a blue-white mist.

I barely saw her appear next to the bound woman in the middle of the pyre before both of them vanished in a puff of mist. The pile of wood caught fire instantly, the flames soaring hot and high into the

air, obscuring the fact that there was no longer anyone bound to the upright post.

The crowd howled its approval, a sudden, bloodthirsty wall of sound that almost knocked me flat.

Zmogus continued to keep the flames roaring high for the crowd. The younger adherent behind me put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me back a step. "We need to do something about this," he whispered urgently.

"I know. I'm—"

"Not just the Veil," he said. "The humans. The Church. You're not alone," he added. I felt a quick wash of power as the man sank into the ground beneath us.

Zmogus turned to fix me with a hateful glare. "Fix the Veil, child."

I could do nothing but nod.

CHAPTER 12

The Foundation

Gemma had left the workshop. I found her in her family's inn, a stack of ledgers in her arms.

"Daniel!"

"I'm sorry I had to leave so quickly."

"No, I understand." She set her burden on the counter. "Is everything all right? That woman seemed concerned."

"That was Debesi, senior adherent of Sky. And yes, it was urgent. The humans had a woman of witchkind tied to a stake . . . to burn her." All the color seemed to drain from Gemma's soft, lovely face. "We stopped them. The woman is fine. But I need to go."

"Daniel, is it that bad? Is it . . . the Hunts?"

I nodded gravely. "When were you planning to return to Evermore?"

"Tomorrow, actually, I just need to—"

"Go now. Tonight. As early as you can. You said you had the necessary magic?" She nodded. "Then go. Tell your family to stay inside. Don't risk appearing anywhere you might be seen. Have them spread the word." I gathered my Axis to myself.

"Will I see you again?" She seemed so frightened, so desperate. My heart almost broke.

"I'll find you."

"Promise."

My stomach fluttered. "I promise." I truly hoped I could keep it. But the consequences of my failings needed dealing with, even if it meant never seeing her again.

"I need to go." I seized the Axis. When I appeared in the Tower library, I realized I'd used a powerful traveling magic that wouldn't look anything like the methods used by the four elemental Axes. Unless I concocted some excuse—a lie—Gemma would know which Axis I served. Death. Endings. My chest tightened. *She'd know.* Perhaps I could later convince her it had been ordinary magic fueled by my Axis. If there was ordinary magic that did such a thing. Or—

I shook my head to clear it. I needed to focus.

I looked around at the books, encircling me and soaring high above me. None of them had given me an answer. I needed to . . .

What? What could possibly be next?

I shook my head again. Why couldn't I concentrate?

I was kidding myself. Almighty adherent I might be, but I was also just twenty-one. I wasn't clever. My failings at the river and the current debacle proved that, didn't they? Plaktukas had been clever. He'd contrived to hide information from the Sixth Axis itself. All I could do was endanger innocent women of witchkind.

Is this how history would remember me? Daniel the Failure? The adherent who'd shredded the Veil and eventually retired completely alone? Who'd endangered all of witchkind and couldn't even bring himself to be honest with the one person who'd been kind to him?

I wasn't clever. I wasn't subtle. I was brute force, flinging out Endings without regard.

But, yes, Plaktukas *had* been clever. And I had Plaktukas's rune, I could—

I'd killed someone today.

The truth of it finally settled on me like the heaviest cloak imaginable. My shoulders sagged, and my back bent under the weight of it. This is what Kirmin had warned me about. She'd cautioned me against acting rashly, using her own story, her own mistake, her own murders, to try and drive home the enormous weight of my responsibility.

I hadn't listened closely enough.

Urgent as the situation had become, I needed to accept accountability for what I'd done. I'd killed a man, and even if it had been to prevent him from killing another, the entire situation was my fault. I'd *caused* the entire situation by supporting those junior adherents, by failing to End the memories of just one or two humans—by not heeding the warnings of the high adherents.

I took myself to the Foundation.

My eyes were drawn directly to it. A crack so small and tight I couldn't have wedged a single hair into it. It ran crosswise for maybe the breadth of my hand and triple my height up the huge, solid column. I Ended the earth's pull beneath me and used one hand on the Foundation to pull myself gently up to the new fracture. As I ran my hand across the barely noticeable flaw, the memory came back to me.

Heart thumping. Voice raised. Terror. Exhorting the citizens to goodness. Reviling the evil before us. Joy in our victory. Pleasure in burning this demon in woman's form. Tightness in my chest—too much. Pressure. Gasping. Lungs won't work, chest so tight. Heat—fire? Darkness.

I yanked my hand back. I hadn't expected to experience the Ending from the priest's point of view, but it felt all too appropriate. I'd *killed*. It was only right that I experience some of it. My own heart felt cold, my spirit sodden. It had been a no-win situation, and Debesi had given me the choice.

This was—whether by the builders' original intent or not—how the Tower made its adherents accountable. Each crack, whether thinner than a hair or wide enough to poke your thumb into, was a memory of our wrongdoings. Our mistakes. I had but to rest my hand on any one of them to see, feel, and hear exactly what had happened. Evidence. I wasn't sure if they came from the Axis itself, whether they were bound into the rock of the Foundation, or if it was some combination of the two.

I ran my hand more lightly across the adjacent fissures, each of them almost too small, too thin to see—stark reminders of every bad decision an adherent had ever made. Those memories swam past me

quickly—I refused to let my hand linger too long on any one of them.

Memories.

Why had I never made this connection before? The Axis might hold all—or perhaps most—of the memories of prior adherents, but the Foundation held memories too. Memories of wrongs, of unjust Endings.

Carefully placing my hand on a smooth section of rock, I pulled myself a bit higher, sliding upward beside the Foundation, and let my other hand settle on another fissure. This one ran as long as my arm, cutting vertically through the black rock, deep enough that I could almost push a thumbnail into it.

My perspective shifted.

"So you agree?"

"That this needs to End?"

"Yes."

I sighed. "I do."

"You'll do it?"

His look was intent—firm. He knew what he was asking. "The Axis will resist," I pointed out.

His forehead wrinkled. "It can do that?"

I chuckled wryly. "It can. It resists anything that's not a natural End. An early End, fine. Ending something that should never have been, fine. Temporarily Ending something abstract, sure. Even Ending an argument—both parties want the Ending, even if they want different outcomes, so the Ending is fine. But this . . . this dam should have lasted forever."

"It's blocking all the water from reaching the fields."

"Oh, I know. As I said, I agree. It needs to go. You're sure you couldn't just tear it out yourselves?"

He looked uncertain. "It's dangerous. The animals are . . . vicious. And protective."

Nothing for it, then. "Agreed. And they'd just rebuild it, I suppose. My way, it will last longer."

"Will the Axis obey?"

I steeled myself. It wouldn't be straightforward, but he didn't need to know that. "It will. There just will be . . . consequences."

"Of what nature?"

He definitely didn't need to know *that*. The responsibility here was mine and mine alone. "Nothing you need to worry about. Everyone's well clear downstream? Once I End the dam, I can't put it back. Even the creatures who built it will struggle to rebuild."

"Everyone has signaled readiness. I'd feel more comfortable if we had a Sea adherent to help—"

"This isn't the sea. You've seen Markus around freshwater."

"Aye."

"Let's have at this, then."

A structure, built by small, industrious animals over the course of years. Home to generations of them. Holding rushing waters at bay, giving small fish a place to swim and breed, the food of even more animals.

End it.

Resistance. Dismay.

Obedience.

I snatched my hand back. That had to have been a memory of Vandens. He'd become famous for reinvigorating the farmlands in the lower Southeast. I'd read of him in the histories—he'd restored a major river's natural riverbed, bringing fresh water from the mountains to countless fields.

The Axis had resisted?

The emotions from the recollection were still fresh in my mind. The Axis had wanted to leave things alone—leave them as nature had changed them, rather than restoring them to what they'd been before. But the Axis still obeyed Vandens, an act that fractured the Foundation.

How in the world had that Ending been unjust? Tens of thousands had been fed as a result, preventing a near-famine that would have swept half the continent.

I thought of how I'd Ended the priest. The Axis would have preferred I'd Ended that poor woman instead. After all, her End—as precipitated by the humans—had already been near. It was a sure thing. I shook my head, my chest still tight and my stomach hollow. I couldn't. Not to one of my own people. Not when she could be saved.

Placing just my fingertips on the Foundation now, I pulled myself around its circumference and a bit higher, looking to see if another crack would catch my attention.

There.

"No, Sylphis, I agree. She seems fine, apart from that injury. But it's gone gangrenous."

"The healerwitch will be here tomorrow. He needed specific herbs, ones he said could only come from the Wood. Can't you End the gangrene?"

Everyone thought the Sixth was some unconstrained miracle. "That flesh is already dead, Sylphis," I said with a sigh. "Past its End. Gangrene is a result of that, not the cause."

"She'll die, Gailest. If the toxins reach her heart. *When* they do."

"She'll lose the leg regardless."

"The healerwitch can handle that! There's no reason for her to die now!"

I considered it, feeling out the Axis's awareness. "The Axis expects her to pass this evening. It's . . . close."

"Dona, are you in pain?" The little girl shook her head, her expression brave and afraid. "Gailest, if it wasn't for the fever—"

"It's not the fever, Sylphis," I said for what must have been the twentieth time. "It's the poison from the dead flesh."

"There has to be something you can do. She's your niece!"

Something. There was. I resigned myself to it. "The Axis will insist. But . . . I can hold it."

Dona's mother looked confused. "Hold it?"

"Nothing dies without the Axis's permission, without its involvement. Left alone, it would take Dona tonight. If you truly believe the healerwitch can counteract the damage—"

"He insists he can. He says he knows the magic. He just needed the ingredients."

"Then I can hold the Axis. Withhold its permission, its involvement."

The woman's mouth widened in amazement. "You can do that?"

"I'm the adherent of the Sixth, Sylphis. But there will be consequences."

"How so?"

My decision, my problem. "Don't worry about it. I'll handle it."

Leashed and now reined. Thrashing, bucking. An End meant to be —denied. All focus here now. That which is righteous—denied. Bitter betrayal.

Obedience.

I pulled my hand back more slowly as the emotionally charged memory ran its course. Gailest. I'd read of him. Nothing much—he'd been an unmemorable adherent by all accounts. Not, I suspect, like myself. No, I'd be remembered for certain.

But he'd *prevented* an Ending? Nowhere, ever, had I read about that being one of our powers, one of our prerogatives. I wondered how he'd done it, how he'd discovered it was even possible. Even the *Book of Endings* hadn't mentioned it.

At least, in the pages that had opened themselves for me. There was still a stack of pages at the end, as thick as my finger, that remained stubbornly stuck together.

I found myself wondering if Dona had indeed survived and what kind of relationship Gailest and the Axis had maintained afterward.

I slid higher up the Foundation now, pulling myself further around its wide girth. What else could I learn from my predecessors' alleged mistakes?

Here.

"And you just want me to End them for you? Remove the competition?" I plucked a peeled grape from the bowl on the table and popped it into my mouth. The soft flesh melted into sweet juice across my tongue. The obsequious little man before me sought to indulge as well. My frown stopped him.

"Yes, Skriaudikas," he said, ducking his head in apology. "If it's possible."

I laughed. "Of course it's possible, idiot. The question is whether or not it's . . . hmm, shall we say, *financially feasible*."

His face was a portrait of hope. "We've brought the chests, as you asked."

"Asked?" Irritating insect. "I never *ask*. I may have *suggested* a donation, as others have offered them in the past. That's far from a *request*, let alone a *demand,* as you seem to be implying."

His hope transformed into terror, and I took great amusement from it. "I was mistaken, Adherent. I meant—"

I stood quickly, fixing him with my most intense glare. "Don't call me that," I hissed. "Don't *ever* call me that. I'm not *adhered* to anything. Do you understand?"

The terror in his expression seemed to double. "Of course, Skriaudikas. I am . . . a poor speaker."

"Then let's hope your offering speaks for you," I said casually and settled back in my chair.

"Of . . . of course. It's a bit more than what others have donated, as we feel we respect your work more than others."

Perhaps he is not completely without intellect. "Hmm. Yes, I think that will do. Now, what was the man's name?"

"It's the clan, your honor."

I smiled. "*Your honor*. I like the sound of that. Very well. What's the clan name? I haven't loosed the Horde in some time. Perhaps it will appreciate an afternoon out."

I swallowed bile as I pulled my hand away from the Foundation, certain the glossy rock had grown ice cold. That would have been Skriaudikas the Abuser, one of the most infamous adherents. He'd lived not long after Galas and had openly accepted enormous bribes—most of which he funneled to his family—in exchange for "favors," including the mass murder of the entire Statytojas clan of shipbuilders. Unsurprisingly, the modern fear of the Sixth Axis largely originated with Skriaudikas.

At least I wasn't a monster like him.

I floated a bit higher, scanning for another prominent fracture. These moments of recollection, of reflection were proving useful. The Foundation wasn't, as I'd been taught, damaged by unjust Endings. The cracks seemed to come from simply opposing the Axis—from ordering it to End something that it didn't want to, like causing unnatural Endings or holding back an Ending it had anticipated. Justice had nothing to do with it. The Axis didn't have a sense of right and wrong, only a role in the natural order of things, and it disliked being unable to fulfill that role.

Interesting.

I decided to try one more.

"You're certain this will do it?" Damon asked.

"Yes, Galas. Without question."

I sighed. "You know how much I hate the idea of consigning my successors to such a place. Myself, certainly—I understand the fear. But others? I—"

"It's the only way to keep the peace, Galas. Sky, Flame, Earth, Sea, they're all bad enough, but already those Axes have Chosen others. The Sixth seems stubbornly fixated on you. And without the balance of Beginning, it's just too much for people. Too much power in one person."

I chuckled. "It's a power with surprising little utility, Damon."

"If only you'd all succeeded in chaining the Fifth Axis as well."

"We tried. She died trying, in fact. So here we are. People will just have to learn to live with me."

"You could End anyone. Or everyone."

"Little good that would do me, though. And after all the effort and sacrifice I've put into saving everyone."

"You know what I mean."

This isn't how I'd hoped this would turn out. "I do. Show it to me again."



"It's less complex than I thought," I mused.

Damon looked frustrated. "Well, it's more complex than I'd hoped. Magic is thin now, with so much bound in the Axes. This is going to be horrifically expensive to empower."

Ah, now we come to it. "You want me to do it, don't you?"

Damon had the courtesy to look embarrassed, refusing to meet my eyes. "You'll have to. It's the only way to ensure it's perpetual. Self-powering, as it were. This will be centered on a monolith, which should act as an anchor."

I nodded. "I recognize the magic. Wait—did you say *should*?"

He hesitated before replying. "This is old magic. From before the Sundering. From before the Exodus, even, if you're being technical."

"I feel we should be technical," I said. "You might even aim for *precise*."

"Our best minds believe it will work as designed."

I looked carefully at the construct. "This bit here," I said slowly, tapping a part of the drawing. "You're certain you mean for it to have this form?"

"Yes?" Damon looked confused. "It's meant to keep you there all your life. Any adherent that ascends there will be caught in it as well. And since you've said—"

"I know, I know." *A loophole!* "It's just . . . all my life."

"That was the agreement."

"It was." I chuckled. "Go ahead. I'm fine with it."

His brow furrowed slightly. "You're going to have to—"

"Oh, I know. Once you leave this room, you won't remember any of this."

The rune in Galas's memory had been *the* rune—the one from Plaktukas's memories. But what did that mean? Galas's memory suggested the rune was part of the magic that trapped us in the Tower. But something was off. Galas had felt . . . amused? Victorious? He must have already conceived of the idea of moving past his own Ending. Or maybe he'd already done so. I had no way of placing that memory in a particular time, so there was no way to tell. He'd obviously Ended someone's memory—someone named Damon. I could look that up later. But this Damon had mentioned *perpetuity*. The magic meant to trap me, to trap all adherents of the Sixth, was perpetual. It wasn't tied to the Axis, but it was somehow connected to the Axis.

He'd mentioned a monolith. Was that the Foundation? Did this massive column of granite do more than just support the Tower? It obviously did, given that adherents' resistance to the Axis damaged it.

It was all very confusing. I stepped back from the Foundation and had the Axis gradually let the earth's pull reassert itself. As I drifted slowly back to the bedrock floor of the Foundation chamber, I looked down.

Stop, I ordered.

I hovered there in the air for a long, long time.

A giant rune construct was carved into the bedrock on which the Foundation rested, centered beneath that giant pillar of obsidian rock. It was so large that I'd never even noticed I was walking on it. Close-up, its broad strokes had seemed like nothing more than uneven cuts in the granite.



Galas's memory had been of that rune. The rune that . . . what, controlled the magic of the Tower itself? Fed that magic? The same rune that Plaktukas had used to awaken the Veil, and to keep it active all these centuries?

I needed to find out what it meant. The rune was too complex for me to decipher as Galas had, and even now it triggered no memories from the Axis itself. My self-taught knowledge of runes and magic was deeply insufficient. I needed someone who could explain it to me and tell me what it did.

Evermore would know. Well, someone there. The scholars there knew the entire history of magic; surely one of them would know what this rune meant and how it worked. And Gemma had been heading to Evermore. I could find her, and she could help me find someone.

But . . . today was a rest day. All the halls of government and scholarship would be closed. Could I track down one of the scholars? Find them in their home?

I took myself up to the Tower's map room—and realized that I

didn't know any of their names. "Show me the scholars of Runehall in Evermore," I said hesitantly.

The map didn't move. So no, I couldn't find them that way.

I couldn't just lie idle while priests were trying to burn innocent people over a power they simply didn't understand. I needed—

Wait.

Zmogus had mocked my idea of looking into the humans' religion, to see if a solution could be found there. But Zmogus mocked nearly everything I proposed since I'd ascended. So why let that stop me? I could go to Evermore first thing in the morning, which left me much of the day to . . .

To what?

I squared my shoulders. To discover why the human religion hated us so much. To find a loophole, a story, a reason, anything that could end the attacks. Or at least abate them until I could heal the Veil. I was going to do something clever.

I pulled the Axis to me and ordered it to take me to Lastpointe.

CHAPTER 13

Lastpointe

It was the smallest village I knew of that was far from Twynsits and still had a church. It was almost impossible that anyone here, on an island off the main continent's westernmost shore, would have heard of the re-emergence of magic.

Immediately I recalled why I loved Lastpointe. The people—even those of witchkind—were unfailingly laid back, taking life at a slower pace than "those busy folk on the mainland," as they often put it. Like most small, seaside villages, fishing was a major occupation, but the few small cafés and pubs in the village served the most delectable species of fish I'd tasted anywhere in the world. After the whiplash of the day thus far, Lastpointe filled me with a much-needed sense of calm carried on a salty sea breeze.

I appeared directly in front of Lastpointe's church. It sat at the edge of the village, about as far inland as you could go before entering the island's sparse interior meadows, rolling hills, and rocky prominences.

I'd never paid much attention to the building, but I did now.

Humans built their churches according to a strict pattern, adapting when needed to accommodate the local climate, building materials, and terrain. Aside from the finer churches in the bigger towns, the buildings were usually compact, squat, and shaped like a crossroads. Whenever

possible, they were oriented so that the entrance—almost invariable a tall, double wooden door—faced west. Human myths said they'd come into this world from the west, so they looked that way with wary and watchful eyes. If evil ever entered this world, it would also come from that direction. Accordingly, Lastpointe's church faced west, away from the town proper, so I circled the building on a well-worn dirt path.

The exterior was made of simple wood planks coated in thick white paint made from limestone and clay. The stuff was virtually impervious to weather, and I knew it could last for several years before needing even minor touch-ups. The corners of the building were stout wooden posts that could stand up to almost any kind of weather or wind. The eaves of the roof were decorated with carved pieces of wood, all painted in the dull, earthy shades that were the humans' sole concession to color: earthy reds, forest greens, grayish blues, and the humblest of brown oranges.

The church, like all the other human churches I'd seen, was entirely free of windows. I had no idea why, but I supposed their deity wanted them to avoid any possible distractions during worship.

Stepping inside, I was surprised to find two fireplaces contentedly burning to the left and right, their bright, flickering light supplemented by dozens of fat three-wick candles throughout the space. A series of wooden benches were lined up before me, and at the far end of the building was a lectern on a small dais, where I imagined the priest would stand to deliver sermons and such. The interior otherwise lacked adornments. No paintings, no tile mosaics—nothing but more of the sturdy white paint, now blackened by soot.

"Well, hello," a creaky old voice greeted me. I jumped slightly as a tall old man stepped through a hidden door behind the lectern. "How can I help you, son?"

He may have been taller in his youth, before age had stooped his shoulders. His deep-black skin shone in the firelight, reflecting sharply off his bald pate. A carefully groomed beard of coarse white hair stretched to his midchest, and his thin, lanky limbs moved with ease and confidence as he walked down a center aisle between the benches.

"I'm . . ." Why hadn't I come up with some kind of story?

He paused halfway to me and cocked an eyebrow. "Looking for some advice?"

That would do. I nodded. "I think so."

He smiled, and his bright teeth lit the room. He gestured to a bench. "Have a seat." He settled into an adjacent bench and added, "I'm guessing you're not from around here."

Of course not. He'd know everyone in town, and this wasn't the part of the continent where skin as pale as mine was even somewhat common. "No, just . . . visiting. On business." I sat on the edge of the bench, facing him.

"So how can I help?"

"It's about"—*might as well get right to it*—"magic."

His eyebrows rose, the skin on his head wrinkling. "That's probably the last thing I thought you'd say." He chuckled. "Magic it is. What can I tell you?"

"I've gotten a letter from family . . . from my sister," I said, stumbling a bit as I concocted a story. "It talked about magic—people using. Back east. There's been an uproar, of course."

He tilted his head a bit. "Of course?"

"Well, yes. Of course. You know the texts."

"*Suffer not a witch to live*, you mean?"

"That."

"Ah. And your sister, she's in one of the big towns?"

"Chiton." People with skin like mine weren't a once-in-a-lifetime sighting there.

He nodded slowly. "Well, that is what the texts say. Well, one of them." He peered at me closely. "Does she think the magic is real? Sometimes, you know, we think we see something strange, but it's easily explained—"

"Everyone seems pretty convinced, she said."

"I see." He sighed. "I suppose that's very frightening." I nodded. "Have they called for any . . . action?"

I could see he was avoiding the word. "Hunts? Yes. She says they have."

"Mm-hmm." He looked away for a moment before speaking

again. "You know, I have to admit that I probably have a . . . let's call it an unorthodox view of the subject?"

"Oh?"

"Do you know much about the First Concordance?"

I hadn't heard of it. Was it a theory, a doctrine? Wait. "You mean the book you mentioned? No, not much."

He dismissed my ignorance with a wave. "Few do, I suppose, outside the seminaries. We don't refer to it much in modern times. Obviously it was our first text. It established the Church. But did you know it was written hundreds of years after we came to this world?"

"Came? You mean the Exodus?"

He nodded slowly. "There are older histories. I've read some. A few are considered apocryphal now, but there are grains of truth in them, I think."

Fascinating. I leaned forward. "What do they say?"

"They say that magic came into this world with us. That it was a gift of the Creator, just as we are. The texts say we lived in harmony with magic, side by side, for centuries."

This was eerily close to witchkind's version of events. "Then what?"

He spread his hands. "It's hard to say, actually. The stories change. The few texts written immediately before the First Concordance don't all agree, but they all suggest that magic became uncooperative. Dangerous, some of them say. Magic was bottled up by a few who perverted it. Instead of using it for the betterment of all, they used it to rule."

That was a new interpretation, but honestly, it wasn't hard to imagine witchkind doing exactly that.

"And then?"

"The first high priest, Canonicus, prayed for magic to either be released or stricken from the world. That's in the First Concordance."

"And?"

He shrugged. "It was stricken, of course. Taken entirely from the world. Taken from those who had perverted it so that they could no longer do so. To ensure that we could all live freely and equally."

If only you knew, I thought. "And if anyone uses magic again, if it comes back into the world?"

He nodded. "*Suffer not a witch to live.* The Hunts were an attempt to purge the last of the people who claimed to wield it."

"So magic itself isn't evil."

Another sigh. "I choose to think not. If it ever actually existed, which I admit is difficult for my old mind to imagine, it would have been a tool—something that could have been used or misused, depending on whose hands it fell into."

"Could it come back?"

He chuckled at that. "As a boy, I used to dream about it. How wonderful, how fantastical, would that be? And I suppose, if we were found worthy, the Creator could release it back into the world."

"What if the Creator already had? What if what my sister says is true—that magic is out there right now? What if these Hunts are . . . wrong?" That might be the loophole I'd hoped for: a permissible return of magic.

The priest nodded solemnly. "You know, there's much in the First Concordance that I find . . . political."

My eyebrows went up. "Political?"

"Of their time. It provides a message that suited the priesthood of the day. Look," he said with another resigned sigh, "priests aren't gods. Maybe some people did try to bottle up magic and use it to control the rest of us. Or maybe some of us demanded things of magic that weren't within reason. Maybe magic itself posed a threat to the Church."

"A threat?"

"You've read the Second Concordance. And the Third, of course." My expression must have given me away because he let out a deep, hearty laugh. "I'm not about to quiz you on it, son, nor judge you. Just basic familiarity." I nodded once. "It's mostly rules. Ways to live, things to avoid, that kind of thing."

"Sure."

"Some of those things, if we're being honest, are really just about putting the Church in control. The old books tell you to do things just so you're following orders. None of those orders are really *bad*,

but . . . I mean, how angry is the Creator actually going to be if you cook fish on the holy day?"

You mean you can't? "Okay?"

"But it's a way to keep people following the Church's rules. A minor thing, easily adopted. You get people to accept enough minor things, and they'll accept the big ones. Like the rules on tithing."

I don't even know what that word means. "Sure," I repeated.

"You see, magic would make many of those rules seem quite foolish, right?"

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know. Say, maybe . . . oh, the prohibition on more lights in a room than people. 'We shine as lights unto the Creator's eyes, and ill betide those who would blind the Creator with false lights; therefore, never shall more false lights burn than true lights be in that room.'"

That's a thing? Good grief, their Church is weird. "Of course."

"The prohibition, as many religious scholars have discussed, originated from a safety concern. But it was couched in religious terms: you were upsetting the Creator if you didn't obey."

"What safety concern?"

"That if your home is filled with too many lit candles, you might start a fire."

I turned to look at the dozens of lit candles about the church. "Seems you have an excess of false lights, then."

He chuckled heartily. "Well, this is a church, not a home. Our lights represent all those who aren't with us. We put them out during services, right?"

"Oh . . . right," I stammered, flustered.

"But what if we had magic lights? Lights that illuminated without burning?" His look became more serious. "That would be a pretty silly restriction, at least the way it's worded now."

"I see," I said with a slow nod. I could see the implications.

"And there are a hundred more examples. Probably hundreds of little instances where the Church would look silly or ineffective if magic existed in the world. And so the prohibition on magic, the

Hunts for anyone accused of practicing it, and so on. It all comes about."

Lies built on lies, you mean, I thought. "I guess that makes me feel a little better. Safer, maybe." The man's concept of his faith was . . . different. Certainly not what I'd expected.

"I'm sure your sister is fine. If you write back, I'd just encourage her to stay out of it. No good comes from the kind of thinking that leads to a Hunt. After all, is our first commandment not to protect life in all forms we find it?"

Is it? Good to know. "It is. Although . . ."

"Yes?"

"It seems a bit of a contradiction, doesn't it? Protect life but kill the witches?"

He chuckled. "Yes, well. Priests are men as any other. We needn't take everything they say as . . . law, I suppose."

"The people in Chiton seem to."

He nodded slowly. "And it will take a good man or woman to point out another path." I said nothing, and he held my gaze for a few moments before asking, "Anything else?"

"No! No, sorry. I didn't mean to take up so much of your time." We both stood. I found myself surprised. He'd been gracious and wise. He seemed as far removed from the spittle-spraying madman in Twynsists as possible, and not at all what I'd expected. "Thank you, really."

"Not at all. It's what I'm here for when it's not a holy day." He smiled. "I've enjoyed revisiting these topics. I haven't thought about these ideas . . . oh, since shortly after seminary." He gave me a wink. "You know, it's why they stuck me out here. 'Insidious ideas. Too many questions.' Little did they know how much I'd come to love this place."

"I do too," I said, wishing I could stay and leave the Veil mess behind me.

"Please, come in again the next time you're here on business."

"I will." As I said it, I found that I meant my words.

"Then I shall bid you good day."

"Good day." I turned to go. "Oh." I turned back and offered my hand. "My name is Daniel."

The priest smiled and shook my hand—a gesture witchkind and humans had kept in common for millennia. "Dedicant Ormond."

"Thank you, Dedicant Ormond."

He nodded a farewell, and I made my way out of the church. As the door shut behind me, I realized that I didn't have anything close to a solution, at least inasmuch as the humans' religion went. Perhaps we could have some Sky adherents spread whispers that magic had returned at the hand of the Creator? But Ormond's words about magic taking away power from the Church—that seemed like a powerful incentive for the priests in Twynsits to shout down any suggestions of magic's legitimacy.

Ormond would see me again, but for now it seemed as if getting the Veil back in place remained my best bet.

Our discussion had put a different light on things. I found myself feeling less hostile—toward the humans, that is. They'd been manipulated by religious leaders to hate witchkind. Before then, we'd lived peacefully. Perhaps we could again.

The sun was nearing the western horizon, and already I could see the first moon slipping into the sky. This time of year, the second moon would follow shortly after, tired of being alone. They'd part ways again soon enough, I knew.

As I wrapped the Axis about me for my return to the Tower, I wondered if the humans had their own stories about the sun and the moons.

CHAPTER 14

Evermore

The capital of witchkind, the only city in the world that was ours and ours alone.

There were none of the squat, sturdy buildings that the humans had erected. Instead, the builders of Evermore had created soaring, graceful structures that reached five, six, even ten stories into the sky. The sun glistened off flawless glass windows and gilt ornamentation, putting witchkind's love of color on display. Bright flags of emerald and crimson rippled in the breeze, flashes of turquoise and violet outlined door frames, and mosaics in every color imaginable depicted scenes of family, revelry, and myths.

In human towns, the streets were rough cobblestones at best. More often they were dirt or mud or gravel. Evermore's streets, even in the lowliest of service alleys, were paved with smooth, sturdy bricks formed from a combination of local limestone and clever magic. Each piece was carved with additional runes for durability and traction, and those runes were renewed regularly by the city's hardworking maintenance teams.

Here, witchkind could not only live in the open, but live openly: bright fabrics, glistening metals, and sparkling gems adorned each and every person, down to the smallest child. And yet Evermore and its

riot of color and texture somehow blended into a harmonious, iridescent whole.

When I'd first come here, I'd wondered how such a bright, brilliant city could possibly have remained hidden from humans for so many centuries. As I inquired and investigated, I realized that it hadn't. Any human could stumble across Evermore and see it plain as day. The trick was simply making sure they didn't.

Magic, a lack of any incoming roads, and a subtle discouragement of human development too close to the city all worked together to ensure Evermore remain undiscovered. And so it became the center of witchkind life, culture, and history. The tall government buildings held our records of births and deaths, genealogies, real estate, and more. That was why I'd come: if anyone could help me understand this mysterious rune, they would be here in Evermore.

In the heart of the city was a wide-open square full of trees, fountains, grassy hills, and other areas to relax and enjoy. A profligate amount of magic—much of it derived from various taxes and the labors of adherents of Sky—was spent to ensure continually pleasant weather over this portion of the city. From that central park, I made my way to Runehall, Plaktukas's rune construct hoarding my mind's attention. It felt so tantalizingly familiar yet so foreign at the same time. It was clearly old, but I'd—

"Daniel?"

I snapped out of my reverie and refocused on my surroundings. The man who'd spoken was a young adherent, Earth if I was to—wait. "Cyril?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "What chance, running across you here this morning! We were hoping to speak to you about—"

"I'm actually on fairly urgent business," I said, moving to continue on my way.

"This is urgent as well," he said in a low voice, grabbing my arm. I stopped and begrudgingly looked down into his eyes, then at his hand on my arm. I didn't have time for this. He audibly swallowed and released me. "Apologies. But this *is* urgent, and it has to do with"—his voice lowered to a whisper—"the Hunts."

That was very specific. And timely. I met his gaze again. "Go on."

He quickly looked around at the many witchkind hurrying past us on their morning errands. "Not here," he muttered. "There—may I buy you a cup of *kavos?"* He nodded toward a small café.

"Quickly." I followed him into the café, which had just begun emptying of its morning customers. We took a small table in the back corner. "What is this about?"

"I know you feel responsible for this . . . situation," he said quickly, keeping his voice low as he signaled the server for two mugs. I frowned. "But this isn't the first time."

My frown deepened. "The first time for what?"

"That the Veil has been threatened. Not even the first time it's been threatened in an attempt to keep the iron roadway work at bay."

He'd piqued my curiosity, and I leaned forward as two mugs of steaming black liquid were placed between us. "What do you mean?"

"Not just the iron roadway. Did you know the human shipbuilders in Chiton launched a whole new ship design not long ago? They promised it would be sturdier, safer, and able to move at nearly twice the speed of the designs everyone has been using for centuries."

"And?"

"They were right. But they got there by using iron strapping to reinforce the hull beams and planks."

My eyes widened. That would have made the fisherwitches' runes useless and prevented them from even being *on* those ships.

"We—a couple of Sea adherents, that is—were able to capsize it. We floated the story that the iron made it too top heavy over the high seas, despite what their designers had predicted."

"They accepted it?"

"We think so. We're watching them more closely now."

"You keep saying *we*."

"That's why I wanted to speak to you. There needs to be a more concerted effort to monitor the humans' advances. Their use of iron, in particular. We let the iron roadway happen without resistance—we have to stop further advances before they get far. If we'd have been watching, paying attention, we could have stopped that ship from ever being built. Come up with . . . something."

"Why are you coming to me?" Was he proposing another

outlandish display to deter humans? Was he looking for me to End something—or someone?

"We're putting together a group. A small one. The senior adherents—" He stopped with a frown.

"I understand completely," I said bitterly.

"Yes. So it's a few of us juniors. But not just adherents. We've found a few ordinary witchkind, ones who are better positioned to learn about human advances and experiments."

"Which leads to me how?"

"We want to know we can call on you if a quiet Ending, early enough on, can prevent something from progressing too far. From becoming another iron roadway."

"Sounds perfectly reasonable."

"So you're in?"

"I suppose. I don't interact much with humans, but—"

"We'll handle the watching. We're building a network. We just need to know that at least one major power is with us."

I nodded firmly. "I'm with you."

"Thank you." His expression was a portrait of relief. Had he feared I would turn him into Mesla or something? "We will—"

"I do need to go," I reminded him, then drained my mug. "When this is all over, let's speak again."

He nodded quickly. "May I ask where you're going?"

"Runehall. I'm researching. Well, I may have found a clue about re-establishing the Veil."

His eyes grew wide. "That would be amazing. I know a shortcut from here, out of the morning traffic."

"I'll follow you, then."

Runehall was the repository of all known magic in the world: every rune, every technique, every word of the True Language, and anything else related to our magical heritage was stored here. Many of the books in my own library were copies of volumes kept in Runehall.

As I entered the building through tall, arched doors, a young man

seated at a neat wooden desk raised his head and gave me a bright smile. "How can I help you today, Adherent?"

"I've got a rune I need some help with. History on it, even deciphering it if possible."

He raised an eyebrow. "May I see it?"

Plaktukas had worked hard to keep the rune a secret, but there was no way the scholars here could help me without seeing it. Plus, at this point, the diagram was firmly in the memories I would leave behind one day. Inevitably, the Axis would know this rune despite Plaktukas's efforts. Feeling the slight weight of a failure I didn't understand, I slid my sketch across his desk. The young man turned the paper over a few times, as Gemma had, and then frowned. "This is . . . old. I suggest you take it to the Research section." He pointed down one of several hallways behind him. "Second door on the right, straight back to the end. There's a speed rune just inside the doorway, if you like. Take a left at the end and ask for Andreas. He's in charge of the section."

"Thank you." I reclaimed my sketch and stepped through the door he'd indicated. As promised, a speed rune was carved into the doorpost, and I touched it. In an eye blink, I found myself at the far end of the hallway. Efficient magic. I turned left and stepped through an arch that had "Research" carved overhead. I found myself in a long, wide, vaulted hall. Magic lights dotted the walls, lending a dim but unflickering glow to the place. It exuded a deep sense of age and reminded me of some of the wine cellars I'd been in—except vastly larger, of course. My nose tickled as motes of dust slid and eddied around me.

"Good morning, good morning." An incredibly old man stood behind a tall counter, a sheaf of papers spread out before him. He was tall and almost skeletally thin, his dark skin heavily lined and worn with age.

"Andreas?"

He nodded with great energy, his expression splitting into a wide grin full of bright white teeth. "I am indeed. Not often an adherent pays a visit to us back here, dusty and old as we are! How can I help you today?"

Once again, I slid my sketch over. "I need to understand what this does and how it works, if possible."

He turned the sketch over a few times. "Hmm. Quite old. Interesting." He stared for a bit longer. "Gel!" he shouted suddenly, making me start. The Axis poked forward, echoing my alarm.

"What is it, Andre—oh. Well, hello. I said to come visit sometime, but I didn't think you'd come so quickly!"

It was Gemma. "I . . . uh, I didn't realize you worked here," I stammered.

Her smile seemed to strip away a century of age from the place. "This is where I'm starting my scholarly work!" She glanced down at the counter and saw the slip of paper still in Andreas's hand. "Oh, your rune. How clever to bring it here! Have you learned anything more about it?"

"A bit," I said, hesitant to tell her about the Tower. "But I was hoping someone here would be able to tell me more."

"Here, Gel," Andreas said, pushing the paper in front of her. "What time frame would you place this in?" He looked at her sharply, as if testing her.

Gemma chewed her lip for a moment before replying. "It's not modern, obviously. But it's not Old Runic either, is it?"

"Why do you say so?"

"They're more . . . organized. Parallel lines, sharp angles, very meticulous symbology. This seems . . . almost like a mix of old and new."

Andreas nodded. "We call it Transitional Runic. Actually quite rare. Nearly every example I've seen came from just after the Forging, no more than ten to twenty years after. Past that, everything shifted over to the modern style we still use today."

"Can you tell me anything about it?" I asked.

"It's difficult," the old man mused. "Grab us the Tokenen, would you?" he asked Gemma. "The one in the green binding, not the blue." We waited for a moment as Gemma ducked through a side door, emerging a few moments later with a thick, heavy-looking book. She laid it on the counter in front of Andreas, who flipped it about halfway open and began slowly turning pages. "Ah, yes. Hmm." His

head swiveled between my sketch and the book a few times before he spoke. "You see here," he said to Gemma, tapping the page, "where this curves to this side, and this the other?"

"Mm-hmm." She seemed engrossed in whatever he was showing her, and I leaned over the counter to see.

"In Old Runic, that would have been a feedback mechanism, looping unused power back into the rune. There's no modern equivalent, not really. No need, thin as magic is."

"But what about this bit?" Gemma asked, touching my sketch.

"Ah, I suspect . . ." Andreas trailed off as he flipped a few more pages. "Yes, yes. See here?"

None of it made any sense to me, especially upside down. Gemma frowned. "A parasite tap?"

Andreas nodded vigorously. "Quite rare. A means of fueling a rune from a storage system of some kind. Not anything like we have now, though. The ancients could store power in huge crystals. But this . . . hmm. Not intended for one of those. See how the symmetry here is different?"

"Mm-hmm," Gemma murmured. *Storage crystals?* I thought. I'd never encountered a mention of such a thing. Modern witchkind stored excess magic in their coins, making commerce more about the exchange of power than the base metal that contained it. But giant crystals?

"Meant to draw from something else," Andres said, followed by something low that I couldn't hear, and then his head snapped up and his eyes bore into mine. "Where'd you find this?"

"It's . . . associated with my Axis."

He frowned. "In the Tower?"

Well, that was out of the bag. Gemma gave me an odd, confused look as I simply nodded.

Andreas nodded slowly, his eyes returning to his book as he flipped a few more pages. "Yes, yes, I suppose that makes sense. Probably what powers half the place. Expect it draws from your Axis itself."

"Wait," Gemma said, apparently putting it all together. "You're *that* Daniel?"

"Hush, Gel," Andreas said. But something he'd said had caught my attention. *Draws from the Axis.* It made sense, taken with the memories I'd experienced at the Foundation.

Wait, the Foundation wasn't a giant *crystal,* but—

"See here? This is an anchoring device," Andreas was saying, tapping another bit of my sketch. "Always wondered how it was the Sixth stayed chained between adherents. Expect this does it. Must tie it to the island itself or something else. Maybe those great spikes you've got."

Not the spikes. The Foundation. This rune was at the heart of the Tower's function. Between adherents, it somehow chained the Axis to the Foundation itself— or at least the prominent part of the Axis whose awareness I could feel even now.

"Odd anchor, though," the old man mused as Gemma continued to give me an inscrutable stare. "It'd require intelligence of some kind. Sentience. Not sure it's just the rock."

Would the Foundation's memories be sufficient? No . . . that couldn't have been it. When it was built, the Foundation had been flawless and empty. Its creators must have intended it for something else. "You mentioned a loop?"

Andreas nodded, flipping back several pages in his book and tapping it again. I leaned closer but still couldn't decipher the tiny, crabbed writing or any of the elegantly drawn runes. "Perpetual magic. Rare, but not unheard of. Most commonly used to make these expanded spaces. Half of Evermore runs on these. Not this exact one, mind—this is elegant work. Would have taken a wagonload of magic to get it started, but from there it'd run forever. Never need a top-up, if it's indeed drawing from the Axis for replenishment."

So that would keep the Veil going. But how had Plaktukas awoken it in the first place? The Veil itself wasn't of the Axis, even if the Axis was keeping it awake. Or was supposed to be doing so? "Is there more?"

Andreas sighed. "You know, it might be easiest to have it simplified. I never had the knack for that, though."

"Simplified?"

"Most Old Runic constructs can be redrawn in modern runes," Gemma explained. I still couldn't make sense of her expression: it was flatter but still polite. Doubtless she was terrified that she'd been spending time with the adherent of Death and likely upset that I'd deceived her. But she didn't show anger. Why? My guts clenched. *Because she was afraid to.*

"I could take you down to Stevas," she offered, looking at Andreas for permission. Maybe she wasn't afraid, then? "He's a fair hand at simplifying, didn't you say?"

Andreas nodded. "The best we've got, and he'll have the reference books to help. That's what I'd suggest," he said, looking back up at me.

"If it isn't too much trouble," I said, still looking at Gemma. She hid her emotions well.

"This is about . . . Twynsits?" she asked quietly, once again making eye contact. In this dim hall, her eyes had lost their sparkle and warmth. I nodded. "Then there's no time to waste," she said firmly. She stepped around the counter and put a hand on my elbow, turning me toward the exit. "Off we go."

We didn't link arms as we had at her family's inn. That would be too close, too personal. I was the lying embodiment of Endings, I thought miserably. My stomach felt like a sack of rocks, sitting heavy in my body. This is exactly what I'd known would happen once she found out. Any chance I'd had of—

"I knew," she said quietly as she led me back into the main hallway and down a set of steps that the speed rune had carried me past. "When you vanished yesterday, I knew you weren't one of the first four. We've an adherent of Sky in my family, and he always just seems to . . . dissipate. You simply vanished."

"You're not upset?" I asked, keeping my voice low as well.

"Surprised, I suppose," she mused.

But not angry? Even if she'd known, I'd still lied to her.

"I can't blame you, now that I think about it. Your kind lead lonely lives, don't they?"

My kind. As if there was more the one of me. "I do," I admitted even more quietly.

"You were afraid I'd . . . I guess people don't want to spend much time with you, do they?"

"I was meant to be imprisoned in the Tower of Endings," I said bitterly. "I'm not supposed to be around people. People aren't supposed to be around me. The adherent of the Sixth is meant to be alone."

"You don't have to be," she said, matching my tone as we came to the bottom of the steps. "I don't think I'm afraid of you, at least." Warmth spread through my limbs as we stepped into a small office, furnished with a battered old table and three rickety chairs. "Stevas?" she called out.

"Eh?" A middle-aged man appeared through a narrow doorway.

"Andreas suggested we see you. This is . . . Daniel. He's the adherent of the Sixth." Stevas's eyes widened. "He's come to ask us about simplifying a rune."

Stevas nodded, his eyes still bulging, and gestured to the table. Gemma had taken my sketch, and she laid it in the center of the table. "I can pay you," I blurted. I didn't expect these people to do everything for free just because I was . . . me.

"Pay?" He seemed to consider the concept. "Guess it's normal enough. Usually charge twenty, maybe thirty for one this complex," he added, eyeing the sketch.

"You can't possibly—" Gemma began, heat rising in her voice. "Do you know who—"

"I'm happy to," I interrupted. I withdrew a handful of coins—my family's rather than any of the ones hoarded throughout the Tower—and gently set the stack on the table.

Stevas looked at them for a moment before scooping them into his own pocket and sliding into one of the chairs. "Sit," he said as he pulled the sketch closer to him. "Hmm." He held a hand out to one side, palm up. "Brevas," he ordered in a sharp tone. "The old one. And Tommis, third edition. And pen and paper."

The requested books and supplies soared through the same narrow doorway and thumped in his outstretched hand, his arm dipping under the weight. He quickly slid the pile onto the table,

opened one of the books, and arranged the blank sheets of paper in front of him.

He muttered and turned pages for several minutes, finally picking up the pen and sketching a single rune:



My eyes widened. Stevas laid his pen down and examined his work before looking up at me. "*Teisėjas,* in the True Language," he said carefully, perhaps with a note of suspicion in his voice.

Judge, the word meant. It was also my family's true surname, one we rarely shared with anyone. For generations, they'd used pseudonyms like Scratch.

"Not sure I care to finish this," Stevas said in a low voice, his eyes drilling into mine. "Not an auspicious start."

I cleared my throat. "I think you'll find," I said carefully, "that accepting my family's coin imposes a burden." I licked my lips nervously.

Stevas cocked his head and me and attempted to push his chair back from the table. It didn't budge. He struggled with it for several moments, wiggling it hard enough that I worried it might actually shatter. With a resigned sigh, he said, "I see."

Gemma gave me another odd look that I didn't quite know how to interpret. *She's probably decided I'm too weird to trouble with*, I thought sadly. I pushed it aside—I was naïve to think I could have a life outside the Tower, to have anything as absurd as a friend, despite her well-meaning words.

My mood continued to darken as we watched Stevas translate the rune I'd sketched. He summoned book after book, eventually accu-

mulating a stack that stood higher than his head. When he finished, he pushed the completed page toward me.

"Thank you."

He slid his chair back with a grunt, stood, and with a parting glare, hurried out of the room.

The page contained two additional runes.





"I know the first one," Gemma said, peering at the page. *"Įkalinimas.* To be imprisoned."

"Imprisonment," I corrected her absentmindedly. I'd built up a solid knowledge of the True Language while alone in my tower. "The connotation is describing the actual condition, not the future eventuality."

We stared at the other rune for a long moment. "But I don't know this one," I said at last.

"Is it a compound?" she asked. She'd moved very close to me so that we were standing shoulder to shoulder as we leaned over the sketches. I breathed in gently, savoring the light, sweet scent of her. Would she have stood so close if she'd given up on me?

She was still speaking. "Something like *nepaliaujama*?"

"Never-ending?" I mused, forcing my attention back to the sketch. "So this bit," I said, tapping the drawing. "In the . . . presence?"

She shook her head. "It's more like *kol gyvybė egzistuoja*. 'Never-ending in the presence of life.'" She shuddered. "That's a little ghoulish."

"But it squares with what Andreas said, doesn't it? Never-ending—something perpetual? Still, I don't see how these would all connect."

"They wouldn't in modern runic. That's as much of a compound rune as I've ever seen, in fact—at least one used for magic. It would take a good bit of energy to empower it. Old Runic . . . there was a way about it, how they linked concepts. There was a word for it." She chewed her lip as she thought. "*Sinergija*."

"The whole is more than the sum of its parts," I translated with a nod. "That tracks."

"So does it tell you what you need to know?"

I sighed. "It seems close. Almost tantalizing. But I'm still . . ." I shook my head in frustration. "I don't know. I think I'm still missing a piece." I found myself incredibly distracted by my family's true name being part of this. "You know," I said carefully, folding the paper and looking into Gemma's eyes. "I'm wondering if my family might be part of this somehow."

Her brow wrinkled. "Your family? How so?"

I dropped the paper into my pocket. "It's a hunch."

"Andreas said this was part of the Tower. He meant the Tower of Endings? Your home?"

I snorted. "My prison. Or intended to be." So we'd been told, but I was having doubts. "But yes, the rune is part of its construction apparently."

"Do you think your family may have been part of that as well?"

I blinked as I considered it. "Actually . . . that's a thought. But . . ."

"But what?"

I sighed in exasperation. "My family is difficult. Elusive. I've struggled to learn anything about them. My parents were the last generation. My mother, that is. She married out-clan, sort of. Out-family,

really. I'm the last, and now there won't be any more. But I've only ever found hints about them. Mentions in a social paper, real estate transactions, little things. I've always run out of leads, hit dead ends."

Her expression brightened with a wide smile. "Well, you happen to be in the perfect place to learn more."

Daniel, came a voice. It seemed to drift through the air itself, tickling my ear. My Axis reared up.

"Debesi," I said aloud.

Carvendam, the voice replied.

"Gemma," I said, keeping my voice casual. "Would you like to come with me for a moment?"

CHAPTER 15

Carvendam

"What's she doing here?" Debesi's voice was cold and accusing. I'd found her in Carvendam's large, central square, where a crowd of humans was standing before the village's church, roaring and shouting.

"*She* is named Gemma," I replied evenly, "and she is helping me research the Veil, both its creation and its maintenance. She works at Runehall in Evermore."

The older adherent blinked a few times before regarding Gemma with more respect. At least, the tightness around Debesi's mouth eased a bit, which I took as an improvement—no matter the reason.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"Word of magic has spread," Debesi said, waving a hand toward the angry mob.

"I gathered," I muttered, struggling to contain my irritation. "What is it you want from me?"

"I had hoped this village would be small enough for you to take all of their memories at once."

"You can do that?" Gemma whispered.

"Oh, the Sixth can do anything. *Everything*, in fact. Just ask him," Debesi mocked.

I wouldn't satisfy her with a reply, instead directing the Axis to

spread its awareness across as much of the village as possible. In truth, Carvendam—named for the enormous, carved wooden dam that straddled the river, far downstream from Twynsits—was large enough to be called a town.

I shook my head. "No. It's still too big. I could do this group—"

"Don't bother." Debesi sighed. Disappointment chilled her voice. "There's another group preparing to burn down a home a few streets over."

"You're kidding."

"That way. Two streets." She waved her hand again to indicate the direction, then vanished in a cool mist.

I wrapped my Axis around myself, expanded it to include Gemma, and invoked the Axis's travel magic to follow Debesi.

Zmogus was already there, standing as far back as he could while still keeping an eye on the structure that the humans were, without a doubt, trying to burn down. Easily a dozen men carried flaming torches. "They saw someone appear out of thin air and ran for the torches. Apparently word had already spread from upriver, but *seeing* it tipped them over."

A mad part of my brain suddenly wondered where all the torches had come from. Was there a stockpile someplace?

"Do they know it's a *human* building?"

"I don't think they care," Debesi observed. "Look, they're trying again."

I watched as three humans dashed up to the building, holding their torches against one wooden wall until it caught flame. As they retreated, the fire died. "I've been doing that for a while now," Zmogus said with a grin. "But I expect they're about to decide that's magic as well, not just a wall that won't burn."

"Is anyone inside?"

"I retrieved the family, so no." Debesi shrugged. "There might be some humans in the main building."

"I can End their memories," I offered.

Zmogus snorted. "There's already another group on the other side of town, trying to burn down a café that's also home to the local witchkind council hall. Another adherent of Flame is dealing with it.

They'll light the whole city aflame if we don't stop them, but I don't know how long we can keep it up without being caught."

A strategy formed in my mind. "Get caught."

"What?" Debesi's voice turned sharper than the glare she gave upon my arrival.

"We can't let them destroy us. Evacuate who you can. Keep the flames down. Adherents can get away easily; it's not like the humans can do anything to us. Don't worry about whether or not they think there's magic."

"The Veil—" Gemma started, earning a pointed stare from Zmogus that silenced her at once.

"The Veil is already torn," I said. "We're close to fixing it, and once we do, everything goes back to normal. In the meantime, just keep everyone safe." I hoped I was right about being close to fixing it. And that doing so would return everything to normal.

"There aren't enough of us to protect the witchkind in every town and village across the world," Zmogus growled.

Always fighting. I forced my voice to remain calm and confident. "Then keep it contained. Don't let anyone leave. Send more people to Twynsits with the same orders. If there are other cities nearby that've been told of magic, send people there too. If we just use our magic, we can keep the humans bottled up. For a while, at least. They don't have any means of communicating over any kind of distance. Earth adherents can raise barriers if needed. You just need to hold them."

"For how long?" Zmogus asked, flicking a hand and dousing the humans' torches.

"A day. Two, at most. We're close, I'm telling you. I've found the magic. I've found its anchor. I just need to understand where to put the power." An oversimplification, true, but I felt my confidence grow as I said it.

Debesi nodded slowly. "We're betting everything on you repairing the Veil, then."

"You already were."

"I'll send word," she said, once again vanishing in a short-lived cloud of mist.

"Best get on it, boy," Zmogus growled, his Axis snuffing another

flame against the building. The small crowd was already grumbling and looking around as they relit their torches. Zmogus gave them a wide, fierce grin.

"I am," I said. I told my Axis to take Gemma and me back to Evermore.

CHAPTER 16

Family History

"Do you even know where to start?" Gemma asked as we arrived just outside Runehall.

"I was hoping you might," I admitted.

"Family Hall, then. Follow me."

She hurried off, leading me through Evermore's gently curved streets until we came to another government building, although one that seemed almost human made. Its architectural style was rare for Evermore: solid walls and pillars stretched a half dozen stories overhead, everything squared off and solemn. "One of the oldest repositories in all of Evermore," she said as she pushed her way through the stout granite doors and into the dim, somber foyer.

"May I help—oh! Hullo, Gemma."

"Hello, Danske. Bit of an emergency." She tilted her head toward me, and Danske's eyes widened.

"Hello . . . Adherent," she stammered while bobbing her head and attempting what may have been a curtsy. "How may we—"

"I've got it," Gemma said, grabbing my forearm and hauling me forward. "We'll need to use the Great Tree," she called back over one shoulder.

"It's available!" Danske called back as we marched quickly out of earshot down a long hallway.

"We like our hallways, don't we?" I mused as Gemma led me along at a brisk pace.

"Leaves more room to attach expanded spaces," she explained. "Here. This is us."

She pushed through another door, this one made of finely carved, glossy wood, and we stepped into . . .

A forest?

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees all around us. The floor was still stone, but trees seemed to grow directly from it. As Gemma wound her way through them, aiming for some destination only she knew, I realized that the trees had been planted—grown? Magicked into existence? Placed?—in a complex pattern.

Gemma stopped abruptly. "We're here."

A tree stretched so high into the sky-ceiling that I couldn't make out its top, and its trunk was so wide even eight people holding hands with their arms outstretched couldn't encircle it. Its bark was a deep reddish brown, and between it and us was a podium. As Gemma took a step closer to it, I realized that the podium itself was a tall stump of the same kind of tree; it had been far smaller when it had been cut off at waist level, but it had the same bark.

"This is *the* Tree, I take it?" I asked. Something about the room—forest? Space?—made me keep my voice low.

"It is," Gemma replied quietly. "This is an organic repository of all knowledge of the families of witchkind, going all the way back to the Exodus."

According to the legends, that was when all of witchkind came into the world. I'd read about it several times and always wondered where the humans—who weren't mentioned in the tale—fit into it. "How do we use it?"

"You said you weren't in a clan?"

"No."

"Then your family rune. Scratch, right?" She took one final step forward and sketched a rune.



The wood glowed as she moved her finger, and the final sparkling rune seemed to sink downward. A breeze blew around us, rustling the leaves. I realized then that one reason this space seemed so odd was the lack of sound: a real forest of this size would have had birds chirping, small animals creeping through the underbrush, and so forth. Until the breeze stirred, it was eerily, impossibly silent.

Symbols, glowing in every color of the rainbow, began appearing above the podium. The glyphs spun and swam for a moment before coalescing into something legible.

"Odd," Gemma remarked with a frown. "It's . . . a land deed." She pulled a pad of paper and a carbon stylus from somewhere—did her dress have hidden pockets?—and copied down the reference. When she finished, she tapped the stump, and the shining letters and numbers dissolved into motes of light that quickly faded away.

She turned to me. "That was a lot less than I expected."

I flushed. "Yeah. The world knows me as Daniel Scratch, but Scratch isn't actually my family name." She raised one delicate black eyebrow, inviting me to continue. "My family changed the name they used in public. Our real name . . . I always understood it to be something of a secret."

"It's one of the runes Stevas drew, isn't it?"

I sighed and nodded. "I don't even know why it was such a secret." I stepped up to the stump and drew a new rune:



"*Teisėjas*," Gemma said, and then the breeze blew more strongly as the glowing symbol sank into the wood. Once again the air above the stump was filled with twisting, twirling symbols.

"Some families were always protective of their name," Gemma mused as we waited for the symbols to stabilize. "It was one of the reasons they formed clans originally. To hide the family names. But the Tree always knows. We may even—ah. Yes, see?"

I did. Shining letters of crimson and plum spelled out additional names, ones I supposed my family had used in the past. Lines of peach and azure connected them in a complex web. Circles and squares, rendered in illuminated amber and cobalt, formed a proper family tree. Tiny words written in lustrous viridian noted names, dates of birth, and relationships.

My family, written in radiant hues.

I found my throat tight and my eyes a bit wet. Why hadn't I known of this Tree sooner?

"Laikytojas," I recited. "Statybininkas." The two main branches of the oldest part of my family. I peered at the dates. "They did go back to the Exodus. Or at least to those dates."

"Laikytojas," Gemma said. "That's an old name. It means . . . Keepers?"

I believe so. "And Statybininkas would be Builders. Hopefully that's a good sign."

"You know, there's that evidence the Exodus was a real event," she said, almost absentmindedly. She had a finger in the air and was tracing the delicate connections between the most ancient members of my lineage. "Oh!" she exclaimed, pulling back as if she'd been stung. "Too close."

"What do you mean?"

"The Tree can share . . . not exactly memories, but recollections." She shook her head. "That didn't make sense, did it? It doesn't know private memories, but anything public, anything that was in broad awareness, it stores. Try it. Just touch one of them."

I reached out and poked the glowing diagram. It was a bit like experiencing shards of memory from the Axis. Flashes came quickly and left even faster, although the process felt gentler than I was used to.

Stepping through a glowing portal, holding tight to the children.

Coaching a new Earth adherent as they raised a new island from the ocean floor.

Empowering the family home for defense and secrecy.

Clearing land for a new homestead.

Arguing with human neighbors: "You've no right to demand we use our magic to help you!"

Then one grabbed my attention.

Drawing up detailed plans. This will work. Here, this will hold the power. Spikes, all around it, to catch at the spirit. On an island—isolated. But the plan will take generations to play out.

We'll need someone to guide it over the decades. A volunteer. We'll make them a space.

In the house?

Of course. Everything will play out there. They'll need the shelter.

Document everything. Write it all down.

There were a dozen—a hundred, maybe a thousand—more that zipped through my brain faster than I could count, making me dizzy. But a few key impressions stuck, the first being that the Statybininkas branch of my family had built the home I'd grown up in—it was far older than I'd ever realized.

I snapped back to reality, my stomach protesting the rapid shifts in perspective. "Ouch," I said softly, rubbing my temples. "How does that even work?" The last images were already fading from my consciousness, and my innards were managing to settle themselves.

"The Tree?" Gemma tapped her chin with one long, delicate finger. "I've heard different theories. My favorite is that we're all part

of magic and that magic preserves us. It's difficult to access, and you only get those flashes, but we're all in it, forever, to some extent."

Not unlike how the Axis seemed to preserve its adherents' memories, it seemed.

"Did you get anything useful?"

"Hmm? Oh. I think so. Maybe. There was a flash. I think my family may have helped build the Tower. Somehow they're connected to its magic, which is what Plaktukas apparently connected to, or duplicated, to power the Veil. Whatever the Veil is, he awakened it, and now it's . . . nodding off, I guess. The humans have seen through it. That's my theory."

"So . . . where do we go from here?"

"We've a name, now. Laikytojas. From the family tree. You said Scratch came up with a real estate transaction?"

"The Tree has connections to the main archives a few blocks from here."

"Let's try Laikytojas, then." I tapped the stump, and my family tree vanished. I wrote the Laikytojas rune onto the stump, watching as it settled into the wood.

This time, the result was . . . impressive.

"Oh, my."

"My thoughts exactly," I said wryly. "I hope you can make sense of all that."

The glowing symbols had snapped into place much more quickly, forming a dense, almost unreadable web of connections, symbols, and tiny, crabbed text.

Gemma waved her hands in a practiced motion, and the symbols shifted, some shrinking away, while others grew large enough to read.

"You're good at this," I observed.

She blushed. "I used to beg the staff to let me in here when I was a teenager. It's part of what got me interested in becoming a scholar." She peered at the now-legible text. "Well. It's interesting, at least."

"How so?"

"Laikytojas goes back to the Exodus. From what this says, they were one of the leading Twelve."

I thought back to one of the memories. *Stepping through a*

glowing portal, holding tight to the children. "The families that allegedly brought witchkind to our New Haven?"

"Exactly. And they were involved with Erškėtis, the family that later drove the Sundering."

"The Sundering? I definitely thought *that* was a myth."

"The Exodus and the Sundering are connected. Did you not get all of this in—oh, right. You never got to attend a proper school."

"I had an island all to myself and a ghost to mentor me," I countered. "And I read a lot."

Gemma gave me a long look. "You're actually serious about the ghost part."

"I am."

"Well, we should discuss that whole business sometime." She turned back to the glowing display. "Myth or no, the Exodus and the Sundering were the first two major events for witchkind in this world."

"There are more?"

"The Forging."

"Of course."

"The Exodus represents the time that witchkind arrived in this world. Some contend that it's when we got our powers, our connection to magic, and that the Sundering was when we severed our ties to humans. Others insist that we literally came to this world from another, and the Sundering was the time when the last way home closed."

"That was the version I read. Which do you believe?"

She shrugged. "I've never bothered deciding. It doesn't matter much either way, does it? The Forging is far more interesting because we *know* that happened."

"So my family goes a ways back."

"All the way. You're practically royalty, being of the Twelve."

She turned to smile at me, and I realized how very close we were standing. Her honeyed scent filled my nostrils, tickling the back of my throat. She leaned forward ever so slightly, and I reciprocated. *She's almost exactly my height*, a distant part of my brain observed. I heard

her feet shuffle on the stone floor, and suddenly she was no longer just *close*.

Our lips brushed.

I felt . . . everything. Fire, racing along my veins. Or was it ice, sharp and cool and tingling? My stomach flipped round and round, and my heartbeat seemed to triple in speed and intensity. I realized I'd closed my eyes but could still see brightly glowing points of light, flashing and exploding on the insides of my eyelids.

"Sorry," she whispered as she drew back, breaking contact.

"Don't be," I said softly, slowly opening my eyes.

"Is it allowed? Permitted?"

Good question. I reached out to the Axis, but it was off nosing around in a far corner of the room, seemingly unconcerned. "I believe it is."

"Then we shall have to try again."

"Later. The Veil . . ."

"Yes." She stepped back, clearing her throat and nodding. "Business. So." She turned back to the stump, gathering her thoughts. "Your family, part of it at least, goes back pretty far. Here," she added, lifting a finger to the diagram, careful not to touch it. "Eril Laikytojas married Stonna Statybininkas about a dozen years before the Forging."

"Can you look at the Statybininkas side? Before then?"

She nodded, making a complex twisting motion with her fingers. The shining diagram shimmered and shifted, showing the other side of my family's original line. "Oh. Look at that."

I couldn't make sense of any of it.

"It's just . . . here," she said, pointing to a long row of letters and numbers. "Statybininkas registered a family archive. Just after the Forging, in fact."

"A family archive?" *Document everything. Write it all down.*

"They were common back then. Now everyone relies on the Evermore archives, but this was before Evermore was even a hamlet. Bigger families would keep their own records, and they'd register their archives." She put a gentle hand on my forearm as she spoke.

"Does it still exist?" My heart quickened again, and not entirely because of this new information.

She took her pad and stylus back out and copied down the letters and numbers. "These are coordinates. We'll need someone look up where this is, and then we can go see. Should be simple since you're able to travel so easily." I detected a note of amused jealousy in her tone.

"Where would we do that?"

"A land agent, of course. Can you whisk us back outside? I believe there's one just down the road." No sooner said than done, we appeared back on the street. "That takes your breath away a bit" She rubbed her arms as if to warm them. "But I could get used to it. Look, it's just there."

I followed her to a small office. The door clanked against a bell as we entered, setting off a tinny clanging noise.

"Help you?" a worn-looking woman asked without standing from her desk.

Gemma handed her the slip of paper with the coordinates. "Can you tell us where this is? Exactly?"

The woman sighed as she looked at it. "Old system. This a listing?"

"Not that we know of."

"I see." She peered at the paper for several moments. "Seventy-four . . . that'll be Farreach. The one in the north. Hmm." She opened a drawer in her desk and rummaged around a bit. "The map, I'll have to charge you for it." I slid one of my family's coins across the desk. She eyed it before nodding. "That'll do. So it's just here." She picked up a carbon stylus and carefully marked a small X on the map. "Nasty location, if it's a listing."

"It's not. But why?" Gemma asked.

"All cliffs along that bleak, freezing excuse for a lake they have up there. Good ways out of the village proper."

"Can you take us there?" Gemma asked me. "Although perhaps we should stop for a coat."

"No need." I picked up the map, stared at it for a long moment, and willed the Axis to carry us away.

CHAPTER 17

Farreach (in the North)

As we appeared, a biting, almost crushing wind assaulted us, whipping Gemma's hair around and stinging our eyes with wet, icy air. I Ended the cold around us—one of the more abstract uses of the Axis's power—and Gemma gasped with relief. "Sorry," I offered, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

"No, it's fine," she said, rubbing her hands together. "That was just so sudden."

"I guess I'm used to it." I paused, swiveling my head to take in the gray sodden landscape. "Not the most hospitable place, is it?"

"You've come here before?"

"To the town, yes. Never out here on the shore."

"Is it always so . . . grim?"

I chuckled. "I think so. You know, this is where I always imagined my family originated."

"Because of your skin?"

"Being so pale, yes. This part of the world is the only place I don't feel so obvious."

She looked at me for a moment. "It does sort of suit you, you know. Your eyes, your skin, your hair—you fit in here. Visually, at least. But you never lived here?"

"No, the family—"

"Daniel." A gust of wind formed into a short, broadly built man with piercing blue eyes and light-brown hair.

"Yes?" Who would have known to look for me here?

He gave a slight bow from the waist. "I'm Vėjas, adherent—"

"—of Sky, no doubt." I grinned, but it twisted into a frown. "How did you know I was here?"

"Nuvilnijo and I—she's a fellow Sky adherent—were sent to help maintain order here. We've cast a net of sorts that detects magic, so we can respond quickly."

Interesting. Yet another application of their Axis that was new to me. "So word of the Hunts has reached Farreach?"

He nodded. "There isn't a full-on riot like the one in Twynsits, but we have an adherent of Flame here as well in case witchkind are discovered. The humans are rumbling about magic and Hunts, but we don't think any of them have actually seen anything. And with all this wind available to us," he added, gesturing around himself, "we've got plenty to work with in terms of creating illusions." They used similar illusions to mask Evermore, I recalled, but the specifics eluded me. I made a note to spend more time studying the capabilities of the other Axes. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"This is Gemma," I said, my arm still around her shoulder. "She's been helping me research this. We're close to a solution for the Veil, and there's supposed to be a family archive near here with information we believe may help."

He nodded again. "Not surprising. Earth magic has always run strong here, and it excels at preservation. The cliffs in particular are probably riddled with old family archives, to say nothing of all the ones in the town itself."

"I believe we're looking for one of the ones in the cliffs."

"Any idea where?"

I still had the land agent's map in my hand, so I offered it to him.

Vėjas stepped forward and took it. "Yes, easy enough." He pointed toward the lake. "Do you see that tall pillar of stone? The one that juts up about twice your height, very close to the shore?"

I scanned the horizon, but it seemed far away and shrouded in mist. "Not quite."

"Ah, right. Try this." He held his hand up and the air in front of me *solidified*. A large circle of air seemed to clear and hold still, somehow magnifying what was beyond it.

Absolutely fascinating. "I see it now."

"Then I will leave you to it." He gave another quick bow and vanished in a gust of wind.

I had the Axis take us to the shoreline just in front of that tall pillar. "Any idea how we—"

"There," Gemma said at once, pointing to the cliffside.

I peered more closely, taking a few steps forward, careful to pull her along with me, as the Axis's zone of no-cold didn't extend very far. "Ah," I said as I spotted it: a series of runes had been carved into the rock, just above my head. The carvings, probably once crisp and precise, appeared worn from centuries of wind and rain.

We stepped closer, and I began pushing on the rough rock face below the runes. There were no seams, no grooves, nothing that indicated an entrance. "How do these things usually open?"

"I've never actually been in one."

I couldn't have the Axis just jump us inside—there was too much risk of appearing within solid rock. Although I was already past my own End, Gemma wasn't past hers, and I didn't relish the thought of somehow being trapped in granite. So instead, I fed just a bit of power into the rock face, probing gently to see if I could detect anything. *Ah*, I thought as a tiny void seemed to draw at my power. *Maybe if I push that a—*

The world blinked, and we found ourselves inside a small cavern. Magic lights began glowing to life around us, providing a dim, even illumination.

We were standing in some sort of entry foyer. It was bare of any furniture, without even any carpeting on the smooth-hewn rock beneath our feet. But the walls were inlaid with elegant, precisely cut crystals and tiles, all formed into hexagons that interlinked with one another, alternating between a creamy, alabaster white and a dark, shiny onyx.

Four portraits hung in the room, each one depicting a stern-look-

ing, matriarchal older woman. I released Gemma and stepped forward to examine them.

A small brass plate affixed to the bottom of each frame provided the women's names: Sprendimas, Montuotojas, Cherise, Phoebe. Older names, graduating to ones that were more common in modern times. I wondered what they'd done to earn a place on these walls and examined them again. Cherise stood out this time. She bore a stunning resemblance to Mother.

"Daniel," Gemma said softly, pointing. I followed her finger and realized there was a door carefully fitted into the rock wall of the cavern. It was inlaid entirely with a matte-black material that seemed to absorb light, which is why I'd missed it at first. We stepped toward it, and it swung inward at a light touch.

We stepped into a library.

It didn't have the soaring grandeur of the one in my Tower, but elements of the room reminded me of my island home. The cavern was perfectly round, with the walls carved and polished into a smooth, glossy dome that reached perhaps thrice my height at the center. The walls were lined with head-height shelves, each one filled with books in ordered rows. In the middle of the room, a large, round, waist-high table offered a place to lay books out for study.

"They're all in the True Language," Gemma muttered.

"What is?"

"The labels," she said, pointing.

Indeed, there were signs carved into the smooth rock above each bookcase. "*Šeima*," I read aloud. "Family. *Statyba.* Building. *Grimuaras.*" That was an odd one. "Grimoire?" I guessed. "Books of magic? *Finansai.* That's finances." The list went on around the room: Legal. Land. Politics. Everything the family had ever done or engaged in, apparently, was documented here.

"Even Evermore doesn't use the True Language for shelf labels," Gemma grumbled.

"My family comes from an older time," I agreed. "As a scholar, are you not already conversant in the True Language?"

"Not as much as my mentors would have me be, no," she admitted. "I'm surprised you are."

"Five years alone on an island with almost nothing to do but read," I said with a shrug. "Even before then, I was always bookish, I guess. And Great-Great-Grandmother encouraged an interest in the old tongue." She'd ordered me to memorize a vocabulary book when I was twelve, I remembered. "These all seem promising."

We separated, Gemma heading for one set of shelves and I for another. I aimed for the Building section and began pulling books from the shelves, examining them and putting them back. These weren't like the books in my library in the Tower: these were all hand-penned, with hand-drawn illustrations and diagrams. *Document everything.* This was indeed an archive of everything the family had done.

"Here!" I exclaimed as I opened a book to its title page. *Pabaigų bokšto pastatas*, it read. "This is how they built the Tower."

"Daniel, have you seen this?"

I turned, expecting to see Gemma holding a book as I was. Instead, she was walking slowly around the room's central table, staring at the floor. I dropped my eyes and inhaled sharply.

Carved into the floor was the rune. *The* rune. The one in Palktukas's memories. The one carved below the Foundation of the Tower.

"There are words," she added, hunching down to trace them with a finger.

"*Šviesk, šviesk*," I muttered, causing the magic lights in the room to grow brighter. Still holding my book, I followed Gemma around the table, picking up where a phrase seemed to begin and tracing it around the outside of the circular rune. "It says, '*Visi dalykai, laikomi kartu valios ir proto, patvarūs ir nesibaigiantys*.'"

"That's a mouthful," she muttered. "'All things?'"

"'All things held together by . . .'" I paused, dredging up the meaning of the obscure words. 'Through?' No, 'by means of.' Same thing. 'By means of . . . will and reason.'"

"'Enduring.'"

"'And unending.'"

"'All things held together by means of will and reason, enduring and unending,'" Gemma recited, putting it all together. "Quite the motto." She stepped back, casting her eyes around the room. "Oh!"

I followed her gaze. "It can't be," I breathed.

I laid my book on the central table and stepped over to the shelf. The brightened lights had revealed something I couldn't believe I'd missed: a tiny, intricately detailed model of a tall, stately home.

"It's so beautiful," Gemma said next to me, leaning over to examine the model, her nose almost touching it.

My Axis nosed around the house to confirm my suspicion. "It's my family home. The one I grew up in."

"Oh, it's so precious. You said they built it? This must have been the model."

"Actually," I said slowly, noting the Axis's discovery: a deep and powerful magic permeated the home. "I think this *is* my family home."

Gemma pulled back. "What?"

"It vanished when I left. There was nobody else in the family for it to serve, I thought, and so it just . . . went." I nodded toward the shelf. "I think this is it. I bet there's even a book here that explains how they did it. But I think it must have come here until it was needed again."

We stared at it for a moment longer, wonder still filling my mind. But then I recalled my purpose here. "Come on. We've come here for answers. There'll be time enough for all that later."

I returned to my book and began flipping through it. Gemma went back to the family shelves and began poking through the books there.

I read for what felt like hours, laboriously translating the long passages of True Language. "It's true," I said at last, my gaze still riveted into the book's pages. "The memories from the Tree were real. They built the Tower of Endings, using a rune they'd invented, one designed to cycle power indefinitely. The book details all the runes they used to raise the island and the Tower itself." I shook my head. "They're incomprehensible, at least to me. Incredibly old." Gemma stepped up quietly beside me, startling me. "The Foundation *is* the key. Somehow it's part of what anchors the Axis, not just the current adherent. Something about . . . I don't understand this bit. *Visų, kurie laikė vadeles, esmė.* Any of that make sense to you?"

She reached out with one long delicate finger, tracing the words. "'Essential?'" she asked, stopping on one.

"Essence."

"'The essence of all' and . . . something about holding?"

"Past tense. 'Who have held.'" If nothing else, the two of us made an excellent rune-lore team.

"'Leash?'" she guessed.

"Close enough, I think. I'd have said 'reins,' maybe." I frowned, not understanding the context.

"And what does this have to do with it all?"

"It's part of the anchor. I don't understand it, though. This implies that an Axis can only be anchored, chained, to a person. Which we knew—that's why we're Chosen. But it's also saying that the Sixth is partly anchored to the Foundation of the Tower, which is just a huge rock pillar, not a person at all."

"Andreas said something about crystals storing power?"

"The Foundation isn't a crystal. And this isn't about power, it's about anchoring it. Keeping it in one place." I shook my head. "This must be how the Axis stays anchored even when there's no adherent, but I don't understand the context. What was the other rune? You said it was ghoulish."

"'In the presence of life,'" Gemma said.

"Which doesn't make sense. There's no life *in* the Tower."

"You're alive," she pointed out.

"Not technically," I muttered offhandedly. "We have to End ourselves to actually accept the mantle of adherent." I ignored the fact that her eyes grew very wide. "Maybe I don't need to understand this. Look here—this is how they empowered the rune. And the Veil—I may just need to feed more of the Axis's power into the rune."

"Surely it's not that easy. Just giving it more magic?"

"I don't think it's going to be. From what they're saying here, they actually worried raising the Tower and empowering this rune might kill Galas."

"But you just said you're already—"

"Past my Ending," I interrupted. "It's different. Maybe a paradox.

I don't know." I studied the book for a while longer. "Have you found anything?"

"This," she said softly, sliding a book onto the table.

Priešpaskutinė was stamped into the leather cover. "Penultimate?" I asked.

I felt her nod as she flipped the book open, turning to the last page. "See here?"

My eyes scanned the page. "That's me." And it was: neatly lettered inside a box near the bottom of the page was "Daniel." Above that, two boxes with my parents' names. Above Mother's was my grandmother and her husband. Above her, Great-Grandmother. Above her, Great-Great-Grandmother. "Great-Great-Grandmother's name has a star next to it," I noted.

"Daniel, *yours* has *Sekėjas* next to it. 'Adherent.'"

I shrugged. "I am an adherent."

"So someone's been in here *since you were Chosen* to update this?"

I blinked. That seemed unlikely. But . . . "Maybe?"

"No, wait. Look at the inks. Start with your Great-Great-Grandmother. See how the ink has faded? It's almost a light brown at this point. But the ink gets darker as you go. Even Earth magic can't fully preserve a book in pristine condition."

"My name's dark black," I said with another shrug. "I was the last born."

"Yes, but *Sekėjas* is faded worse than your Great-Great-Grandmother's."

I frowned. Meaning . . . they'd known that the child in my generation would be an adherent? Before Great-Great-Grandmother had even been born? "How could they have known?"

I flipped back a few pages but found nothing more than a matrilineal family tree, stretching back centuries. Every fourth or fifth generation, sixth at most, a name would be starred. But none had any other notations written next to them. "I don't understand."

"Daniel," Gemma said slowly, carefully, "what if they *meant* for you to become an adherent."

My mind balked. "That's impossible. Nobody can predict who an Axis will Choose."

"What if *they* could?"

"I—" I began, before snapping my mouth shut. There had been a prophecy, a smattering of badly rhymed words that Great-Great-Grandmother had whispered to me. It was one of the last things she'd said, in fact. Clearly, my family thought they could predict who would become an adherent. "It doesn't matter. That's not helping with the Veil. I need to go back to the Tower, try to re-empower the rune there. Pushing more power into the Veil should fix everything."

"You're certain?" Gemma didn't seem to be.

"I need to try. I—Gemma, I need to take you back to Evermore, for now."

"You said Galas almost died doing this," she protested. "What—"

"I said they worried about it. He didn't. He lived well beyond the Tower's construction. I'll be fine. Also"—*I'm not sure about having personal guests in the Tower*, I started to say— "it might be dangerous. I have an Axis, and you said yourself you barely have enough power to light a candle."

"Okay." She sounded dubious.

"If it works, I'll tell you immediately. And if you don't hear from me, contact an adherent. Any of them. Tell them to check on me." Of course, I was assuming the Tower would let them in if I was injured. Or dead.

"Okay," she agreed, sounding reluctant. "Will you have time for a meal, at least?"

Oh, how I wanted to say yes. How I wanted to do nothing more than remain in her company, to see her smile. To try another kiss, perhaps. My heart cracked as I said, "No. I'm so sorry. Not now. I need to fix the Veil. You saw what was happening, and we couldn't even contain it to Twynsits and Carvendam. But afterward. Once this is all fixed, we'll go to the nicest restaurant in Evermore. I promise."

She smiled, and the room seemed to grow exponentially brighter. "I will hold you to that, Daniel Scratch. I—"

I cried out as a blinding, burning pain crushed my mind. I fell to my knees, clutching my head, feeling the Axis hurtle about the room in alarm.

"Daniel, what is it?" Gemma knelt next to me, concern filling her features.

I massaged my temples. "It's a Summons."

"For you?" she seemed confused.

"For the adherent of the Sixth. The strongest I've ever felt. I need to go."

"I'll—"

"Now."

CHAPTER 18

Eldritch Fire

I took Gemma to Evermore, leaving her without a word on the steps of Runehall, the Summons still ringing in my head. I followed the Summons blindly, directing the Axis to *just go!* and found myself in a meadow, facing a dense, ancient forest.

And a fire.

The smell of burning wood assaulted my nose, and within moments I was all but engulfed in hot, stinking smoke.

"Daniel!"

I turned to see Zmogus running toward me. "I thought you were in Carvendam," I said. "Where are we?"

"The Great Northern Wood," he panted as he thudded to a stop next to me. He hadn't hurled an insult at me along with his answer—this was urgent. "It's burning."

Anyone could see that much: A fire had started in the meadow, judging from a blackened ring of grass whose center was still aflame, but the conflagration had spread to the forest itself. Whole trees were engulfed, throwing sparks on their neighbors as the fire threatened to run out of control.

My heart beat faster. I had been here on my birthday, answering a Summons to offer a merciful death. But this Summons was dire. The

Great Northern Wood was where all of witchkind came into the world. Seeing it burn felt like sacrilege.

"We can't control it," Zmogus said, still breathing heavily. His face was more flushed that usual, his dark skin taking bright-red undertones. "Something is fueling it. Something magic."

There must have been a half dozen Flame adherents scattered along the fire's front, manically waving their arms to little effect. They'd get one tree to stop burning, then another would catch, and the moment they turned their attention to that one, the first would burst back into flames.

As I watched, a troupe of people—all witchkind, from the magic floating around them—poured out of the forest and began waving their arms, bringing to bear what magic they could to stop the blaze. "Are those Woodwitches?"

Zmogus looked. "Yes. Very secretive. And I don't know that they'll be able to do anything a group of Flame adherents couldn't."

I knew of them. "Secretive" was something of an understatement: as far as I knew, the Woodwitches *never* left the Great Northern Wood. The Wood sheltered them, and they protected it, in some kind of mysterious, almost mythical symbiosis.

But Zmogus was right: their magic was having little effect. They'd quickly deployed to the edges of the fire and were trying to convince the still-intact trees to *not* catch on fire. I felt the cyclical bursts of banishment magic, which were accompanied by an oddly organic and loamy intent. With each casting, brief gusts of wind attempted to blow glowing embers back into the main body of the fire.

That magic wouldn't last. No matter how much the Woodwitches had Gathered the night before, they were spending magic at a rate that was simply unsustainable.

"End it, Daniel." Zmogus's order snapped me back. "That's why we Summoned you."

"Right." I pushed the Axis toward the flames. This was the best and easiest use of its power: this fire would eventually end itself, so we were just hurrying the natural order of things. There were no abstractions here: I simply wanted the fire to *stop being*.



My power sped into the fire, which immediately flickered and died. Smoke and steam still roiled off the trees, but even the embers floating in the sky sputtered and went dark. Everyone who'd been frantically—and futilely—fighting the blaze look surprised, and then began cheering, jumping up and down and shaking each other's—

The flames roared back to life, taller and hotter than before. Zmogus and I took an involuntary step backward as the furnace before us nearly melted our faces.

"What?" I was stunned. Even the Axis was confused, pulling back as if considering the leaping flames and wondering why they were still there. I pushed it forward, ordering it to End the fire, investing it with every ounce of my authority as the adherent of the Sixth Axis, and once again the inferno died down.

And once again, it reignited.

"What are you doing?" Zmogus demanded. "This is no time—"

"It's what you said," I shot back, confused and irritated. "I'm Ending it, but . . . a new fire starts. It's not the same one," I said as the realization struck me. "That's why your adherents can't put it out either. You *are* putting it out, but then a *new* one blazes up. Something's powering it. Something . . . perpetual." The rune from the Tower flashed through my mind.

"Where?"

"I'm about to find out," I said grimly. One more time, I sent the Axis in to End the blaze, but this time I held onto the power tightly, keeping my senses firmly focused on what the Axis felt. It had a sense for magical power, and I used that sense now, casting it about.

The forest fire roared back to life, but I'd caught its center. "It's there, in the meadow. Just on the edge of the Wood. That's where it

started." I pointed to the blackened, burning ring of grass, where a huge pillar of fire whirrled at its center. It's existence seemed impossible. All natural fuel had long since been consumed.

"Can you stop it?"

"We'll find out." This time, I directed the Axis to the center of the burning pillar, seeking out the magic rather than the flames themselves, directing it to End whatever was there. It arrowed into the maelstrom of heat and light, striking into a dense, singular source of magic that kept bringing the fire back to life.

With a *snap* that must have been audible to everyone in the area, the magic broke. The fire sputtered and died under the Flame adherents' power. The column of fire in the meadow gave one final surge, leaping higher into the sky before it ran out of magical fuel and flickered into nothingness.

"Dust and destruction," Zmogus cursed softly. He began trudging toward whatever had started all this, and I fell in behind him. Steam and smoke still rose from the burned and blackened earth, and I quickly had the Axis End much of the residual heat before my own clothes burst into flame.

"That's it?" Zmogus asked as we stopped in front of a hip-high granite plinth that someone had settled into the soft dirt of the meadow. It had been carved into a rough cylinder, its top a blunt cone. Despite having been in the center of immense heat, it looked unaffected by the ravages of heat: the stone wasn't blackened, cracked, or even slightly sooty.

An old woman, one of the ones who'd come out of the Wood, stepped up next to us. "This was the cause?" she asked.

I nodded tiredly. The Axis may have done the work, but I suddenly felt as if I'd put the fire out with my own force of will. "I believe so. Look, there are runes carved into it."

The old woman leaned down to look and then shook her head and made a *tsk* noise. "Nasty work, that. You recognize it?"

I looked closely and, with some alarm, realized that I did. The runes were of the same complex style as the one I'd been working with for days. The same—what had Gemma called it—Transitional Runic. But these runes were cruder, as if carved by a careless child. Far less

precise than what was in the Tower. Some of the runes bore a strong resemblance to the rune my family had apparently contrived—the circular components, what Andreas had called an anchoring element, and more.

"I know some of this," I said.

But the runes on the plinth were also slightly different, more like modern runes than the Transitional one I'd been looking at for days. There, for example, were modern runes to light fire. Interesting. While the main construct seemed to draw power and loop it, that bit would act to—

"You are Daniel? Adherent of the Sixth?" the old woman asked. I focused on her for the first time. Her eyes were a tired brown, her deeply wrinkled skin a dark mahogany, and her short-cropped hair as pure a white as I'd ever seen. She moved briskly enough, but with a slight stoop. Even now, she stood with her feet slightly apart, as if struggling to balance herself.

"I am. And you are?"

"Call me Ikwity."

"You're a Woodwitch?"

She merely shrugged.

"What are all these?" Zmogus asked. He stepped away from the plinth, surveying the area around it. He leaned down and picked up something from the ground, holding it up for us to see.

It was still smoking in his hand.

"Looks like . . . metal?" I guessed.

"Copper," he agreed. "Badly melted, of course. They're scattered all over."

I looked around and found another lump of molten metal nearby. I Ended its heat and picked it up. "Heavy. This one feels like brass. But what's it for?"

"You ever see anything like that?" Zmogus asked, ignoring me and pointing at the plinth.

"There's something . . . well, not like it, I guess. But similar. In the Tower. Its Foundation. The runes—"

"Such constructs were once used to hold the world in place," Ikwity broke in quietly.

Zmogus snorted, disinterested as always in stories and histories, focused entirely on the present. "Someone was seeking to burn the Wood, not hold the world in place," he growled. "I mean to find them." He stalked off to confer with his colleagues, carrying the lump of metal with him.

"What do you know of them?" I asked her. "Those constructs?"

"No need for them anymore. Well, aside from your obvious exception." She gave me a piercing look. "They're mostly gone now. Broken down as the relationship between humans and witchkind."

"My Foundation, you mean? The obvious exception?"

She nodded. "Dangerous precedent, that one. I suppose it serves its purpose. Inasmuch as the Forging was destined to occur, no matter what anyone with sense advised."

"I thought the Forging was done out of necessity."

Ikwity frowned. "Necessary for whom? Magic hates being leashed. Always has."

"Magic was running amok. Causing untold damage. It was chaos." We had leashed magic for the good of all.

"There to see it, were you?"

"Of course—I mean, no, but . . . I've sort of seen it since then." Via the Axis.

She nodded as if she knew what I meant. "But colored by the eyes that did see it. Ikwity says that's when the relationship cracked. When humans and witchkind grew apart."

"What do you mean, *cracked*? We live alongside humans now. That's what the Veil is for, isn't it?"

Now she snorted and wagged a finger at me. "Live *apart.* Separated. That's the whole point of the thing. The Veil. To separate us. Thinly so, but apart nonetheless." She let her finger drop.

"I broke it."

She shook her head at me and sighed. "You didn't. It was always a broken thing. Unnatural. Raised by fools with more fear than sense."

"You're saying it can't be fixed?"

"Saying we should let it go. There's no fixing it, whether you want to or not. It just needs reminding." She looked over her shoulder, and

I noticed the Woodwitches nodding goodbyes to the Flame adherents, and moving back into the Wood.

"How do you know? That it just need reminding?"

She turned back to me. "I know much, child. Been around a while, Ikwity has. Long enough to know what goes on in that Foundation of yours. Long enough to know about the Veil. Noxious, misguided business, the both of them."

"Aunt!" One of the Woodwitches was calling to Ikwity, waving for her to rejoin them. She waved back.

"Still, I need to fix it," I said. She turned back, regarding me with a curious stare. "Or remind it."

"Sure, sure. Work to do, important work. No time for Ikwity and her stories." She turned to go.

"It's not that—"

"Nobody ever has time for stories," she said over her shoulder as she began ambling away. "Not with the Keepers and Builders thinned to just a man." She turned and gave me another knowing, appraising look.

Keepers and Builders. The two branches that had come together to form my family. "What do—"

"Daniel!"

I turned to see Zmogus striding back toward me. I turned back to the old woman—but she was gone, vanished into the Wood with her people. "What?" I asked distractedly.

"Thank you for your help." My head whipped around at the first compliment he'd ever paid me. His expression was sincere. "I—"

"Look out!" I shouted, stepping backward as a lick of flame burst into life in front of us. I grabbed at my Axis, preparing to End whatever new attack this was, when the flame flickered and resolved into a young woman.

"Zmogus!" she said, panting. "It's Carvendam. You're needed. It's getting worse."

Zmogus's expression drew back into the angry scowl I was accustomed to. "How goes the Veil, Daniel?"

"I think I have it," I said, still somewhat distracted by what Ikwity

had said. “It needs reminding, she said.” Not to mention that interesting little addition I’d seen on the plinth.

“What?”

“Reminding. The Veil. I think I know how. I just need one more piece.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t quite know. But I know where to get it.”

“Hurry.”

CHAPTER 19

Secrets from the Past

I quickly took myself back to the family archive. Now that I was familiar with it, I had the Axis deposit me directly in the main cavern, next to the central table. I knew the light outside would already be fading, that the sun would yet again have given up on bringing any light to this sullen corner of the world. But inside the archive, it was warm, well lit, and . . . cozy, actually.

The books Gemma and I had taken out were no longer lying open on that table. They'd been reshelved, most likely, by some magic in the place—not unlike the library in the Tower. But even odder was the fact that the table looked pristine.

No—not *pristine.* It had been covered in a fine layer of dust, which Gemma and I had thoroughly disturbed, at least on this section of the table. Now that dust was back in place.

It reminded me of my workshop table. Drawing runes in the dust is how Kirmin had taught me much of the Axis's workings. Something about the table kept the runes from activating, making it a perfect tool for teaching—and for experimenting.

I quickly used one finger to sketch a common rune, one for summoning light, in the dust.



The drawing stayed for several moments before the little granules of dust visibly rearranged themselves, erasing the image. Fine, but was it just accepting the drawing, or was it checking it as well? I sketched the rune again, this time deliberately getting it wrong. Just like my worktable in the Tower, the dust seemed to pool and eddy around my finger, not letting me finish the flawed rune. I'd marveled at that behavior when I'd first seen it on my own table; Kirmin had explained that the table fed a small trickle of energy into whatever you drew, enough energy to know when the magic wouldn't flow freely as it should but not enough to actually empower the rune. I waved my hand over my attempt, and the dust redistributed itself.

Now I sketched out the rune. *The Rune*, as I'd increasingly found myself thinking of it. I'd seen it enough to draw it from memory, although this time I added a small hook to one side—the extra bit I'd seen on the plinth. The bit that had reignited the flames. Or, as Ikwity might have phrased it, that had *reminded* the flames to burn.



The image held, and I almost cheered. This would make my task much easier.

I looked around the room for pen and paper, something on which I could copy down this new version, but didn't see anything. Irritated, I decided to just try it—on a small scale. If this worked, then I would know how to heal the Veil.

I took myself outside, the wet, chilled wind hitting me like a slap in the face. I quickly Ended the cold and looked about for a suitable rock. There was no shortage of them on this inhospitable, gray, desolate shoreline, and I found a fist-sized specimen with a single, almost perfectly flat face.

I knew a rune that would let me carve an image into the rock, but I'd never mastered its use. Usually the rock would crumble to pieces. But perhaps I could focus the Axis on a task this delicate and precise. All rocks crumbled to dust in the end, but perhaps I could hurry that along for just a fingernail's thickness of the rock's face?

Concentrating and holding the Axis with a delicacy I'd never before attempted, I began tracing my finger over the flat surface. The Axis followed my lead, dipping in every so slightly, and crumbs of rock began flaking off in my finger's wake. My neck and arm ached at the sustained, measured effort, even with the addition of a basic light rune to the rock. But I was pleased with the result. With the rune, I'd ensured myself a simple, safe test.

Now for the tricky part.

I began dripping power into the rune construct. At first, I realized that I was inadvertently feeding it my own personal magic, unaccustomed as I was to using the Axis this way. I redoubled my concentration, wrapping the Axis around my personal power, gradually reducing what I sent from myself and replacing that with the Axis's energy. The Axis seemed . . . curious. It held very still, as a cat might when eyeing prey that was just out of reach but moving closer. I'd never tried to send pure magic out of the Axis before, but the sensation felt oddly familiar, like a song I'd heard a long time ago but forgotten about until someone whistled a piece of it nearby.

Although I hadn't done this before, the Axis obviously had, and it remembered the sensation.

The flow of energy picked up, and I focused on keeping it smooth and steady, afraid I'd shatter the rock if I gave it too much too quickly. Then, with a sudden flush of warmth in my skin, the air around me began glowing with light. It was as if a hole had broken open in the dismal gray clouds above, letting a single shaft of pure sunlight play upon me. I even looked up to check. But this wasn't sunlight: it was pure magic.

A tear crept from my eye. I'd learned this light-bringing rune from Mother—the only bit of real magic she'd ever taught me.

I pulled back the Axis, cutting off the flow of magic into the rock—but the light continued unabated, now glowing without the Axis's active input. The Axis didn't feel depleted in any way, although of course only the tiniest portion of its power had been captured by the energy loop I'd created. I let the magical light glow for several minutes, then Ended the light. All light ends, after all, so this was merely speeding up that natural process.

The light winked out, returning the area around me to its dour grays.

But then the magic rekindled.

The light bloomed back into existence. I felt a slight draw on the Axis, for just a moment—so fast I may have even imagined it. The rune upon the rock—it made the light *perpetual*.

I'd done it. I knew how to repair the Veil. To remind it, as Ikwity had said.

One more test: I Ended the rock that bore the rune construct.

It crumbled to powder in my hand, a hundred thousand years of environmental wear reduced to an instant. As it crumbled, the light around me also faded, the rune that had kept it running now gone. This time I felt a quick surge of power as the magic trapped in the construct returned to the Axis.

I'd done it.

There was clearly a limit to this trick, as at some point the Axis would become strained, but given how long the Tower and the Veil had remained intact, the Axis seemed able to support a tremendous draw over a long period of time. Likely forever.

I needed to write it down. *Document everything.* Capture it while it was fresh.

I took myself back inside, searching frantically for a blank sheet of paper and a stylus, but I found nothing. Frustrated, I found myself at a break in the shelves where a door exited the foyer. I'd been in there, and—

Wait.

I turned toward the center of the room. There, exactly opposite where I was standing, was a door. I looked up at the labels over the shelves. *That* was the door through which Gemma and I had first entered this chamber. I turned back to the wall closest to me.

So where did *this* door lead?

A small finger-hole at about waist height provided a way to pull the door inward on perfectly silent, exquisitely balanced hinges.

I stepped through.

This small chamber was exactly like the one we'd first entered from the shoreline—but opposite. Instead of alabaster and onyx, the walls here were tiled with hexagons of amethyst and topaz. Even the floor had been buffed to an off-white, unlike the natural dark gray of the other side. The magic lights here glowed a comforting yellow rather than the harsher white of the first foyer.

There were also four more portraits, each of elegant, severe-looking women. I walked from one to the other, reading the nameplates.

Laikytas. Stanislava. Agnes. Sorsia.

I stopped. Sorsia looked familiar. Incredibly, impossibly familiar. I looked again at the nameplate.

Sorsia Viešpatie.

Sorsia looked exactly like Gemma, with perhaps forty years added.

Exactly like her. The same nose. The same eyes. The same hair. The same cheekbones. Had the painter included them, I knew Sorsia's fingers would be long, delicate, and strong.

The same lips.

But the family name was unfamiliar. Viešpatie meant . . . "Lady?" No, it was a male connotation. "Lord," then. Or "king?" No, my beleaguered brain informed me, "king" was—

I swallowed hard. In the True Language, "king" was *karal*.

My mind stopped working, broken as it spun in circles.

Gemma was Viešpatie. Viešpatie was Karal.

Gemma was Karal.

My enemies. The clan who'd killed Mother and then vanished. The ones who'd drained power from humans—

I fell to my knees.

They'd drained power from humans and stored it in metal ingots, as witchkind had always stored excess magic in copper and brass coins.

The image of Zmogus, holding a smoking lump of copper in his hand, shot through my mind.

Dust and destruction, he'd said.

I couldn't focus enough to call the Axis. I tried, but it slipped out of my mental grasp. I stumbled forward—I needed fresh air. Was there an exit on this side? I felt blindly against the wall, my vision suddenly gray and shaking. There—push.

I stepped out into bright sunlight, warm air gently swirling around me. The fresh smell of seawater tickled my nose. The sun was hours higher in a clear blue sky.

What the—

I was standing on a beach—but not the cold, dour shoreline of Farreach in the north. This beach was covered with soft, white sand. The scent here wasn't the dense, dull smell of freezing lake water but the fresh, salty smell of a warm sea.

A dirt path, almost grown over by lush, soft green grass, led up a gentle slope to the top of the cliff from which I'd just emerged. I clambered up, twice falling to my knees and pulling myself forward with my hands. At the top, I stood. There, stretched out before me, not so very far away, was a beautiful village, with buildings all of creamy white sandstone.

Farreach.

In the south.

I sat down suddenly, almost cracking my tailbone in the process.

It was impossible. Yet here I was.

And Gemma and I were related.

She has to know.

My guts clenched, and my vision started to grow black around the edges. My fingers and toes started to sting with pins-and-needles sensations, and I suddenly realized I was hyperventilating. My stomach heaved, and I clamped my jaw shut. The Axis swam around me, exuding concern, but I could only bat at it with mental hands that seemed to be wrapped in cloth.

Stop, I told myself. I forced myself to breathe slowly: in . . . out . . . in . . . out. My vision steadied, but I was sure standing would make me vomit. So I sat, my sense of the Axis sharpening slightly as it nuzzled close.

She can't have known.

I hauled the Axis around me, clumsy as if I'd been Chosen but yesterday, and bid it take me to Evermore.

CHAPTER 20
Gemma

I appeared—still sitting—in Runehall, in front of Andreas's counter.

"Adherent?" The old man was standing there, leaning over his counter to peer at me, his expression and voice full of concern.

"Gemma," I croaked.

He frowned. "I believe she's left for the—"

"*Gemma!*" I roared, pulling myself into a squatting position, hoping my stomach wouldn't betray me—when had I last eaten? I couldn't remember—I lurched to my feet. "GEMMA!"

I am tall for witchkind. Not unusually so, but few heads reach even my eye level. My skin is pale, almost white and somewhat translucent—rare among my people. Rare even among humans, except in the deep north. I habitually dress in blacks and grays, clothes that the Tower provides to me in colors—or lack thereof—traditionally favored by adherents of the Sixth. But I was angry. My form must have seemed larger, the Axis billowing behind me. My face must have flushed red, the blood boiling within me. My voice boomed with rage found only in betrayal.

The old man skittered backward, his mouth opening and closing like that of a fish. "G . . . G . . ." he stammered.

"What's all the commotion?" Gemma came hurrying out from a

side door, running to Andreas before she caught sight of me. "Daniel?" She frowned. "What are you—why are your trousers covered in sand?"

"Did you know?" I asked hoarsely.

She straightened, the hand that she'd had on Andreas's shoulder dropping to her side. She looked at me for a long moment, calculating.

Then she shrugged. "Of course."

Something about her appearance *melted*. It was as if she'd been covered in a gauze so fine that you couldn't even see it until it fell away. And fall it did, slipping down across her features.

The resemblance to Sorsia's portrait was even stronger now, as Gemma aged twenty years in a moment.

"We're kin, you and I," she said easily as I gaped and struggled to make sense of what I was seeing. "Different sides of the same family, really. Split and re-split over the centuries, obviously. Although your half seems to have forgotten all that, as you dwindled."

"But—"

The sweet smell of her. The softness of her lips. The easy familiarity of her hand on my arm.

"I was meant to distract you, silly."

I tried to say something, but no words would come.

"Although I have to say, I felt a bit redundant after your debacle with the Veil."

"Who?" I managed to get out. Even Andreas was blinking furiously at her, clearly not understanding why his young assistant had become a mature woman.

"Our families only ever had one goal, Daniel: to leash both of the Axes. Fifth and Sixth. Beginnings and Endings. Life and Death." She shrugged. "Yours took a different path than mine, and I have to tell you—well, I didn't actually know about the archive. That would have been useful."

"What are you talking about?" I felt I might retch.

She looked thoughtful as she said, "We probably could have prevented that little mishap in the Wood."

"The . . . Wood? The fires?"

She shrugged. "You know how it is with rune constructs. What was it you were telling me, Andreas?" She looked at the older man, whose mouth was opening and closing like a landed fish. "You miss one little element, and the whole thing blows up in your face?"

"I don't—" I began, but I was cut off as a Summons, urgent as any I'd ever felt, pierced my bewildered, spinning brain. I was needed in Twynsits.

She read my expression. "Another mess to clean up? Tsk, tsk. Go, Daniel. Go and fix your Veil." She smiled, and it was nothing like the soft, glowing, gentle smile I remembered. This one was cunning. Vicious.

And triumphant.

"We'll handle everything on our end," she said as my Axis spirited me to Twynsits.

CHAPTER 21

The Veil

"Daniel!" Debesi again, her voice uncharacteristically hot with panic.

"What's happening?" My voice still felt rough, my focus was shattered, and my limbs were shaking so badly I wondered how I remained upright.

"It's gotten worse," she said hurriedly. "We've begun carrying witchkind out as quickly as we can. We've advised everyone to burn whatever magic they have to get out of the city, even if it's just into the fields. The schools have sent—

"Debesi," I growled. "*What is happening?*"

She blinked. "They're going to burn the city. The Flame adherents—it's all they can do, they're dampening every fire in the city, even the street lights. But they can't hold for much longer. We've been at this continuously for two days. We're all tired. And when their torches quit holding a flame, they just began pulling up cobblestones and throwing them. People have been killed. Their priests have gone mad, they've been ordering—"

"Debesi, stop!" I cried. I needed a moment. Just *one moment* where everything wasn't blowing up around me.

"The Veil, Daniel."

I took a deep breath. "I know how to fix it," I said. "I'll go and—"

"Daniel, wait," she interrupted as she sensed me pulling my Axis close. "Thornwaith's is here as well."

My heart started beating faster, but I couldn't tell if I was picking up Debesi's obvious fears or if it was curiosity about the mysterious school and its alumni. "Where?"

"Outside the town. Due west."

I took myself there, and Debesi appeared next to me. I spotted them at once: at least two dozen men and women of witchkind, slowly walking toward the city. Through the smoke, a short, stocky man of perhaps middle age moved toward us. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

He said nothing.

"They're under its control," Debesi whispered. She was all but in a panic. "We have to stop them before it's too late!"

The man had stopped rather than walking into me. I leaned down a bit, putting our faces at the same level. "Sir? What are you doing?"

Nothing, and I started to feel Debesi's panic. The centers of the man's eyes were open wide—wider even than they'd be on the darkest evening. And they glowed, but softly, a deep, midnight blue. Almost black to be sure, but there was a murky, swirling intelligence tinting them with the darkest indigo.

I could sense a raw, primal fear paired with cold, unyielding anger.

The man began to slowly step around me, and I shuffled to one side to block him. Around me, in a ragged line, the other Thornwaith's alumni were continuing their advance.

"It's the magic, Daniel," Debesi said, louder this time. "It's afraid."

I Ended the man's possession. Or tried. My Axis surged forward and . . . bounced. It pulled back, confused.

"I don't know what you just tried," Debesi said in a low, urgent tone, "but I wouldn't do it again."

I looked around and saw the other Thornwaith alumni had stopped. They'd all turned their heads and were staring at me with cold, unblinking eyes.

I stepped out from in front of the man I'd been blocking.

The others' heads slowly swiveled back, and they resumed their slow, plodding pace.

"Can you delay them?" I asked Debesi. "Push them back?"

"I daren't." Her tone was as much horror as fear, now. "These people have *flattened* their enemies. They'll level the entire town."

"They'll kill plenty of our people at the same time."

"In the stories, witchkind are always spirited away somehow. This is the magic of the world itself, Daniel. It's protecting its own, but it doesn't care what other damage it causes."

I could feel the power gathered around the alumni. I looked at the man who'd just stepped past me as he continued his inexorable, patient march forward. Raw magic roiled around him, more than I'd ever felt in one place at once. It was filling the alumni, I realized, pushing itself into them faster than simple Gathering. Magic might lie thin upon the world in general, but here it was thick and heavy, drawing itself into the former Thornwaith's students. With this much magic available to them, they could accomplish near miracles on a scale only adherents could normally contemplate.

Flattening a town would be well within their abilities. "Debesi, how long do we have?"

She hesitated. "If Zmogus and his people can keep the flames out, the magic might restrain itself. It feeds on panic—ours, the humans, and talk of magic and Hunts. But if there's no actual violence, Thornwraith's may hold."

"Will the magic release them?"

"Now? Not until the threat's ended. One way or another."

"Then let's End it." I seized the Axis, and it whipped me back to the Tower, directly to the Foundation. The rune carved into the bedrock was clear to me, now that I knew it was here. I quickly walked its circumference, finding the exact spot where the "reminding" addition would go. Repeating the trick I'd done with the rock in Farreach, I carved the new element into the bedrock.

When it was done, I centered myself as best I could in the cavern, standing just next to the Foundation. I laid one palm flat against the

tall, cool, solid rock—careful to avoid any of the fractures. Then I centered my *soul* as best I could, reaching out to the Axis with gentle, steady mental hands. It came to me at once, coiling around me more tightly than ever. It knew why we were here, and it was ready.

I felt a thrumming from the Foundation, vibrating through my hand and into my torso. With the Axis attuned, I could feel, clearly and for the first time, what the Foundation was.

Nasty business, Ikwity had said.

The magic of the Forging, that last great work of free magic in the world, had chained the Axes to living people—the Archons, the first adherents. After the Archons, the Axes—aware in some sense, if not fully sentient—Chose those they would be bound to, creating an uninterrupted chain of living souls, each one holding a portion of their Axis's power under control.

Except for the Fifth.

The Fifth had snaked away from the Forging, refusing to be captured. It had distributed itself, the story said, in all of witchkind and all of humanity, dispersing its own magic to avoid being chained. Spread out like that, its Forging failed.

A similar anomaly occurred with the Sixth.

The Archon Galas successfully leashed the Axis of Endings, but it never Chose another—not while Galas lived, and not for a long time after he'd stepped down. And so it had been ever after: the Sixth Chose only one adherent for itself and went long periods without one. The gap between Kirmin and me had been *decades*.

So what kept the Axis chained when there was no adherent?

Souls.

That was the "nasty business" Ikwity had mentioned.

The Foundation was a prison, home to the soul of every adherent of the Sixth that had ever walked this world. *They* were the once-living energy that kept the Axis bound when no live adherent served. *They* maintained order in the world until the Axis Chose another.

Resisting the Axis damaged the Foundation, and eventually those souls would break free—and whoever was adherent at the time would be the last. When they stepped down, the world would return to chaos as the Sixth Axis roamed freely once again.

The sudden realization stabbed at my soul.

The Axis's own energy, via the rune construct beneath my feet, maintained the Foundation and all the little magics of the Tower itself. Plaktukas had tapped into that perpetual loop of magic, using it not to *awaken* the Veil—I still had no idea how he'd accomplished that—but to *remind* the Veil to remain awake.

But in creating our dragon, those junior adherents had overburdened the Veil. From the human perspective, there was no explanation for our actions other than the will of a god—or magic. To think I could confidently End their memories after our display! They'd *seen* magic, they'd seen witchkind, and I hadn't upheld my role as adherent of the Sixth Axis—as steward of the Veil.

That resistance to the Veil, that *blindingly obvious* display of magic, had strained the Sixth Axis itself—so tightly interconnected were Axis and Veil. That resistance had fractured the Foundation and severed the link that kept the Veil awake. And so it had started to return to the slumber from which Plaktukas had roused it.

Hopefully, it was not yet fully asleep. Hopefully, something of it remained, and all I would need to do is once again *remind* it of its duty.

I poured the Axis's power into the rune construct at my feet.

The Axis seemed to howl with pleasure, the feeling of being *nearly* unleashed, even if only for this moment, rippling through its awareness. Even the Axis's more diffuse, world-spanning aspect seemed to pull inward and concentrate here in the Tower, pushing a flood of power, a rushing river of energy, a veritable *sea* of magic, into the sturdy bedrock upon which the Foundation sat.

The Foundation and Veil were linked—and had been since Plaktukas's little trick. The rush of power shot up into the Foundation, and I sensed some of the fractures—the past transgressions on the Axis's desires and instincts—healing, as if those arguments and wrongdoings had finally been forgiven.

Plaktukas hadn't wanted other adherents to know his trick. I imagined he had feared—rightfully, in my opinion—that an abuser would arise and use the Tower's perpetual loop of magic to enact some kind of horror on the world.

From within the Foundation, the souls of the past adherents howled in anguish. My heart ached for them. Whether the Forging had been a good idea or, as Ikwity had suggested, a bad one, no adherent had expected this treatment when they'd been Chosen. To be all but forced to End themselves simply to ascend, then to have their souls snatched up and imprisoned when they finally grew weary enough to step down . . . it was cruel, at best.

And it would happen to me one day.

I pushed all of that down, focusing on maintaining a smooth torrent of power into the rune construct, until suddenly the world seemed to snap.

I stumbled and caught myself against the Foundation, sliding down its side and coming to rest in a tangle of my own limbs on the cold bedrock. The cavern was eerily quiet, my mind suddenly an empty chamber. My ears strained to hear something, *anything*.

A moment later, I felt the comforting *thud thud* of my heart. The sound of rushing blood filled my ears. My vision swam back to clarity—I'd blacked out. My legs felt weak and unreliable, but with a hand on the Foundation, I steadied myself and stood upright again.

The Axis drifted lazily about the room, and I could feel its diffuse aspect spreading across the world, eager to catch up on whatever small Endings it had neglected over the past few moments. The aware part of the Axis, the part that was always with me, seemed satiated. I called to it in my mind, and it slid toward me, sniffing curiously. I felt its power swirl around my chest, and my legs stopped shaking quite so badly.

"We need to go to Twynsits and check our work," I told it, my voice weak and rough.

It gathered me up and took me there.

"Daniel." Debesi found me at once, and her voice was calmer. Cool, almost soothing in a way. Her expression was less tense, her posture relieved. "You did it. We all felt it the moment you did it."

"It worked?"

She nodded and smiled. "You look terrible. But it worked. Look."

I scanned the square in which I'd arrived. Several humans were

standing around, confused looks on their faces. I spotted a priest who looked flustered and out of sorts.

"They literally stopped screaming midsentence," Debesi murmured.

"And Thornwaith's?"

She vanished in a gust of cold air, reappearing just moments later. "They're themselves again. They'll start making their way back to their homes."

"They'll be disoriented."

"This is what they learn to cope with at Thornwaith's."

I stepped over to a human. "Sir, are you all right?"

He nodded slowly, looking about as steady as I felt. "I think so."

I held up a finger and summoned a few motes of light to it, holding the rune briefly in my mind. He blinked and leaned toward me. Then he shook his head and smiled. "You've got something sparkly on your fingers," he said with a chuckle. "Caught the moonlight a bit. My wife would love that. What is it?"

I smiled. "I believe it's some sand, is all."

"I'll have to try that. I'm a glazier. Seems ripe for making an expensive piece."

"I'll leave you to it, then."

He nodded and walked away, growing more sure of his steps as he went.

"Satisfied?" Debesi asked in a low voice as she stepped up behind me.

I nodded. "He found an explanation other than what it was. So yes."

"And see how they look at us."

The humans wandering through the square glanced at each other, exchanging nods and smiles. But when their gazes landed on Debesi and me, they just slid off. We weren't interesting to them, not worth noticing unless we put ourselves in front of them.

"So much damage," said a voice behind me. I turned to see a human in priestly vestments, shaking his head as he surveyed the square. Cobblestones had indeed been pulled up, and cold torches were scattered everywhere.

"Bad food, I believe," Debesi offered. The priest looked at her, his eyes widening as if just now noticing her presence. "You know how it is. You get fevered, and people get angry. Could even have been fouled water."

I nodded. "Water would make sense. Why so many were affected so quickly."

The priest bobbed his head in agreement. "Yes, I recall delivering . . . that is, we've been telling people the laws on keeping the wells pure." He frowned. "Seemed very worked up about it, as I recall." Then he nodded again, squaring his shoulders. "Clearly a subject to revisit come holy day."

"Clearly," I agreed.

Debesi and I stepped back as the priest marched away with renewed purpose. "That story should hold," she said quietly. "Thank you," she added, her tone sincere.

"It was my fault."

"And you fixed it."

"People died."

Debesi was silent for a moment. "Yes. And there may be others we don't know about. Our actions have consequences. More so than most."

"I know."

She regarded me carefully. "I believe you do now."

"I'm sorry."

She accepted my apology with silence.

"Debesi—there's something happening."

"What now?"

"Gemma—the woman I was with. We're related, it turns out. My family—" My head spun. Where could I even begin? "It's a long story. You know the fire in the Great Northern Wood?"

"Zmogus told me."

"She started it. Well, not her. Her family. Her clan. She was Clan Karal."

Debesi's eyes widened. "The stolen power."

"I think I know what they're trying to do."

"Oh?"

Even now, I could sense my Axis's interest being drawn away. "I need to go."

"Call us if you need us. I'll be listening."

I nodded and let the Axis follow its nose.

CHAPTER 22

Forged

We—I should say *I*, but at that moment, the Axis felt very much like a companion to me—appeared outside the Great Northern Wood. We were nowhere near where the forest had burned, but as the shadows of night threatened the Wood, the Axis sensed a stirring. It drew toward the magic, and I saw it: another granite plinth had been erected. It stood in the center of a loose circle of witchkind. There must have been fifty, maybe sixty people there. Piled at the base of the plinth were bars of copper and brass, each one of them charged with an immense amount of magic. The sheer amount of power hanging over that circle was indescribable. Nearly *lethal*, in my eyes. The magic around that plinth was so thick it would have been visible to humans. I couldn't imagine any beneficent use of that much raw power. It hummed and vibrated as if it might explode at any moment.

Next to the plinth stood a single young man of witchkind. His appearance was unremarkable: middling-brown skin, plain clothing, close-cut black hair. Even-enough features, average height, absolutely the definition of "normal" for our people.

The Axis strained to pull forward. It was eager—no, that's not sufficient. *Desperate.* Like a child who hadn't eaten in days and had

been commanded to wait until the table had been fully set to gorge on a feast. It pulled, and for once, rather than letting its awareness wander free, some instinct deep inside me held it back.

Something was happening here, and I—no, the world—*convulsed*.

That's the only way I could think to describe it. Everything seemed to draw inward, to roll into a fetal position, centered on that granite plinth. Magic compressed into the space, and the air grew hot. I tried to say Debesi's name, to summon her, and Zmogus, and the others, for surely there would be another blaze that threatened the Wood. But my words were ripped from my mouth and packed into the air that seemed to be careening inexorably toward that stone pillar.

I fell to my knees, ignoring my body as my mind fought to keep the Axis in check. It struggled, trying to tear itself free of my grip, to join the inexorable *pull* that seemed to be drawing everything inward and—

Then the world exploded.

I was blasted backward, lifted into the air, and impelled away from the circle. The Axis was blown back as well, and for a brief, terrifying, existential moment, I felt the Axis *detach* from me. In that one eternal eyeblink, I hung prone in the air, my arms stretched over my head, my legs akimbo, my soul *empty.* My personal magic was fountaining out of me, shattering in the sudden onslaught. *This is what it would have felt like*, my mind managed to assemble, *if I'd never been Chosen.*

Time resumed, and I slammed into the grassy earth, the Axis snapping back into place. It was cowed. Afraid. Frustrated. Depleted. Denied. It was a dog, beaten with impunity, its tail tucked between its legs and its head lowered in shame, its body quivering in fear.

A column of pure energy—not fire but pure, unadulterated magic, the likes of which I'd never felt in one place before—rose into the sky. Face-down on the ground as I was, I didn't see it, but I could sense it, feel it, as the unspeakable pressure of it threatened to lift me back into the air.

Then it winked out.

My ears were pounding, my heart racing. I tasted dirt in my mouth, paired with the unmistakable metallic bite of blood. I pushed myself up and spat out a few bloodied blades of grass. All plant life,

even trees, had been blown flat in a perfect circle around the plinth, as had every single person who'd been standing around it. An old woman was creeping slowly forward out of the Wood, taking in the scene. Ikwity? I blinked, willing my eyes to focus. But when I looked again, she'd gone.

Of the young man who'd stood next to the plinth, I could see no sign.

The people on the ground began to stir, pushing themselves upright as I had.

"That's done, then."

I turned to see Gemma—the new, older Gemma—standing behind me, her face bearing a broad, happy smile.

"What have you done?"

She laughed. It was the rich, hearty laugh I knew, made denser and more layered by the decades she'd acquired. "We've completed the Forging, Daniel. After all these centuries, the work is done."

I knew what each of those words meant, but they didn't make sense strung together that way. "What?"

She crouched in front of me, putting us eye to eye. "We did the impossible. We gathered power for years, Daniel. Until you stopped us. But by then we had nearly enough. The rest, we've Gathered the old-fashioned way over the past three years.

"And we hid from you, didn't we? I can't imagine you didn't look for us. Do you know how we did it?"

I swallowed. "Your runes."

She nodded, a clever smile stealing across her features. "We burned out our identity, yes. Every one of us. Some died of it, you know."

Was I supposed to feel bad about that?

"We hoarded that power, beggaring ourselves in the process. Because we knew it would all come to this. And you helped! Your family history, those clever runes from that archive—that gave us the last bit we needed. The bit that let us correct the mistake from our trial run."

She leaned closer. "We've completed the Forging, Daniel. We've made the Fifth Axis."

My own Axis howled a lament, anguish and desperation filling my mind and spirit.

She stood, brushing grass off her long dress. "We figured you'd be more alert after what happened three years ago, but you were so caught up with the damage you'd done to the Veil that we almost needn't have bothered. Giving up on the little people, concentrating your efforts on all of your big projects—it kept you nicely out of the way."

"The Fifth Axis." My voice was all but spent, now weak and raspy even in my own ears.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, speaking slowly, as if to a child. "The Fifth Axis. The Axis of Beginnings, the Axis of Life. The foil to your own. Our family's dream, finally realized. Although I suspect they planned for us to be more cooperative than you've been."

"How?"

She waved a hand. "I don't really know the magical details. I really *am* as weak as I told you. A cousin brought me here, in fact. I know it took an unprecedented amount of power, as well as runes that haven't been seen since the Archons first devised them."

That left only the obvious, pressing, and most meaningful question. "Why?"

She laughed again, this time with a mocking undertone. "You're not that much a fool. You know full well the liberties—the *opportunities*—provided to an adherent, especially one who controls Death. Imagine your opposite: an adherent of Life."

I wondered if they knew that their new adherent would be able to *withhold* life, as I'd learned I could withhold death.

Inside me, my Axis sobbed.

"Where's your new adherent, then?" I asked. I presumed that was the young man who'd stood next to the plinth.

"Aron?" She waved one hand vaguely in the air. "Off somewhere recovering, I expect. That was the plan."

He'd learned to use his Axis in record time, then, unless another cousin had somehow spirited him away.

"But, Daniel, there's no reason for this to be acrimonious, you

know." Gemma held out a hand to help me up. I declined, pushing myself back to my trembling, unsteady feet. "We can work together."

I just looked at her, blinking as the last rays of the sun dipped below the far-off horizon.

"After all, we're family."

Epilogue

Abrupt? I suppose. But that's the end of this story.

Oh, of course. You'll find that there's almost always another story, and another after that. It's no different with my stories.

I can tell you. It's just . . . a bit long. And sadder than this one, in ways. Happier in others, maybe.

Perhaps another time? It's growing light out, and you've not slept at all.

Agreed, then. What's that?

Hmm. No, I rather think that will be the last of my stories for you.

It'll make sense when you hear it.

Yes, best saved for when you don't have to be up and about so early.

I'll see you then.

The Fifth Axis

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER 1

The Search

I bolted upright in my bed, drenched coverings falling away from me.

For the first time since I'd come to the Tower, I'd tossed and turned all night, slipping in and out of a dreamless, unsatisfying unconsciousness that couldn't truly be called sleep. Visions of the Great Northern Wood haunted me. The Karal, my rivals, had leashed a power we all thought would go untamed. The Fifth Axis. My brain had been fumbling at deciphering the implications.

Just before dawn, absolute exhaustion had claimed me, dragging me into a welcome numbness. Then came the pain, searing and stabbing, that blasted through my eyes and into the center of my brain.

Aron. The name settled into my mind even as the pain in my head faded. Without knowing how, without knowing why, I knew the pain was connected to the new adherent of the Fifth Axis. My twin. My opposite. The world's new embodiment of Creation, Life, and Beginnings.

With a low moan, I swung out of bed to start my day.

I ached. I'd been going nearly nonstop for days, working to repair the damage I'd done to the Veil, the magic that helped witchkind hide their true nature from the humans we lived among. My legs were sore. My back was stiff. My neck was acutely tender. My head throbbed. I

was tired, truly tired, in a way I'd never been before. Even my eyes seemed bruised and beaten.

The flickering shadow servants of the Tower, the *driežai*, seemed to move more silently than usual, staying in the edges of my vision as if worried about bringing me further discomfort. On one of the Tower's open upper levels, peering out at the gray, choppy ocean from the stone crenelations, I slowly ate toasted bread and cheese and sipped steaming hot kavos. To the west, the second moon was setting. To the east, the sun began trudging its way through the cloud-smeared sky. The wind off the sea bore the first bite of winter, far too early for this time of year. The world, it seemed, was as off-kilter as I felt.

Aron. Again, my mind turned to the new adherent. I'd caught only a glimpse of him through the magics that had, after all these centuries, finally Forged the Fifth Axis. The Axis of Beginnings and Creation, of Life. The Axis that had somehow managed to avoid being Forged all those years ago. And now it was invested in Aron, a man of middling-brown skin, plain clothing, close-cut black hair—the perfect model of "average" among human and witchkind alike. He'd been enrobed by magic as the Fifth was chained to him. In that moment, my own power, my Axis, had been temporarily forced from my body. When I'd come to, Aron was gone. And I ached. I still ached. *I need to find him.*

With grim determination and the mug of kavos gripped firmly in my hand, I arrived at the Tower's second level. Each of the structure's upper levels had a specific, singular purpose aligned to one of the Axis's major Forms of Power: communication, judgment, defense, and so forth. The second level was a large, circular, nearly empty space, its sole attraction being the magically powered map table set against an exterior wall.

"Aron," I ordered the map. It could find almost anyone of witchkind, even an entire clan, simply by hearing the name. The map would zoom and slide until it displayed a bright mote of light indicating the target's location. I could zoom in farther, until buildings and even people moving about their day were clearly visible. But some of witchkind could hide from the map—a feat Clan Karal had

managed when I'd been an apprentice in this Tower. And Aron was one of them.

The map didn't seem to know what to do. It jittered, slewing back and forth as if searching, but ultimately stopped, zoomed out to a continent-level view, and then . . . sulked. "Aron," I repeated, but the map made no move. I could feel its magic complaining darkly. I looked up to the shadow servant that always lingered here. "Nothing?" Faceless, it shrank into the stone wall, as if apologizing for its inability to obey. I sighed. "Fine." I stalked down the stairs to the main level rather than letting the Axis take me there instantly. Neither my head nor my stomach seemed ready for magically fueled travel.

I stepped off the wide, circular stone stairs when another lance of pain speared me, sending me to one knee. My now-empty mug fell out of my hand, shattering into several rough shards. *Driežai* swarmed instantly, carrying the pieces away and leaving me with a thudding heart and the taste of copper in my mouth. *Aron.* It was an absolute certainty in my mind, although I had no idea how or why. These jolts of pain were somehow his doing.

I leaned into the Axis, pushing my mind into the diffuse, world-spanning awareness that connected it to every Ending, everywhere. Endings of life, yes, but also Endings of everything. Arguments. Relationships. Dinners. Days. The Axis was aware of them all, complicit in them all. But it's awareness eddied and frothed, which was nothing like the smooth surety I'd come to know of it over the past three years. I held my breath, ignoring the throbbing pain that was already starting to fade, and *felt*.

There. A lazily spinning swirl in the Axis's awareness, centered on something . . . different. I gathered the Axis to me, invoking its Form of Travel, and took myself there.

I arrived amid an explosion of vegetation. The lush meadow, obviously far to the west and just brightening under the first touch of sunlight, thrust upward, tall grasses tickling my waist. Enormous clumps of brightly colored flowers blazed with in hues more intense than I'd ever seen: burning crimson, emeralds that all but glowed, ceruleans so deep they rivaled the clearest summer skies. Even under

the last of the moon's waning light, the violets, titians, cobalts, and ambers stood out boldly from the blue-green canvas of tall grass.

The meadow pulsed with life. New life. Without question, this was the result of the Fifth—

I gasped as another hot pain seared through me. I forced myself to breathe deeply, to sink back into the Axis's distant awareness, until I found another gentle vortex. I took myself there.

This time, I found myself on a wharf. From the dim rose glow just beginning to lighten the sky, I figured myself somewhere in the southeast. A dozen fishing boats were still tied up, their crews staring in awe at the still-dark seawater beneath them. One shouted, and others began running toward the wharf from the town behind me.

The sea was full of fish.

It was as if these ships had crept out in the night, filled their nets with their catch, and then returned, only to empty their holds. The fish jumped and flipped, seemingly too numerous for the waters of the harbor. All around the ships, fish leaped and frothed, pushing over and past one another in confusion.

"Adherent," said a soft, deep voice at my side. A middle-aged man of witchkind. His blue eyes stood out against the dark skin of his face. "What's happened?"

"You're a fisherwitch?" I guessed. Few others of witchkind would be awake this early in a fishing town. He nodded, still transfixed by the glistening chaos before us. "I suspect," I said slowly, the pain in my head finally receding, "that the new adherent of the Fifth is exercising his powers."

The man looked at me, his eyes growing wide. "Did you say the Fifth?"

I nodded. "Forged at last, it would seem."

"So these fish. . . "

"Created by magic. Or drawn here. Probably the former. I don't know."

"When?"

"Yesterday. Hours ago, I think." I shook my head. "I've not slept in . . . days."

"Was this . . . the trouble with the Veil?"

I chuckled despite myself. "No, that was something else. Dealt with now. The Veil is fine. Provided this kind of thing"—I gestured to the water—"doesn't upset it again. No, we've stepped swiftly from one crisis to"—I indicated to where fish were finally beginning to sort themselves out and disperse—"to whatever this is."

"Will we—"

I gasped and fell to my knees.

"Adherent!" the man cried.

"It's fine," I managed between clenched teeth. The pain had receded more quickly this time, but its intensity had crested. "I need to go." Once again, I leaned into the Axis's distant awareness, found the whirlpool that represented Aron's use of his power, and took myself there.

This continued through the day: a stab of pain would announce Aron empowering a new Beginning. I would seek him out as quickly as I could, then take myself there. Without variation, I was met by a newly Created riot of life: meadows full of flowers, forests with new trees stretching toward the sun, fields of grain grown ready for harvest months early, sea cliffs covered in dense flocks of birds. Each time, no sight of Aron. I returned to the Tower late, exhausted and frustrated.

And it began again the next day. I followed much the same pattern, although the pace slowed throughout the day. Aron's Creations were becoming more deliberate and thoughtful—less extravagant. He was coming to grips with his power. But still, I never saw him, arriving moments too late each time.

And then he stopped.

No energy tugged at me. Not sharp, stabbing pain. It was evening. I waited, letting myself sink into my Axis's broader awareness, but after two hours, I gave up and returned to the Tower for another failed attempt at sleep.

On the third day, Aron's efforts were more noticeable, slicing into my mind like a thin knife. I didn't need the Axis to detect him—it hurt so sharply that I couldn't travel immediately, instead needing several long minutes to recompose myself. And of course, by the time I could investigate where the pain had come from, Aron was gone. Tiny new forests had overtaken what had previously been rolling

meadows, each new tree evenly spaced in a perfect, orchard-like grid. The local rabbit population had exploded elsewhere, with so many small, furry gray bodies bounding about that I wondered how they'd manage to feed themselves. The next location was the most worrying: a small seaside village that had collapsed into a conglomeration of petty arguments. These I Ended as quickly as I could, but after questioning a few of the local witchkind, I found no one knew what had set them off. Aron's creations were becoming more abstract.

By evening, I found myself in a meadow where a new mountain had thrust up from the earth and reached toward the sky. Mesla, senior adherent of Earth, arrived moments after me, rising from the ground itself and shaking dirt from her simple brown shift. "What's happening?" she asked as she surveyed the new landmark.

"You don't know?"

"There have been messages. They've been . . . confusing. Something about the Fifth Axis."

"Nothing confusing about it." I sighed. "Clan Karal—or whatever they're calling themselves these days—finally did it. All the magic they stole with their machines, using Mother's identity rune—"

Mesla nodded, her eyebrows climbing to her hairline.

"That's what it was all for. They Forged the Fifth and anchored it to one of their own. A young man named Aron. About my age, I'd guess."

"You've seen him?"

"Briefly. As it was happening. I've been chasing him for days. Every time he does this, every time he Creates, I feel it."

"Through your Axis?"

"I assume so. It's incredibly painful, and I truly wish he'd stop. This is the boldest Creation yet," I added, nodding toward the spire of rock. "I think he's experimenting."

Mesla nodded slowly. "Debesi's people have been spreading messages, trying to figure it out. Have the humans noticed?"

I listened. Not to her, but to my Axis, to the world itself. Before Aron arrived, I'd spent considerable effort trying to heal the Veil, the magical construct that encouraged humans to ignore magic and find mundane explanations for the supernatural. Since then, I'd become

more sensitive to the Veil, more aware of its existence. "No," I said slowly. "The Veil, at least, seems intact. And quiet. So far the humans may just see Aron's work as miracles from their gods." Most of their priests were, I suspected, more than happy to take credit for a bounty of fish or an inexplicable early harvest. I much preferred that to their Hunts on witchkind.

"You said you can feel it?"

"I couldn't possibly ignore it. It stabs through my mind like a hot poker. I don't know if he feels me as well, though."

"Why would you feel anything? You don't feel when we use our Axes, do you?"

I shook my head. "I never have. And I don't know. My Axis . . . when I was there, when they Forged the Fifth, my Axis seemed . . . eager. More than that. The magic was so powerful, so intense, it felt like my own Axis separated from me." Her eyes grew wider. "Just for an instant. Maybe my presence there linked Aron and me somehow. I don't know." I yawned.

"You look terrible."

"I *feel* terrible. I haven't slept properly in days."

"There's an inn not far—"

She stopped as I shook my head. "I'd just be drawn back to the Tower anyway. I might as well take myself there."

"A moment." She knelt and put her palm against the ground. It sank in, the earth like water to her. The power of Earth. She withdrew her hand, clutching a smooth sphere of shiny blue granite. "Take this. Lay it under your pillow."

I took the sphere and eyed it curiously. "What will it do?"

"It'll calm you. While you lie there, it'll make it hard to focus on anything. You'll find it soothing, I promise. It won't force you to sleep, but it'll help."

"Honestly, I'd welcome it forcing me at this point. But thank you."

She surveyed the rocky prominence before us. "You think he'll continue?"

"I've been chasing him for three days. He's been slowing down. This is the longest stretch I've had. Maybe he's tired."

"But maybe not tomorrow?"

I shrugged. "Who's to say? Gem—his family, a woman I spoke to, was there. She implied they had plans for him." My jaw clenched as I remembered Gemma's lies and betrayal.

Mesla frowned. "That seems . . . dark."

"I agree. I don't know their motives." I yawned again. "But I have suspicions. He's doing more than Creating rocks and forests. There was a village—I don't even know where I was, to be honest—where every man, woman, and child was engaged in a screaming match. The whole place, a thousand arguments."

Mesla wrinkled her brow. "Why would that be Aron?"

"I can End arguments. Stands to reason he could begin them."

"But why—oh."

I nodded. "If this is what his clan elders are pressing him to do—create strife, turmoil—well, now they know he can."

Her eyes grew wide as she considered the ramifications.

Either Mesla had understated the power of her gift, or I'd been so exhausted that I hadn't needed more than a nudge to welcome oblivion. My head still pulsed with a gentle ache, but I felt, if not refreshed, then at least less like a corpse-to-be.

I managed to finish breakfast without incident, washing down the last of the calming tea before an unexpectedly gentle twinge of pain stabbed my temples. I sighed, rubbing my head, before sinking back into the Axis and taking myself to yet another swirling vortex of magic.

"Oh!"

I blinked. Before me was a man around my age, with middling-brown skin, middling-brown hair, and middling-green eyes. He was wearing a crisp white shirt and black trousers, and his eyes were widening as he took me in. "Aron?"

He nodded vigorously. "You're Daniel?"

"You can tell?"

He smiled and touched a cheek.

Of course. My pale skin set me apart from most people, human and witchkind alike. "What have you been doing?"

His eyes sparkled with a sly gleam. "Practicing."

"Experimenting, you mean."

He shrugged. "Maybe that. I'm an Archon now."

I scowled. Is that what they'd told him? That he was an Archon? "You're not. Not really. The Archons Forged the Axes. Your family did this. Did it to you."

He frowned. "I'm still special."

"They told you that?" He nodded. "I suppose you are. Any adherent is."

"I'm the only one of me."

"True," I allowed. "As am I."

"Are you special as well?"

I chuckled, but there was no humor in it. "I guess I am. I doesn't always feel that way."

He frowned. "It hurts, sometimes. Like a headache."

"When you use your power?"

"No, usually just after. I've been taking myself away as fast as possible, but the pain still comes. It's fast, but hard."

"Taking yourself away how?" Every Axis had a Form of Travel, but I obviously knew nothing about his.

He shrugged, still rubbing the sides of his head. "It just does. I tell it, and it takes me." Not unlike my own Form of Travel, then. "But the pain still comes."

"It affects me too," I said slowly, earning a confused look from him. "I think I feel it every time you use your power. Maybe your own headaches come from me using mine."

"You've been . . . Ending people again?"

Again? What had his family been telling him about me? "No, I've been looking for you."

"Why?"

"Because I—" I started. That was an excellent question. Why was I looking for Aron? "The headaches, maybe. You . . . it felt connected to you, I think. Could I ask you to . . . just stop? Just not use your power for a while? I won't either."

His eyebrows lowered slightly, and he nodded. "Will the voices stop as well?"

My eyebrows drew together in confusion. "Voices?"

"In my head. They're loud. Indistinct. Insistent." He fluttered his hands around his head, frowning as he tried to describe something that he clearly didn't understand. "Pushing, proving, suggestion, wooing," he said in quick succession. He was rambling, but he managed to come back to himself after a moment. "I just want them to be quiet."

"I don't know. I've . . . there have never been voices. In my head." Which wasn't strictly true: while my Axis hadn't spoken to me as such, I had certainly felt its awareness. Its intelligence.

"It wants more, you know," he said, lowering his hands and taking a deep breath. "More, more, more."

"More of what?" I kept my voice calm, despite a sudden clenching in my chest.

"*More*," he said insistently, his eyes suddenly boring into mine. "More of everything. I gave it more fish. More flowers. More birds. More—"

"I saw those things," I interrupted, holding out a hand in what I hoped was a calming gesture. "You don't have to do that all the time. They'll be born on their own, the fish and the birds. The flowers will grow on their own. You don't have to do it all." My Axis quietly attended to all the small Endings in the world without my intervention. I assumed his did the same with Beginnings.

"More grains," he continued more calmly. "Ending the growing season, quickly."

Ending?

"It wanted a mountain. To End all the flatness."

That didn't make sense. Mine was the Axis of—

"I can start arguments, you know," he said casually. "I can End the peace. Give people something to argue about."

As I'd Ended arguments, creating . . .

Oh. I'd Created peace, hadn't I? Kirmin, my mentor, had said Endings are the other face of Beginnings. And so Beginnings were the other side of Endings.

A cold trickle of fear dripped down my spine.

"It wants more," Aron continued, a sob catching in his throat. "To start more. To begin more. To have more. It's . . . anxious. Eager? It's been held back."

"It's been free for centuries," I argued.

"The Axis? I know. They explained it. Not that." His voice trailed off and his eyes seemed to unfocus slightly.

"I don't understand," I said. "What's been held back?"

He flapped his hands more wildly. "I don't know. It just hurts. And it won't stop. More, more, more. Make, make, make. Start new things, stop others." He fell very still and took a small step toward me, his eyes drilling into mine. I forced myself to stand my ground. "I need to make it stop." His voice was suddenly cold and flat.

"I don't—" I began, but he stepped back and waved me to silence.

His head cocked to one side, and his gaze seemed to look over my shoulder. "They're in there too," he said in a distracted tone.

"Who?"

"Them. The elders." His voice was now that of a child's, one who'd done something wrong and was about to be punished. Small and fearful. Full of a gentle dread.

"Elders? Your clan, you mean?" He nodded, shrinking in on himself. He wrapped his arms around his chest, and a tear ran down one cheek. "What do they want?"

His eyes snapped back to mine, wet and afraid. "*Power*."

He shook his head, more tears running down his face, and vanished.

CHAPTER 2

Family Ties

The only firm connection I had to Aron's family—my family, if you go back far enough—was Gemma. After she betrayed my trust, I had little desire to speak to her, but I knew of no other way to find Aron's masters. They'd once been called Karal, but they'd done something to End that, leaving me with no way to track them down.

I spent a frustrating few hours of searching in Tower's map room. Asking for Gemma resulted in another skittering, sliding performance that ended with the map zooming out and sitting sullenly still. But then it came to me: like everything else in the Tower, the map table was ultimately powered by my Axis—and my Axis had felt off for days. Even its stable, distant, diffuse awareness—the sense I'd used to chase down Aron—had felt unsteady. Perhaps that same disruption in my Axis's awareness was preventing the map table from working properly.

I tried to still myself as I sank into the world-spanning aspect of the Axis. It tossed me about like a dinghy lost at sea. But rather than fight to stay afloat or sink into it, I tried to exercise some control. I'd never managed to influence this part of the Axis before despite trying to give it orders. Now, I simply tried to give it calm—a calm I didn't entirely feel myself. My current state of exhaustion seemed to lend me

a stillness that sufficed. Slowly, ever so slowly, the swirling slowed. I couldn't stop it, but I could at least reduce the Axis's apprehension, transmuting the roiling to gentle swaying.

As I came back to myself, I once again ordered the map table to find Gemma. it complied. Hesitatingly and jerkily, it slewed itself to focus on the town of Withring, where it reluctantly kindled a point of churlish green-gold light. It hovered over an unremarkable building—a human shop of some sort. Gemma was likely in a hidden space attached to it. Traveling their directly would be difficult, so the adjacent alley looked attractive.

I took myself there immediately, nausea suddenly gripping my stomach. *The Axis is still unsettled.* I wondered how bad it would get.

I'd arrived in an alley between two wood-and-stone buildings, and I braced myself against the nearest one until my head stopped spinning and my stomach righted itself. Was this all because of Aron? Was his mere existence enough to do this to me, or had the Forging of the Fifth damaged my connection to the Axis?

I shook my head, putting my questions aside. Time enough for them later. According to the map table, Gemma was in the very building I was leaning against. I pulled myself upright and walked toward the alley's mouth, rapidly scanning the structure for an entry rune. I found it at the very corner of the building, a shallow carving in a granite cornerstone, and tapped it, bracing myself as a swirl of cool magic—much gentler than my own had been that day—swept me inside.

I found myself in an entry foyer, a common-enough arrival point for witchkind residences. A comfortable, worn carpet adorned the center of the small room, covering well-polished wooden floorboards. Clean, plastered white walls surrounded me, and an arched doorway led to the rest of the residence. The witchkind who'd built this space could have filled it with almost anything, used almost any materials available to them. I'd always found it amusing that my people chose finishes and furniture so similar to those of their human neighbors.

The echoes of a gong were just fading, having announced my arrival. A rapid scuffle of footsteps followed.

"Daniel." I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, provided

by unflickering yellow globes of light hanging from the ceiling. Gemma looked a couple of decades older than me, having dropped the glamour that once disguised her appearance. She frowned as she crossed her arms. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"I'm surprised to be here," I admitted. "But I need to find Aron. I need to know his—your—clan name."

"Now, Daniel, any clan that changes its name wants it kept a secret." Her smugness grated at me.

"I'd imagine." So they *had* managed to change their clan identity. Complex, difficult, and often painful, but not impossible. But for so many people? What could have made that worth their while? What was in it for the former Clan Karal?

"How did you even find me?" Gemma asked.

"I have my ways."

"Ah," she said, a mocking grin widening her mouth. "The mighty, mysterious adherent. I'll have to ask Aron if he can do something similar. Match you, so to speak."

"I still need to find him. Where is he? Or just tell me the new clan name so I can track him down myself."

She arched an eyebrow. "Why ever for? You can't undo the Forging."

Why would she think that was my goal? "Maybe. Maybe not. That's not the point. He's been experimenting with his powers, causing no end of trouble. He'll endanger the Veil again if it continues."

"We'll endeavor to keep him leashed, then." Her tone was cool, confident.

"As you have been, you mean? You seem to have done a poor job at it."

"The elders have their plans, and I'm not privvy to all of them."

"Elders? Who specifically?" She merely tilted her head a bit. I found her arrogance frustrating. "How can you possibly expect this to hold?" I asked, my voice growing louder. "What makes you think you can leash an adherent, especially one of such a primal Axis? Will Aron live forever? Will the Fifth Choose more adherents? What if it doesn't? What if Aron dies? What happens then?" I was all but

shouting now, but Gemma showed no response. She simply stood, glaring at me with her arms crossed casually in front of her. "Is he here?" I demanded.

"No," she said coolly. "And why should you care? You're probably just jealous that your power now has a check."

"Is everything all right?" A short, round little man came up behind Gemma, a hesitant smile on his face. "I heard voices."

"It's fine, Quintin," Gemma said evenly, her eyes never leaving mine. "This is Daniel. He's an adherent. *The* adherent, in fact, of the Sixth Axis. He doesn't always tell people that."

I clenched my jaw, but it was a fair point. I suppose there'd been a certain amount of deception on both sides.

"I can get—" Quintin began.

"No need for anything," Gemma interrupted.

"Quintin," I said, careful to keep my tone even. "Are you familiar with Aron? I believe he's from the clan—"

"Say nothing," Gemma snapped, her eyes flashing. "Go back in the house. Tell everyone else to leave us be. This is a private conversation."

Quintin looked at me uneasily. I forced myself to smile, and that seemed to make him even more uneasy. He backed into the archway behind Gemma before scuttling away.

"I'm quite aware that you hate me," Gemma said easily as the sound of Quintin's footsteps faded away. "But I have to tell you, jealousy of power doesn't look good on you."

"Hate you?" I found myself surprised. "I don't hate you." But what *did* I feel? "You—you lied. I *liked* you—who I thought you were, at least. I'm just . . . your clan has offered nothing but deception. Lies."

"You weren't actually falling in love with me, were you?"

I couldn't tell if she was gloating or genuinely curious. "It was nice not being alone."

She laughed violently. "I'm old enough to be your moth—"

"I had a mother. And I obviously didn't know your true age at the time. Because, as I've said, lies."

"You know, this doesn't need to be a confrontation. We're of the same family, in the end."

"In the *beginning*," I corrected her. "Not the end. And you're right, this doesn't need to be a confrontation. Tell me where Aron is. As you say, he's family. I'd like to meet him."

"Our families shared a goal. You were in the archive. You must have seen that."

"A shared goal to . . . what?" I couldn't decide whether she was trying to distract me from finding Aron or genuinely trying to win me over.

"Control both the Fifth and Sixth Axes, obviously. Your branch did their part, which I have to say was a great deal easier, what with the Sixth already existing. Our side spent generations trying to gather sufficient power. Centuries researching the magic that could Forge an Axis. But don't act as if your family had some kind of noble ambition. They wanted power, plain and simple."

"But *my* family is gone. I'm the last. I'm not leashed. What they wanted or didn't want doesn't matter. No power went to them. *Your* clan killed humans. You used my mother. You almost burned down the Great Northern Wood. But you and your elders have *plan* beyond that, do you? No plan to *handle* Aron. He's one adherent! You have no idea what will happen if he dies. What will happen to the new Axis." I stabbed a finger at her. "I need to know where he is. Right now."

"I'm not telling—"

"I can make you."

"You won't."

I wasn't sure she was wrong. My anger with her betrayal warred with my sheer exhaustion, and my intense desire to go home to my Tower, crawl into my bed, and never come out again. "Your clan is playing with a power they don't understand. And you've invested it in a single person who's completely unprepared. You have to see the danger."

"Perhaps the Fifth will Choose others," she argued. "Perhaps it won't. But the Sixth has always managed, hasn't it? With a single adherent, and sometimes not even that."

My throat tightened. This particular aspect of my Axis was still fresh and raw in my mind. "Precautions were taken," I said softly. "Sacrifices were made. You've done none of that." *Precautions.* I shuddered as I thought about all those souls, the spirit of every former adherent of the Sixth, trapped forever in the Tower's Foundation, acting as anchors for when the Axis had no living adherent. I'd join them one day.

"What sacrifices?"

I bristled. "That's my business. You wouldn't know anything about—"

"About sacrifices?" Gemma snapped. "You mean something like burning out your *identity* because some young upstart ruined plans that had been in place since before he was born? Or do you mean giving up everything you've ever known—your business, your home, your everything— to take on a new identity?"

My ire flared. "None of that would have happened if Karal wasn't draining power from humans!" I shouted. "Using my *mother's* identity rune! They cut off her hands and kept her in an iron cage!"

Gemma fell silent, and I wanted more than anything to believe I'd seen sorrow and regret in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I knew about the rune. I didn't know . . . I'm sorry."

My heart was thudding against my chest, and I inhaled deeply, willing it to slow before I did something rash.

"Wait," Gemma said, her voice even quieter now. "That rune. The one that went missing."

"Mother's identity rune," I said wearily. I suddenly found that I was tired of the rage. Maybe it was the events of the past few days, but I simply no longer had the energy.

"But you . . . did something. It was gone."

"I Ended it." *I'm so tired.*

"But . . ."

I nodded, and it felt as if the muscles of my neck might simply give up. "She died."

Gemma stared at me for a long while. "I'm sorry."

It meant something. I felt my anger waning.

"But we don't have to fight anymore. We don't have to lie. All six

Axes are now leashed. You hold one set of reins, and we hold another. It was always meant to be this way. Knowing where Aron is won't change anything."

She wasn't hostile, and I certainly lacked the will to fight. "If the death of my mother taught me anything, it's that nothing is simple. Not where magic is concerned."

She looked at me for a long moment, assessing me. "What do you mean?"

I felt myself being earnest, not combative. "Aron's not well. His mind. There's . . . something between us, he and I. I don't know if it's our Axes, or if it's because I was there when you chained the Fifth to him. We're . . . affecting each other. He—"

"Affecting each other? How"

I paused for a moment, giving myself a chance to phrase my next words carefully. "He . . . hurts. So do I," I admitted. "But it seems to be worse for him. I found him. Hours ago, at most. He was rambling. He's . . . unfocused."

Her face betrayed her concern. "Aron was the steadiest, most loyal candidate. We were careful," she insisted. "We selected someone your age. Someone quiet. Intense. Not as arrogant as you." I let that go. "But steady."

"I was Chosen when I was thirteen," I reminded her. "Every adherent is. How old is Aron?"

"Twenty-two. But why should that—"

"It took me five years to adjust to my Axis. To learn to use it. Five long, lonely years. You've given him, what, seconds?"

"The Archons were—"

"The Archons knew what they were doing, and even then, they struggled with the power. Trust me."

"You can't possibly know—"

"I *can.* My Tower holds many secrets. Too many." I'd discovered as much when I'd restored the Veil. Galas, the Archon of the Sixth, was forever bound to the Tower, along with all past adherents of the Sixth. The horror of all those trapped souls was still strong in my mind. I'd never fully understood why my Axis was able to hold the memories of my predecessors, and the revelation had been—remained—sobering.

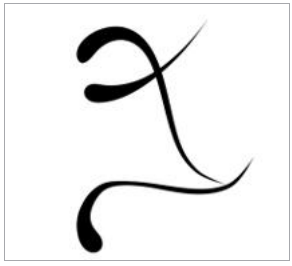
She blinked several times as she processed that, and then shook her head. "Aron is clever," she insisted. "He'll—"

"He'll experiment. And that's what he's been doing. He's raised schools of fish, flocks of birds, forests' worth of trees. Crops are ready for harvest months ahead of time. He's overgrown meadows. He's pulled a mountain out of the ground, for Origin's sake!"

A flash of uncertainty sped across her expression. "You're just—"

Despite my exhaustion, a last ball of anger managed to rekindle itself in my chest. "Just nothing!" I snapped. "This has nothing to do with our family's feud. You've put a sixth of the world's magic power, half of its most primal power, in the hands of someone untrained and unready! And you claim to have him leashed?" How could she persist in this? Was she completely ignorant?

"Where is he now?" I demanded. Almost by reflex, I summoned my Axis's Form of Mind, defined by the rune *to know*:



My stomach cramped as the Axis obeyed, settling itself over Gemma.

"I don't know," she said.

My blood ran cold with magic, and the skin on the back of my neck seemed to shrink. A lie. "Try again." I kept my voice flat and hard.

She frowned. "I don't. They're keeping him—"

"I can tell when you're lying, you know. I can End lies, Gemma. Once I know to look for them." *I can End you* was the unsaid accompaniment.

She blinked, and then a wary craftiness overtook her. Her expression hardened, and she let her hands fall slowly to her sides as she

raised her shoulders a bit. I'd danced this dance enough to know she intended to resist me. My feelings for her—for what I'd thought had been her—came crashing back to me, colored by the fact that it had all been a lie, a gambit to keep me distracted from her family's workings. The butterflies I'd felt in my stomach were now shards of glass. The joy I'd felt when she'd simply touched my arm was now a crawling disgust. I'd been wrong: nothing was settled between me and this creature.

She opened her mouth to speak, and with a flick of the Axis's power, I Ended the air around her. Her eyes grew wide for a split second as her lungs struggled to find purchase in the vacuum. I released the magic, and she stepped back, startled, as air rushed to fill the void I'd created. She gasped twice, one hand on her chest, and looked up at me.

Her expression was no longer crafty and clever. I saw fear.

"Don't lie to me again," I warned her.

She stared at me for a moment before softly saying, "I'll tell you. Only please, don't hurt him."

The concern in her voice was genuine, and I felt a twinge of regret at acting so harshly.

"He's my son," she finished.

CHAPTER 3

Elders

A tree smashing into my chest couldn't have taken my breath away more effectively. "Your *son?"* I repeated, incredulous.

Gemma nodded. "It's why—I wanted to be there. When it happened. Even though I wasn't part of the ritual."

The still-unresolved pain over losing my own mother clashed with my dislike for Gemma, and I forced myself to unclench fists I hadn't even realized I'd made. "I don't want to hurt Aron," I assured her. "But he's causing damage. He can't—"

"It's the elders," she interrupted. "They're the ones making him do it. This is all their plan."

Which I knew, but . . . hmm. "Can you tell me where *they* are, then? Your elders?"

Her eyes widened and I imagined I could hear her heartbeat quicken. "I can't," she whispered, shaking her head quicky. "You don't know what they'd do."

"You don't know what *I'll* do," I reminded her, although I wasn't as convinced as I'd been when I Ended her breath.

Her eyes flicked over my shoulder and then back to mine. I turned, examining the wall behind me carefully. What could she possibly—

Ah.

A tiny entry rune had been scratched into the corner of a gilded frame that hung on the wall. "A space *within* this space?" I asked softly. That was powerful magic.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a low voice as I stepped toward the wall, carefully examining the rune.

"I'm going to ask them what they want," I said easily. "And convince them to stop."

I touched the rune, trickling just a bit of power into it.

The sensation of being drawn into the space-within-a-space was unlike any I'd ever felt. Usually, the sensation of flying or flowing accompanied one's entering a hidden space. This was like being squeezed and forced through a narrow opening. I emerged in the new space with a *pop*, air rushing away from me as I appeared.

The walls around me were plain, smooth stone. The ceiling was low, easily within reach of my outstretched fingers, and the passageway was tight, scarcely wider than my shoulders. Illumination came from spheres mounted to the walls, each glowing a soft, steady orange-yellow. With a blank stone wall behind me, the passageway stretching forward seemed my only path. I followed it for a dozen or so steps before it opened into a room, though the walls were only a few paces more apart than the passageway. Portraits covered those walls, and a heavy, overstuffed chair dominated the center of the room. Sitting in it was the oldest living person of witchkind I had ever seen.

He glared at me with small brown eyes set deeply into a dark, heavily lined face. His bald pate dully reflected the light globes, and his wrinkled hands clenched the arms of his chair.

"Found us out at last, boy?"

"You know who I am."

He let out something halfway between a wheezy laugh and a raspy bark. "Know who you are? Whelp. I knew your great-great-grandmother. Knew her daughter. Knew *her* daughter. I arranged your mother's marriage with one of my own grandsons. Yes, I know you, boy."

My fists clenched at my sides. "Where are the rest of you?"

"Rest? Oh, the elders." He waved one wizened hand toward the

portraits. "They're there. Visionless wretches the lot, and I'm well quit of them."

My eyes grew wide. "You mean *you're* the only clan elder?"

"The only one as matters. One of the only ones who ever has! The others, *pah*. Assistants. Faces. *I* lead the clan. *I* have brought us our victory."

"So you're the one giving Aron his orders."

The old man sneered. "He is ours. *Mine.* My plan, the whole thing. All the hoarding, all the planning. All the details so cleverly conceived. You slowed us down for a bit," he acknowledged with a slight nod of his wizened head, "but we got what we needed, didn't we? Forged an Axis! Not so many as can say that." He coughed heavily before pulling himself more upright in his seat. "Can't stop it now, can you? Can't just magic away a rune this time."

My anger began boiling inside me, but I forced myself to focus. "Aron is damaged."

He nodded slowly, a smile stretching his furrowed, withered features. "But he minds his elders still."

"His *mind* is the problem," I said flatly. "He's not prepared to be an adherent. He wasn't Chosen, wasn't trained. His mind is breaking. And when it does, do you know what will happen to his Axis?"

He shrugged. "Choose another. We've plenty of candidates."

"Or it may break free."

Another shrug. "Not a concern."

"Why are you doing this? What's your game?"

"Game?" he snapped, his eyes glinting coldly. "This is no game, child. For centuries we've schemed to take the two most powerful Axes. Your side of the family beat us to it—bred you to be attractive to the Sixth. But we had the harder role." He leered at me. "We had to *make* our Axis. Forge the Fifth. Couldn't simply dangle a tasty treat in front of it. No, we had to *make it*!"

"But why?" I demanded.

"Same reason all the Axes were Forged. Power. With the Fifth chained, we can counter even you. Take our place on the Taryba. *Replace* the damn Taryba. But more importantly," he started, but dissolved into a fit of coughing. I made no move to help as he

convulsed over and over, finally wiping his mouth with the back of one hand, panting slightly and glaring at me.

Replace the highest governing council of witchkind? He was insane. "More importantly what?"

"Not yours to know," he whispered roughly. "But you can join us. Beginnings and Endings, as it was meant to be."

"Meant to be?" What was he talking about?

"Oh, did old Pranasa not discuss it? I know she was set to watch over you. She was the one who accepted your father into the family, you know."

I hadn't, but it was hardly surprising. Pranasa, my great-great-grandmother, had ruled the family home from her attic domain. She'd been well past life but hadn't moved on to death. It made me wonder for a moment if the man in front of me was truly alive, but he didn't have any of the dense, dank smells I'd associated with Great-Great-Grandmother. "Discuss what?"

"The *prophecy*, fool child! The one that's ruled our families since we, since witchkind, came to this forsaken world!"

He glared at me for a moment, took a deep, hesitant breath, and recited:

Sky and Earth, Flame and Sea
Cast adrift, their center lost
Until a Sixth might come to be
To join them all, or pay the cost

My eyes widened. Great-Great-Grandmother *had* told me that. I'd even shared it with Kirmin. My mentor had called it a prophecy as well, although she'd dismissed it, calling it one of the Axis's great mysteries. But she'd said it had come *after* Galas. This old man had implied it was much older.

"Oh, she did mention it." He smirked. "Didn't tell you what it meant, did she?" "Well, not my job to educate you." His mouth set into a stubborn line.

The Sixth was obviously a reference to the Axis they'd just Forged. In the original plan, Beginnings had been the Fifth, of course, but—I shook myself. This was off topic. "So you want to rule witchkind?" I asked. "That's what this is all about?"

"Witchkind?" He laughed again, then hacked a noise that turned my stomach. "Everyone, stupid child. Humans and witchkind. The lot. Something *you* could have done, if you'd have had the fortitude. The proper guidance. But no, your family was always shortsighted. Wanted an adherent, never thought what they'd do with it if they got one. But *we* are meant to rule. Not these petty councils. Not the Taryba. *We*, the ones with all the power, must wield it."

"Who do you mean? All of the adherents?" Now I was confused.

He laughed until it turned into another hacking cough. "Not all, of course. Only the most senior. But they won't get involved, will they? Never have. Never truly understood." He shook his head. "So we will. Through Aron."

This old man's ambitions apparently knew no bounds. "Aron is disrupting the world. It may seem innocent now, but he's sowing a great deal of chaos." Much like the chaos I'd created—the recent incident with nearly destroying the Veil, for example, or when I'd tried to help clear an obstructing rock formation from a river.

"Course he is. It's what he was told to do. And he'll do more. This is all just practice. Soon they'll all be begging him to stop. And for the right price, for the right incentives, we will."

"I can't let you do that," I said. I pulled my Axis around me, mentally grasping its tattered edges and bringing it to focus on the old man.

"You can't stop me, fool," the old man wheezed. He smacked the arm of his chair, and I was spat out of the hidden space, suddenly lying on the floor. I quickly looked up at the gilt frame and saw the rune there curling with smoke as it burned away.

"You spoke to them?" Gemma asked.

I pulled myself to my feet, my head spinning. "Him. Your 'clan elders' are an ancient old man." Gemma's eyes widened. I pushed the Axis out and around me but couldn't find any trace of the space I'd

just been in. He'd collapsed the entrance I'd used, but that didn't mean there weren't others. "How else can I get to him?"

"One man?"

"One," I repeated grimly. "He implied that everyone else you may have seen was just a front. How do I find him again?"

"I don't know." I glared at her. "Truly, I don't. Aron's the only one who's even used that entry rune. Nobody else is permitted."

"He's putting everyone in danger," I muttered, my eyes still casting around the room. "Aron wasn't down there. Do you know where he would be? At least tell me—"

A crash of magic slammed down upon me, driving me to my knees so fast, so hard, that I cried out in pain. It wasn't a Summons, but it carried much of the same sensations. Urgency. Need. Danger. "All right!" I shouted through it, leaning forward under the physically palpable weight of it. "All right!" I repeated. I hauled the Axis back to myself, fed it the torrent of power smashing into my brain, and let it take us there.

CHAPTER 4

Magestorm

I arrived flat on my face, with gritty, sharp-edged sand pressing into one cheek. The crushing sense of urgency had faded but was replaced by the searing, howling pain of magic being misused. Freezing, wet, roaring wind sent more sand blasting through the air. I could barely tell which way was up, only that down was clearly the dirt that my face was pressed into.

I levered myself to my feet, squinting against the biting air and sleeting dirt, and tried to get my bearings.

The sun was setting. That was west, then. It cast an angry red light across the sky, sitting like a swollen tick on the horizon. The wind was sharp and bitter—so I was in the north. Westhead, maybe. No, there was more heaving gray ocean than land. Bryssi? Or—the sight of black, lichen-encrusted rocks cinched it. I was at Lastpointe.

"Adherent!" I turned in toward the call, holding my hands over my eyes to filter out some of the blowing grit. "Adherent!" a man's voice repeated, shouting through the sound of this most unnatural storm.

A dark shape pushed through the wind, leaning this way and that as the gale shifted directions. That shape resolved into a stout man of witchkind, who leaned in close to be heard. "My name is Ander, adherent of Sea! How did you know to come?"

"I could hardly ignore it," I shouted despite us being just inches apart. "You didn't send the Summons?"

"We've had no time!" he replied. "But whatever the reason, praise the Origin you're here. This hurricane blew up out of nowhere—in seconds, I tell you! We've lost at least two boats, crews and all. Marten and I have been fighting it, but it resists us!"

"Marten is also of Sea?"

"Aye!"

"Take me to him!"

Ander didn't answer and instead grabbed my forearm in a viselike grip. "We can't sense an eye to the storm," he shouted as he pulled me along the shore. "Normally we'd try to move the eye over us, give ourselves room to work. But this doesn't seem to have a locus—no place of calm!"

Aron's work, I thought grimly. The elder's work. Inflict damage on the world and demand ransom. That was their game. A return to the days before the Forging—but with them in control of the chaos. No current adherent but Aron would have acted this way, although he hadn't had the benefit of being brought up as an adherent, and his clan certainly didn't care. They didn't have the lessons Kirmin taught me or the do-nothing attitude cultivated by the other senior adherents.

"This is Marten!" Ander hollered as we approached another dark shape. This one turned out to be an equally stout, heavily weathered man who somehow found the strength to stand perfectly upright in the storm, as if it were nothing more than a gentle breeze.

"What have you tried?" I yelled as Ander and I huddled against Marten.

"Cooling the sea," Marten shouted back. "We've pulled energy from the water—more than we ought—which should have killed it instantly. Storms can't live without warm water. But this one can."

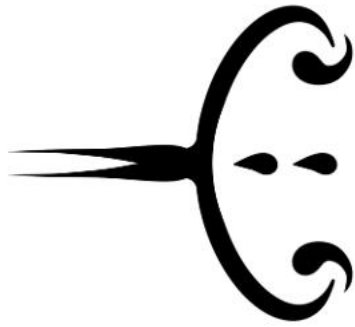
"Something else is feeding it energy," Ander agreed.

Aron. I cast about with the Axis, but I couldn't sense any of the eddying magic that I'd used before to find Aron. Could he be feeding this from farther away? The choppy water and the waves in the Axis's diffuse awareness seemed to move as one. There was no

finding him. "It's fueled by magic," I shouted. "How else can we break it?"

"Can you End it entirely?" Ander asked.

I stood up a bit more, my eyes nearly shut against the wind. "I can try!" This shouldn't be an abstract exercise of the Axis's power: storms were real phenomena, they were local, and they always ended of their own accord, at some point. I just needed to hurry that along. I focused on the Axis's local presence, pointed it out to the ocean, and *pushed*. I held the simple, directive rune for Ending firmly in my mind, as I had done a hundred times before:



The power of Ending pounded down all around us as the Axis almost gleefully lashed out. *At last*, I thought with relief. *Something is going ri—*

Even as I thought it, I felt the Axis *shatter*. Its power spun back to me—too fast. My legs collapsed beneath me as Marten and Ander grabbed my arms to keep me upright. I gagged as my insides seemed to churn. The Axis moaned in my mind, whimpering and sore, as if it had been thrashed.

A wooden *crack* pierced the air. I could just make out the murky, dark shape of a small ship fetching up against the nearby docks. Ship, docks—it all smashed into the rocky shore, splintering into thousands of sodden shards.

"I guess not," Marten shouted. Even he was hunched over as the wind seemed to pick up strength.

"We need to do it together!" I shouted, shaking an arm loose long enough to wipe my face clean of vile fluid and wet sand. "I can't End the storm, but maybe I can counter the magic in it! If I do that, if I take its energy away, can you break the storm itself?"

The two looked at each other before nodding in agreement. "Aye!" Ander hollered. "We'll need to pull a spout of water from the sea!"

Marten nodded again and seemed to brace himself. "Say the word, Adherent!"

I gathered myself and my Axis. I lowered myself to my knees, figuring it would give me a shorter fall if I collapsed again. The Axis rallied, and I forced it through the storm, seeking out whatever unearthly power was feeding this monster. *There*, I thought grimly as I found a bright, golden, swirling loop of magic. This thread wasn't being fed externally; the immense amount of energy had managed to reinforce itself in a perpetual loop. I recalled the runes at the base of the Tower's Foundation. The rune construct looped the Axis's magic over and over, maintaining both the Tower and reminding the Veil to conceal witchkind from humans. I didn't know what had set this particular loop in motion—although I obviously had a very good guess—but I saw at once how to break it.

I pulled the Axis together, holding a different rune in my mind:



Sustabdykite ciklą. It had come from the last pages of the Book of Endings. It unlocked the means to nullify magic. To nullify life. I'd

never thought I'd need it—and would never have dared consider it. But in this very moment, I *knew* this was its purpose.

"Now!" I cried as I forced the Axis to obey. It jerked the rune out of my mind and hurtled forward, crashing into the loop of golden power. In the same instant, an enormous pillar of freezing-cold seawater erupted from the ocean, forcing itself high into the sky. The air around us was instantly fueled with freezing mist, just as my Axis arrowed into the opposing magic.

A thunderclap a thousand times louder than any I'd ever heard buffeted us, shoving the air ruthlessly out of its way, knocking us to the ground.My Axis roared in triumph, but it hadn't won without a price: my entire spine seared with pain, and my head felt as if it was full of molten brass. Deafened, I couldn't hear my screams of agony, but I imagined them harmonizing with the deeper cry of the Axis in my mind.

Everything went still.

Time itself seemed to freeze, the grit in the air becoming motionless. It lasted less than an eyeblink but felt like an eternity, an endless stretch of time in which I couldn't inhale, couldn't even feel my own heartbeat. The world sounded dull and distant.

Then everything collapsed.

A thousand barrels of cold seawater rained down on us, carrying with it the dirt and sand that the winds had swept into the air. Out of habit, I tried to reach out with the Axis's power and End the wetness and freezing cold around me. The Axis didn't even respond, instead choosing to curl around my belly, licking its wounds. The burning sensation in my body was replaced with a shaking, shuddering cold. I leaned forward on my knees, resting my elbows on the ground, and vomited whatever was left inside of me.

"Up with you, Adherent," Ander said gently as he and Marten carefully pulled me up by my arms. I strained to hear him. "Still with us?"

I nodded wretchedly.

"That's done it." Marten sighed, relaxing his grip on me to see if I could stand. I stumbled, caught myself, and then nodded again as my legs managed to find some strength.

"Here then," Ander said. A wave of warm magic poured over me, pushing the seawater off my skin, out of my clothes, and out of my hair. My hearing returned in full.

"Thank you," I gasped. My heart seemed to relax to a steady pace, although I still felt as if I might need to sleep for a week.

"I've never seen the like of that," Marten said quietly.

"Nor I," Ander agreed.

My ears had stopped ringing so loudly. "That's all three of us, then," I added.

I took stock of our surroundings. The nearby docks were utterly shattered, and the hulks of a half dozen ships had been pummeled into the shoreline. Beyond that, building after building had been smashed in. People were emerging from the wreckage of ships and buildings, shaking themselves off as they stumbled around to look for other survivors.

Martin and Ander looked like the fisherwitches I'd seen everywhere, despite being obviously skilled adherents. They were stocky, with muscular builds and thick, powerful hands. Their faces were weathered, their hair cropped short. Their clothes—now as dry as mine—were simple and sturdy but designed to stand up to hard use.

They looked as exhausted as I felt.

"Are there any . . . you mentioned ships . . . " I asked, not sure how to phrase it.

"No point," Marten said with a sigh, shaking his head. "Not in a storm like that. They all had fisherwitches with them. If any survived, they'll have made it back. Those without fisherwitches . . ."

"Too sudden," Ander agreed. "When waves like those come down on you, heave you over and send you down . . ." He shook his head. "Too sudden."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"I'm too late," a voice called from the shore.

"Gilioj!" Marten called, lifting a hand in greeting. The old senior adherent of Sea strode toward us, his boots splashing in the now-gentle surf, shedding water almost instantly as he strode toward us.

"I felt the disturbance," he said as he drew closer. "But the sea itself fought me." He shook his head. "I've never felt anything like it."

"It was Aron," I said, earning three quizzical looks. "Gilioj, have you heard? About the Fifth?"

"The Fifth . . . Axis?" Ander asked, frowning as Gilioj nodded slowly.

"The Fifth was Forged yesterday," I said. "Wait, yesterday?" It seemed so long ago. "No. It's been a few days. I've lost track already. I haven't slept much."

"The Fifth," Marten breathed.

"And you think this is the Fifth's storm?" Gilioj asked.

"I do. There was a loop of magic feeding it. Golden in my mind's eye. It . . . resisted my own Axis. I couldn't simply End it."

"Creation," Marten whispered.

"It was the energy Clan Karal stole. Stole and hoarded," I explained. "They used it all to Forge the Fifth and chain it to one of their own. A man named Aron, about my age. He's been experimenting with his new power."

"This," Gilioj said wearily, looking past us to the shore, "was an *experiment*?"

"Possibly. Their elder apparently contrived a way to leash the new adherent. Or they'd planned to. I'm not certain it's working, whatever they intended. If Aron did this, he may have been directed to."

"Directed?" Ander said with a frown. "Who would—" He stopped himself, his face turning a dull gray. "Control."

"Possibly," I repeated, nodding slowly. "They mean to use his power to cause problems, to extract things from others. Money. Power. Position. Aron on his own didn't seem inimical." *Dangerously unbalanced,* perhaps, but he hadn't struck me as evil. "But the clan and their influence . . ."

"It felt as if the sea itself fought us," Martin said, echoing Gilioj's words. "As if our own Axis was against us."

"Creation would be powerful," I said. "My own Axis would, under normal conditions, be able to End anything you contrived with Sea. Stands to reason the Fifth would be able to . . . Begin something. And keep it going."

"Which is why your Tower was built," Gilioj muttered. Heat flushed my face. We were not meant to be caged! I opened my mouth

for a sharp retort, but he just sighed and waved me down. "Peace, Daniel. You did well here. I meant only that this new Fifth Axis has no fetters. None we understand, at least." He looked over the wreckage, thinking. "It's good that you were here," he said, turning to Marten and Ander. "Are you the only ones of us?"

"On the island, yes," Marten confirmed. "There are fisherwitches, of course. Two dozen here, more in Bryssi. A few in the smaller hamlets along the western coast."

"They wouldn't have had the power to affect this," Ander noted.

"No, of course not." Gilioj rubbed his bald pate. "Of course not." He paused for a moment. "Walk with me, Daniel?"

"Of course."

We left Marten and Ander behind as they moved toward the demolished docks and those in need of aid. I followed Gilioj along the shoreline but far from where the water could lap at our boots.

"You don't think much of us, do you?"

"Us?"

"Adherents. Any of us. We four seniors especially."

"You could do more good in the world than you do."

"We helped break this storm."

"You did," I admitted.

"You think we waste our power. Normally."

"On your little charms, yes. On standing by and doing nothing, yes."

"Adherents of Sea always respond to a storm. But we don't always break them. Storms serve a need. They're natural. They'd occur without us. And so yes . . . we often stand idle."

"If all of witchkind had even a piece of your power, would they all stand idle as well?" I challenged him.

He sighed. "No. Of course not. And I take your point. Our lack of action is an action of its own."

"Why do I think you won't change?"

"I'm too old. I've been an adherent for a hundred years, at this point. More. This is all I know."

"And the others? Your juniors?"

He snorted. "Marten is only a dozen years younger than I. Seems

disingenuous to call him *junior*." We crunched through the gravelly beach. "He would intervene more. Many of them would."

"Maybe it's time for one of them to set the rules."

Gilioj gave me a sharp look, but then his expression fell. He looked resigned. "It may be."

His response surprised me. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the rest of the Adherents of Sea will turn to Marten when I'm gone. We've always taken our cues from the eldest of us, just as the other Axes do. All but yours, obviously. Perhaps it is time for me to do so as well."

I swallowed hard. "You're . . . stepping down. It won't change life for the rest of witchkind."

"No? I wonder. We can't give them our magic, you're right. But perhaps Marten will be the protector, and not the hoarder. Perhaps..." He paused. "Hmm. Perhaps I can at least let him try."

I stopped and turned to him. He took another short step before stopping as well. "I don't . . ." I began. "You can't just step down, can you?"

"No more than you." The old adherent sighed. "The Axis will let me go, but that'll be my end."

"Do you . . . is there a—" I stopped, flustered. "I don't know what to do."

"As you've been told before, young Daniel," Gilioj said sternly, "not everything is for you to do."

He turned to look me square in the eye and held my gaze for many long moments. Then he turned and strode steadily into the sea.

My Axis, attuned even in its exhaustion to great Endings, keened a resonating tone in my mind, mirroring the gentle crashing of the low waves on the shore.

I stood for . . . I don't know how long. Several minutes at least, just watching the sea softly slap in against the sand and then slide back out again. Gilioj was—had been—the oldest of the senior adherents. The oldest adherent in the world.

"Adherent?"

"Hmm?" I turned to see Marten walking toward me.

"Where's Gilioj?"

I looked back out to the sea. "I'm told you're senior adherent of Sea now."

Marten stopped, and I could feel his eyes on me. Then I heard him turn toward the sea, his boots churning the gravely sand of the beach.

"I think I'll go," I said at last.

"Don't say . . . " he said. "Please. Let me tell them."

"Of course."

I crunched inland, eventually finding the remains of a footpath that had once been hard-packed earth. Now it was a muddy mess covered with broken branches and torn vegetation. I followed it into the village proper.

The damage here was extensive, but nowhere near the total destruction of the waterfront. Windows had been broken, and plenty of roofs would need re-covering. The streets—cobbled here instead of dirt—were slick with blown-in mud, and full of debris. The village's humans were moving slowly about, picking up belongings and trash in equal measure. I spotted a few people of witchkind, surreptitiously moving from building to building, from lamppost to lamppost, quietly reinforcing the magics that had helped hold everything together through the storm. A small café had already reopened, and servers were passing out mugs of steaming beverages to anyone who wanted one. An old man, a human, sat crouched next to what must have been a food stall before the storm. It was little more than a pile of broken sticks now, and he simply stared at it, shaking his head slowly in disappointment.

"Thank you," a middle-aged woman of witchkind whispered as she passed me.

"For what?" I asked softly, turning toward her.

"We all felt it," was all she said before she moved on.

Half the world might have felt it, I thought.

A wagon rattled past, heading for the waterfront and carrying boxes of supplies. Two older men, clad in the long gray coats of human physickers, hurried after it, obviously intent on helping whomever they could at the worst scene of destruction.

I followed the street around a corner, passing another couple nailing a heavy oil canvas over the hole where shutters had once kept

out the weather. Past that, two small children were making a half-hearted attempt at playing in the street, pouncing in small puddles and chasing each other around a battered stone bench. As I moved through the center of town, and toward its inland edge, I came across a building that, sitting aside those along the docks, had suffered the worst damage I'd seen yet.

One entire wall of the boxy building had caved in. The cause was apparent: an enormous tree, likely a hundred years old or more, had finally been ripped from the ground by the storm and sent crashing into the side of the building. The roof had almost completely collapsed, and I wouldn't have trusted what remained to keep out a stiff breeze. In fact, I was almost ready to reach out with the Axis and just finish it off before it could fall in on someone. Then I realized what the building was.

Lastpointe's human church.

Walking slowly from around the back of the building, looking disheveled and beaten, was Dedicant Ormand.

CHAPTER 5

Dedicant

"Dedicant Ormand," I said quietly as I stepped toward him.

He looked up, taking only a moment to recognize me. "You're back," he said with a small, sad smile. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a comfortable place to sit, this time."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It happened so quickly," he said, shaking his head and looking back at the demolished church. "I've never known a storm to come up so hard, so fast." He turned back to me.

Something passed between us, in our eyes, and I nodded slowly. I'd asked him about magic once. Now he seemed to be asking me. "What will you do now?"

"Rebuild, of course. It's what we'll all do."

"It will take a lot of effort."

He shrugged and stepped a bit closer to me. "None of this existed before people came to this island. We built all this. We can build it again."

"That storm was . . . unintended," I said carefully, keeping my eyes on his. "Some people took something. Something they shouldn't have. Much is out of sorts, and I'm afraid this storm is but the first."

He nodded in thoughtful acknowledgment. When I'd last spoken to him—was it just a couple of days ago?—he'd suggested that

believing in magic did not contradict the views of the church he served, even if other priests insisted that magic was evil and that its practitioners must be put to death. "And this . . . thing? That was taken?"

I sighed. "Power. A power was taken. It was something that used to be freely available. To everyone. It's now been gathered into one person's control. They seem to be experimenting with it."

"So this was a . . . would you call it a natural power?"

"Very much so."

He sighed and quickly glanced back at the ruin of his church. "People gathering up nature's gifts and hoarding them for themselves. It's an ancient story."

It's pretty much the story of the Forging of the Axes, I thought to myself. His words struck a chord with me: I'd long felt that the adherents of the other four Axes should do more with their power, use more of it to help the rest of witchkind, to help the world. But their unbending policy was to stay out of it—to keep their power bottled up, used only for small, trifling things.

"What do they intend to do with it, those who took this power?" Ormand asked.

"I don't know. I think they feel slighted. Left out. Like they were promised something that never materialized." *That they want to go back to whatever world we all came from*, I added to myself. "I think in a way, they just want it for what it is. Power. This," I added with a gesture to the demolished church, "came from them wanting to prove they have it. To prove nobody can stop them."

He nodded slowly. "Power can make people do funny things. People often seek power for its own sake. Just to have it, with no idea what they'll even use it for. Even in our church."

"Oh?"

"When we last spoke, I mentioned how my peers see the church as a way to control people. They don't often do anything with that power, but they seem to enjoy having it."

"You don't?"

He chuckled and started brushing dust from his robes. "That's part of why they sent me here. I see the church's power as something

to serve its people. My congregation. People believe in the church, and that gives the church power. I would turn that toward the good of the people who believe in it. A virtuous circle, if you will."

A curious idea, and not unlike what I felt adherents should be doing with our power: using it to benefit ordinary witchkind, who'd been left with little power after the Axes had been Forged. "And how would you do that?"

"The church wields power by telling people what to do. Because worshippers believe those instructions are sanctified, if you will, they follow them. I instruct my congregation to do good for each other. To help each other when needs arise. To respect each other. Our books teach exactly that, after all, do they not?" His eyes teased me, as if he was quite sure I'd never read those books. "That's what the Words of Law are, after all: rules to be followed for the betterment of everyone. Do not murder. Do not lie. Love one another. Lift a hand in aid. Four simple rules that keep our communities in harmony."

"They *seem* simple," I agreed.

"They are. But many of my colleagues find other words in the books and craft them into their own laws. Give money to the church. Obey those with wealth. Remain obedient. Marry within your clan. Those are all modern notions, ones that aren't—at least in my view—supported by the texts." He shrugged. "But perhaps I'm wrong. I'm the one out on this island, after all."

"Would you take that power from the other priests—the ones who misuse it—if you could?"

He thought for a moment before replying. "It saddens me to see something misused that could be put to so much good. I might."

"I'd take the power away as well, if I could. The one that was stolen."

"Would you? Can you?"

"I would. Whether or not I can . . . I don't know. I may need to try."

"Can you convince those who took it to do good with it? To use it for the benefit of everyone?"

I frowned. "I have grave doubts on that front. They wronged a

great many people in order to gain this power. I don't think the welfare of others is foremost in their minds."

"So if you take it from them, what would you do with it?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead. If I Ended Aron, if such a thing were even possible now, would the Fifth Axis simply dissolve? Go back to being whatever it had been before? Or would it remain an Axis and Choose another adherent? "I'm not sure."

"Would you keep it?"

If, as I was beginning to suspect, the Fifth and Sixth were somehow linked, would that be an option? "It would be less dangerous if I did. If I even could."

"Are you certain?"

No. Wasn't it time for me to admit that I'd done plenty of damage with one Axis? I'd already damaged the Veil, called attention to witchkind, and let the priests—the ones who used the church to control people—resume the Hunts. "I suppose not."

"Then what will you do?"

"I . . . don't know." Aron's actions would surely threaten the Veil too, and who knows what other damage he might cause before then.

"Dealing with power is always a difficult question. Filled with difficult choices."

"Agreed."

"It's easy to imagine that you'd be the beneficent one. The one who could hold power and believe you were doing so for everyone's good. I know many priests who feel exactly that way, even as they're preaching ideas that mainly benefit themselves."

I nodded slowly, my heart heavy. I'd certainly been guilty of thinking that way.

"Are there . . . others?" Ormand raised an eyebrow, and in my heart I knew he knew I wasn't like him. That I wasn't human. "Someone you could go to for advice? Who could help you?"

I sighed. "There are. Maybe. I'm not sure. Like your colleagues, we differ in our opinions on power." The adherents would rather not use it, a position I realized I was slowly coming to share. Aron was a stark example of why our vast powers should possibly sit unused. "Or maybe we don't. Differ, I mean." I looked past him to the rubble of

his church. "Do you have somewhere to stay, until you rebuild? Is there anything I can do?"

"Can you create a new building?" he asked with a smile.

Aron could. Probably as easily as he'd Created the storm that had destroyed it. An Ending disguised as a Beginning. Two faces of the same coin. "Nothing so . . . useful, no."

"I was joking." He chuckled. "No, I'll be fine. I'll put up with someone, help out where I can. We'll get to the church after everyone's homes are sound again. We can speak to our creator from the waterfront as easily as in a building. I imagine we'll have far more important tasks ahead of us for some time."

"The ships." I doubted he knew the amount of damage their little fleet had suffered.

He nodded. "Ships. Docks. Whatever was damaged, we'll repair. Anything can be repaired, given time and effort."

Anything can be repaired. "I hope that's true."

He looked deeply into my eyes, stepping forward to clap a firm hand on my shoulder. "It is. Believe it."

"I will," I said quietly. I meant it.

"May I offer you a piece of advice?" I nodded. "Don't cling too hard to power. It's often best not wielded at all."

"I'm starting to see the wisdom of that."

"Or if it must be used, let it be used by those who most need whatever it can provide."

So all of witchkind. I found myself wondering anew at the motives of the Archons. The Forging of the Axes had taken power from witchkind, left them to live on the leftover dregs of magic. If the dozens of witchkind here in Lastpointe had possessed even a fraction of the power invested solely in the adherents, would that storm have been brought to heel more quickly? Would it have been possible to even create it in the first place? "I'm starting to see the wisdom of that as well."

"Good." His hand dropped and he turned to walk into the village. "I hope you'll visit us again in happier times," he said over one shoulder.

"I will." I hoped I'd be able to, at least.

I watched him disappear around the curving street. *Anything can be repaired.*

I tugged my weary Axis to myself. I needed respite and a place to think. The Tower. But someone called to me.

"Daniel!"

I let go of the Axis. It was Marten.

CHAPTER 6

Demands

"What is it?" I asked.

Marten looked just as spent as I felt. He was walking toward me from the waterfront, and I began trudging toward him. He held out a piece of parchment. "This was delivered to the local headman."

I took it, squinting to make out the writing on it. "*Šiek tiek šviesos*," I muttered. The parchment began to glow slightly, throwing the writing into sharp contrast—but then the light sputtered and died.

Marten frowned. "*Apšviesti*," he said in a firm voice. A suffuse, soft glow surrounded us at once, but then it, too, flickered and faded.

"What's happening?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Some of the fisherwitches said their weather magics and protections were faltering during the storm. I didn't know what they meant."

"But the storm's over."

"There was a lot of magic," he suggested. "It may take some time to settle."

"I suppose. In the meantime, I can't read whatever this is."

"It's a warning," he said with a heavy sigh.

My shoulders tensed. "From who?"

"It doesn't say. It only says—here, let me try one more. *Skaitymo lemputė."* A bright pinpoint of light flared to life at the top edge of the parchment. The light seemed to hold steady. "Well, that works."

The words on the page had been made with a strong hand, the strokes of the letters bold and black. They were oversized, taking up most of the page despite their brevity.

As you can now see, the adherents cannot reliably protect you. We command the Sea and its fury. We can command it to aid, or we can command it to harm. Tell all you know, and await our next sign.

I forced my jaw to unclench. "This is Aron. Or his clan, at least."

Marten nodded as if he'd expected as much. "What do they want?"

"As near as I can tell? To rule."

"Rule?"

"Witchkind. Humans. Everyone." I handed the parchment back, shaking my head. "I don't know. Tell everyone to . . . I don't know. Rebuild. Hunker down. Keep their eyes open. This isn't the last of this."

Marten's face filled with concern. Then he nodded and, without a further word, began walking slowly back toward the wharves.

"It will be easier to give in," a soft voice said behind me.

I whirled, expecting to see Dedicant Ormond, but the human priest hadn't returned. Instead, Aron had appeared. "You did this," I said coldly.

He nodded. His face looked a bit sad. "They said I needed to. Said nobody would pay attention, nobody would take us seriously, unless they could see the extent of what we can do."

"You've killed people."

He looked genuinely sad at that. "I know. I didn't want to. I've . . . spoken with one of the elders. Let him know I don't want to do that again. He said I might not have to."

"Might not—you don't *have* to do anything! You're an adherent,

the adherent of Beginnings!" I said, my voice rising with my emotions. "You're not part of them now! Adherents *leave* their clans, leave their families! We're supposed to *help* people!"

He cocked his head to one side. "Is that true? That adherents help people?"

"Of—" I stopped myself. It wasn't, not as a rule. "I try to," I replied, lowering my voice.

"Do you help your family?"

"My family is gone."

He nodded slightly. "Mine isn't, and this our clan's destiny. They said I could ask you to join us. To help." He paused for a moment and then smiled. "You'd have family again if you did."

"I'm no—" I stopped myself. *No, I am a killer. I've killed.* "This isn't what the Axes were meant for." It sounded unconvincing even to me.

"The elders say the Axes were always about consolidating power. About creating order from chaos."

That's certainly the story we've all been told. "The other adherents don't seek to rule people."

"Mmm," he said, nodding but obviously not agreeing.

"What are they going to make you do next?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just know that it's all designed to help us fulfill our destiny as a family. As a clan."

The look on his face was one of absolute, perfect, unwavering conviction. I realized now why they'd chosen him to be their adherent: He'd been fully indoctrinated in their plans. He was their unquestioning tool, their weapon. With him, they stood a reasonable chance of achieving their aims. "I'll oppose you," I said firmly.

His expression fell. "I know," he whispered. "They told me you would. But I wish you wouldn't."

He vanished in a gust of wind, leaving a sharp prickling sensation in my mind.

I felt the last of my energy draining away as the moons rose into the sky. At this rate, I'd pass out, and the Tower's magic would pull me home.

I decided to save it the trouble.

CHAPTER 7

Sunrise

I slept poorly that night, my head throbbing with pain and too fogged to assemble a credible dream. I rolled out of bed well before the Tower's lights brightened to their daytime levels, and wandered into my little dining room. The *driežai* scampered in, laying out a light breakfast of bread and fruit, accompanied by a calming *ramunėlių* tea.

I munched slowly, wondering what to do.

Without Aron's new clan name, I couldn't easily find their elder again. I'd taken Gemma at her word that she had no other means of reaching him—I might revisit that, use the Axis to compel her to tell the truth. As far as I knew, it was impossible to force yourself into a hidden space—an entry rune was an absolute requirement. And that was for a hidden space I was familiar with; for one that was hidden *within* another, I wouldn't even know where to begin.

I could try tracking Aron down again. Perhaps he could be convinced. If I couldn't stop the clan's elder, I could remove his tool. Without Aron, he'd be powerless again.

I leaned back into my chair, swallowing a bite of fruit. I felt the Axis swirling around me, its lethargy matching my own. I eased into its awareness, letting my consciousness spread itself over the world.

Everything was eddied and pooled, now, as if magic itself had been

forcefully disrupted. I felt nothing of the particular kind of disturbance I associated with Aron using his power. Either the world itself was in too much disarray for Aron to stand out, or he wasn't using his power at the moment.

I returned to myself. The former Clan Karal seemed out of reach—still. I couldn't find Aron until he used his Axis, at which point it'd probably be too late to stop him. The so-called prophecy still lingered in my mind—but what of it? If the old elder and Great-Great-Grandmother had truly been contemporaries—it still boggled my mind that he'd survived for so long—then it stood to reason they'd both heard the same thing. He'd implied that the two sides of the family were closer, back then. Kirmin hadn't thought much of the little verse, and I'd already broken it down a hundred times to try and make sense of it.

I decided to walk down to the shore to clear my head. Sea air—when it wasn't whipped into a frenzy, of course—had always felt calming, a means of—

A Summons struck.

CHAPTER 8

Magequake

This was a proper Summons, one cast using the proper magic and carrying all the proper signals of need and intent. The need was urgent and came from adherents. Earth, I felt, but the nuance of their request was hard to grasp through the throbbing in my skull. The main feeling transmitted was . . . panic. Sheer, unadulterated panic.

Without even standing, I gathered the tattered remnants of my focus, twisted my Axis about myself, and aimed it toward the Summons.

It deposited me unceremoniously face-down on the loamy soil of a forest. My entire body was thrumming, resonating with some unheard minor chord, a tingling sensation stinging my extremities. But the Summons continued unabated. My Axis should have ended it, followed it, and—

I retched. The nausea had come on suddenly, as it had when I'd traveled before during this time of unwinding magic.

And then I realized it. I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

I managed to push myself upright and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. I was alone, surrounded by trees. The Summons pounded. I pulled the Axis arou—

Wait.

The Axis wasn't here.

My mind began unhelpfully running around in circles, gibbering in confusion, instead of trying to help me make sense of the feeling. The Axis was gone. I was stuck here, wherever here was. But the Summons continued. How could the Summons continue if the Axis was gone? Was I still an adherent? Where was I? The Axis was gone—

Stop. I forced my inner monologue to shut up, took a deep breath, and waited for my trembling limbs to stabilize. I spent a bit of my personal power, power I'd only recently learned to properly Gather, to warm my limbs and help them still. With another deep breath, I tried to sink into the Axis's distant awareness.

It was still there.

As I continued forcing myself to breathe deeply and slowly, as my frantic heartbeat returned to something closer to normal, I could feel the Axis's local presence more strongly. It was there, just . . . distracted. As I focused on it, that presence strengthened, renewing itself and its connection to me. Gently, I directed it to the Summons that was still pricking my mind. It sniffed warily, then seized that thread of magic. It brought itself around me and took me there.

My arrival this time was less dramatic and—given that the Summons immediately relaxed—on target. Once again, I stood on the edge of the Great Northern Wood, a stretch of scenery I was becoming all too accustomed to. Just days ago, unhinged, uncontrolled magic had set a portion of the Wood afire, and I'd been Summoned to help put it out. That had been a trial run for the actual Forging of the Fifth Axis, which had taken place just a few minutes' walk from here.

My limbs were wobbling again, and I felt dizzy. I sent one foot out sideways as I attempted to maintain my balance. I spread my arms and hunched a bit, worried that I would fall. Why were my—

No, wait. My limbs were fine. It was the earth that was shaking. It was . . . rolling. I'd once spent a day on a fishing ship, fascinated with the work the fisherwitches did, and the deck of the ship had rolled in exactly this fashion. Except this was the ground. The ground was meant to be still.

"Adherent!"

Two Earth adherents were running toward me, their dun-colored robes flapping. "What's happening?" I shouted as they closed the gap between us.

"Earthquakes!" one replied as they pounded to a halt next to me. I'd never heard the term, but it was marvelously self-explanatory—especially in the midst of it.

"It's happening everywhere—the worst is at Evermore!" the other adherent said, still breathing heavily from his run to me.

"Can't you stop it?" I asked.

"We've tried!" the first insisted. "And it shouldn't be happening here anyway. The Wood is one of the most strongly anchored places on the continent. Nothing interesting is supposed to happen here, that's the whole point of it." *Anchored.* An interesting word to describe it.

"Evermore lies near an underground fault," the other added, "and it's bad there. They're going to lose some buildings, we think. Mesla is there now, but we can't get this to stop. It's as if something is fighting our Axis."

"No, not fighting it," the other one insisted. "Suborning it. Hijacking it. It's working against us somehow."

Aron, I thought at once. That's exactly how the storm in Lastpointe had felt to the Sea adherents there. "What do you want me to do?"

"End it!" the first adherent snapped. "Sorry," he added immediately. "This is just . . . we've never seen anything like this. It's . . . bad for this to be happening anywhere, but here especially."

Again, the special situation of the Great Northern Wood that I still didn't understand. "What, exactly, am I Ending? I'll need to give the Axis a command."

They both stared at me as if I was mad. "The earthquake," one of them said somewhat slowly, as if to a small child.

I frowned. A clearer explanation of the cause would have been better. The Axis struggled with abstract or nonspecific requests. But that was all I had to work with. *End this earthquake*, I ordered the Axis. I didn't even know what rune to hold in my mind. But the Axis was paying attention, and I felt it cast its attention to the earth below

us, but at that exact moment there was no rumbling. Nothing to End. Its attention wandered elsewhere.

Had the earthquake stopped of its own—

No. A particularly large rumble thudded through the meadow, vibrating my very bones. With a *crack* louder than a peal of thunder, two long sections of earth seemed to separate, creating a narrow chasm between them. This chasm zigzagged away from us, reaching into the Wood and throwing up a cloud of dust.

"End *that!*" the first adherent shouted, pointing to the crack in the earth.

I obeyed, sending the Axis into the ground and instructing it to End the rumbling. I didn't hold a rune in my mind, couldn't imagine which one I'd have used anyway, and hoped that my desperate intent was sufficient.

It wasn't. Perhaps I was too focused on the foot-wide gap in the earth, a geological feature that the Axis didn't understand how to End. The rumbling did pause for a moment, but then another wave rolled below us.

"No?" the second adherent asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know what I'm Ending. What's the actual mechanism, here? What's actually causing this?"

The first adherent took a deep breath. "In most of the world, the earth consists of numerous overlapping layers, each with a slightly different composition." He was speaking quickly, obviously repeating some lecture he'd once been given. Another *boom* rolled the ground beneath us as we adjusted our stances to stay upright. "Those layers aren't evenly distributed—layers end and begin everywhere. Wherever there's a big change in their configuration, you can get faults—sections of earth that are only loosely held together."

"You're really murdering this," the other adherent muttered.

"No!" I said. "This is good. Keep going!"

"Some of these layers are soft," said the first adherent, "and they're constantly in motion. They're also impacted by the deep magma beneath the—wait, do you know what magma is?"

I nodded furiously. I'd become quite acquainted with it these past few days. I'd recently engaged with several junior adherents who

shaped glowing-hot magma into a dragon that spewed fire at stacks of iron rails the humans had made. My carelessness during the whole debacle contributed to the near-destruction of the Veil that helped conceal witchkind's magic from humans.

"So the magma is always in motion, and it can push the layers around. Get the right things all going on in the same place at the same time, and the layers shift dramatically—an earthquake."

"Which can't happen here," I noted.

"No!" the second yelled. "The layers here are extraordinarily consistent and stable. The magma reservoir is deeper here than anyplace else in the world! Earthquakes are rare enough as it is, but they *can't* happen here!"

Another wave shook us from beneath, putting the lie to his assertion.

"So it's all layers shifting," I said, earning confirming nods from both of them. "Fine, maybe I can—"

"What is it?" the first adherent asked, noting my change in expression.

Something was pricking at the back of my neck. My spine tingled slightly. "I don't know," I said slowly. "Something's—"

My sentence cut off in a scream as claws of white-hot pain pierced my brain behind my eyes. I fell to my knees—something that had become all too common recently—and clutched my head. The most intense part of the pain vanished in an instant, leaving a pulsing ache behind.

"Daniel?"

I looked up. "Aron." The first Earth adherent offered me his hand, and I accepted his assistance in getting back on my feet. "Is this your doing?"

"What?" Aron's expression was one of genuine confusion.

Another rumble shuddered the ground. "That."

"Oh. Maybe?" He looked around as if he'd never been here before, even though wasn't far from where he'd become an adherent just a few days prior. "They had me do something in Evermore."

"What?" the two Earth adherents demanded.

"They wanted to Create something dramatic in Evermore," he said sadly. "Something the Taryba would pay attention to."

"He's after ransom," I muttered.

"Who is this?" the second Earth adherent demanded, pointing at Aron.

"Aron, formerly of Clan Karal, formerly of a clan I don't know the name of, now adherent of the Fifth Axis."

Their eyes went wide.

"Pergalės," Aron said softly.

My eyebrows climbed to my hairline. "What did you say?"

"Pergalės. That's my clan name now. It . . . hurt when they did it. I remember that." His voice was low and soft, and I struggled to hear him over the crunching, booming sounds that were still coming from the crack in the earth.

Now I know their clan name, I thought grimly. *They were right to keep it from me.* But first things first. "Aron, what did you do? What did you tell your Axis to do?"

He looked at me distractedly. "In Evermore?" I nodded. "They said to make the earth beneath the city slide around."

I seized my Axis, and once again sent it arrowing into the earth below us. This time, I gave it a rune, the one for Ending movement. This would be an odd use of that rune, as it was intended to freeze large crowds in place, but I knew of no other to try. *End the movement in the earth*, I ordered. *Here, in this place, End its motion.*

My power blasted downward, and this time I felt the Axis do its work. This was the kind of straightforward, transactional Ending it understood well: this is a thing that is happening, and you're to make it stop happening.

Aron screamed and fell to his knees.

The earth stilled midrumble.

"No, no, no, no, no, no," Aron moaned, holding his head and rocking to and fro.

"Aron," I said quietly, crouching next to him and drawing him into an embrace. "What's the matter?"

"The hurt." He sobbed. "And the earth has stopped. They'll be angry with me."

"The elder?"

He nodded, still sobbing.

"How is he *making* you do this? Your—someone, that is, mentioned a leash. What do they have over you?"

He shook his head. "This is my duty!" he cried. "My destiny! All our destinies! I have to do what they tell me. I can't fail!" A twinge of pain shot up my spine. Aron moaned softly. "It's not working!"

"Aron, you don't *have* to do anything! Everything they've told you, it's lies! Exaggerations! The Axes weren't meant to *rule* people!" *Although they probably were, but it's not what's happened so far.*

"I know that," he said softly, although he sounded unconvinced. "I tried to tell them to stop. That I wouldn't do it anymore, wouldn't hurt people anymore." He sniffed. "We're not supposed to rule. You said that. Adherents aren't supposed to rule. I'm an adherent now, right? So I told them I wanted to stop."

"Then why keep doing it?"

Aron looked up at me, his eyes bloodshot and full of tears. "They told me they'd hurt Mother if I didn't obey."

My world turned red.

My heart hammered against the inside of my chest. My vision tightened to two small circles, each hazed with crimson. My blood pounded in my ears. This clan, Karal, Pergalės, whatever—they were evil. My last memories of Mother swam through my brain, and I again saw her damaged hand, felt her shattered magic, felt her fade as I Ended the rune that Karal had perverted. And now they'd threatened to harm Gemma? I had no love for the woman, but—

"I have to go back," Aron said with another gulping sob.

"Wait—"

I was too late. I felt my Axis *blink.* Every so briefly. Another dagger of white pain pierced my brain as Aron vanished, leaving me to catch myself on my elbows as I fell over.

"Adherent?"

"I'm fine," once again accepting a hand up. "The immediate danger—"

"BY ALL THE GODS OLD AND NEW, WHAT ARE YOU FOOLS PLAYING AT HERE?"

A brace of woodwitches was marching out of the wood, their expressions twisted in anger. At their lead was a short, dark-featured old woman.

"Aunt," I said tiredly. "We—"

"*You* may address me as Ikwity," she snapped, stabbing a finger at me. "What is the meaning of *this*?" she shouted, her finger turning to point at the crevice in the earth. "This is no place to be summoning such magic! You—"

"We didn't do this," one of the Earth adherents protested.

Ikwity whirled around to face him. "You think Ikwity can't tell Earth magic when she smells it? Hmm? Bad enough your petty ancestors chained such powers. Now you go flinging them about with no care for anyone's safety?"

"We—" the other adherent attempted.

"Two creatures, we've put down already this morning! Two! Creatures changed by whatever you've thrown around! They were broken, displaced, wrong! Sensitive, this place is! Sacred! A refuge, the Last Bastion, not . . . not some zoo! Not some sandbox for children to test their stolen magic!"

Stolen? "Ikwity, we had nothing to do with this," I tried, forcing my voice to stay reasonable even as my heart was still thudding away. "We—"

"And *you*," she snapped, whirling back to me. "*Smelled* your power on this, I did! Rip the whole world off its base, you will! We—"

"I didn't do this!" I shouted back, venting some of the anger that was roiling inside me. "Just days ago, you remember? They Forged the Fifth! He did this at the bidding of his masters. They meant to threaten Evermore, not here. This was . . ." I struggled to find a word.

"Aftershocks," one of the Earth adherents offered.

"That," I said, nodding to him. "I Ended them."

Ikwity stared at me, suspicion written all over her face. "Smelled of Endings," she insisted, although she'd stopped shouting.

"I'm not sure there's a difference."

"Still, boy, you keep your magic *away* from the Wood, you understand?" She was back to shouting now, and my fury quickly rekindled. "Take your Earth, take your Endings, take your Axes, take your—"

"WE DID NOTHING!" I roared. My Axis mantled my emotions, its power flaring out around me. The two Earth adherents fell backward, landing on their asses. Three of the woodwitches who'd accompanied Ikwity fell to their knees, their eyes wide. The others took several steps backward. Even the old woman stopped midrant, snapping her jaw shut. "We did nothing!" I repeated, wrestling down my temper.

"You have no idea," she said in a cold, menacing voice, "what you will unleash. None of you do." She treated each of us to a long, penetrating glare. "Keep all of your upset away from the Wood."

With that, she spun round and marched back into the forest, the woodwitches scrambling to accompany her.

I sighed and helped the two adherents to their feet. "What was that all about?"

The first sighed, brushing himself off and extending his hand. "Jakub." We shook. "You know much about the Wood?"

"Apparently not," I replied. "Daniel," I said, offering my hand to the other.

"Timot," he replied as we shook.

"Magic is taboo here," Jakub said. "It's why nobody witchkind lives in Greensea, and the few who live in Rushford temper their magic. No hidden spaces even. They live in the open. The woodwitches keep basically everyone out of the Wood itself, and they only use the smallest, personal magics."

"But why?"

They both shrugged. "I don't know that anyone's ever gotten the right answer," Timot said. "I grew up in Evermore, and as kids you hear stories. Stay away from the Great Northern Wood. The Wood is full of monsters. Obey your parents or the woodwitches will carry you away. That kind of thing."

I looked into the trees, but the dense canopy made it so dark I couldn't see more than a few strides in. I sent the Axis to sniff about. There was *something.* Something odd. *Old.* "She mentioned creatures. Have you met her before?"

Both adherents shook their heads. "No," Jakub said, "but did you notice?"

I turned back to him. "Notice what?"

"She's not witchkind."

My eyes widened.

"Now that you mention it, she didn't have the smell," Tomit agreed slowly.

"Smell?" I asked.

"Adherent thing," Tomit replied. "Earth smells magic. Sky hears it. Sea says they can feel it on their skin. Flame . . . what was it?"

"Tastes it," Jakub supplied. "You can sense it too, right?"

"When I look for it," I replied, thinking about it. "It's not a sense, though, it's . . . I just can tell. I guess even if I'm thinking about it, but I just didn't notice. Interesting."

"We should get back to the others," Jakub said after a moment of silence.

"It'll take forever if the earth is still churned," Timot groused.

"Before you go," I said, "I need to talk to Mesla. Did you say she was in Evermore?"

"She's here," a voice said from behind us. I turned to see her rising from the ground, brushing dirt from her robes. "Evermore is under control. A few minutes ago, the quakes seemed to lose their will. Your doing?"

"I believe so," I replied.

"Our thanks," she said with a sigh. Her shoulders slumped. "Evermore is . . . damaged. We can repair and rebuild. But many were injured. A few killed." She peered at me. "You don't look well."

"I don't feel well. Something is . . . wrong. Aron started the quakes."

Her eyes flew open. "Why?"

"Remember Clan Karal?" She nodded. "They're Pergalės, now. Burned away their identities to hide from me and crafted new ones. They chained the Fifth, made Aron their adherent. They've indoctrinated him, made him believe he's fulfilling their destiny. And they've threatened him, on top of it, if he doesn't comply. That storm off Lastpointe yesterday—that was him."

"I'm told Gilioj is gone," she said quietly.

"I saw him go. Yes."

Mesla's expression grew sad and lonely, her soft eyes glistening with unshed tears. "What could possibly threaten an adherent?"

"They've promised to harm his mother."

Mesla's eyes grew wide. She'd been with me when I'd attempted to free Mother— when I'd realized Ending her identity rune, Ending her, was my only choice. "They would do that to one of their own?"

"They want power, and they are already ransoming lives en masse. What's one of their own to them if it means they succeed?"

"Despicable."

I nodded. "My Axis . . . it's tied to the Fifth, somehow. I think . . . I think the Fifth and the Sixth might be the same thing." Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Whenever Aron uses his power, I feel it. Painfully. When I use it, I think he hurts too. My Axis seems to weaken when he draws on the Fifth as well. I think only one of us can use our power at once."

Her eyes widened again, and I saw comprehension in her face. "The Archons—"

"Yes. I think they lied. Or misunderstood. I don't think the Fifth escaped. I think they just couldn't Forge whatever it was, into two separate things. Not all at once."

"But now it's done."

"It's incomplete. *I'm* incomplete." A bit of my pain surfaced in my voice, and Mesla winced.

"Our own powers have been . . . diminished," Jakub said quietly.

Mesla looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. "I think we're all feeling it." She looked back to me. "Daniel, is it possible that Forging the Fifth has damaged the Origin, somehow?"

The mythical source of magic, the thing that all witchkind revered. Our version of the human deity. I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe there just isn't enough magic of Beginnings left free in the world, and you're feeling the effects of that. Maybe it's what everyone felt when they Forged the Axes originally. Maybe it will settle down." I shrugged again. "I just don't know."

"We need to do something," she said firmly.

"I know."

"Where will you go first?"

"It turns out I know Aron's mother. And now I know their clan name. I'm going to go find her if I can. If they have nothing over him, maybe we can talk. Figure this out. Maybe I can get to their elder and . . . do something." *End him*, my eyes said.

Mesla nodded her understanding. "How can we help?"

"Can I call on you?" I had no idea what was ahead of me, but the strong steadiness of an Earth adherent could be useful, if not reassuring.

"Can you take me with you?" she countered. "Our Form of Travel isn't as swift and limited to undisturbed earth."

"Normally I'd say yes. Right now, it may be risky. The Axis dumped me in a forest somewhere, on the way here. If you don't mind taking a chance . . ."

She nodded firmly, her expression resolved. "We all do what must be done. Where do we go first?"

"Evermore, if you don't mind going back."

"Why?"

"I suspect the Taryba may be able to give us some news."

She looked confused but nodded assent. I took her arm and called on my Axis.

CHAPTER 9

Evermore

Every member of witchkind's highest governing body was present in their council chamber when Mesla and I arrived—an arm's length above the granite floor. She and I fell into an ungainly pile, and by the time we'd untangled ourselves and stood, we'd gained the attention of the entire room.

"The earthquake," I said. "Was there a demand?" A dozen confused gazes met mine. "A demand," I repeated, growing frustrated. "Requests. Warnings. Something someone delivered after the earthquake abated. Or during it—I don't know."

One of the counselors, Trisian, an even-tempered woman who'd often taken my side in arguments with the council, pointed behind me.

Mesla and I turned to see an upright slab of granite, tall as me, leaning against the chamber's grand doors. Into its flat, glossy surface was carved the demand:

Earth and well as Sky. All of Evermore must bend the knee. Prepare to step down and be governed by your betters. We will be in touch.

. . .

"What do you know of this?" one of the counselors asked.

I turned back to them. "The same clan that caused the storm at Lastpointe, the same clan that was draining humans for power—they used that power to Forge the Fifth Axis on the edge of the Great Northern Wood. When was that?" I asked, turning to Mesla. "A week ago, now?"

"Almost," she nodded with a sigh. "It feels like much longer. Do you need me to move it?" she asked the counselors.

"If you can," an elderly man said. "We've tried, but our magic is . . . uneven."

"That's been going around," I said grimly as Mesla used her Axis to decompose the slab into a pile of tiny fragments.

"Can the adherents not stop them?" another counselor asked.

"The power of Beginnings is . . . difficult to counter," Mesla said slowly. "Working with Daniel, yes, we were able to stop the earthquake."

"And the storm," I added. "But it was difficult. Far from a sure thing."

"And even the Axes have been responding . . . unevenly, as you say," Mesla finished, nodding at the older counselor.

"So they mean to make themselves kings?" It was a hard word to hear. In the True Language of magic, *king* was *karal*.

"Singular, I believe," I replied flatly. "I'm given to understand their entire clan has but one elder."

Eyes rose. "To maintain a clan identity with but one elder—" someone whispered.

"He's positively ancient, if that helps," I added.

A few heads nodded. "It might." Lina, the Taryba's senior counselor and its official spokesperson. "Age confers a certain . . . gravity. Stability. But still, to hold an entire clan . . ."

"He claims he knew my great-great-grandmother," I said. "Assuming he was young when she was fairly old"—I did some quick math in my head—"he'd have to be at least two hundred." The women in my family tended to give birth fairly early for witchkind, as early as forty.

"Not unheard of, and that might be sufficient to anchor an entire

clan's identity," Lina mused. "So now he means to rule all of witchkind?"

"Apparently," I said, shaking my head. "There's a whole story about destiny, about them having been meant to control an Axis for hundreds of years, about how the adherents should be in charge of the entire world."

"Well, at least we're included," Mesla muttered.

I gave her a reproaching side-eye. "He didn't expect us to participate, but he's willing to take it all on himself."

"How kind."

"How can we help stop this?" asked Acantha, the sharpest of the counselors. "If there have been attacks on Sea and Earth, can we presume Flame and Sky are next?"

I nodded tiredly. "You should assume so, yes, although I have no idea when and where. Get the word out. Tell people to be prepared. Their magic may not be enough to protect them. It may not be reliable. Evacuate hidden spaces in case they collapse. Seek physical shelters."

"That will set off a panic," a counselor pointed out.

"We have nothing else to tell you," Mesla said sharply. "I will help Daniel as best I can. We all will. In the meantime, take what precautions you can." She turned to me. "You believe speaking with the boy's mother may help?"

"Rescuing her might," I said.

"Then let us go to her now."

"I think it might actually be wiser to try and find their clan elder. He's at the root of this."

"Do you think you can?"

I sighed. "I'm not sure. But I want to try."

Mesla nodded, her mouth set in a line as she took my forearm.

Gently, I begged the Axis.

CHAPTER 10
Gemma

The Axis managed to comply, depositing us gently in the Tower's map room.

"This is interesting," Mesla said, holding her hands behind her back as she leaned over the map table, peering at the detailed depiction of the continent.

"Hopefully this will work." I cleared my throat to announce my command. "The elder of Clan Pergalės."

The map shuddered briefly before steadying but otherwise didn't move.

"I was afraid of that."

"What?"

"They've gotten skilled at hiding themselves from me. From this map. Maybe if I knew the elder's given name . . . I don't know. He's likely moved his hidden space. I would if I was hiding from me."

"So we go to the mother?"

I nodded. "Gemma. Of Clan Pergalės."

"Oh!" Mesla exclaimed as the map began sliding and zooming. "Oh, that's clever, I've never seen anything quite— Is it supposed to do that?"

"No," I said with a sigh as the map stopped, spun through a

complete circle, and then zoomed back out to the continent-wide view. "It's Aron. All of this is powered by the Sixth Axis, and it's been in a mood since the Fifth's Forging." I frowned. "Give me a minute."

Once again, I calmed myself and sank into the Axis. It was less turbulent than it had been, but it still wasn't the smooth steadiness I'd grown accustomed to. I focused, willing it to slow its churn, to even its awareness across the continent, and to find Gemma.

"It's doing something."

I ignored her, focusing intently on keeping the Axis evenly dispersed as best I could. I'd never been able to fully control this aspect of it, and it still had vortices here and there—the largest of which was probably Aron—but I was able to calm it enough for the map table to do its work.

"Oh, there's a light."

My eyes snapped open, scanning the map before it could fade. "Landshire?" It was a tiny village in the far east, north of the Great Northern Range and just south of the river that separated it from the larger Chiton. "They're really making an effort."

"How does this work?" she asked curiously.

"Endings are everywhere. The Sixth Axis attends to them, and so does the map."

Her forehead wrinkled. "Attend? Are you saying the Axis is somehow responsible for every death in the world?"

I shrugged. "It's always felt that way. And I know I can withhold it."

Now here eyebrows rose. "You mean prevent deaths from happening?"

"For a short time. It's an effort. Are you saying your Axis isn't responsible for every little thing that goes on with the earth? Surely its power is at work when you're not asking it for something."

She was quiet for a moment. "I never thought about it. Hmm. But what's next?"

I tapped the map where the glowing point of light was just starting to fade. "We go there."

I started to pull my Axis around us, but she stopped me. "Do you mind if I try something?"

"What?"

"The Axis of Earth is steadying. Strong. If you don't mind my saying so, your Form of Travel feels a bit . . . rough. Even when you brought us here."

"I did warn you."

"I know. I'm just wondering if I can lend a hand, so to speak."

"I don't see why not."

"Give me a moment." She closed her eyes, and I could feel Earth magic moving around her. It was a slow, implacable force, not entirely unlike my own Axis, but less flighty. The earth wasn't a transactional power, it was a *forever* power. Earth magic preserved and maintained. "Okay."

I pointed my Axis to the last wisp of light on the map table, and ordered it to take us there. It wrapped around us in a ragged flurry, but something about Mesla's Axis seemed to steady it. What had started to feel like another rough ride became smoother, surer. The map room blinked out, and a near-freezing cold settled onto us as we appeared in Landshire.

"I've got it," Mesla said, laying a hand on my arm. The cold immediately backed off, and I again sensed her Axis at work.

"How does that work for you?"

"The earth is hot, far below, and incredibly stable just a few feet down. I just pull on that difference a bit. Can't you do something similar?"

I shrugged. "I just End the cold."

"Fascinating. Is this our destination?"

We'd appeared on the outskirts of town, with the cloud-topped mountains of the Great Northern Range far off behind us. Before us stood storehouses and stables designed to support the brave—or possibly mad—trade caravans that trekked through the lone pass connecting Landshire to Taliesin on the other side of the range. Most of the structures here were made of wood, carved from the hard, durable local evergreens. But our target was a low building of local stone, stacked and mortared together. I pointed to it. "It's that one. But—"

"No, I can feel it."

Iron. A fury began rising in me. Karal—Pergalės, whatever—had used a similar structure, also crowned with the magic-sapping metal, to imprison Mother. If I had to guess, the inside would have upright bars forming a cage.

Mesla and I stepped as close as we could to it. "It's starting to pull at my magic," she said, stopping a dozen paces away.

"It's odd," I said as I took another step or two further. "I've heard others describe it that way. But mine isn't. It's more like it's repelled."

"Pushed back, do you mean?"

"No," I said slowly, tasting the Axis's reaction to the iron. "More like being repelled by something distasteful. It doesn't want to go forward. I'm even finding it hard to lift a foot to take another step. Gemma!" I called out.

The building had two small ventilation slots near its roofline. "Who's there?" a woman's voice floated out.

"Daniel. And a friend."

I imagined her weighing her options: engage with the enemy of her son or rot in a cell. "You can see what they've done."

"Are you okay?"

"My magic is gone."

"That's the iron. Have they hurt you?"

"They haven't even told me why I'm in here!" Her tone was angry now.

"It's Aron. You're his leash." Behind me, I could sense Mesla bristling. I hadn't fully explained the situation before we'd left.

"That's ridiculous," Gemma yelled back, although she didn't sound entirely convinced. "They've used magic to leash him, they said."

"What magic could leash an adherent?" Mesla called.

I could almost feel her simmering. "Who's that?"

"Mesla, senior Adherent of Earth."

Another silence. "I don't understand."

"You can't leash an adherent with magic, Gemma," I called back. "We're too powerful. There's no bond I couldn't End and therefore no bond Aron couldn't Begin a new life without."

"Begin a new life?"

"Beginnings and Endings are two sides of the same coin. I had to move past my own Ending to become adherent of the Sixth. Chances are Aron can . . . Begin himself. Whenever he wants to. He's been told that your safety, probably your life, is forfeit if he doesn't obey."

"He set off an earthquake under Evermore," Mesla said loudly.

Nearby, a couple of human hostlers had looked toward us, pausing from their work at hitching horses to wagons. I idly Ended their attention and created a bubble of silence around myself, Mesla, and Gemma's prison.

"Buildings have fallen," Mesla continued. "People were injured. Killed."

"The Great Northern Wood was threatened. Again," I added.

Another silence. "What do you want me to do?" Gemma asked, her voice a bit softer.

"If we can get you out of there, will you speak to Aron? We need to him stop listening to your elder. This bid for power is killing people."

"They told me they were taking me to keep me safe from you."

I barked a laugh. "From me? And so they put you in a cage where you couldn't use magic? Come on, Gemma. I'm the one letting you out. Are you ready to quit trusting them? Quit obeying them?"

She was silent for a long time now, and I looked back at Mesla, who simply shrugged. "I'd be ready to burn their rune out of my soul again," Gemma said at last, her voice hard.

"We can arrange that," Mesla murmured. "And it might be a good idea. They likely have a means of tracking their members."

"They won't track her to where I'm going to take her," I said softly.

"How will you get me out?" Gemma asked. "There are iron bars surrounding me and across the ceiling."

Mesla chuckled. "No need to worry about that."

"What?" I asked.

"Nobody ever thinks of the floor." She sank quickly into the earth, a sight that never failed to unnerve me.

"Hold on Gemma," I said. "I think we may have—"

"Oh!" Gemma cried out.

"—a plan," I finished with a chuckle.

"This is a lot, Daniel." Mesla's voice came from inside the cell. I could hear the strain in her tone. "Even with an Axis, I'm—"

Gemma screamed, sending a shiver of fear down my spine. What happens when iron stymies an Earth adherent? What happens when their magic is incomp—

"Never mind, that's better," Mesla finished, her voice oddly muffled now. A moment later, the earth began collapsing in front of me, somehow falling in on itself in a long shoulder-wide trough nearby me. I peered into it. The bottom had been fashioned into a ramp.

Before long, Mesla and Gemma came walking up that ramp, turning slightly sideways as they squeezed through the tight space. Gemma looked washed out and perturbed.

"All okay?" I asked.

"She dropped us into a pit," Gemma muttered, brushing dirt from her dress.

"Our Form of Travel doesn't accommodate passengers," Mesla said with a shrug. "It seemed the easiest way to get you out of the iron's influence." With a gesture, she commanded the trough to refill itself, and within seconds a wide patch of roughened dirt was the only sign it had ever existed. "Not perfect, but I could get some grass to grow on—"

"It's fine," I said. "Gemma, I'm taking you to the Tower of Endings. My home. I have some questions I need you to answer, and we're going to try to call to Aron. You'll need to stay there, no matter what. Do you understand?" She nodded, her eyes wide. "The Tower can keep you safe from the clan." For as long as I'd been adherent of the Sixth, I'd kept an open-island policy, permitting anyone to alight on the island and walk up the path to the Tower. That permissiveness Ends now. None without an explicit invite will be allowed on the island. "Mesla?"

"I have things to attend to. Evermore needs our help." With that, she sank back into the earth.

"That is unnerving in the extreme," Gemma muttered.

"I couldn't agree more. But you may find this less comfortable than last time." My Axis whirled around us and spirited us to the Tower.

"Oof," Gemma gasped, bending over and resting her hands on her thighs as we appeared in the Tower's foyer. "That was rough."

"I warned you. It's Aron. His existence. The Fifth Axis. It wasn't meant to be Forged, and it's disrupting the Sixth now. The others as well, to some degree. Possibly magic everywhere."

She exhaled deeply and stood upright. "How?"

"I don't know. But what's more important is learning why. Come in here. Have a seat." I led her into the Tower's library, its magically expanded space soaring high overhead, and showed her to a comfortable chair. "Do you need anything? Tea? Something to eat?"

"Watercress would be wonderful, if you have it. And tea, yes."

"Tea. Watercress sandwich."

"Yes, that would be—oh!" she exclaimed, as a flickering, shadowy *driežai* delivered her request. "Ah, thank you."

"You're welcome," I said coolly. "Now, I need to know why your elder is doing this. I know he wants power. Position. But more specifically. Why? What was the plan from the outset?"

"You said *he*. I still can't believe . . ."

"There was only one man in the hidden space. One old man. I told you that, after he ejected me."

"I'm sure they wouldn't all congregate in the same place all at once."

"He implied he was the only living elder."

"That's . . . not possible."

"Have you seen others?"

"Of course," she said, but I could see her confidence waver. "They've explained the plans, the Great Work, the—"

"Yes, there have been *people*. But are you certain they were your *elders*? The ones actually making decisions? Not just people playing a role?"

"I—" she started, but fell silent. "How can there have been only one?"

"I'm starting to get the impression that the people of your clan have been ill-used."

Gemma looked at me for a long time, sipping her tea gently before she answered. "They spoke so passionately about the Great Work. About finally bringing the Fifth Axis under control, making it available to everyone."

"The power of Creation was never unavailable," I pointed out. "That's the downside of the Axes, the thing the stories don't discuss. The thing the Archons seemed to have glossed over. Forging these powers *restricted* them to the adherents."

She blinked. "I guess I never thought of it that way." She shook her head more slowly this time. "They . . . it was our clan against the world, they told us. We were very tight, very close, you know. Just four families in the clan, maybe three hundred of us total. We were in a race, they said, to finally Forge the Fifth. You were our main opposition six years back. They said you'd be jealous of having balance, of there being an equal Axis in the world. When you disrupted our plans and stopped us from gathering power, we took it as proof."

"You were killing the humans you Gathered from. You know that right?"

She took another sip of tea. "I think I didn't want to know. They'd already said Aron was a candidate, the right age and all. After what I found in your family archive—well, our family archive—that seemed to confirm it."

"But why? What did they get out of it all?"

She sighed and set the teacup back on the table beside her. "The two families, Statybininkas and Laikytojas."

"Builders and Keepers," I translated. Those names in the archive."

She nodded. "Clan history is that they were the ones who helped build the bridge to this world from wherever we all came from. The Exodus. But they weren't politically astute. They'd expected to be leaders in the new world, but they were overshadowed. Pushed aside. They weren't allowed to put up a candidate to be Archon. Instead that honor fell to Jura, Leipsna, Zeme, Vejas, Galas, and Gyvenima, rest her spirit."

I smiled at Gemma's effortless recitation of the Archons' names

"They were from the big families—the ones too large and too powerful to care about being on the Taryba. They saw us, our predecessors, as menials. Workers. No way were they going to give us a seat at the table. And so after the Axes were Forged, the two families made plans to seize two of them. The big ones."

"Endings and Beginnings."

"With the latter being decidedly more difficult."

"So this was all . . . just to be in the mix?"

She sighed. "Originally, but not anymore. My clan holds grudges. I can admit that. They want power, and they want to rub everyone's noses in it. After having been locked in an iron cell, I can see it. Setting an earthquake on Evermore—they won't ask for money to make it stop. They just want everyone to know they can do it again. They want the bowing and scraping." She gave me a hard look. "Like you get."

"I don't—"

"Oh, you do. I don't know if you enjoy it, but the whole world, all of witchkind at least, lives in fear of you. What other Axis can cast down a Judgment and enforce it the way you can? Not just common witchkind, but other adherents call for your aid through Summons. And you could simply ignore them, never minding how much magic an ordinary person has to Gather to cast it."

"I never meant—"

"I know you didn't, Daniel." She gave an exasperated sigh and picked a pinch of watercress out of her sandwich, munching it slowly before continuing. "You seem . . . very kind, actually. You remind me a bit of Aron, when he was younger." Her eyes were a little misty, now. "But you know the history of your predecessors."

I slowly nodded acknowledgment. "There have been many bad ones. And perhaps very few great ones."

"And so our clan wanted that. The respect. The power. I think your ascension vexed them greatly."

"They knew I was related?"

"We have genealogists. We were never meant to mingle, once the plans began. Keeping apart felt like the only way to stay safe. But your

family clearly lost track of us. Marrying your mother to one of ours? What were they thinking?"

"I don't know," I said softly.

"And this whole tradition of burning out the husband's clan identity? It's just cruel."

"They were very . . . focused," I admitted. I knew so little about them, really, but everything I did know pointed to singlemindedness. They'd been just as determined in their quest to own an Axis. If any of them had survived alongside me, would they have directed me in the way Aron was being directed now? Would I have been their tool, their pawn? Would I have gone along with it, just to make my family happy?

I was very afraid I might have.

Gemma picked up her sandwich and finished it in several large bites. "Thank you for that. They'd given me nothing in there. Do you have a way to find Aron? As you found me?"

"It's easy enough. He disrupts my Axis—and I his, I think. If he's using his power at all, I can tell. He hasn't since the earthquake." *I'm not sure if I should be glad of that or afraid.* "If I can find him, if I tell him you're here, will he listen? Will he come here and ignore your elder?"

"I believe so. Yes," she said, sounding sure of herself. "Do you—adherents, I mean . . . Do you still have clan runes?"

I shook my head. "We're Chosen when we're thirteen. Clan runes aren't fully set by then. Whatever we do have fades—and I never had one. Others, I hear, keep in touch with their families, support them, send them money"—something that still grated on my nerves, but this wasn't the time or place. "But no."

"Will Aron still have his, then?"

I blinked. "I hadn't considered it," I said slowly. "I honestly don't know. Apart from the Archons, no adult has ever become an adherent. I don't know whether his Axis would have purged his clan rune or not."

"Then there's something you need to know," she said in a very small voice. "After Shura. After you stopped her . . . excesses." Gemma took a deep breath. Shura had shown no remorse when draining

energy from humans. How many lives had she taken? "They carved a new rune into us, making us a new clan."

"Pergalės."

Her eyes widened. "Ah. So you know."

"I know I wasn't meant to."

"We knew you had some means of tracking us. We had to hide. But that's not what I'm trying to tell you. The rune they crafted—it was more than our name. They added something."

My skin crawled, and my stomach clenched. Given what the elder had already done . . . "What?"

"They called it *Mirties Spąstai.*"

I translated in my head. "Death trap."

She nodded. "Any of us can be killed from afar if we disobey. I think they'd hesitate to use it on Aron, but if they believe he's forever beyond their reach . . . "

"Then why the iron cage?"

She shrugged. "They can't monitor me all the time. That was to ensure I was fully under their control. That I couldn't use my magic. I couldn't even call to Aron."

My heart started pounding. "Gemma," I said calmly, "what if they discover you're gone?"

Her eyes flew open, and her skin went gray. "They . . . need me. For Aron. They wouldn't—"

"I wouldn't be so sure," I said grimly. I held out a hand and summoned the Book of Endings. It dropped easily into my hand, appearing out of thin air. Despite its size, it had little heft to it, making it easy to catch. I took it to a nearby bookrest and opened it, flipping quickly through the thick vellum leaves.

"What are you doing?"

"I End things, Gemma. Better than anyone."

There: *Narystės klane pabaiga.* "Were you serious about no longer wanting to belong to your clan?" I asked quietly, turning to look at her.

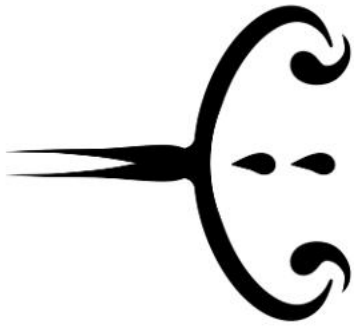
"You . . . you can do that?"

"I suspect it will hurt a lot less than whatever they did to burn

Karal out of you." The Axis's Endings had always been swift, painless, and effortless.

Fear resolved into acceptance on her face. "Do it."

Without another thought, I sent the Axis lancing toward her, holding the rune in my mind:



She inhaled sharply as it hit her, her shoulders tensing for a moment. But then she exhaled slowly and seemed to relax. "You were right. That was . . . odd. But not painful. Thank you."

"You can feel it?"

"Oh, yes. It's gone. There's a piece of me missing, again. Where they used to be. But it's fine." She paused, and her expression gentled. "You've been kinder than I expected. Than I deserved."

It took me a moment to reply. What could I even say? She'd deceived me. I'd lied to her. She was twice my age. I was never going to have time for a relationship anyway. I'm trying not to be the monster some of my predecessors were. "You're welcome."

"Can you do that for Aron? Remove his rune?"

I had no idea. "Maybe," I prevaricated. "If it's still even in him. I may need his cooperation. If you urge him . . . "

"I will."

"All right. I'm going to go find him, then. Stay here. Bring her food and drink at her request," I ordered the Tower. "And admit no one without my express consent. And in my presence." The

atmosphere of the Tower seemed to harden at that. Gemma would be safe from her clan here.

"Where will you start?" she asked.

At that moment, a jab of pain spiked into my skull.

"What?" Gemma asked, seeing my grimace.

"Aron." I gasped as the pain faded. "He's using his power."

"Can you tell where?"

A Summons hit me between the eyes. "Pretty sure I can, yes."

CHAPTER 11

Magefire

I arrived poorly, literally rolling head over heels on a slick, cold, stone floor in near-darkness.

"Daniel!"

I'd recognize Zmogus's rough shout in any circumstance. I swore I could hear his scowl. He thudded over to me, grabbed an arm, and hauled me to my feet. While helpful, my body protested the treatment, complaining mightily in my stomach and muscles. "You were quick," he said, quickly bowing his head in what I belatedly realized was a show of thanks.

"What's happening? Where am I?" I forced myself to breathe slowly, to stand upright even as my head spun and my vision swam. I was standing in a long, wide corridor, stone walls rising twice my height on either side. Everything was slick stone. Torches were set into the walls at regular intervals, lit with actual, orange-yellow flames, not the steady lights preferred by most of witchkind.

"You're inside Flamefast," he said. I stifled a laugh, the name a little too on the nose. "Have you been here before?" I shook my head as my eyes adjusted to the dim, flickering light. "Thought not. Not many visit the home of Flame adherents."

"Is Aron . . . please don't tell me he's attacking you."

Zmogus nodded grimly. "He's not out there right now. But he

was. Fortunately we're well-defended here within the hill. Flamefast has long been a worthy fortress."

"A fortress." This was unbelievable. Nobody else had fortresses. Even my Tower wasn't a *fortress*.

"Built by humans, centuries ago. Small factions warred with one another almost continually back then. Whoever built this clearly wanted to be left alone."

"And so they built a fortress. In a hillside." I knew I needed to just move on, but my befuddled wits wouldn't let me.

"Yes, and that's the problem," Zmogus growled. "We're in the inner chambers, the living areas. That's surrounded by an outer wall that goes all around and over the inner portion. There's a gap about three times your height between the two. Fortified outer door, fortified inner door."

My head was spinning. "Please explain why this is important."

"It is. As a defensive measure, the gap between the inner and outer walls can be filled with fire."

Filled with fire. Because of course it could.

"If someone breaches the outer wall, they have an inferno to contend with. One we can obviously keep going for a long, long time." His gravelly, coarse voice sounded smug.

"So . . . you get attacked often?"

"Never in living memory, no."

"But still." A fortress filled with fire.

"Whoever originally built this must have had enemies," he said with a shrug. "But today *we* were attacked."

"By Aron."

"The adherent of the Fifth, yes."

"What did he do?"

"The outer doors are usually only opened a small amount. Plenty of room to get in and out. But the doors are heavy, and we're no Earth adherents. Aron closed them. I don't know how—it takes six of us to move them at all unless we use personal magic to push them."

"I'm sure there's a roundabout way in which closed doors represent a Beginning," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "He's actually really good at that, it seems." I was starting to feel I needed to

speak with him—not just to stop him, but to take instruction on getting an Axis to obey abstract directions. "Then what? I assume a set of closed doors don't pose that serious a challenge to you all."

"Of course not. We could push the doors back open. But he also closed the inner doors." Zmogus's voice seemed to be accusing me of being a simpleton, which in my current condition seemed quite fair.

"And the inner doors are . . . harder to open?"

He scowled at me. "Of course not. They push open just as easily. It's just that he's filled the defensive space with water."

"What? Water? How?"

Zmogus shrugged.

"He probably Began a spring or something. Is it leaking in?"

"The doors seal completely. The defenses originally relied on burning oil, and so the doors would need to seal tightly enough to keep that out. Otherwise the defenders would have burned themselves alive in here."

"So you can get out."

"Not easily, no," he said, his scowl deepening. "Traveling through earth is . . . difficult for us. Open air is easier with our Form of Travel. But water? Impossible. There's no way we can pass through it."

Unbelievable. "So you and how many other adherents of Flame are trapped in here?"

"Almost all of us. Sixty."

"Wait, there's only sixty of you?" I'd somehow imagined there must be hundreds.

"I said almost. There are seventy-two of us. Flame has never Chosen as many as the others—excepting your Axis, of course."

"Of course. Fine. If this inner portion is completely surrounded—"

"It is."

"—and the doors are completely watertight—"

"They are." He pointed behind me. "You can see for yourself, just down the corridor."

"Stop interrupting me. How much air is in here?"

"Air?" he asked with a puzzled expression. "Why would air—"

"To breathe, you great idiot!" I snapped. He was struck dumb at

that, and his face slowly indicated his comprehension. "Have you ever kept all the doors closed?"

"Of course not."

Of course— "Fine. So there's some degree of urgency, here."

"The inner sanctum is huge, it holds plenty of air."

Sanctum? He was really too much. "Fine. Let's think this through. Did Aron say anything? What he wanted?"

"No. Dmitri saw him, though, and described him to me. That's how I know it was him. Why wouldn't he just attack us in here?"

"He probably can't get in here, having never seen it. That's assuming his Form of Travel works like mine, which I'm pretty sure it does. I had your Summons to anchor to; without that, I'd have had to walk here." I wouldn't mention that my map table could have pinpointed him and led me here, if it were working reliably. This was a cordial enough conversation, but I didn't yet trust Zmogus enough to reveal all of the Tower's secrets and abilities.

"So can you . . . End the water?" Zmogus asked, finally coming to the point.

"I doubt it. I can't believe he managed to fill it so fast, to be honest. What you're describing sounds like an immense volume of— Did you hear that?"

It sounded like two enormous boulders being pushed against one another, a grinding, cracking noise amplified a hundredfold. It filled the enormous chamber, the low grumbling setting my bones to vibrating in sympathy.

Zmogus nodded grimly. "That's the stone overhead creaking under the weight of all that water. Someone Summoned you as soon as they saw Aron; we've been all over the continent fighting fires he's been setting, so I've trained them all on the Summons—for emergencies. By—"

"Wait, all over the continent?" I hadn't sensed a thing.

"Yes, tiny fires everywhere. But they grow easily once started." Perhaps that was why I hadn't sensed Aron doing this. As frazzled as I was, brief, small uses of his power might not have registered.

"But they Summoned me here?"

"They'd have realized immediately something was wrong. But by

the time you received the word, he was gone, the chamber filled." His frustration and annoyance flared with the recounting. "Why can't you just End it? The water?" Zmogus insisted.

"I'm thinking about it!" I snapped. "But I can't just End water. Water doesn't have an End. It's always there. It changes form, moves from place to place, but it doesn't just stop existing."

Wait, that was it. *Water moves from place to place.* I didn't need to End it, did I? I just needed to let it out. "I'll be right back."

Gingerly, I had the Axis take me outside to the front door of Zmogus's personal citadel.

Seriously . . . a fortress? Before Aron, who even needed a fortress? And all it had done was get Zmogus and his fellows trapped.

The front doors were indeed fortified. And huge. They were triple my height across and four or five times my height high. They seemed to fit together tightly indeed; I couldn't make out where the two massive slabs of rock came together.

Words had been carved into the doors, the grooves deeper than my thumb and the letters taller than my forearm.

Bend the knee. Rule with us, or be ruled by us.

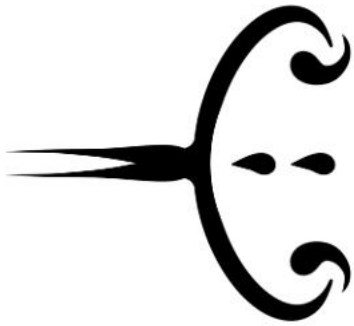
Bold statement. Clearly, the elder hadn't met Zmogus.

I looked around. This hill—a minor mountain, really—sat on the edge of a flat meadow, the ground sloping gently away in every direction. Letting the water pour out here would be messy, but it would eventually spread out, wouldn't it? I was hesitant to create a pit or trough; Mesla's comments on the earth's behavior, since Aron's ascension, made me want to avoid messing with things I didn't fully understand. But all I needed to do was give most of the water a place to go. It didn't matter if the surrounding area became waterlogged for a while.

And I had the perfect means. I imagined it would irritate Zmogus to no end, and honestly, as tired as I was, that seemed like nothing but a bonus.

Water didn't End, but stone and rock certainly did. It took centuries, millennia, but eventually the environment—wind, rain, baking sun—wore all rock down to dust. Just as I'd done to the rock formation in the river near Twynsits, I could hurry that process along.

I stood well to the side of Flamefast's gigantic front doors, pulled my Axis to me, and Ended them.



Stone crumbled into gritty dust as a truly overwhelming, unimaginable amount of water came crashing forth. It flooded the meadow as I'd expected, ripping up grass and flowers and leaving thick, wet mud in its place. The rush of water even managed to dig a deep, muddy furrow directly in front of Flamefast's entrance. Zmogus would be delighted.

The deluge took several minutes to subside, a testament to the sheer volume of water Aron had managed to direct. I waited and was relieved when the flow eventually slowed to a trickle. I'd been half-afraid that whatever Aron had done to bring all that water here in the first place—Creating several new springs was still my best guess—would still be gushing water. But whatever he'd done didn't seem to offer a perpetual supply of water.

A spike of pain shot through my skin.

"I knew you would do that," came a singsong voice behind me.

I didn't even turn around. "So now you're attacking the adherents directly?"

Aron was quiet for a moment. "The elders were angry," he said in a small, childlike voice.

"Your little fires weren't impressive enough?" I turned to face him. His expression was drawn and troubled, and his eyes were darting back and forth, refusing to meet mine.

"Have to show the adherents, *have* to show everyone, *nobody* is safe, *only* Beginnings, *have* to overwhelm them," he recited, his voice taking on a worryingly mad cadence.

"You don't have to," I said, careful to keep my tone even. "You—"

"THEY'LL HURT MOTHER!" he screamed, his eyes suddenly locking onto mine as they widened in anger. His brown skin flushed almost purple, veins standing out in his neck and on his forehead.

"Gemma is safe," I said quietly.

As quickly as it came, his anger fled. "Safe?" he asked hopefully. "Safe as in home, safe as in bed, safe as in a box?" There was a madness in his eyes. This was the damage I'd been worried about and had tried to get his elder to understand. I felt it in my own mind, the twisting and wrenching of my Axis. Only my long familiarity with it, the discipline Kirmin had drilled into me for five years, was keeping me sane.

"I can take you to—" I started.

"They're calling me," Aron interrupted, his expression tight. "Calling for dinner! Time to come in!" His mouth puckered in a tight frown. "Or not. Time to go blow. Gusts and gales." He shook his head. "Or no dinner at all."

"You don't have to—"

But he was gone.

I sighed and took myself back inside.

"Water's gone," I said cheerfully, even though my stomach felt queasy from all the traveling in quick succession. "Your front doors may need some work, though."

Zmogus frowned. "How much work?"

I shrugged with feigned guilt.

"You Ended the doors?" There was the Zmogus I knew so well, scowl and all.

"As I said, this seemed urgent. I didn't want you all suffocating in here, and I don't know enough about the structures involved in

boring a hole through the hillside. I'm sure Mesla or someone could help you build new ones." I tilted my head. "Out of curiosity, why me? Why not call an Earth adherent? They could have made a hole just as quickly."

The man had the courtesy to look slightly embarrassed. "I didn't think of that." Then he straightened and looked more composed. "But there's no Summoning magic for anyone but you. All of our communications charms rely on Sky magic."

"Which were obviously blocked."

"Yes. Open the doors!" he shouted, and several Flame adherents ran to the interior doors, leaning into the doors and beginning to push them outward. As soon as the doors split open, leftover water began gently lapping inward. Zmogus looked at it with a disdain deeper than he'd ever leveled at me.

But I wasn't quite done with him. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions? About Aron, I mean. I think I have a plan to stop him, but I want to get as much information as I can before I try to find him." I kept my voice as level as possible, even though I was laughing madly inside as the water continued to trickle inward.

"Of course," Zmogus growled. "Come inside. No, don't turn it to steam, you fools. We'll bake in here!" he shouted. Two of his adherents looked sheepish and walked slowly toward the now-gaping exit. "This way," he told me, stalking down the corridor deeper into Flamefast—no, I just couldn't keep thinking that name. I'd end up laughing in his face.

"Why do you need a fortress?" I asked as we walked. "If you're not normally being attacked, that is."

He was quiet for a moment, although I imagined I could hear him grinding his molars. "Adherents of Flame are put under much pressure to . . . perform. More so than adherents of the other Axes."

"Really?"

His shoulders looked too tense to shrug. "Apart from Sea, people see as us the most useful Axis. Sea adherents have a well-defined place in the fishing villages. Us? Everyone believes they can find a 'use' for us. It's easier for us to be here. Where we can't be . . . forced." His

voice hardened on that last word, and I suddenly realized that even Zmogus must have a . . . past.

"How long have you been an adherent?"

He snorted. "Do I look so old to you, boy?"

"No, I just—"

"A hundred and thirty years."

My mouth fell open, and I closed it quickly before he could see it. He might well be one of the oldest adherents in the world, and he absolutely didn't look it.

The long entry corridor opened into a vast domed space. The center of the ceiling must have been a dozen times my own height overhead, and I could scarcely believe that all this fit within the hillside. Normal-sized doorways were spaced evenly along the walls, and there must have been seventy or eighty of them in total. Sleeping rooms, I realized, for the adherents of Flame, if not entire suites for each one. Between each pair of doors was a sturdy worktable. More worktables formed concentric rings in the middle of the space, which must have been three hundred feet across. The inner rings of circles were interrupted here and there by large wooden crates, bins, and other containers.

"What is this place?" I asked as Zmogus came to a stop at the outermost ring of tables.

"Our home," he said roughly. "Our workshop."

Workshop. I realized what I was looking at, and confirmed my suspicion by glancing into a nearby crate, which was full of small, uniformly made wooden charms. I stepped closer and picked one up. It was well-polished, and a single rune had been carefully carved into one side, the deep lines filled with some sort of matte-black substance. "Fire starters," I said, shaking my head.

"Oh, your famous disapproval," Zmogus mocked. "Yes, they're fire starters. Yes, we sell them—for a pittance. And yes, they help ordinary witchkind save a bit of their own personal power, providing a reliable way of safely lighting cookstoves and hearths."

I'd made no secret of my disdain for the other adherents' businesses. They made money from the power of their Axes, constructing magical charms that performed simple tasks. But the desperateness of

recent events had made my dislike of these charm workshops even more intense. "You realize that if our Axes didn't exist, ordinary witchkind would have more than enough power to light their own fires?"

He turned to me and stood very, very close, almost nose to nose. It took an act of will not to take a step back.

"Do you know what happens to a family whose child is taken for an Axis?" he asked. His voice was low, almost dangerous. "They lose that child. Lose their magic. Lose the work they might have done. I left a sister behind, and without me, my family struggled. And so yes. We try to earn some money and send it back to help. These charms?" he said, pointing to the crate without taking his face away from mine. "The magic in the coins we receive for them is a fraction of the magic that goes into them. Witchkind who buy these from us exchange a pittance of their power for far, far more. We do use our power to help others. But you," and here he stabbed a thick finger into my chest, "choose to see things through only one set of eyes."

"I—"

Zmogus's face twisted into a sneer as he stepped back. "Always *you*. Now, ask me what you will do about the adherent of the Fifth before I throw you out of here, boy."

I'd like to see you try, I thought at once, and even the Axis bristled around me. But fighting with Zmogus wouldn't solve anything, and he'd made a good point. "You said you'd been running around, putting out fires. You suspect he started them?"

"We don't ordinarily see three dozen fires flair up in a single day, no," he said. Why did nearly every phrase he uttered seem to imply that I was stupid? "And we've seen him start at least a couple."

"You never spoke to him?"

"He left quickly."

It bothered me that I hadn't been feeling Aron using his Axis so much. "Were these fires . . . big?"

"A tree or two. Left alone, they'd have spread far and wide."

"And you can you tell when that happens?"

"We're Adherents of Flame, boy. Of course we can. Can you not feel every death in the world? The end of every argument?"

"Definitely not."

He gave me an odd look. "Truly?"

"Of course not. Origin defend, how horrific would that be? You're saying you—all of you—can feel every new fire that's kindled in the world? All the time?"

He nodded. "And every one that gutters and dies. You learn to ignore the smaller ones, but when a couple of trees are suddenly ablaze, where there'd previously been not even a spark, we notice it."

"That seems . . . useful." And by that, I meant horrible. All the time? "What do you normally do about it?"

"Do?" he scoffed. "We put them out. It's not unusual for a lightning storm to start a fire or two once or twice a year. But there have been dozens—today alone. We've been working like mad to keep them under control."

"Aron's clan—they've been trying to show that the adherents can't counter him. They're demanding all the other Axes bend the knee, just as they've demanded of you. They're intending to replace the Taryba."

"And they see the Axis of Flame as a threat." Zmogus sounded oddly pleased at the possibility.

"They're trying to show they can counter each of the Axes," I said. "The hurricane in Lastepointe—Sea. Two adherents struggled to hold it. Mesla and her people fought back the earthquakes, and their Axis was pushing against them, they said. How big of a fire could you contain with less than a hundred of you?"

"No limit," he growled, a satisfied smirk on this face. "Set half the continent aflame, and a dozen of us could quench it instantly."

"And has your Axis been as obedient as you're accustomed to?"

He frowned. "What? How did you—"

I kept my gaze firmly on him.

"No. It hasn't. I've stayed here. To coordinate. The others, the ones who've returned, said it took them longer to bring the fires under control."

"How long does it usually take?"

"Seconds."

"So I assume it took longer."

He nodded grimly. “Some of them are lazy. I just assumed—”

“All of the Axes seem to be off their game.”

“So we’re not—” He clenched his jaw. “We’re all weakened,” he spat through clenched teeth.

I nodded. “They may not know that your Axis is struggling. Their main goal is simply to show some kind of dominance over you: lure you out, distract you, trap you here.” Zmogus’s eyes flashed in anger. “I do have a favor to ask.”

His expression grew even darker. “What?”

“Do something. With your Axis. Something big. Tell me how it feels.”

He considered for a moment, then called to one of the other adherents. “Moze! Tell everyone to clear the entry. Make sure they’re out of the gap.”

A young man ran down the entry corridor. He returned a few minutes later, accompanied by a handful of other adherents. “All clear, Zmogus!” he shouted.

Zmogus looked up at the center of the domed ceiling above us, and I could feel him concentrating. Wafts of steam began floating in from the entry corridor, and I realized he must be flashing the remaining water into steam. While most of it was blasted outside, anyone in that hallway would have been scorched.

A sudden commotion came from the worktables. Adherents were converging on one table, shouting for help.

Zmogus’s attention snapped to them. “What’s happened?”

“Tory and Anel collapsed!” someone shouted.

I followed Zmogus as he strode quickly to the fallen adherents. They were both young, possibly still apprentices. Both were sitting upright now, blinking slowly. Their faces were ashen. “What happened?” Zmogus repeated.

“I just . . . felt woozy,” one said, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

“Drained,” the other added. “Just for a second. I think I’m okay now.”

Zmogus looked at me, concern softening his features.

“Regular magic has been acting strangely as well,” I said quietly. “My own Axis. . .”

"What now?" he growled.

"I need to find Aron."

"Will stopping him fix this? Can you do it?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping I won't have to find out." Gemma was the key.

I couldn't wait to wrap my Axis about myself and leave Zmogus's fortress of fire.

CHAPTER 12

Taliesin

I didn't feel any evidence of Aron using his powers. He'd likely target Debesi and the Air adherents next, but surely he needed to rest as much as I did. Now that I knew his name, I could track him with the map table, at least in theory, but my need to take a break, to not chase Aron across the continent, won out.

When I'd left Zmogus's fortress, I hadn't actually given my Axis a destination. But it must have felt my mood, for it took me straight to the Tower library.

"Oh!"

Gemma bolted from the chair she'd been sitting in, and the book she'd been holding tumbled to the floor. A shadow caught it before it landed, whisking it back to its place on the shelves that soared high overhead.

"Sorry," I apologized, rubbing my eyes. "It's been a day."

"Is everything all right now? Have you seen Aron?"

"Kavos. Some cheese. Oat bread. Yes, but he didn't stay long." Shadows flickered over a table as the *driežai* deposited my food, along with a steaming mug of dark, energizing kavos. "He's been setting examples, I guess you would call it."

"How so?" She looked worried.

"The storm, the earthquake. You know about those." She nodded.

"They came with demands, telling witchkind—telling the Taryba—to bend the knee. Then he started setting fires all over the continent, but Zmogus's people—the adherents of Flame, I mean—were too quick. So Aron sealed them in their fortress."

Gemma's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Fortress? How would we seal someone—"

"Trust me, he did. Using water, which is obviously not their Axis' strong suit. I got them out. Aron appeared and remained just long enough for me to tell him you are free."

"It might not help," she said with a sigh, sinking back into her chair. "Actually, are you hungrier than bread and cheese?"

As I looked at the food sitting on the table, my stomach growled. "I guess I am."

"Have you ever been to Taliesin?"

"Several times. It's the closest village to here."

"There's a lovely little restaurant. Human."

"Let's go." I wrapped the Axis around us without thinking, directing it to the village square in Taliesin.

"Oof," Gemma said, wrapping her arms around her stomach and bending over slightly as we arrived.

"Sorry." My own stomach was cramping. "I keep forgetting it's not exactly reliable, right now."

"Nothing has been," she muttered, straightening. She looked around, taking her bearings, and marched down one of the main roads that met at the square.

"What do you mean?" I asked as I hurried after her.

"I can barely summon light," she said as we walked. "Your . . . what do you call them? The shadows?"

"*Driežai*."

"They would only bring me kavos, bread, and cheese. Like they're stuck. Do you order that a lot?" I nodded. "And look, there."

She stopped short, and I had to take a step back to rejoin her. She was staring at a man—of witchkind, I realized—who was, in turn, staring at a street lamp. The flame inside the lamp was flickering erratically. "What?"

"He's a lamplighter," she whispered. "But look, you can tell he's struggling. The flame shouldn't be flickering at all."

We watched for several minutes as the man clenched and unclenched his fists, his face furrowed in concentration. Finally, he exhaled sharply, shook his head, and walked away, the lamp still flickering madly.

"Adherent," a woman's voice said softly behind us. We both turned to find an older woman of witchkind, nodding respectfully. "Are you here about the . . . troubles?"

I looked around quickly, ensuring no humans were within earshot. "We'd actually come for a meal. What's wrong?"

"There's an inn," she said, nodding toward a jeweler's shop that had closed for the night. "You can eat there and see for yourself."

"Not one of my clan's," Gemma whispered. "And it's a good inn, I don't mind."

"Thank you," I said. She led us to an alley next to the jeweler's and touched the entry rune that was carved into the building's wood-slat wall. I took Gemma's arm and touched the rune myself, letting it carry us inside.

The journey was smooth but took a bit longer than I was used to. We emerged in a respectable-looking inn. The main room held about two dozen trestle tables, about half of which were occupied. The old woman slid onto an empty bench, and Gemma and I sat on the bench opposite her. "Food's simple but wholesome," she said, catching the eye of a server and holding up three fingers. Within moments, mugs of cool water and hot tea were placed before us, followed quickly by bowls of white stew and a plate heaped with thick, hearty bread.

"We've heard of the demands on the Taryba," the woman said as Gemma and I dug in. She made no attempt to keep her voice low, and everyone else in the room seemed to turn to listen. "And that the adherents can't protect us."

"I believe that danger has passed," I said carefully. "The clan making the threats, they—"

"Is it true the Fifth Axis was Forged?" someone across the room asked.

I nodded, seeing no reason to lie. "It is."

"It's upset magic," someone muttered.

"It's hard to Gather," someone else put in.

"I've noticed that as well," Gemma said softly.

"Is the new adherent doing this? The one of Beginnings? We heard about the earthquake in Evermore." Low muttering followed the statement. An attack on Evermore felt like an attack on all of witchkind.

"I hear he still clings to his clan," another said.

"He and his clan were involved," I admitted. "But I believe the danger has passed."

"Dismantle the Taryba and be done with it, I say," someone behind me grumbled. "Not like they've ever done us any good."

"Word is they've got Beginnings *and* Endings under their thumb. They're going after the other four Axes," someone said.

My blood rushed in my ears at the comments. I wasn't under *anyone's* thumb. "Enough," I said, standing. "Look at me. Truly *look*. Unsettled as magic is right now, at least some of you should see who I am. *What* I am."

The room was quiet for a heartbeat before a quiet murmur took over.

"Let me assure you, plainly and simply, that the Sixth Axis is not under anyone's thumb but *mine*. And I am under nobody's control. I have been countering the Fifth, Ending the storm and the quake. Yes, the Fifth and a rogue clan have been seeking to intimidate you, to intimidate all the adherents. But that clan has failed. I have removed their remaining weapon." I stole a look at Gemma, who didn't seem convinced. "Dismantle the Taryba, if you want, I don't care. But you will not be *forced* to bow to this clan who would rule you."

All eyes were on me, and I slowly raked my gaze over the room, letting them feel the weight of my Axis. "Come on," I told Gemma in a low voice. "I've lost my appetite."

I took us directly to the Tower's library and wolfed down the cheese and bread that remained. I gave Gemma a hard look. "When I told them Aron wasn't a threat anymore, you didn't look sure."

"I'm not," she admitted, sinking into a chair. "Aron has always been . . . impressionable. The elders took an interest in him five or six

years ago. Coddled him. Filled him with stories of our great destiny." She paused, biting her lip before continuing. "I don't know if he'll stop obeying them just because I'm safe."

"His mind is damaged."

"Exactly. Maybe that means he'll care more about them, about the future they've promised him."

"You continue to say *they*. There's only one elder in your clan."

"So you've said. I still struggle to grasp that. But regardless, I don't know if Aron— What's the matter?"

I felt the blood drain from my face, and I put my hand on the back of a chair to steady myself. "It's Aron," I said with a grimace. "He's using his power again."

"Can you tell where?"

"I'm pretty sure I know."

CHAPTER 13

Magewinds

I took myself directly to Debesi's home. I'd been there once before to ask something of her, so it was, in theory, an easy enough destination to reach. The current condition of my Axis made it less comfortable: I arrived with a knotted stomach and had to stand still and breathe slowly for over a minute before I could walk again.

Debesi's home, the Aerie, was located on a low peak in the Great Northern Range. It was a large home, one she shared with a handful of other adherents, although nothing as enormous as Zmogus's citadel. Most adherents of Sky, she once told me, preferred to live alone or in small groups, rather than bunching up as those of Flame did.

At least she hadn't named it Skykeep or something similarly grandiose. I grinned despite my roiling stomach.

"Daniel." Debesi stood on the wide front porch of the house, clad in nothing but her usual gossamer robes despite the freezing air.

She looked vaguely distracted, her eyes meeting mine for a moment but then drifting up to stare at the gray sky.

"I've come about Aron. He—"

"He's out there now," she said curtly. "He's been prodding us, off and on, for about an hour now."

"He attacked Zmogus earlier today," I said.

"Attacked?" Her attention was on me now, a frown on her face, her eyes hard and intense.

"He's been probing each Axis in turn. The storm in Lastpointe, the earthquakes. He managed to barricade Zmogus in their . . . fortress."

Debesi's lips quirked at that, the start of a quickly suppressed smile. "And how did he manage that?"

"A lot of well-placed water. He, or someone else, carved a warning into the fortress's outer door, basically telling the adherents to submit."

"You know, I always warned Zmogus that it was better to be free to move than backed into that hillside of his." She shrugged. "Different Axis, different approach, I suppose. But submit? They've obviously never met Zmogus. I'm guessing you let the water out?"

"He's missing a front door now, yes."

"Oh my." She chuckled. "I should have enjoyed seeing that." Her amusement faded almost instantly, the same distracted expression slipping back into place.

"If Aron's been here about an hour, then he must have come directly here. He may have even been going back and forth. But he's hardly *my* Aron. He—"

"I was teasing. He's been prodding us more gently, though. Nothing so bold as a face-on attack, although we're a lot harder to tie down than Zmogus's people. He started with a blast of air pushed up the mountainside. Easily gentled, as it was too warm and didn't want to be up this high anyway. He managed a vortex for a moment, but we've more experience with the sky than he does. He doesn't understand how it works, and so his efforts are little more than irritating. I've put a handful of younger adherents on it, and they're monitoring him closely. What is his game?"

"Not his. His clan elders. Elder, I should say. He's trying to establish the clan as a power, using Aron. They had his mother prisoner and threatened to harm her. This is the same elder who once ran Karal, Debesi."

Her eyes widened. She'd been there, along with Mesla, when I'd

attempted to rescue Mother from the iron cage the Karal had kept her in. "You said *had* his mother?"

"Mesla helped me pull her out. She's in my Tower. I need to find Aron, get him to stop."

"I can take you to him now," she said confidently, and I felt the air grow denser around me as she summoned her magic.

"Wait a moment." I could feel a gentle pricking in my skin, telling me Aron wasn't too far off. Debesi raised an eyebrow, and the air around me loosened. "Aron and I are affecting one another. The Fifth and Sixth weren't meant to be separated like this. That's my theory, at least. My powers are . . . compromised. If he's not harming anything right now—"

The pricking sensation briefly crescendoed as the gentle mountain breezes suddenly grew into a howling gale. Debesi rolled her eyes, and with the barest flick of one hand, the wind died down again. "He doesn't understand temperature and pressure," she said disdainfully. "He's trying to start something, but he doesn't know what fuels a proper windstorm. They're much more nuanced than a storm fueled by moisture. But you said you're affecting one another? His power seems intact enough."

"Neither of us is what I'd call reliable. If one of us is doing something significant enough, the other feels pain. Our Axes . . . they're not opposites, exactly."

"You once said something." She paused for a moment, thinking. "Every Ending is a Beginning?"

"And every Beginning an End, yes. Two sides of the same coin, not two distinct powers."

She nodded slowly. "So you're saying you may not be able to stop him if he's not reasonable. If he doesn't listen."

"I don't know. Maybe not."

"I can bring a handful of older adherents with me. We can help counter him with you."

"I appreciate it. We can—"

"Another moment," she said, stepping off the porch and coming closer to me. "This irregularity in your magic. It has been happening elsewhere. Is Aron the cause?"

I nodded slowly. "He may be. But I didn't know about the widespread instability of magic until today. But I was just in Taliesin, and witchkind there have noticed."

She chuckled. "An advantage of being an adherent of Sky. We spread ourselves out across the world, some of us living in the towns and villages, others in small cottages scattered here and there. We can hear each other anytime we need to. The Axis carries our voices to the corners of the world. Magic has been irregular everywhere. Ordinary witchkind have found their powers scattered. I've an adherent to the south, in Nworlons, and she says the locals describe their magic as *pulsing*. Some have been unable to Gather."

Someone in Taliesin had said as much. "Why would that be true?"

"I haven't had a moment to investigate myself. But I've heard said that magic has lost some of its flavor. That it was . . . the word they used was *grynas.* Do you know it? In the True Language?"

"*Pure*. Roughly. But I don't understand. Why would pure magic be harder to Gather?" This was the first I'd ever heard of magic being flavored.

"All magic is flavored of the elements. Sky and Sea, Earth and Flame. Each person of witchkind has their own . . . mmm, not preference, exactly. *Lygiavimas*, it's called. My sister used to teach at Duocastella's; she could explain it better."

"That means . . . orientation?" I asked.

"Close. *Affinity*. A person with Sky affinity would Gather magic that was touched with Sky. Earth to Earth, and so on. If magic is losing its *lygiavimas*, it would be more difficult for them to Gather. Might even be less stable. If magic used to bind the hulls of ships no longer tasted of Sea—"

"The bindings might fail," I finished. "I understand. It's been happening to everyone, then. But I'm not sure why that would be the case now. I mean, I had assumed it was just magic being unsettled after the Forging of the Fifth. But that shouldn't have changed the fundamental nature of magic. Would it?"

"Most bindings are about Creation, more so than Endings. Perhaps the power of Beginnings being bound up in an Axis has taken the tint from magic?"

I nodded slowly. "It could be. We don't really understand where our magic comes from, but—"

"Magic comes from the Origin," Debesi said instantly. "That's never been a question."

It's never been a fact, either, I thought. More akin to the humans' religious beliefs than anything anyone had proven. "Yes, but what is the Origin? What if it is, or is at least partly, the power of Creation? Of Beginnings? What if the Fifth Axis is . . . I don't know. A part of the Origin?"

Her eyes widened fractionally. "That would imply that your own Axis is as well. Or was."

That had never occurred to me. But if the Fifth and Sixth were indeed two sides of the same coin . . . "I've realized, over the past few days, how little I understand about the true nature of magic. Of the Axes, even. But what if . . ."

"If what?" Debesi prompted me when I paused.

"What if chaining the Fifth has somehow compromised the Origin?"

She looked at me for a moment and sighed. "Since you ascended, you've railed against us for how we use our powers. The charms, the little favors we sell."

I raised my eyebrows at the sudden change in topic, but Zmogus's tirade came back to me. "I may have been hasty in that assessment," I admitted.

"You were. But perhaps you were also not wholly wrong. Consider: if leashing the Fifth is indeed what has now begun to diminish all of witchkind, then what were we like before any of the Axes existed? If the power of the Axes were not chained, would that give ordinary witchkind the magic they need, right now?"

Don't cling too hard to power. It's often best not wielded at all. Ormand's words came back to me.

"Debesi, why were the Axes formed?"

Her brow creased. "Surely you know the histories."

"I know the stories. That magic was raw and wild, damaging the world. That the Axes were formed to bring magic under control."

"Correct."

"Is it, though? Is it correct? The power of Beginnings certainly wasn't out of control. It wasn't Creating storms and earthquakes. I didn't even know what an earthquake was until this morning!"

The crease deepened. "What are you suggesting?"

"That the Archons' motives were less . . . selfless. That they simply wanted the power for themselves. Just as Aron's clan does."

She thought about it for a moment and then sighed. "I don't know how it matters, all these centuries later. We are where we are."

"Yes, but now even ordinary magic is failing."

Debesi took on a grave countenance. "Daniel, without magic being reliable, even the humans will begin to suffer. Their buildings, their ships—"

"Will fail. They need our magic as much as we do, even if they don't know it."

She chewed her lip for a moment, an uncharacteristically vulnerable tic. "You bring me to my point, then. Daniel . . . my own Axis has become unreliable too." Her voice was soft now, and I wondered if she was using her magic to carry it to me through the gusting breezes. "We lost a young adherent. Just now, on her way to assist us. The Axis simply . . . stopped. When she was traveling, high in the air." I could see the muscles of Debesi's jaw clenching and releasing.

That explained the vague look she'd had when I arrived. "Debesi —" I gasped as a stab of pain pierced my skull. "Debesi," I got out. "It's Aron."

And it was. Whether his previous attempts at summoning a windstorm had been experiments he'd learned from, or whether he'd found an altogether new approach for his Axis, what was coming was serious. I could feel the air around me stiffening, the pressure increasing even at this altitude. The temperature dropped, and I began shivering. Debesi's eyes widened in panic, and she stepped down from her porch and grabbed my arm. "Inside. Quickly."

She led me up the short set of steps and into the relative comfort of her home. A fire flickered merrily in the fireplace, but it began to gutter as the winds outside picked up, drawing air away.

Debesi was muttering under her breath, and I caught snatches of

what must have been instructions, given in the True Language, to her Axis. *Tawelwch. Dal. Rhyddhau.* Be calm. Be still. Let go.

It wasn't working. Through one of the Aerie's expansive windows, the world had darkened. The winds were picking up grit and dust, pelting them against the building with a hissing sound.

"This will need to get worse before it gets better," she said grimly. "Lina! Angelika!" she called. "Are you still here?" Two women scurried into the room from a hallway, one younger and one closer to Debesi's age. "This is the new adherent," Debesi said quickly. "He's driving this wind through sheer force. Can you feel it?" Both nodded. "We need to pull the reins from him. Lina, you will steer." The younger woman nodded. "Angelika, you and I will pull. You understand?"

"Move it even faster?" Lina asked. "Will the building hold?"

"The Aerie will hold through far worse," Debesi assured her.

"I can—" I started.

"Do nothing," Debesi said sharply. Which was just as well, since my head continued to pulse with a hot, angry pain. "Lina, are you ready?"

"The Axis's hands are slippery," Lina said, her face tight with concentration. Her hands twitched at her side. "There will be no precision in this."

"We need none," Debesi said. "Up the mountainside and over. Keep it low as you can. Make it work against the terrain. Angelika?"

The older adherent nodded grimly. "Ready."

"We begin."

All three closed their eyes, and I could feel their magic harden around us. Outside, the winds picked up speed. It sounded as if they'd doubled in power, and as I listened, they doubled again. The building shook around us, and I took a step back from the large windows as they began rattling and flexing in their frames.

"More," Debesi whispered. All three adherents' hands were at their sides, twitching in odd, syncopated gestures. "*More*." They began swaying slightly, in time with one another, slowly leaning a bit to the left, then a bit to the right. "MORE," Debesi insisted softly.

"It's drawing away from me," Lina said, panic in her voice. "The Axis."

"Tory and Anel collapsed!" someone shouted.

"Debesi, pull back a bit," I said quickly.

"This is no time to—" she began, her tone irritated.

"Trust me!" I said. "There's only so much Axis to go around!"

Her eyes snapped open and she glared at me.

"It's coming back to me," Lina said with relief.

Debesi's eyes widened and the irritation vanished from her face. "We pull together, then," she said, giving me a brief nod before closing her eyes.

The winds were howling now, the Aerie's doors pushed shut so tightly by the force of it that I doubted I could force my way out, had I been foolish enough to try. Small pebbles rattled against the outside walls and pinged against the windows. I pulled the irritated, smoldering presence of my Axis close to me, unsure of what I could contribute should the structure fail.

"Keep it low," Debesi murmured calmly, her demeanor belying the roaring intensity of magic they were wielding.

The air outside seemed to grow thicker. The winds were blowing so strongly that they were now picking up stones, entire tree branches. A mad part of my mind wondered if all the birds in the area had managed to take shelter or if they'd been blown ahead of all this and were even now wondering what would become of them.

Stones were bouncing off the building, and I began to reach out with my Axis, hoping I could at least End the barrage. If something large enough managed to—

"No," Debesi cautioned me sharply. "I don't know what you're planning, but do nothing. Hold firm."

I pulled the Axis back at her command. At the very least, if the walls failed or the windows shattered, I could take myself away from this chaos.

"Debesi," Angelika muttered.

"I know," Debesi said.

The winds began . . . pulsing. There was no other way to describe it: a half-second of silence was followed by a half second of frenetic,

surging pressure, repeating on a loop. It was as if the air itself was punching the Aerie, and the building shuddered in time to the assault.

"The Axis, Debesi," Lina said in a low, urgent tone.

"I feel it," Debesi muttered. Even I could feel it now: a vibration in the magic around us, as if the Axis of Sky itself was flickering on and off. "Be ready for it. When you can get your hands firmly around it again, pull with everything you have. Now!"

The pulsing was replaced by a tempestuous rush of air outside—fierce wild winds, shrieking and screaming like a banshee in a rage. The entire building seemed to bow inward, and the pressure inside became so much that my eardrums began to ache.

And then it was gone. The walls relaxed, my ears popped, and the pain behind my eyes receded to a now-familiar dull throb. The three adherents' shoulders slumped as they opened their eyes. Lina's were bloodshot, and Angelika's were tearing. Only Debesi looked unaffected, although a subtle weariness around her own eyes put the lie to her composed facade.

"That's done it," Debesi said with a sigh.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"We pulled the air from him. Made it go faster than he could keep up with. Instead of fighting him, we went along with it and outplayed him. The air is our domain," she added proudly, "and he will never hold mastery of it."

"That was a near thing," Angelika muttered. "The more we pulled at the air, the more the Axis seemed to . . ." She stopped, searching for the right phrase.

"It was like it didn't want to be here," Lina said softly.

Debesi's eyes narrowed, but she nodded in agreement. "But we managed it. Thank you. Go, rest now." They nodded and walked slowly down the hallway they'd emerged from.

"He may try again," I pointed out.

"He may." She whispered something I didn't catch. "I'm recalling those who were set to watch him. I suspect he overcame them, or we would have felt their efforts joining ours just now."

"Can you call more?"

"I could," she nodded firmly. "There are over three hundred of us

in the world. But I won't. We scatter ourselves for a reason. If I called everyone here, could Aron not simply take himself to another part of the continent and operate without opposition? Swift as we can be, our travel is not instantaneous as yours and his. If his goal is to test us, to distract us, he could lead us on a merry chase. And if he repeats this closer to a village . . ."

"A good point." Not every building, even those enhanced by the bindings of witchkind's hidden spaces, would be able to hold up to such a tempest.

"Numerous as we are, we are too few." She turned to look out the window, which was now blurry from all the dust it had accumulated. For all her calm, I could see the tension in her neck. "I am inexorably led," she said more slowly, forcing herself to relax a bit, "to the conclusion that we need more hands. There are three hundred adherents of Sky. Far fewer of Flame. Perhaps as many of Sea. Earth, I don't know, but the number is likely similar. We are not enough. This Aron may have the power to Create chaos across the world, and we will not be able to oppose him." Her hand flicked out again, and a quick breeze blew the dust from the outside of the window. "All of witchkind must become empowered again, if ever they once were. We need to find a way to get magic to all of our people. So they can defend themselves."

I opened to mouth to respond, but my voice caught in my throat. The idea that Aron, a single adherent, couldn't be countered by the hundreds of other adherents—it felt mad. Impossible. But then, could they all, in their hundreds, truly oppose me if I bent myself against them? If they couldn't, then Debesi was right: Aron couldn't be opposed either. But how could we make *all* of witchkind more powerful? "You're saying you want to . . . what are you saying?"

"I don't know. Only that if this Aron is our enemy, we will need more people, more magic, than I believe we can currently summon."

"I understand. But I don't think . . . that is, I believe Aron will see reason. He's not doing this of his own will. He knows his mother is safe. I just need to convince him. He may just need to see her with his own eyes." Suddenly I felt less sure of that than I had at the inn in Taliesin.

She nodded. "Then let us go."

CHAPTER 14
Aron

Debesi took us to a rocky plain at the foot of the mountains that, in better weather, might have been a pleasant meadow. She took a couple of steps back, standing behind me, then whispered something I couldn't make out. Within seconds, several soft bursts of air behind me announced the arrival of more adherents of Sky. My backup.

I kept my eyes on the new adherent.

Not a dozen paces away, Aron stood before me. He held his hands up, palms toward me, and said, "Let's not fight, friend!" There was a desperate, manic tone in his voice, overlaid by a false cheerfulness.

"We don't need to, Aron," I called back. "Your mother is safe, now, remember? They can't hurt her."

"You said that before!" he cried merrily. "But the elders said you'd lie! Lie down, lie in bed, lie in fire! And when you lie, I must fly!"

"No lie. It's true, Aron. I swear it."

"He's telling the truth, Aron," Debesi added firmly.

Imagine standing still and quickly turning your head from left to right while blinking your eyes as fast as possible. The scenery before you will wink in and out, in and out, as your head moves. That's what happened to Aron: he seemed to *skip* toward me. His limbs didn't even seem to move. In half an eyeblink, he was two paces closer. Another half blink, two more.

And in two full eyeblinks, he was standing right before me, his eyes boring into mine. My skin itched and crawled as he did so, and my stomach briefly considered ejecting the cheese and bread from my last meal.

The sun was low in the sky behind Aron and would set within a few hours.

"Are you," Aron asked in a low, perilous growl as he leaned his face into mine, "lying to me?"

"Your mother is safe," I repeated slowly. "Mesla—she's an adherent of Earth. A friend. She and I found your mother. Your clan was holding her captive, in an iron cage. In Landshire, not far from here. We got her out. She's safe now."

"Safe." He said the word as if he was testing the taste of it. His eyes were cold and hard and just inches from my own.

"Utterly safe," I assured him. "Very safe. Unharmed. I made sure she ate."

"Where?" His eyes softened a bit, and he pulled back a fraction.

"In my Tower. It was the safest place I could think of. But she's free to go anytime she wants. You can see her if you want. I could take you there now."

Slowly, ever so slowly, he raised a hand and placed it gently on my cheek. I sensed Debesi and her companions tensing; the air thickened ever so slightly. I forced myself to stay very still as Aron continued to stare into my eyes. "If you did that," he said, his voice now velvety soft, "thank you." He let his hand slide slowly down my cheek until it dropped to my shoulder. He let it remain there for a heartbeat before bringing it back to his side. "Thank you." He sniffed. "They said you would lie."

"Your elder has been the one lying, Aron. The other adherents are not your enemies. They helped me free your mother. None of us are your enemies," I repeated.

"Oh, I know that," he chirped, his voice now loud and bright and his face breaking into a smile. He took a step back, his eyes twinkling. "The elders are my enemies, but they had me! Had me on a leash." His expression fell into a hard frown. "They still do, you know. I can feel it. Even with Mother safe, there's still it. Inside of me. Something

dangerous. Something final. At first I thought you might have put it there, but . . . it doesn't taste like us."

Like *us*? "Your clan rune. There's a trap in it—in your spirit. Your mother told me of it."

"Oh, that?" Again, his expression flipped back to cheerfulness. He shook himself like a wet dog, and one eye twitched a few times. I felt my head throb for a moment as he used his power. "There! I've Begun a new life independent of the clan!" Now his brow wrinkled in confusion. "I have, haven't I?" His voice was that of a child, bewildered and afraid, high pitched and querulous. "Have I? What if Mother has the same thing?"

"She did." His expression started to slip into alarm, so I quickly added, "but I removed it. Ended it. Painlessly. She's clanless now and safe from them."

"So I *have* started a new life. And so has she."

I nodded solemnly. "You have. But it's probably important that you stop using the Axis for a while. There are some things you need to know about it."

"And you'll tell me?" He seemed eager, now, eyes wide in anticipation.

"I will."

"Will you lie?" Strangely, neither his voice nor his expression changed at that. He sounded almost excited about the prospect.

"No," I said firmly.

"So tell me! Tell me everything!" He clapped his hands twice, wriggling like an eager child. I found his quick, radical shifts in attitude off-putting. He wasn't well.

"There's a lot to tell," I said slowly. "You know about the five . . . well, the six Axes, right?"

"Sure, sure," he said quickly, nodding. "Sea, Sky, Flame, Earth, Endings, and Beginnings. I'm the last one!" he added excitedly, thumping a thumb against his chest. "And we can do anything."

"Perhaps, but we need to be careful with our power. We can't just do whatever we want. There are consequences." Origin defend, was that me giving that speech? I heard Debesi give a soft snort of amuse-

ment behind me. "And your power in particular is both wondrous and dangerous."

"Dangerous? How?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to make him angry. "It's possible that creating the Fifth Axis, your Axis, has damaged magic for everyone else." A thought occurred to me. "Even for your mother."

His eyes flew wide, and his face went ashen. "I've damaged Mother?" he asked in a very small voice. "Damaged, flawed, broken, hurt?"

"We may be able to fix it," I said. *I've no idea how, but let's go with that.* "If we work together."

His expression twisted into one of distrust. "You're not lying?"

"I said I wouldn't lie to you. I won't. And I can show you a rune that will let you detect lies if you want." Assuming his power was enough like mine, then many of my Forms of Power should work for him.

"Ooooo," he cooed, his face lighting up as he wrapped his arms around himself. "I do want. I want very much. But first"—his voice was pitched almost normally, and his face seemed fully sane for a moment—"I need to make sure Mother is protected."

"She is," I insisted. "She's—"

"Who are they?" Aron snapped, taking another step back and apparently noticing the adherents of Sky for the first time. His expression was now guarded, his tone sharp, his eyes suspicious.

"Friends," I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice. "If they're bothering you, they can go. You and I can keep talking."

He was eerily still for a moment, and then he burst into motion, nodding frantically and bouncing up and down on his toes. "Yes, they can go. You and I can keep talking. I'd like that. We should talk a great deal. Goodbye!"

"It's fine, Debesi." I lowered my voice to a bare whisper. "Keep watch." Then, in my normal tone, "You can all go. Thank you. It's been wonderful seeing you again. I look forward to seeing you again soon."

"Look forward to it!" Aron called, shooting a hand high above his hand and waving enthusiastically. "Wonderful seeing you again! You can all go!"

Puffs of wind accompanied their departure.

"I've been trying not to use it, you know," Aron said as he let his arms fall back to his side. "The Axis. Not using it is easier. They make me, but I don't want to. When I use it, the voices are louder."

"What voices?" I tried to keep my tone calm and curious rather than alarmed. "I've not heard voices, when I use my Axis. That's new for me."

"They're quite. Quiet? No, quite. Quite *loud*—that's it. Quite loud. Insistent, really." He cocked his head to one side. "Lonely. Detached. You know, they're softer when you're here. When I'm not using the magic. When you're not using it. They like it here, with you." He raised a hand then, as if offering to take mine. But even that gesture seemed to confuse him: he looked down at his hand with a pained expression and then let it fall listlessly back to his side. "Will you stay?"

"I can stay for a while. If you're here, there's nowhere else I need to be."

"You know, I can't hear *them* anymore." The spitting emphasis he put on that word left little doubt as to who he meant.

"With your clan rune gone, your elder may not be able to reach you anymore. He probably can't even tell where you are."

"Because I'm free," he said, nodding gravely.

"What exactly did your elder tell you to do?"

He straightened, assuming a perfect, erect posture. He held one arm out toward me, his hand in a fist. I braced myself, scrabbling to pull my Axis closer while trying to mimic Debesi's effortlessly calm facade.

He extended one finger. "Show them what we're made of. Start a storm the Sea adherents can't stop."

I relaxed.

Another finger raised. "Start a quake in Evermore, enough to make them pay attention." Another finger. "Burn a forest. Make sure the Flame adherents are kept busy. They're the dangerous ones." He frowned. "I got that wrong. Had to trap them instead. Had to show them." A fourth finger. "Distract the adherents of Sky. Blow them out of the air if you have to." His arm dropped. "That's all for now.

Return when you're done, and we'll tell you what to do next." His posture relaxed as he finished his recitation. "Oh!" he exclaimed as if something had just occurred to him. "I didn't return when I was done. I don't have to!" He smiled.

"You do not," I agreed. "But did they tell you why? Why they wanted you to do all that?"

He shook his head. "Sometimes they forget that I'm standing right there. That I can hear."

"Did you overhear anything, then?"

He nodded quickly. "Upset the balance. We'll need to come to terms with the boy, but the other four will be subservient. The Taryba will do whatever we tell them once the Axes are brought to heel. With the Fifth, we can even build a home, a proper home, for our clan. We'll build our strength. See if it will accept more adherents. And then we can see about going home. Reverse the Exodus? Yes, that's been our dream all along, hasn't it? We never intended to stay in this world. We had no idea we'd be cut off. All the family histories are clear on that. Boy, what are you doing? We've given you your orders, now go about it!"

"Reverse . . . the Exodus? They said that?" I hadn't thought that possible—hadn't even imagined it."

"I've always had a poor memory. I asked the Axis if I could start having a good memory. It said yes. They said that. I can remember now."

I suppose that wasn't unlike my own Axis storing all of my experiences and those of my predecessors. Although I'd thought that was more a function of the Foundation rather than—

Focus, Daniel.

"Have they ever spoken about the Exodus before?"

He shook his head.

"Well, you don't have to do anything they say anymore. They wanted to hurt your mother." Aron's face clouded with anger. "They hurt mine, you know." His face cleared and filled with curiosity. "She was . . . special. A part of her drew strength from humans. Your elders perverted that, used it to extract power from humans against their will. They stored that power, and it's what they used to chain the

Fifth Axis. To make you its adherent." I felt my voice start to quiver and took a deep breath. "They hurt my mother. In the end, she died of it."

Tears began rolling down his face. "I don't want them to do that to Mother," he sobbed.

"They won't!" I assured him. "They can't. My Tower is the safest place in the world. Nobody can get in without my permission. Your mother is comfortable. She has food, everything she needs. Books to read. She's not a prisoner," I reminded him. "She can leave anytime she wants to. And you can come visit."

"I'd like to visit," he said distractedly. "What's an Exodus?"

Another conversational right turn, but it was important to humor him. "It's just a story. Or I always thought it was. It's about how we, all of us, came into this world. Human and witchkind alike."

"Where did we come from?"

"You know, I wondered the same thing, the first time I read of it. But the stories never say. The version I remember says, 'the Exodus brought the allies from a world of danger, from walls that were closing in on all sides, into a world of open fields and freedom.' But it never says where that first world is."

"Huh." He seemed to think about it for a few moments and then shrugged. "You said you would teach me a rune about lying."

I chuckled. "It's a rune about truth, actually. If you use it on someone, you'll feel cold if they lie, warm if they're telling the truth. It's the Form of Mind for the Sixth Axis. My Axis. I don't know if it will work for you, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"I don't know any runes," he said sadly.

How was that even possible? "How do you tell your Axis what to do, then?"

Another shrug. "I just do. Will you show me a rune?"

I crouched and used a finger to sketch a rune in the dusty earth:



I stood. "This is called *išsiaiškinti*: to know. You just hold it in your mind, as you look at the person you want it to affect. And then you have your Axis feed it a little magic."

Aron blinked at my sketch a few times, then looked up at me. I felt an odd sensation. It seemed as though someone had bounced a small rubber ball off my forehead.

"Tell a lie."

"My name is Galas, End-Watcher."

Aron frowned. "I don't feel anything."

"I'm not sure it worked, honestly. You might need to try on someone else. It might not work on me at all."

"So you can still lie to me." He didn't seem upset by the possibility—the tone of his voice and his body language didn't change at all. He was still showing the curiosity of a small child.

"But I wouldn't. I won't." I kept my own voice firm and friendly.

"So Mother really is safe?" He was almost whimpering with the need for it to be true.

"She's safe. I can take you to her right now, and she can leave anytime she wants. She isn't a prisoner anymore."

"But they'd get her again. If she leaves." Lips tight, eyes flashing, voice rough.

"She can also stay as long as she wants and stay safe. We'll find your elders. Without you to control, they'll have no—"

"Do you know what we need?" Eyes bright, mouth smiling widely, voice joyous. "A house!"

Aron's conversational twists were becoming increasingly difficult to follow. "A house?"

"A house. The safest place in the world. You're always safe at home!" He frowned at that. "So not a house. A home." The frown vanished as quickly as it had come. "Do you know what we need?"

"A home?"

"A home! Mother can be comfortable. She can leave anytime she wants to." He frowned again but for just a second. Smiling again, he added, "But she won't want to. She'll want to be safe! And you can come visit!" His pattern of reusing my own phrases was odd. Eerie. Despite the function of his Axis, he wasn't creating new phrases, he was just recycling others. Mine, at least.

"She's already safe," I told him, confused. Was he also having trouble tracking the present?

"Does she live in your Tower?"

What? "No, but she can stay for as long as—"

"So it isn't her home," he said in a bit of a condescending tone. "So she needs a home."

"I guess we could—"

"Oh, you've been so helpful!" he interrupted happily. He took a deep step forward, grasped my head between his hands, and kissed me full on the lips. He held it for several heartbeats before releasing me and stepping back. My mind spun as it tried to grasp what had just happened. Aron's face had split into a broad, joyful smile. "So helpful! And now we need a house." He turned away, facing the broad, flat land that led up to the mountain. Turning back over one shoulder, he added, "I'll make sure there's room for you too!"

"What are—"

When Aron had previously used his powers, I'd experienced pain. Sometimes just a slight, annoying tingle; other times it was a searing, debilitating agony.

What happened next made the worst of that seem like little more than a stubbed toe.

A solid pillar of torment smashed into me. It speared me from head to toe, as if a tree made of pure anguish had been driven down from the sky, transfixing me, hammering me to the ground. Every

muscle in my body clenched so tightly that I couldn't even manage to fall down. My arms were thrown outward and back, my eyes pointed directly upward, and I couldn't breathe. Then I was released, allowed to fall onto my knees. Then the real pain began.

This is what dying feels like.

My Axis seemed to have fled, not that I could muster enough focus to command it. My entire body raged in pain, although nothing was touching me. Every bit of skin was on fire. My muscles withered and disintegrated beneath my skin. My eyes boiled, my tongue melted. Even my hair hurt. I still couldn't breathe.

But I could see.

Before me, Aron stretched his arms out wide, and far in front of him, something was pushing itself out of the ground. I struggled to focus through my body's torture. A . . . was that a branch? No, a tree. Origin protect, it was *huge*.

A massive tree, far larger than any that could ever have existed in the world, was growing from the ground. Its trunk was so big, it would have taken three men to embrace it. No, four. Five, now. Six. More. Its branches were equally stout, capable of supporting horses. *Houses*. Its leaves were broad and flat, colored a deep emerald. It stretched fifty feet into the sky. Sixty. Eighty. A hundred, and it kept going. The sound of it was indescribable, rock and silt grinding against each other, the organic sound of branches and leaves unfurling and growing. The ground rumbled beneath me, pushing like a herd-beast giving birth.

My stomach finally unclenched, and I sucked in air as greedily as a newborn babe. I was bent over on the ground now, my knees and elbows barely managing to support me, my head craned uncomfortably back so I could witness what was being Created before me.

The rocky, barren soil was erupting with green life. Long, thick blades of grass pushed up everywhere, accompanied by flowers of every color imaginable: cream, sepia, butter, amber, rose, lilac, lapis, olive, and more.

Either my pain had subsided or I'd simply lost the ability to feel anymore. I was weak, my entire body shuddering. I was cold, a piercing, aching cold that bore into the center of my being. My vision

started to narrow, tightening to a black tunnel as bees and butterflies began emerging from the flowers, flitting here and there as the new meadow continued to fill in.

My blood was pounding in my ears—too hard, too fast. My heart was thudding unevenly. My fingers started to tingle, and my chest felt tight.

Just as the first bright, happy chirps of birdsong reached my thrumming ears, my body reached its limit.

I blacked out.

CHAPTER 15

Reunion

I awoke with one cheek pressed against cold, dusty stone. *This is becoming an unpleasantly regular occurrence*, my befuddled brain thought. I pushed myself to my hands and knees, then managed to sit up on my knees. I was in the Tower. In the foyer.

I'd blacked out. The Tower's magic pulled me home, but not into my bed as it was meant to do. Perhaps the foyer was as far as it had managed to get me before the Axis's power sputtered out.

"Daniel?" Gemma peeked around the library's door before opening it all the way and stepping into the foyer.

"Gemma. Hello. Have you been in the library this whole time?"

"Yes, but there was a thudding sound. Out here." She let the library door swing shut behind her, leaving us in the dim, even light of the foyer. "I came to see."

"I'm thinking the thudding was me."

"Are you all right?"

I slowly rose to my feet, carefully inventorying myself. "I think so." My head seemed to be clearing at least, if still throbbing.

"What happened?"

"My Axis isn't well, and I'm starting to think it isn't entirely Aron's doing. At least not directly. Magic seems . . . troubled." The energy in the air around me was off in a way I couldn't quite describe.

She nodded. "Magic tastes wrong somehow. Like it doesn't want to be used. Did you find him?"

"Aron? Yes. He's ah . . . he's fine. In one piece, his clan rune is gone—his own doing, by the way—and he's . . . well, he's constructed a home for himself. And you. He seems very intent on keeping you safe."

"A home?" She looked confused, which I suspected she'd need to get used to, given her son's . . . state.

"No, not a tower. He Created a tree."

"A tree." Definitely doubtful.

"Yes. A gigantic tree. Just west of the Great Northern Range. It's situated in . . . well, it's now a rather lush meadow. There was a lot of grass growing."

"Why a tree?"

I felt like she was unnecessarily fixating on the tree part. "I have no idea, Gemma," I said wearily. "He wanted a tower. A fortress. Somewhere where you'd both be safe. He Created a tree. A gigantic one. Grew it right out of the ground. Took seconds and an incalculable amount of magic. Hurt like . . . I have no comparison, actually. My head is still throbbing. Do you mind if I eat something?"

"Of course not."

"Bread. Jam. Toast, a couple of pieces. Kavos— no, forget that. Tea. Something relaxing. *Rhisgl* powder, if we have any." I desperately needed my head to stop hurting. "Soup. Something mild, with vegetables." I was already walking down the stairs to the little dining area. Gemma followed as I continued to call out instructions. "Cheese. That hard, mild one. Oh, water. Room temperature, not cold. A lot of it. Are you hungry?" I asked Gemma.

"All of that's just for you?"

"For a start, yes. Cold ham. Sliced. That's all for now."

"I'm fine for now, thank you."

I slid into a seat at the table, and Gemma took a chair across from me as shadows began flickering in, bearing plates of food. I slathered red jam over a piece of toasted bread and began crunching my way through it, washing down every other bite with a long swallow of tepid water.

Gemma watched, an amused expression on her face, as I devoured two more slices that way. Then she asked, "Can I see him?"

"Yes, I think that would be wise," I answered between bites. I picked up a spoon and starting slurping soup. "Sorry, I'm absolutely famished. But yes, you can see him. As soon as possible, in fact. With me gone, he might . . . I don't know. Maybe you can settle him, keep him centered. I have to warn you, he's a little unstable." I looked hard into her eyes. "Above all, and I absolutely cannot stress this too much, I need you to keep him from using his power. Every time he does, it debilitates me. Magic everywhere has become less stable."

"I told you, I know. I tried to Gather, and when it failed, I assumed it just wasn't possible here. But there *is* magic, it just . . . I don't know how to describe it."

"It tastes wrong, you said."

"Yes, that's it. It's bland, and it doesn't want to be Gathered."

"Debesi—she's senior adherent of Air—said as much. Even the Axes are behaving oddly. If Aron uses his power less, maybe he'll do less damage to magic overall. I don't know. Just keep him from doing anything. Please."

"I will. But . . . the Axes? You said they're behaving oddly?"

"Cutting in and out. All of them, not just mine."

"And you think Aron is doing it?"

"Doing it? No. I'm not even sure he could. No, I think it has something to do with the fact that the Fifth Axis now exists. I don't think it was meant to. We've misunderstood Beginnings and Endings all this time."

"How so?"

She seemed genuinely curious, but I'd gotten tired of going over it with everyone. Also, I was still shoveling food into my face. "Beginnings and Endings are the same thing. You End one thing, a new thing Begins. They follow each other. They weren't meant to be separated."

She looked confused. "But how would that affect all magic?"

I folded a slice of ham and ate it in one bite. "I haven't the slightest idea. Debesi thinks it's something with the Origin, which I honestly thought was a myth."

"I thought all magic came from the Origin?"

"That's the dogma, yes."

"It's not true?"

"As I said, I haven't the slightest idea. But everything is weird and broken now, and the only thing that's changed is the existence of the Fifth Axis."

"What if we—if I—can convince Aron to let the Axis go? Would that put things to right?"

"No, because—" I started. "Actually," I said slowly, talking my way through it, "it might. All the other Axes have multiple adherents. That's what keeps them chained. One can step down and the others still hold the chains. With me, it's the Foundation. When I'm done, my soul will be bound into it, along with my predecessors, and we hold the chain until the Axis Chooses a new adherent. But with the Fifth . . ." I leaned back, finding my hunger at least mostly sated. "Aron is the only one. There's no Foundation for him to go to. If he steps down, the Axis would go free. Wouldn't it?"

"You're asking me?"

"No. I mean, it's a theory—one we've never been able to test."

"So all Aron would need to do is step down?"

"Possibly. That would—oh." I looked into her eyes, my heart falling. "Step down. It's, uh, something of a euphemism."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't—that is, adherents are Chosen. We're selected. It's for life."

"But you said . . ." She paled. "So you're saying—"

"Aron can't just release his Axis. It's bound to him, to his soul. He'd have to—"

"Die," she whispered.

I nodded.

"They never . . . We'd sought this for so long. He'd have to want to . . . step down voluntarily?"

"That's the way it's always been done," I said cagily. "We can be killed," I said gently. "It's happened just today. An adherent of Sky fell out of the air when the Axis cut out for a moment."

Gemma stared at me for a long, long moment. "So they'll hunt him. The others. For revenge."

"I—no. No, there's no need for it. If he can just refrain from using the power—"

"Will you refrain as well? You said it hurts you when he uses his power. Does it do the same to him?"

"Ah, yes. I think so, but—"

"So you'd both have to stop using your powers."

"We—"

"But that still won't fix magic, will it? Not if the Fifth merely existing is what's causing the problem."

This wasn't going as I'd hoped. "No. Not if that's what's causing it."

"So at some point, I will have to lose my son or risk magic being damaged forever."

"Mmm . . . maybe," I stammered. My meal was souring in my stomach.

"Take me to him. Please."

I reached out to the Axis. It felt weary, almost hungover. "I'm not sure if I can get to him. The Axis is feeling a little off. It may need some time to recover."

"Do you have any money?"

This was starting to feel too much like talking to her son, with all the the sudden changes in topic. "Excuse me?"

"Money. For the magic."

Ah. Right. "Yes. Yes, that's a good idea. Of course. Wait. Why is it a good idea? Why do you need money?"

She sighed. "You must have hit your head harder than it sounded. I don't need the *coins*. I need the magic they're charged with. If I can fill myself, which I haven't been able to do by Gathering, I can take us to Aron. If you can point the way."

"Oh. Yes, that is a good idea. How much?"

She calculated for a moment. "Three hundred should do it. Is that too much?"

"Adherents hoard money. At least my predecessors did. Three hundred in fully charged coins. From the Tower's vault, not my family's pile."

"What's the difference?"

"My family's coin is charmed to levy an obligation if you accept it."

Her eyebrows rose. "How extraordinary. I've never heard of such a thing."

I shrugged as flickering *driežai* began depositing small piles of coins on the table between Gemma and me, quickly assembling a sum that would have purchased a pair of healthy horses in almost any village in the world. "I've never seen anyone actually draw magic from coins, you know."

Gemma held her hands over the neat stacks. "It's not often done, to be truthful. Easier just to leave them charged and spend them. But it's possible."

"Do they need to be the right flavor?"

She tilted her head as she considered it. "No? I've done it before, but it's easily Gathered. I think being in the actual coin does something to it. I don't know."

"Sorry. Idle thought. Go ahead."

She closed her eyes in concentration and whispered, "*Vertė nuo tavęs, vertė man*." I could feel the trickles of magic flow out of the coins and into her, and after a long moment, she sighed and stood. "That feels much better."

I pointed to the piles of now-useless metal. "What do I do with those?"

"Whatever you like. Recharge them if you want."

"I'm not even sure how to do that. I don't even know if I can." I'd learned the hard way that I did have a store of personal power, but I'd never needed to routinely Gather magic into my body's reservoir. "Store those . . . someplace. Not the vault. I'll deal with them later." A few more flicks of shadows, and the coins were gone.

"Those are terribly useful," Gemma observed.

"The *driežai*? Yes. Not very good company. And they—well, the entire Tower, I suppose—take an immense amount of power to maintain." I was actually surprised everything was working so well here, given the Axis's condition. Maybe the Tower was insulated from everything somehow? "Anyway. Are you ready to take us?"

"Yes," she said, rubbing her hands together. "We should start outside."

"Before we do," I said, giving her a careful look, "are you okay?"

She frowned for a moment, and then sighed. "You mean with the clan? Yes." She took a deep breath and then exhaled heavily. "I think so. It feels . . . strange. More alone than I thought."

I considered for a moment before saying, "I apologize. For earlier. Ending your breath. That was . . . rude."

She tilted her head slightly before giving me a shallow nod. "I appreciate that."

Something passed between us. Forgiveness, perhaps. The sharp pain of my mother's passing diminished slightly. We'd both been wronged by her clan and its power-mad elder.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"For now? Help Aron."

"And after?"

"You seem awfully sure there will be an after."

I grinned wistfully. "Point."

"Let's get this over with. We should start outside."

Something occurred to me. "What do you know about the Exodus?"

She turned and gave me a sharp look. "Why do you ask?"

"Gemma, your clan wants more than just to rule everyone, right?"

She looked uncertain. "I'm . . . I don't know what you mean. When I was young . . . my parents told me that the Axes were meant to rule. That they would. And once we had one, we'd be part of that."

"The aim seems to have evolved."

"I know," she admitted. "The past few years, when they were gathering magic, it was less about being a part of it and more about *being* it."

"What does the Exodus have to do with it?"

"The elders—elder, I guess—there was something about the Exodus he hated. Whatever world we came from, he thinks we can go back. But it would take a terrifying amount of power now."

"Go back to a world that everyone else thinks is just a myth."

She shrugged. "That's what I overheard shortly after the clan took an interest in Aron. Please, we should go to him."

I hesitated. Reverse the Exodus? I hadn't realized anyone took that old story seriously. Was it even possible? Was there any amount of power that could bridge the path to another world? A world our ancestors had left, presumably with good reason?

"Daniel?" she asked.

"Of course. Sorry."

"We should start this outside."

"Right this way." I led her back into the foyer, crossed to the Tower's heavy front door, pulled it open, and ushered her outside. I closed the door behind me as I followed her.

"Have you ever used *balandžio skrydis*?"

"I assume that's some kind of travel magic?"

"So no. We're going to move through the air. Swiftly. I'll let you steer us. Just lean in the direction you want us to go. We'll be above tree level, but try not to hit anything."

"Like what?"

"Birds."

"Ah. Understood." I didn't want to contemplate what would happen if we ran into a flock of gulls.

"Ready?" she asked, linking her arm with mine.

"I think so."

She nodded once and spoke the words: "*Balandžio skrydis*!" I felt the power leave her body and wrap around the two—

I decided instantly that I did not enjoy traveling this way. I imagined it was much how a Sky adherent would travel: blasting through the air at incredible speeds.

We'd headed south as we took off, and so I steered us to the right, looping around in a wide turn to point us east of the Tower. We zoomed above the choppy gray waters of the ocean and quickly found ourselves over the main continent. The treetops were one undifferentiated green blur.

I leaned slightly right, steering us toward the tall peaks of the Great Northern Range. I quickly realized that my vision—our vision—was focused far ahead of our current position, giving me plenty of

time to react and correct our course as needed. It took only minutes for Aron's massive tree to come into sight, and I leaned toward the ground. Gemma must have seen the tree as well because her magic began tapering off and fading, depositing us neatly on the grass just steps from the tree.

"What do you think?" she said somewhat breathlessly.

I found myself breathing heavily as well. "Better than my own Form of Travel recently, but still not my preferred mode of transportation. It's a bit . . . visual."

"Yes," she agreed with a smile. "I've always enjoyed it. Aron!" she called as her son stepped out of what I'd thought was a huge knot at the base of the tree. Turned out to be a door.

"Mother!"

Aron ran to her and they embraced. Gemma's shoulders were shaking with emotion, and tears began pouring over Aron's wide, innocent smile. I heard Gemma give a small sob. Then Aron pulled back slightly to look at his mother, his hands still on her arms. "You look well. They didn't hurt you?" He sounded more sane than any other time I'd seen him.

"I'm fine," Gemma reassured him. "Daniel and another woman rescued me."

"Mesla," I said. "Senior adherent of Earth."

"She has my thanks," Gemma said.

"You'll be safe here," Aron said. "I've Created an area where nobody but you, myself, and Daniel can be unless I invite them."

There was an odd sensation of magic about the area, now that I felt for it. "How are you keeping that going?" I asked Aron. The Tower's magic was fueled by an endless loop of the Axis's own magic, anchored in place by the souls trapped in the Foundation. Surely Aron hadn't time to arrange all of that.

He gave me a quizzical look. "Things just . . . keep going once they're born. Until they die. This won't die for a long, long time."

Huh. I'd never considered the ramifications of the Axis of Beginnings. My own power was all about Endings, about bringing things to a conclusion. It was a very transactional thing: Endings happened, and that was it. They didn't stretch on. But Aron was right: new things,

things that had been Created, did tend to just go about their business until they grew too old to keep going. Convenient.

"So this is hollow?" Gemma said, stepping out of Aron's grip and looking up at the massive tree.

"With a bedroom for each of us," he said proudly. "And a kitchen. And a dining room. And a basement for storage. I Created it," he added, a hint of his earlier boyishness coloring his voice.

Gemma gave him an odd look. "Are you feeling all right, Aron?"

His expression fell. "No," he said in a tiny voice.

"What's wrong?" Now she sounded concerned.

"There's too much in here," he complained, tapping the sides of his head with both hands. "It's too big!"

"The Axis," I blurted out. "That's what he means."

"Explain." She said it softly, but it was definitely an order.

"It's what I warned you about. No Axis has ever been held by a single person aside from the Archons, and even they had help as their Axes Chose more adherents—excepting Galas."

She kept looking into Aron's eyes. "You're all alone," Gemma said as if to decry my logic.

But I knew what she meant. "I'm not. Only Galas was. Thanks to the Tower, every adherent has had all his predecessors helping to hold the Axis. But Aron's trying to do it all himself, and frankly none of us are as experienced with magic as the Archons were."

"There are voices," Aron whispered.

"Voices?" Gemma asked. She turned and raised an eyebrow at me.

"That, I don't know," I said, spreading my hands. "I've never heard voices."

"Listen," Aron said very softly.

I opened my mouth to protest, but a look from Gemma stopped me.

Why not? I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to clear my mind. I realized that the low, dull throbbing that had been my constant companion the past couple of days was gone. As the sun began to set in the west, this meadow felt calming—safe, as Aron intended.

I eased myself into the Axis's broader awareness, and rather than

trying to calm the swirling eddies that had existed since Aron's ascension, I just let it be.

Then I heard them.

Soft, susurrations filtered through my consciousness. If I tried to listen, they faded, so I stopped trying and just let them flow over, around, and through me.

Separation, they sighed. *Distant. Scattered.*

My skin tingled as if Aron had made the slightest use of power. But it felt different, not like a drain on my own power, but instead its complement. I slowly became aware of Aron's presence in my mind. He wasn't using his power. This was simply him.

And with that awareness, the voices changed: *Unity. Togetherness. Alliance.*

Hope.

I tasted the bright, metallic sheen of copper and the thick, firm texture of zinc— metals that alloyed to form brass, one of witchkind's favorite and most useful materials. *Two sides of the same coin.*

There was a yearning there, a longing. I felt the same heartbreak, the same helplessness, when the proctors had taken Mother from me. But at the same time, I felt an age-old, weary hope for return. Not her return—my own feelings were getting mixed up with whatever this was—but the return of pieces torn asunder.

Anything can be repaired, Dedicant Ormand had insisted in his calm, certain way.

"Aron, I think—" I started. I stopped, aware of a sudden pressure pushing against the inside of my skull. Not a Summons: this lacked any sense of purpose or urgency. But still, it demanded my presence. Somewhere.

"Do you feel that?" Aron asked, his expression tight.

"You do as well?"

He nodded. "Pushing and poking and prodding and pulling," he muttered in a singsong voice. Gemma looked alarmed.

Ah, we're back to that. "I'll handle it. Please, stay here. Stay with your mother. Keep her safe. Yes?" Aron nodded vigorously. "And please, don't use your Axis. No magic. None at all. It'll . . . hurt me.

And based on the past day or so, I'll need everything I can get for myself."

"Agreed," Aron said, and Gemma echoed that with a nod. She wrapped her son in a fierce hug. "Daniel?" Aron asked in his small, childlike voice.

"Yes?"

"Will you use your magic?"

My heart felt tight. "I may need to."

"It will hurt." It wasn't a question.

"I know. Can you bear it?"

He hesitated, then buried his face in his mother's embrace, nodding fiercely. Gemma gave me an inscrutable look as she pulled her son in more closely.

"Good. I'll come back as soon as I can and check on you both." I reached out to the Axis, which was starting to feel more its usual self, if still a bit hazy around the edges. I shared with it the pressure inside my skull and asked it to take me there. It curled in close around me.

CHAPTER 16

Tempest of Magic

The Axis took me into chaos.

I landed safely enough, which was a pleasant surprise, but the pleasantness ended there. Night had fallen early, courtesy of a dense, black storm that covered the sky. Wind blew this way and that in sudden, intense blasts. Freezing rain lashed at me, and within seconds, I was drenched to the bone.

"Daniel!"

A short, burly man ran up to me. I squinted through the dense curtain of rain and recognized Marten. "Another storm, Marten?"

"This is more than a storm," he shouted over the wind.

Just then, the darkness was replaced by a series of bright, white blasts of light, accompanied by booming cracks of thunder. Something in my brain tried to count them as they slammed into the earth in rapid succession: one, two, three, four, five, six—I lost count as I clapped my hands over my ears.

"You don't say," I shouted back once the cacophony had ended.

"We've calls out to every adherent who can reach us! There's magic in this—and my Axis is barely responding to me!"

Quick gouts of fire announced the arrival of adherents of Flame, with Zmogus appearing closest to us. He ran over, shouting, "Is this the adherent of the Fifth again?"

"No!" I shouted back. "I just—"

Debesi and a dozen other adherents of Sky rocketed to the ground, landing so fast I thought they'd smash themselves to bits. "Daniel!" she shouted, holding her hands out as if trying—and failing—to control the winds around us. "I thought you and Aron were—"

"This isn't him!" I repeated. "I just left him with his mother! He's fine, they promised he wouldn't even use his power! When did this start?"

"Twenty minutes ago at most," Marten yelled.

"Then it couldn't have been him—I was with him!"

"There are no temperature differentials in the air, nothing that should be keeping this going, let alone so viol—"

She was interrupted by another dozen strikes of lightning. In the glare, I realized that the shadows I'd seen before me the last time were in fact the buildings on the outskirts of a large town. "Where are we?" I shouted.

"Withring!" someone—I couldn't see who—shouted back.

"It's being destroyed!" I yelled, pointing.

Another half dozen lightning strikes revealed the truth of it: nearly every bolt had hammered into a building, shattering it. It was as if the storm was targeting the town, bent on wiping it from the face of the world.

Mesla and six other adherents of Earth rose from the ground, looking around with bewilderment as they took stock. "How can we help?" she yelled, running over to join us. She was soaked within seconds, streaks of mud running from her hair and down her face.

Debesi took charge. "Marten! Rally your people, pull as much moisture out of this air as possible!"

"You know we're not great with fresh water," he yelled back. "And our Axis is—"

"We're all feeling it," Debesi said, wiping rain from her face. "Just do it! As much as you can—move it as far away as you can too! The more we can dry out this storm, the better we'll manage it! Go!" Marten nodded grimly and ran off. "Mesla, you need to add power to the earth somehow. The lightning is an imbalance—"

"Between Earth and Sky, yes!" Mesla said with a nod. "We'll do what we can!" She, too, ran off to rally her fellow adherents.

"Zmogus, we need to warm the air. Start from the edges of the storm as much as you can. Call all of your people to you! As much heat as possible, but only on the edges! Surround it—even application is more important than raw heat!"

Zmogus nodded and vanished in a flash of fire.

"And Daniel!" Debesi said, turning to me. "Do whatever you can! End the magic here, if you can. I think it's supplying most of this energy. Failing that, End the components of the storm—moisture, wind, and cold are the key elements here."

"What will you do?" I called as she turned away.

"We're going to try and punch it apart!" she replied with a wicked grin before gesturing to her adherents.

More lightning washed out the night, more thunder cracked all around us, and more buildings were hammered to the ground.

I reached out to my Axis.

Turbulent magic careened all around me, tinged with the familiar traces of Earth, Sky, Flame, and Sea. I could feel the other adherents wrestling with their Axes, bending all of their willpower to try and manage the rogue magic. Ordinarily, this many adherents would have no trouble whatsoever in bringing magic to heel, but that control was slipping through their fingers. Every time an orderly, disciplined stream of magic reached into the storm, the storm's wild, thready magic would dance out of reach, zipping off in another direction.

Pillars of dense, white-hot flame began lancing into the sky as Zmogus's adherents went to work. I felt the heat immediately, and the storm shrunk back from it. Cold, Debesi had said, kept the storm alive. More flickers of flame danced here and there as additional adherents arrived and repositioned themselves, and before long seventy or more streams of heat were pushing into the dark sky.

My eyes widened in panic. The humans would see this! "Debesi," I shouted, relying on her magic to take my words to her. "Zmogus's people—the humans! The Veil!"

A moment later, her reply reached my ears, choppy through the

gusting winds: "Stories are being spread. Rage of the god. Stay inside. Best we can do."

The rain seemed to slacken as Marten and his people commanded the water to leave the air. The ground beneath my feet began to tingle strangely as Mesla's group pumped raw power into the earth itself. *Booms* sounded as Debesi and the adherents of Sky sent blast after powerful blast into the air to disrupt the storm.

Amid the chaos, my Axis felt oddly calm.

I'd once seen a puppy slip its leash. Its delight in being free was eclipsed only by its delight in smelling new things: it wandered to a lamppost first, then scampered to a bench. Then it put its nose to the cobbles and followed some scent or other for several feet. It was almost as if it were greeting old friends, stopping by each one for a quick hello before moving on. Despite its owner chasing frantically after it, the puppy hadn't shown any sense of urgency: it simply moved here and there, nuzzling and nosing, satisfying its curiosity.

That's what my Axis was doing.

It sidled up to a current of Sky magic, swirling and darting along with it, dashing here and there throughout the storm as the other magic kept the winds moving and blowing. It backed away quickly as a disruptive burst of magic from Debesi's adherents shot through the sky.

Then it jinked to a scattered mass of Sea magic, weaving in and out of the water the adherents were pulling out of the air. Though only a passive participant, my Axis seemed to delight in sliding in and out of the pockets of moisture.

Another bolt of lightning surged from the sky, and my Axis quickly joined it, zigzagging to and fro as it sought a clear path to the ground below. It zipped along, lending its weight as the lightning struck home and Ended a two-story stone building.

Next, it bounced between the pillars of fire that the Flame adherents pushed into the sky. It sniffed happily as the Flame magic sped upward in disciplined, powerful lines.

"Enough," I said aloud, focusing my mind on the moisture in the air. "End—"

Before I could do anything, a sudden wave of what must have been pure, unflavored magic swept across the town.

The Sky magic winked out.

Three adherents of Sky, their powers suddenly gone, fell from the air. My Axis sped to them, eager for their impending Endings. "No!" I screamed as I tried to End their fall, End their momentum, End—

They slammed into the ground at speed, in the exact same instant that the ambient Sky magic seemed to wink back into place. For that fraction of a second, the tempest had slowed. Now it resumed its relentless blowing in earnest.

Pure magic pulsed again, and this time every tall pillar of flame sputtered and died. In the next instant, the Flame magic returned, but Zmogus's people had lost their focus. Instead of tight, orderly pillars of heat, the magic returned as random, fiery explosions. My Axis heeled to two adherents of Flame as their magics overcame them. Greedily, it drank their Endings.

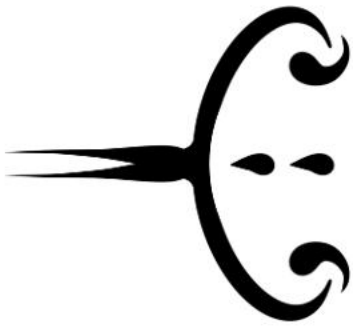
"Stop this!" I shouted, again trying to focus the Axis on the moisture in the air. If I could aid Marten's people, then perhaps—

More lightning struck. One bolt hammered very near to where I was standing, hitting bare earth and blowing chunks of rock and dirt about me. I recoiled, hauling my Axis around me and ordering it to—

A rock slammed into my shoulder, dislocating it instantly and sending a roar of white-hot pain through my body. I lost all control, screamed, felt my Axis gallop away from me, and fell to the ground. I hit hard, directly on my now-injured shoulder, with an audible crunch and another mind-shattering flare of pain.

"Daniel!" Mesla's voice penetrated the bright, howling anguish in my shoulder as she rose from the ground and knelt beside me. "You're hurt!"

"I'm not the only one," I said through gritted teeth. I tried to drag my focus back together, pushing through the pain and summoning my Axis to me. *End this storm!* I ordered it, holding the rune for Endings in my mind:



Storms Began, and they Ended: that was the natural order of things. The Ending of a storm was transactional, something that happened and was then in the past. Exactly the kind of thing the Axis was good at, that it understood.

But the next pulse of pure magic stole away my Axis.

I gasped with the shock of it, as if someone had thrown a boulder into my abdomen. The air wooshed out of my lungs, my stomach clenched, and I suddenly found myself struggling to breathe, struggling to even remain conscious. My magic returned as quickly as it had left, and I sucked air back into my body. I was shuddering, my limbs prickling with pain, and my mind completely unanchored.

"Daniel, are you okay?" Mesla shouted over the wind howling around us with renewed vigor.

I groaned as my feet weakly sought purchase on the soaking-wet soil. All sense of my Axis had left me.

"We're having no effect on this thing," Mesla said, tilting her head back to the sky, ignoring the rain that lashed her face.

"Aron," I managed, turning my head to spit rainwater out of my mouth. "Aron," I repeated, straining to be heard over the storm's fury.

"What about him?" Mesla asked.

"Need," I groaned, my mind still spinning and frothing as it sought to regain control of my Axis. "Need!" I shouted, expending the last of my energy. I let myself sink into the freezing mud.

Mesla didn't question me. "Debesi!" she shouted into the sky.

Debesi landed a moment later, her diaphanous robes rent and torn and her long hair plastered to her face. "Daniel needs Aron!"

Debesi cocked an eyebrow at me, but nodded quickly and hurtled into the sky.

Mesla began pushing magic into my shoulder, attempting to heal me with her Earth magic. But the power was sputtering and uneven, and it hurt almost worse than my injury. "Stop, stop," I begged her. "Go back. Do whatever. I'm fine." The pain in my shoulder diminished to a throb that beat in time with my heart, and I reached out again for my Axis. Just as Mesla was sinking back into the earth, I finally caught the edge of my power. Gently, delicately, I tried to draw it back to me. It allowed me to reel it in, to wrap it around myself. *Please*, I thought to it, *End this pain.*

The Axis complied, and the agony in my shoulder disappeared. I'd pay for that later, I knew, and I'd need to be careful not to inflict further physical damage to myself, but the change at least brought a kind of hesitant clarity to my mind. I used my good arm to push myself into a sitting position and pulled my other forearm into my lap. My Axis remained with me, but I could tell its attention was skyward, like a gull longing to join its flock.

A rush of wind heralded Debesi's return. She was accompanied by two people. "He wouldn't come without her," the adherent snapped before lifting herself back into the sky.

"Aron," I said. "Please."

"Please what?" he said cheerfully, sitting cross-legged in the sloppy mud beside me as if it were a fine, sunny day.

"Daniel, what's happening?" Gemma asked. "She said she was taking us to Withring—"

"Wild magic. We can't stop it."

"I felt you trying," Aron said wryly.

"I need you to do it," I told him.

"My family!" Gemma cried, starting to run toward the town.

"No!" I shouted. She turned in midstride, slipping on the wet, grassy mud, and fell to one knee. "No! Stay with us—"

More lightning bolts, a dozen of them at least, battered the town.

"Aron!" I shouted. "I need you to End—" No, not End. Create.

What Begins after a storm Ends? "Create a night without this storm! Use your Axis!"

"But you said—"

Bam! Bam! Bam! Three more bolts. Another wave of pure magic, this time interrupting the Sea magic pulling water out of the air. The rain pounded harder for a moment before the Axis of Sea reasserted itself and resumed its task.

"Just do it!" I ordered.

Aron smiled madly, and then three things happened in quick succession.

First, the storm vanished. The wind died instantly, and the leaves and debris it had picked up drifted back to the earth. The rain, which had poured down violently, stopped falling. The lightning ended. A new, calmer, storm-free moment had Begun.

Next, the most intense, overwhelming, soul-destroying pain I could ever have imagined descended on me. For what may have been a second but felt like an eternity, I prayed I'd black out. Or die. This would kill me anyway, I felt, and I simply wanted to get it over without more pain. Through it, my Axis seemed utterly unconcerned, as if it had lost interest in me.

Finally, all the energy that had been bound up in the storm—all the motion, all the cold, all the wet—came unleashed. Aron hadn't made that energy vanish—he'd simply made it stop being a storm. Left without a more constructive outlet, it raged.

Dozens of adherents' throats opened in anguished screams, and those were only the ones I could hear over my own wail. All that magic, all the impending Endings that had never happened—all of it came coursing back through every adherent in the area. I screamed until my throat was raw and physically incapable of making more noise. Then I fell backward and just lay there, already as soaked as physically possible, and panted.

"You don't look well," Aron noted, looking wholly unaffected. Had he even screamed?

It took ample effort to reply. "Yeah. Shoulder." My voice was torn and harsh.

He leaned over, inspecting my damaged joint. Then without so

much as a wrench or twinge, my shoulder was back in place. The sudden lack of pain was so intense that I gasped.

He helped me back into a sitting position. Gemma had managed to stumble back to us, covered in mud, her hair limp and wet. "What was that?" she said, her voice rough.

"Wild magic," I said again. Actually, no. That wasn't right. "Pure magic, I mean. Magic unflavored by whatever it is that gives magic its elemental taste. It disrupted the Axes. Even mine."

"It seemed happy," Aron noted, his tone still bright.

"Yeah," I agreed. The magic had seemed happy. Misguided, deadly, and chaotic, but happy. Free.

"Is it going to happen again?" Gemma asked.

I sighed, wiping mud and rain from my face. "Probably. I think something is damaged. Badly."

"The Axes are falling apart," Aron said cheerily, then lay back to gaze at the stars between the parting clouds.

Fear charged through me. He might be right. But what would that mean?

"Can you stop it?" Gemma asked me.

"Apparently not."

Squelching footsteps sounded as someone approached us in the mud. "Daniel."

"Zmogus. This is Aron. Aron, this is Zmogus, senior adherent of Flame."

"I know him. This is the little—" Zmogus started, somehow managing to conjure anger after what had just happened. Aron kept his gaze upward, hardly noticing the new arrival.

"Let it go, Zmogus. He's with us, now," I said tiredly. "What do you want?"

"Our Axis. It—"

"Mine too."

"What could possibly—"

"Pure magic," I sighed. "Not elemental."

"That's impossible. All magic from the Origin is—"

"Oh, stop it with the fairy tales," I said, trying and failing to find the energy to snap at him with conviction. "I don't know why. The

Fifth was Forged, and that changed the rules—or revealed hidden ones. Whatever you think you know about magic, wherever you think it comes from, let's just be open to the possibility that we know nothing. Nothing at all." I shook my head. "Gemma, I hope your elder is starting to wonder what he's done." She was quiet. "I need to go home."

That was my dramatic exit. My mind scrabbled to bring my Axis back to me, and I ordered it to take me home.

I made it about four feet from where I'd been sitting, skidding to a stop on my ass in the mud on the other side of Aron. He turned and smiled at me.

"The Origin . . . it wasn't always a fairy tale," Gemma said softly.

"What did you say?" I asked. I blinked rainwater out of my eyes and tried to focus on her.

"It wasn't always a fairy tale," she said more loudly. "The stories . . . some of them are true. Based on truths, at least."

"How do you know this?"

"Keepers and Builders, Daniel," she said quietly. "Keepers and Builders. Our families."

I was confused. "You've kept . . . stories?"

"No, Daniel." Her voice was firm as she crouched next to me. "We kept *truths*."

"I don't understand."

"I think there's someone you should meet."

"If I don't sleep soon, thoroughly, and in my own Tower, I am very possibly going to die." I wasn't joking. Despite what Aron had done for my shoulder, I felt as if I was straddling a border of some kind—a border between being and not being. I may have passed my own Ending when I became adherent of the Sixth Axis, but I knew I was fully capable of not existing. "I don't think I can—"

"It can wait until morning," she interrupted. "Witchhold doesn't take visitors at night anyway."

CHAPTER 17

Witchhold

A night's sleep in my Tower—blessedly dreamless, uninterrupted, and largely headache-free—did much to restore me. My limbs didn't tremble, my mood was optimistic, and even my Axis felt as normal as it had in days.

It would have been a perfect morning, had the magical light in my bedroom not snapped on to full midday brightness. Normally it gradually ramped up to an early-morning glow, but whatever was affecting magic had started affecting the Tower. And so yesterday's problems became today's.

My preferred breakfast of hot eggs, a warmed slice of ham, and buttered toast came to me as cold eggs, burned ham, and toast with so much butter it had gone limp. Even the *driežai* seemed apologetic, their shadowy forms lingering sadly before darting off to wherever they stayed when they weren't needed.

It wasn't until I found myself in my library, pulling a book from a shelf, that I realized I was procrastinating. I should have already been in Witchhold, the prison- sanitarium of witchkind where my mother had been taken and allegedly died of her maladies—the latter another Karal lie, of course.

No sense in putting it off. Witchhold didn't occupy a fixed space

in the world but occupied a hidden space with an entry rune that wandered around the continent almost at random. That meant I'd have to put forward some effort: I needed to give my Axis a special focus. To reinforce my will, I held the rune for its Form of Travel in my mind:



The journey was smoother than any had been recently, and when I arrived in front of the huge, imposing stone structure, I felt only a modest twinge of nausea.

Witchhold had exactly one entrance. It led to an entry hall with only one other exit, which was bracketed by two desks, both of which were staffed by older, firm-looking women of witchkind.

"Good morning," I said, approaching the path between the two desks. Both women gave me sharp looks. Breakouts, rescues, escapes—these things were unknown to Witchhold. But Witchhold's bureaucracy was just as diligent in their vetting of those they allowed inside, gave access to their records, and simply remain in the entry hall. "I'm here to see Hendrik, formerly of Clan Karal. He may be clanless at this time, or he may be of Clan Pergalės." Gemma hadn't been certain that the man had been brought into the new clan, but it was certain his Karal identity had been removed. My map table would have found him otherwise, Witchhold or no.

"And you are?" the woman on the left sniffed.

I turned and looked hard into her eyes, allowing the hint of a smile to play about my lips. "You know full well who I am, madam"

The other woman was already riffling through a stack of cards. "Hendrik isn't allowed to have visitors," she said in a bored tone. She neatened a stack of cards, squaring its sides, before looking back at me with an unconcerned expression.

"I was told as much," I admitted. "But I will see him anyway—in as pleasant a setting as can be swiftly arranged. Chairs and a table, at least, in a private room."

"Hendrik is *not* allowed to have visitors," the woman on the left said in a slightly louder voice. "And you have no authority here, Adherent of the Sixth."

I stepped over to her desk and leaned down, placing both hands flat on its surface. "Let me explain my *authority* here, then. I *will* speak with Hendrik today. I will do so in a pleasant, private setting, and I will take my time about it. You may arrange this according to your usual means, and you may tell your masters whatever you like about my visit, provided they do not interrupt me. Alternatively, I will End all doors that stand between Hendrik and me. I will turn this place upside down. I will take Hendrik to my Tower for our conversation. I will leave this place with a gaping wound, through which untold numbers may come and go. I am, as you have so correctly noted, the adherent of the Sixth Axis. There are no consequences for me. Do we understand each other?"

She blinked a few times and exchanged a quick glance with her colleague. "Witchhold is warded against magic," she said slowly, her eyes still flicking to the other woman.

"Is it? How quaint." I stood, removing my weight from her desk just as I Ended its existence. Everything on the left-hand desk crashed to the floor amid a pile of brown dust. "Seems my Axis remains fully functional despite your wards." The woman wore a mask of horror, her mouth in a wide O as she looked at the wooden remains. "Now," I said, turning to the other woman, who appeared equally shocked, "who will take me to Hendrik?"

She reached for a wood-handled brass bell that sat on her still-intact desk.

"You can't," the other woman hissed.

"I can End people as easily as furniture," I warned her. "Ring your bell, if that will summon my escort."

She rang the bell.

It took only a moment for the door between them to fly open, and a sturdy-looking, middle-aged man stepped out. He looked at me, looked at the missing desk, and looked back at me, an eyebrow raised.

"There was a disagreement over the decor," I said softly.

"Daniel Scratch, adherent of the Sixth Axis, to see Hendrik, clanless, formerly of Karal," the woman on the right intoned formally. "They're to be given one of the private interview rooms."

"For how long?" the man asked, his voice a rough whisper.

"For however long I require," I said, looking him square in the eyes.

He simply nodded and gestured for me to follow.

Outside, Witchhold was a square, tall fortress. Inside, witchkind's magic had made it something else entirely. My escort led me through winding corridors, past dozens and dozens of closed wooden doors, and down flights of stone stairs. He finally stopped at a particular door, opened it, and gestured for me to enter. The room was windowless—as I imagined every room here would be—and had old tapestries covering three walls. A fourth served as a carpet and was centered beneath a scarred, round wooden table with four stout, equally worn wooden chairs. "Please be comfortable, Adherent," he said in his hoarse voice, "and I will bring Hendrik to you in a moment."

"Thank you." I pulled one of the chairs out from the table.

"Refreshments?" he asked.

"Please. Something simple will suffice." I sat, facing the door.

"It will arrive in moments," he assured me. He backed out of the room, leaving the door open.

My heart was beating quickly. Something about this place . . . you weren't meant to be here. If you were here, something had gone very, very wrong for you. You'd either committed one of the few crimes that witchkind recognized as heinous enough to deserve permanent incarceration—crimes that only the most deranged of people would even contemplate—or your mind had, for whatever reason, snapped, and you were brought here for your own safety and that of others. For

witchkind, high criminals were, as a rule, mentally broken. Even the True Language didn't contain distinct phrases for the two things. And for witchkind, a broken mind was a deadly mind: unable to control its magic and likely to consume itself.

That said, I knew from personal experience that not everyone brought to Witchhold belonged here. I'd long since realized how the world worked and how a few large coins passed to the right hands could unlock doors—or keep them sealed indefinitely.

A different man wheeled in a small cart, then without a word or eye contact with me, laid out its contents: wooden cups, a wooden pitcher of cold water, and wooden plates with sliced bread, cheese, and pieces of fruit. A moment after he wheeled his cart back out, the first man, as promised, returned with who I presumed was Hendrik. The latter was shown in without a word, and the escort closed the door behind him as he left. I couldn't help but smirk as I heard the door lock.

I had the Axis End all sound at the walls of the room, ensuring we would have the privacy I wanted.

"Did they tell you who I am?" I asked softly as Hendrik sat.

"I know who you are, Daniel Scratch, adherent of the Sixth. I was free when . . . you know. During the Hoarding."

"Was that when your clan elder was stripping magic from unsuspecting humans, sickening and killing them in the process?"

He nodded.

"Good. I was sent here by Gemma. You know her?"

"Yes."

"And her son?"

He nodded.

"Her son has been made adherent of the Fifth. Your elder's plan worked."

Hendrik's face looked pained.

"But—" I began, but something in Hendrik's face stopped me. "You knew, didn't you? That it wouldn't work?"

"I suspected," he whispered. "I warned them. How bad is it?"

"Ordinary witchkind are struggling to Gather magic to themselves. Even the Axes—all six of them—are behaving erratically. We fought down a tempest over Withring last night—one driven by wild magic."

"So it's happened." Hendrik said softly, nodding slowly. His voice was coarse, as if from long disuse.

I raised an eyebrow. "So you knew? How?"

He nodded again. "There were signs. Suggestions. Before the Forging, magic was much thicker in the world. And there were signs that the Fifth and Sixth weren't separate. I warned the elders. That's why they put me in here."

"So you're not . . . broken?"

He snorted. "No. You know which clan runs this place?" I shook my head. "Longtime allies of my . . . of my former clan. Our elders used Witchhold as their private hiding place for people they didn't want running about in the world."

"You keep saying elders," I pointed out. He looked confused. "There's only the one."

He shook his head. "That's ridic—" he began, but then his voice trailed off. "Oh. That makes sense now. It was a sham, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"The groups. The councils I'd speak to."

"Did any of them include an incredibly old man?"

He shook his head. "And they always seemed reluctant to actually make decisions."

"Then yes, they were shams."

"Incredibly old, you said?"

"Extremely."

"Sodias, then. It must be. He was the one—generations ago—that made the arrangements with Witchhold. He was brilliant. He did most of the initial research on the Fifth Axis, on the runes for Forging. There's a family archive—"

"I've been."

"But there had to be others. To have the entire clan identity centered on him alone? How could anyone manage that?"

"You've changed that identity more than once," I pointed out.

Hendrik opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. He nodded. "That's how they could do it. He could do it, I mean." Now he shook his head sadly. "I never suspected. None of us did. So much power consolidated into one person."

I blinked. He could have been talking about me. "He's not the adherent, though."

"Too old. He'd never have survived. It was his dream, though."

"Why did he let you live?" I asked suddenly.

Hendrik shrugged. "I could still be useful, I suppose. And they know right where to find me." He smiled ruefully. "No one leaves Witchhold."

"Not always true," I said. "You knew my mother, I assume?"

He gave me an odd look. "I don't think so."

"It was her identity rune that powered the machines. For your Hoarding."

"Ah. I was . . . aware of such a person. Not the circumstances. Not you."

"So tell me what you told your elders. I presume it was about Forging the Fifth?"

"Yes. But before I do, are you here because . . . that is, did Gemma tell you what I am?"

"A family historian, she said."

"Ah. It's a bit more complex than that. I am what the True Language calls a *Prisiminimų Saugotojas*."

I frowned. "Keeper? That's an odd root. Memory, I recognize. Keeper of Memories?"

"Close enough. It is an old word. I come from over two hundred generations of *Prisiminimų Saugotojai*. We have been a part of our clan since the Exodus. My clan—you knew it as Karal, although we've had many names over the centuries—has preserved the art of Keeping. I am the last."

"I am guessing this is something more than passing along stories."

"Much more, Adherent," he said, leaning forward. "May I?" he asked, indicating the cheese. "It's an excellent cheese."

"Please. I had it brought for you."

"Thank you." He took a small bite. When he spoke again, his voice had become a bit stronger. "Much more than stories. Our history is carved into my magic, into my spirit. I have an exact recollection of everything my predecessors knew. There is—was—a ceremony—very complex and expensive magic—that we use to pass on the precise history of our people. The history of Laikytojai."

"The original family name."

"From the time of the Exodus, yes."

"All right. Tell me what you told your elders, then."

"In a moment. I want you to understand something. Something they knew but ignored anyway. I am not capable of misspeaking our histories. What I tell you is fact. Do you understand? I cannot lie. I cannot omit. I cannot bend the truth."

"I have my own ways of verifying that."

His eyes opened a bit wider at that. "Of course. The Sixth Axis, your Form of Mind."

"You know it?"

"The basic Forms for all the Axes are—were—well-known at the time of the Forging. Except the Fifth's, of course. You are welcome to use your power on me."

I nodded and summoned the Axis's power:



The magic settled easily into place, and I gestured for Hendrik to continue.

"My family, the original family, Laikytojai, was one of two who brought our people into this world."

"The other being Statybininkai," I said. "I've gathered a few pieces."

"Yes. They brought about the Exodus. As a result, their descendants held an immense amount of influence and control in the early generations of this world. Between them, they jointly controlled the ability to create new rune constructs. Novel ones, ones that had never been seen before. Not everyone in their families had the gift—it was exceedingly rare—but those who did were held in the highest possible esteem, for a time. They called them Rune Smiths. It is a talent largely considered lost now."

"So the Exodus happened? It was real?"

He nodded. "Very much so, although it's obviously passed into legend at this point. Where we came from, why they left—that wasn't preserved. The other families and clans were jealous of Statybininkai and Laikytojai. You can imagine how much witchkind and humans struggled in those days. New foods, new weather patterns—a whole new world! The ability to create new magic was critical to survival, critical to their chances of thriving here. Being beholden to those two families for all Rune Smiths . . . rankled."

"And I'm sure they were absolutely fair and even-handed about using that special talent."

"Of course not." He sniffed. "Our family history doesn't attempt to paint a bright picture. Our ancestors were just as petty, greedy, and lordly as any clan. They earned the enmity of everyone. It became worse as the first Rune Smiths died, and fewer and fewer were born. Fewer than a dozen came to this world in the Exodus; within a century, fewer than three remained.

"At the same time, humans had their own faction disputes. Clans of witchkind began partnering with favored humans, tilting the balance of power in the world. And then some human factions—those without willing allies among witchkind—began trying to seize control of witchkind. The Taming. They targeted smaller families and threatened their safety in exchange for magic. When witchkind didn't comply, they launched Hunts, restored the human religion, and used

it to unite the masses against us. It was either be killed, bend the knee, or tame a power of our own."

"You're saying that's why the Axes were Forged?"

He nodded. "Ultimately, we needed to protect ourselves. The business with the Axes being used to bring magic under control, that was contrived."

"So the Axes concentrated more power in fewer hands."

Hendrik nodded. "That was the reason. A few powerful families, including some who'd already allied with human factions, began launching indiscriminate magical attacks. They destroyed villages, created powerful storms, burned fields of crops—everything you can imagine."

"The so-called wild magic."

"Exactly. And then, having created a problem, they offered to fix it. Offered to bind up the 'wild magics' and control them. Our history says they took eight-tenths of the world's magic for themselves."

I inhaled sharply. "So much?"

"Ordinary witchkind was left with less than a fifth of the magic they were accustomed to. Suddenly, their focus was on surviving every day. The Forging did benefit some by Ending that situation with the humans: ordinary witchkind no longer had enough power to be useful to the warring human factions. But was that worth barely having enough power to survive? Hard to say. Evermore was the last great creation of witchkind. Once the Axes were bound, there could never again be anything like it."

I should have been amazed, appalled—in denial, if nothing else—of this revision of a history that I'd known for so long. But somehow nothing about the Archons surprised me. This greedy grasping for power, for preeminence, went back a long way. "When did the Axes begin Choosing adherents?"

"That was unexpected, actually. The Testers already existed, although their job wasn't to send children of witchkind to one school or another. Instead, they identified each child's magic affinities."

"The elements."

"Yes. Doing so helped shape each child's life, from the work they would do to the magic they could Gather most easily. Once the Axes

were Forged, the Desks spontaneously began identifying new adherents. The act of Choosing had already occurred by then, you understand—the Axes seem to Choose very near birth. The Desks merely identify the connection as the child's magic is blossoming."

I very much wanted to go down a rabbit hole about those Desks but forced myself to stay on track. "So the Axes exist. Adherents are being Chosen. Then what?"

Hendrik took another piece of cheese, nibbling as he spoke. "Statybininkai and Laikytojai were left out of it, of course. They'd made far too many enemies among witchkind. And so they diminished. With so little power in the world, runesmithing became obsolete. The families who controlled the Axes were ascendant."

"Did they actually rule?"

"In all but name, at least at first. The Taryba and every local council did whatever the Archons and their successors demanded. How could they not? But over time, successor adherents . . . lost interest. That isn't a fact, it's my interpretation. But there is definitely a pattern of less and less involvement as the generations went on."

And this is where I came into the story. "And so, left out of the positions of power, Statybininkai and Laikytojai decided to try breeding their own adherents."

Hendrik nodded. "And not just any adherents, although they had some here and there among the four elemental Axes. They specifically wanted the Sixth. And they wanted to finish the work of the Forging and bind the Fifth—and control it as well, of course."

"Why those?" This was the crux of the matter. "Why the Fifth and the Sixth specifically? Aren't all of the Axes powerful enough?"

Hendrik sighed. "This is where I have to depart from historical facts and relate . . . stories."

"Is this about the Origin?"

"Yes."

I let the Axis drop its truth-sensing magic. I'd remained warm and cozy through Hendrik's entire recitation. "Proceed."

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. "As you know, most witchkind believe that magic comes from some central source, which we call the Origin."

"Yes."

"The oldest stories tell a more complicated tale. They say that magic comes from the world itself, all around us. It flows into the Origin, which colors it with elemental affinity, pairing magic to individuals of witchkind so they can Gather and use it."

"Witchkind is struggling to Gather," I said. "Magic is no longer flavored, no longer touched with the elements." He gave me a long look, and I finally put it together. "You believe that the Fifth and Sixth Axes are the Origin."

He nodded sadly. "There's strong evidence that the older stories are correct. The struggles with Gathering only further confirm the Origin itself has been broken. There is . . . a prophecy." He gave me a careful look.

"The one about joining them all or paying the cost?"

"That one, yes."

"What's it mean?"

He sighed. "Prophesies are usually just wishful thinking. But this one surfaced shortly after Galas stepped down. Plans were already underway, within the family, to try and Forge the Fifth. The prophecy was seen as a sign that we'd eventually succeed."

"Yes, but what's it mean?"

"I can't say definitively. In the family, it was imagined that we'd not only be able to Forge the Fifth Axis but somehow gain control over the Sixth as well. To reunite the Origin. In recent generations, going back perhaps two or three hundred years—"

"Yes?"

"It was seen as a precursor to returning to the world the Exodus left behind and sealed off."

My mind ran in circles for a few moments. "I cannot believe," I said slowly, "that all of this—the wild magic, the Forging, the Archons, these centuries of adherents being Chosen, my family's entire breeding program, your clan's atrocities—that this has all been about controlling magic and what? Reversing the Exodus? It seems so . . ." I stopped, at a loss for words.

"Petty?" Hendrik offered. "Small-minded? Greedy?"

"And more. Impossible. Ridiculous. Why that?"

Hendrik sighed. "More stories. This is before our history, you understand? Before a time I can speak about factually?" I nodded my understanding. "It is said that we came from a world of wonders. A world of miracles and marvels. But we—witchkind—were driven out over fear of our magic. The humans who came with us were our allies, our friends. But we always believed that if we had enough power, we could return. In strength."

I'd read plenty of stories, growing up alone in my Tower. "Sounds like a lot of tales I've read."

"We believed them to be true."

"So with the power of an Axis . . ."

"Or more than one, if the rest of you could be convinced to support us."

"I see. And then what, in this world of miracles and marvels?"

He shrugged. "Rule, I suppose. Family lore is that we'd always intended to go back, that we were tricked or betrayed and the way back was closed."

"It all comes back to power. Preeminence. To rule. And revenge?"

He nodded in agreement. "It is all of those things. And I warned them. I told them the old stories, told them that the Origin had survived being half-chained but that Forging the Fifth might snap it completely."

"And they didn't listen." A pain began building behind my eyes. What was Aron doing?

"Oh, they listened. And then they locked me in here."

"Were they down to just the one elder then?"

He sighed. "I honestly don't know. I always spoke with a group, I'd believed them to be our actual elders."

I thought for several minutes. Hendrik just looked at me for the first few, before shrugging and pouring himself a cup of water.

The Fifth was Forged. Nothing I could do could reverse that, but Aron had freed himself from their influence. Presumably that meant the elder was no longer a threat. But magic itself was damaged now. All the Axes were behaving erratically. Whatever was wrong with magic was affecting the physical world.

I realized it was too much. Too much to imagine, too much to

wrap my head around. Stories were truths, myths were facts, and I had no center from which to understand. To move, to make a change.

And worse, the pain in my head was growing sharper. *This isn't Aron.* The pain was different: sharper and deeper, growing steadily.

Half of Hendrik's water was gone before I spoke again, gritting my teeth against the throbbing in my skull. "How do we fix it?"

"Fix what?"

"The Origin. Ordinary magic. All of it." The pain was growing unbearable.

He set his cup down with a sigh. "At the very least, I suspect you would need to somehow unleash both the Fifth and the Sixth. Killing Aron would likely do it for the Fifth." A sharp sadness pierced my heart at that. "I don't suppose you could simply . . . End yourself?"

"I can," I said with an exasperated sigh. "But that won't End the Sixth. The Tower was built as a prison, you know."

"To hold the living adherent, yes."

"Oh, no. That's only the well-known story. It also holds the souls of every past adherent. That's how the Sixth remains chained between adherents." *Throb. Throb.* My head pulsed in time to my heart.

Hendrik's eyes widened and he paled. "That's monstrous."

"I happen to agree. But it's why I can't simply End myself. Once I step down"—I winced as much at the euphemism as the grinding ache in my brain—"the Axis will remain chained." And not that I had any great desire to End Aron, but . . . "Would freeing the Fifth be enough? Put things back the way they were?"

"I don't know," he said sadly. "Nobody can know."

I nodded carefully as my vision began to tint red at the edges. "Would you prefer to live in my Tower? Or somewhere else? I'm sure we can find someplace where your elder won't find you, especially with you being clanless."

He blinked several times. "I . . . yes. Yes, please. That would be kind. Immensely kind. I didn't think—"

"You've no reason to be here. You're not sick. Not broken. We can —" I stopped as the pressure building in my skull suddenly swelled. "Hendrik," I gasped, unable to keep a note of panic out of my voice, "I may need to make good on that offer at a later time." The pressure

continued to grow, and my eyes ached. The center of my brain was starting to sting. My vision narrowed to a dark-red tunnel.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a look of concern on his face.

"I think," I gasped, as a searing pain began pressing inward on my mind, "that I may black—"

I blacked out.

CHAPTER 18

Strange Beasts

I lay flat on my stomach, one cheek pressed into the . . . sand?

Every bit of good feeling I'd had when I awoke this morning was gone. I was trembling as if I'd never eaten, my head was pounding again, and my stomach was making it very clear that I'd better take extreme care.

I rolled onto one side and took in what I could of my surroundings. I smelled salt in the air: I was near an ocean. I was lying on a patch of coarse gray sand. A beach, then. Around me rose tall black spikes of—

Origin defend, I was on my own beach. The little beach, no deeper than I was tall, at the footpath that led down from the Tower's main entrance. It was the only part of my island's shoreline that wasn't covered in sharp, jagged rocks.

This bode ill because it meant the Tower's magic was truly starting to fail. It hadn't even managed to pull me inside this time.

As if the world was incapable of not piling misery atop challenge for me these days, the pressure of an urgent Summons settled onto my aching brain. I rolled back to my stomach, pulled my knees up to my chest, and pushed myself somewhat upright. My headed pounded harder, and I could hear my blood rushing in my ears. With another

whiff of salt, my stomach threatened to rebel, and I clamped my mouth shut until it reluctantly settled.

And then I threw my head back and screamed. Not one of the screams of anguish I'd been letting out over the past day or two, but a weary, exhausted scream of defeat. I was beaten. I was tired. I hurt. I'd barely kept down a full meal in days. My Axis was shaken, my Tower falling apart, and now there was yet another magic Summons needling into my mind, demanding my presence at what was doubtless another worldwide magical disaster of some kind.

I simply didn't have an erg of energy to spare for it.

My soul was in tatters. I could barely grok what I'd learned in my short time with Hendrik, and I knew it meant something. Maybe it was the key to all of this. But the world had kept me reacting. For days, I'd done no forward thinking, much less put two cohesive thoughts together. Ever since I'd Ended that Origin-damned rock formation at Twynsits and that monumentally stupid affair with the "dragon," I had been on my back foot. Reacting. Responding. I was like an animal, scrabbling to survive, running from every predator that presented itself.

Then it started to rain. My hair and clothes were quickly soaked with cold water.

The Summons pressed into me with renewed urgency.

I stewed. *You can step down. Right now. It might even help*, a selfish, despondent part of my mind told me. *Or just End everything. End it all. Summon the Horde. Surely the Axis will do that much for you, it would be delighted to.*

"I'm better than that!" I cried, the words fighting around the sudden tightness in my throat. I couldn't just quit. Couldn't just . . . ignore all this. I'd been Chosen. I was needed. I'd spent a decade all but entirely alone, all in service to . . . this. To this island. To the Axis. To the people who needed my help—who deserved it. I couldn't just stop.

Could I?

It would be so easy.

I was no better equipped to fix magic than anyone else. There were other adherents. Maybe this was for the best. Hendrik's history

showed that magic had been at the root of almost every disagreement, every battle, every greedy choice, since our people came to this world. Probably in whatever world they'd come from too. Maybe magic *should* shatter and break.

The sky above me darkened as more thick rain clouds moved in.

My Daniel, Mother's voice said softly in my mind. It's what she'd called me. *My Daniel.* And I remembered the first rune I'd learned, the first slight bit of magic she'd shown me. Her own magic had been weak and uncertain, but she'd managed this one thing, the magic to bring light to a dark place:



I cast it now, feeding it a trickle of my personal power, but my mind was too unfocused, my spirit too unquiet. The light flickered and faded before it even fully caught.

A sob escaped me, and I am ashamed to admit that, for a fraction of a fraction of a second, I considered it. Ending it all. I could. Though tattered, my Axis would do it. I could End everything. Magic. Humans. Witchkind. Myself.

After Kirmin shared the story of her own failure, I told myself that I could be better. That I would be better. Had I been? I'd made mistakes: the human priest I'd Ended to save the life of a woman of witchkind, whom I'd endangered when I'd ripped the Veil. All the time I'd spent Ending petty arguments, things that made no important difference in the world. But I'd had bright moments as well, hadn't I? I saw all the tired, kind eyes who'd looked into mine as I

mercifully, gently Ended their suffering. Perhaps I had been somewhat better. Not great, but a little better.

But Origin defend, magic was broken. This was beyond me. Beyond everyone.

Our family does what we must, child. Great-Great-Grandmother's words, delivered in her harsh, freezing tones, echoed in my mind. The smell of her in her attic domain—must and mold, sweat and cloying perfume—came back to me, and I gagged, my stomach issuing one final warning.

"What we must," I whispered.

I seized my Axis, ready to shake it awake if necessary. I showed it the Summons. *Take us there.*

Blackness wrapped around me, accompanied by a scalding trace of pain along every inch of my skin. Light bloomed as the Axis dumped me unceremoniously on the ground. Wetness seeped into my shirt, not from rain—the rain had stopped—but a riverbank. The smell of rotting vegetation slipped into my nose, and my breakfast instantly demanded release. I gave in, rolling on one side to retch. After I'd spit out the last of it, I realized the Summons was still burning in my mind. I hadn't made it.

Again, I said in my mind, roughly grabbing at my Axis's power and demanding its attention. *Again, and get it right this time!* I ordered.

Blackness. Pain. Disorientation. Dappled light. Fresh, loamy scents. A release of pressure in my head, leaving behind a gentle throbbing. I'd made it.

"Adherent!" A man's voice. I nodded and spat into the leaf-covered ground as I once again pushed myself to my knees. "Are you all right?"

"Absolutely not," I said thickly, accepting the strong arm that helped pull me to my feet. "Where am I?" Another man put his hand on my back to help steady me.

"The Great Northern Wood. Near the western edge."

"Really?" I looked around. I'd always imagined that the interior of the Wood was supposed to be . . . I don't know, magical or something. Glowing leaves. I'd only ever been invited—via Summons—directly

into some woodwitch's cottage or cabin, and I'd never truly seen the Wood itself from within. But from where I was standing now, the Wood looked completely ordinary. "What's so urgent?"

"That," the man said, taking me by the shoulders and gently turning me around.

"Oh." Through bleary eyes, I could make out a—

What was that?

It loomed from the forest floor like a nightmare made real, a monster with massive pincers poised to seize and crush with brutal force. Its body was a grotesque array of jagged plates and spiny protrusions, bristling with malice and deadly intent. The creature's tail, a wickedly barbed weapon, coiled and lashed out with lightning speed, poking at the half dozen woodwitches arrayed before it. It was a nightmare, brought to life in monstrous glory.

"It's a giant bug," I said, as a voice in my mind started giggling.

"It's hardly a comedy," the man next to me muttered, and I realized the giggling was actually coming out of me.

"Sorry," I said, forcing myself under control. "I'm not doing well. Is this usual for here? Giant bugs?"

"No," the man said firmly. "It isn't." The monster scuttled backward, stabbing its venomous tail at the woodwitches. They seemed to be trying to surround it, but the monster wasn't having it: every time they edged too far to one side, it would turn toward them, lunge forward with snaps of its claws, and jab its tail forward, forcing them back. "It's an abomination. It shouldn't even be in this world. We've been getting more of them, two a day, sometimes three, where we used to get maybe one a year slipping through."

"Through?"

The man clenched his jaw and refused to say more.

"You want me to End it," I guessed. I started searching for my Axis's attention, all too aware that my mental grip was weak and shaking.

"If you can, it would be better. Otherwise, we'll need to use magic."

"Ending is magic," I replied, but then felt a twinge of doubt. "Isn't it?"

"Things End," the other man said. "You just hurry it along."

"Huh. Well, just in case, do you still have any? Magic, I mean?"

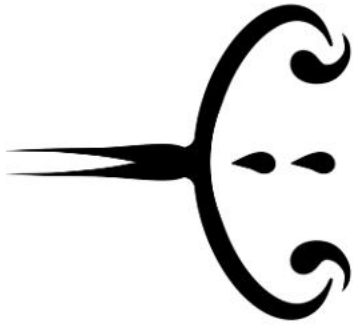
"A thin amount," the first man said grimly. "And if we must spend it putting this creature down, we'll attract . . . other attention."

"Like what?"

"You don't want to know," he muttered. "It isn't safe to use magic here. Not openly, and not in great amounts." I wondered at that. Clearly the mysteries of the Great Northern Wood deserved more of my attention—provided I could survive the current crisis, of course. "Can you do it?"

"End it? Yeah, sure," I said wearily. *Probably not*, I amended. I hoped that hadn't come out aloud. "Give me a second."

The Axis's attention had limped back to me. Its awareness felt as bedraggled as I did, its eyes as full of sand, its muscles as tentative and shaking. It was scattered, hazy, harangued. I took it more gently this time, pointed it at the monstrous insect before us, and bade it do its simplest and most basic function:



The Axis seemed to turn toward the creature, regarding it with a distracted sense of interest. Then it turned away, poking at a nearby tree.

Focus, damn you! I shouted at it in my mind. It turned back to me, and once again I showed it the Rune of Ending and pointed it to the monster. *Fulfill your function!*

It seemed to dip its head at me as it finally acknowledged my

command and surged forward with something like its usual vigor. It slammed into the beast, Ending something that, in my personal opinion, should absolutely never have existed in the first place. But its End didn't come quickly. Once so fierce and threatening, it now writhed in agony. Its body contorted in spasm. Its limbs flailed uselessly as its strength ebbed away. I stared in horror as my Axis pulled away from it, spent. The venom that once flowed through the creature's veins now turned against it, ravaging its nervous system. After its movements finally slowed, with a final shudder, the scorpion went still, its exoskeleton no longer able to contain the life that has now departed. The creature lay there, silent and motionless. The woodwitches who'd been fighting it stared carefully at it for a long moment, waiting to see if it would fight back again. Finally, they stepped back from it, gathering in a group and speaking to each other in low, urgent tones.

"Origin defend," the man next to me whispered. "That was ghastly."

I couldn't have agreed more. Where were the quick, merciful Endings I'd become accustomed to? The clean, surgical Ending that brought no pain, only release? I hadn't just Ended the monster, I'd *killed* it. I felt nauseous again, and if there had been anything left for my stomach to reject, I was certain it would have. "I'm not myself," I muttered.

"Then who's the I that is?" said a familiar voice behind me.

I turned to see the short, stout form of Aunt Ikwity. "Ikwity," I sighed. "Hello. Glad I could help."

"Help?" she snapped. "Broken all of magic, you—"

"That's enough!" I shouted, suddenly filled with a reckless anger, an emotion unable to be checked by the rest of my tired mind. "I came here to *help*! I did not Forge the Fifth! I did not shatter the Origin! I did not create this monster! I have been doing nothing but trying to hold it all down, hold it all together!" I stopped, panting, my eyes bulging at the old woman.

Her face was a riot of emotions: anger, irritation, surprise, concern. Foremost among them all was terror.

She was afraid.

"Shatter the Origin?" she said in a small, rough voice.

I nodded, my anger draining as quickly as it had risen, leaving me feeling even more tired. "I think so. Yes."

"Magic," she said softly.

"Broken." I sighed. "No longer elemental. And it seems to be doing whatever it wants. Did it make that monster?" I pointed to the gigantic corpse. "Magic, I mean?"

"No," she said quietly, stepping close and peering up at my face. "Magic brought that. Why we're careful with magic here. A delicate balance, this place. Magic goes awry here. Easily. Quickly."

"Why is that, exactly?" I asked, my tone unintentionally strained by anger.

"The Wood is the Last Bastion." I heard the woodwitch standing next to me inhale sharply. "The one place that must not fall to wild magic. The one place that must remain still. Serene."

"What is the Last Bastion? You mentioned it before."

She stepped back, but her eyes were still locked to mine. "How hurt are you?" Ignoring my question, of course.

"Badly," I admitted. "This morning. I thought I was better, but every time something like this happens, every Summons . . . it's like a leap backward for every inch forward I manage to crawl. My Axis, all the Axes—they're in tatters. Did you see how that creature died?" She nodded gravely. "That isn't how it's done. Not how it happens. Endings are quick. Not drawn out. I don't know what's happening."

"How much sleep," she asked, her voice very careful now, "would right you?"

I laughed a manic bark that sent shivers down my own spine. "A week at least. A month?"

She nodded slowly and exchanged a quick glance with the man next to me. "Aunt, no—"

She silenced him with a sharp gesture. He assented and took a couple of steps away from me.

"Ikwity will give you a month," she said evenly. "Ikwity will be owed." She sighed, her eyes flicking to and fro. "Ikwity has lost much of herself, her sense of herself," she said. Her tone was higher now, and I sensed a bit of panic in it. "What time is it?" she asked but flicked a hand at me when I opened my mouth to answer. "Not morn-

ing, Ikwity can see that. Not a fool. What time?" She flapped her hands in frustration for a moment, then forced herself back to stillness. "Last Bastion, Last Anchor. Tricked us, she did, that clever girl." She shook her head in frustration. "Showed her the exact spot, took her years, never thought she'd seal it all up behind her. Tricky damn girl."

"I don't—"

Again, she hushed me with a flick of one hand. "Ikwity doesn't either. Is it morning? Night? Years later? Years before?" Another frustrated shake of her head. "No telling what will happen if the Bastion falls, is there?" Her eyes snapped back to mine, an accusatory frown on her face. "Brought plenty of magic, we did. Now it's broken? Can't very well go back for more, can we? Needs to be calm here, boy. Sleepy. Sleepy is good! Sleep is time passing without notice, without consequence."

"I—"

"Hush, child." With a *harrumph,* she brushed at her clothes, smoothing out invisible wrinkles. "Need magic healed. Origin restored. Damn fool Archons, breaking what they couldn't even see. The Wood must be left to sleep. Understand?"

I nodded, but I didn't understand any of it.

With another harrumph, she seemed to finalize her decision. She squared her shoulders and said, "Ikwity will give you your month. Never said Ikwity wasn't generous when she needed to be."

"Okay." It seemed the safest thing to say.

"Aunt," the man now standing a few steps back said, caution in his voice, "are you certain—"

"Ikwity is always certain!" she snapped. "Sees front to back, Ikwity does." Her voice lowered to a mutter. "Ikwity sees. Is certain. A month, he gets."

Something . . . passed. The dappled sunlight, filtered through the canopy of leaves high above, seemed to blink. The old woman never took her eyes from me, but . . . I can't describe it. Something happened. Some healing pushed into me, something cooler than Sky magic and warmer than Sea magic. In an instant, I felt refreshed. Stronger. My head no longer throbbed, and the absence of that pain

was an almost physical shock. My muscles felt . . . healed. My stomach felt full and satisfied and peaceful for the first time in days.

Before me, the old woman seemed to stumble before catching herself. The man ran to her side, kneeling down and taking hold of one arm. She shook him off. "Ikwity has plenty of months," she said, as inscrutable as she'd been all day. "Now, boy, Ikwity needs something from you."

"For that healing? Name it," I said confidently. I hadn't felt this good in . . . well, a month.

"Healing?" she said with a scowl. "Not healed. Rested. What Ikwity needs now is your word. When a Summons comes from the woodwitches, you will heed. Drop everything. If the sky is falling on your precious Tower, you'll come to the Wood as called. Instantly. And you'll do whatever the woodwitches ask of you. And then you'll go. Stay no longer than you must, do no magic that isn't strictly necessary."

I nodded firmly. "I can do that. At least until this is over and we figure out how to—"

"No!" she snapped at me. "No! Not until. No *until*. Ikwity has gifted you something no other has received! She will have your word *forever*! You and all your successors, hear me? Ikwity binds you boy, binds you and your Axis, until the end of the world! Heed the woodwitches! Protect the Last Bastion!"

My eyes widened, and I found myself nodding mutely. Her tirade had caught the Axis's attention as well, and it sniffed curiously about her now. Her head snapped to one side and then the other, as if she could sense the Axis's attention on her. It pulled back sharply, regarding her with a keen, confused interest. She smelled of . . . nothing to it. Any other creature, any other object it had ever encountered had an End ahead of it, and it smelled that End. This woman had no such scent, only one the Axis couldn't identify. Something ancient yet new.

"Your word, boy, not the bobbling of a head."

"My word," I said softly. "My word," I repeated louder. "You have it. But—"

"No exceptions," she scowled.

"Ikwity—"

"Call me Aunt."

I sighed. "Aunt, I'm not even sure how this will end." I already suspected either Aron or I would have to . . . step down. "I may not survive."

She took a step closer to me, peering up into my eyes. "But you may. Ikwity thinks you will."

She nodded solemnly, and I felt the obligation settle on me. She turned and marched off through the wood, quickly losing herself in the soft shadows.

The man who'd been kneeling next to her rose. "You've received something special," he said quietly. "And you've taken a serious oath. Thank you for your help."

"What about—" I said, turning around. The giant scorpion was gone.

"We've handled it," he said coolly. "Dangerous to leave even the corpse of that thing lying around."

I met his eyes. They were older than I'd originally noticed, carved with years and sights that I couldn't imagine. "My name is Daniel," I said.

"Corbin," he responded. "I do not envy you the task before you."

"Healing magic, you mean?"

He snorted slightly. "If that's all you think this is. Go now. We will call you when we need you."

When, not *if*, I noticed.

My Axis still seemed tattered edges. Whatever healing Ikwity had given me hadn't changed the fact that magic was broken, and the Axes along with it. I wrapped the Axis gently around myself and ordered it to take us home.

CHAPTER 19

A Tower in Disarray

The split second of icy-black Axis travel ended in an almost equally cold, biting wetness. I thrashed, struggling to gain some kind of purchase with my feet. I was in the ocean. I thrashed more intentionally when I realized it, treading water to keep my head above the waves and twisting this way and that to find something, anything, on which I could stand. The Axis flitted to and fro, keening wildly, and although I could have tried having it take me out of here, I might actually be better off where I was.

I caught sight of land, my island. I thrashed again—it was my best imitation of proper swimming—and hoisted myself up onto my tiny beach. Panting, sodden, and cold, I crawled onto the gray sand. I pushed myself upright with the aid of a gray boulder and began trudging up the narrow footpath to the Tower.

The entrance door cracked open as I approached, almost as if the Tower was apologizing for my Axis's behavior. As I stepped inside and made my way to my bedroom, I saw that the Tower had plenty of its own apologizing to do. The directionless magical lighting that always filled the place was haphazard: the stairs were in their soft, yellow-orange night mode, while my bedroom was pitch black. The washing room was day-bright, the hallway somewhere in between. "Would it be too much to ask for a mug of hot kavos?" I asked as I

stepped out of my drenched clothing and toweled off. Trying to End my wetness felt too risky. "Bread and cheese as well. It doesn't need to be toasted. You don't even have to slice it." I was finally starting to warm up as I slipped on fresh clothes and made my way to the small dining room.

I sighed as I stepped in. One *driežai*, its shadow form looking more solid than I'd ever seen, was perched on the far corner of the dining table, flickering madly but not moving. In front of it was an entire loaf of dark-brown bread, an uneven lump of yellow-white cheese, and a crock full of black liquid. Kavos, although obviously not hot, and I had no idea how I was meant to drink it from a crock. "Fine." I sighed, settling into a chair. The *driežai* remained where it was, its edges wavering in and out like a shadowy candle.

Atop everything else that had been going wrong, a malfunction here and there in the Tower seemed more like an annoyance than a worldwide emergency, but I was well aware that these effects were mere symptoms of the larger—

I dropped the hunk of bread I'd just torn off.

The Foundation.

If magic was failing, then would the Foundation remain intact? I stood so quickly that the chair I'd been sitting in toppled over backward, clattering to the floor. The *driežai* seemed to shift slightly toward it, but otherwise didn't move. I ran out of the room before I realized I had no idea how to get to the Foundation. The Axis had always taken me there.

The thought stopped me cold. I needed to check the Foundation. I absolutely did not trust the Axis's Form of Travel right now. I also had no choice. I wasn't even sure if the Foundation was accessible by ordinary means. Wait, I did have my personal magic. Would it be more reliable? I ran through the travel magics I knew off the top of my head, but they were all meant for quickly traversing great distances, not accessing hidden underwater caverns. I clenched my jaw: the Axis was the only option.

It came to me quickly when I summoned it, although it was in obvious disarray. "Just the Foundation," I said aloud as I marshaled my thoughts, focusing everything I had on a mental image of the

Foundation, the cold, dry smell of the cavern, and the rough feel of the outer walls. "Quickly."

The Axis coiled around me and everything went black.

My vision returned in the dim, silent cave that sat far beneath the Tower. I clenched my teeth as my stomach flip-flopped, but it remained otherwise obedient.

I looked up at the tall, glossy black pillar that rose from the cavern floor high into the inky darkness above. The Foundation, the pillar upon which the entire Tower rested. The prison for the souls of every prior adherent of the Sixth. The thing that kept the Tower upright, that fueled its magics, and that—not incidentally—helped maintain the Veil that hid witchkind from humans.

It seemed fine—that is, it hadn't shattered into a thousand pieces, which is what I'd half expected to find down here.

I walked up to the Foundation and carefully laid a hand on it, avoiding any of the many fractures that I and my predecessors had created when we'd opposed the Axis's will and inclinations. The Foundation's glassy surface was cool to the touch but not cold. I leaned my weight on it, slowing my breathing, willing my heartbeat to slow as well. I focused solely on the Foundation and *listened*.

Now that I knew of their unending, not-entirely-willing existence, I could sense the souls of my predecessors. They churned within the Foundation, moving alongside each other in a slow, eternal vortex. They seemed—I hesitated to use the term *normal*, but they seemed *usual*. Whatever was happening to the Axis, the Foundation seemed like an anchor, a pillar of calm in the magical storm that roiled everywhere else. The Veil, which I'd learned to sense before the debacle with the Fifth Axis, was intact, awake, and doing its job. In fact, as I stood here, lightly communing with the spirits of the past, I sensed the Axis curling around the Foundation, its presence growing firmer and its attention more focused. Simply being here seemed to steady it, perhaps due to the hundreds of incorporeal hands who helped hold its chains. The presence of those souls steadied me as well, the weight of their centuries counterbalancing the chaos I'd been dealing with.

I heaved a sigh of relief as I pushed myself back from the Foundation. At least this part of the world remained stable. For now.

I wondered how the rest of the Tower was faring. More importantly, I need to get a better feel for what my Axis was feeling. The tattered, distracted senses I'd gotten from it over the past couple of days were imprecise. I needed time, and space, to truly reconnect with my Axis. To feel what it felt. The best way I knew to do that lay far above me.

I tensed as I asked the Axis to take me back to the main level, then I exhaled sharply in relief when it deposited me near the central staircase without so much as a twinge in my guts.

I hurried up the stairs to the first level, where the communications logs of every adherent, including myself, were maintained. The shelves upon shelves of thick journals seemed undisturbed, although the shadow servant that normally attended to them was nowhere to be seen.

Up to the second level, where the map table sat. Its shadow attendant was also missing, and my heart sank as I saw that the surface of the table itself was blank. Whatever the Foundation was doing to stabilize the Axis didn't extend to these ancillary functions.

The third level, my courtroom, was no different: the shelves of reference books were intact, but the shadow bailiff was gone. The fourth level was empty, its walls bare. So, too, with the fifth and sixth.

The seventh level contained a ring carved into the floor. It was from this position, inside that ring, that I could access the Axis's seventh Form of Power: the Demon Horde. I'd never had need to do so, and I certainly wasn't going to now. I hurried upward. The eighth level contained a chair that was now useless to me. I'd sat there as an apprentice adherent, Ended myself, and accepted the mantle of adherent of the Sixth.

The central stairs ended at the eighth level, but a cleverly concealed set of side stairs led to the Tower roof. Here I'd taken meals in the crisp sea air and enjoyed the view of the choppy gray ocean. This is also where I'd always felt the strongest connection to the Axis, for some reason. Perhaps it was the relative peacefulness of the view, the ability to forget the Tower and its complicated purpose. And so I leaned on one of the crenelated walls that surrounded me, closed my eyes, and *reached*.

My connection to my body loosened as a sank into the Axis itself, entreating it to share its awareness with me as it had in the past.

The Axis came to me in a ragged spiritual wind. It curled around me, swooping away and carrying my consciousness with it. We dove down to the surface of the sea, skimming along in the light spray of the waves.

Magic was safe. Its generous flow from the other world had briefly slowed to a trickle, threatening my body and soul. But the clever girl, she with her rainbow-hued vision of magic, had saved me. Had saved them all. She, the Keeper and Builder. She, the one who had held my hand.

She, the one who had reshaped me—given me a firmer form and greater purpose. Who had entrusted me with all her people, those special people who belonged with me. She who had brought her allies and their bright, shining magic to me.

I sang my song for them, caressed their magic with my elemental hands, gentled it and shaped it to purpose.

I inhaled sharply, pulling my consciousness back into my body. The sensations, the glimpses—the thoughts. Was my Axis . . . did it think? Was it sentient? Five years in the Tower, three years as its adherent, and I had never felt that. Even now, the experience triggered no memories, no recollections from my predecessors, nothing that suggested the Axis had its own mind, its own thoughts.

Of course not, I thought with a sharp, bitter realization. *We were too busy telling it what to do.*

I sent my mind out after it again. Its awareness stayed close to the Tower, slipping in between the rocky spikes that covered most of the island, spiraling up into the cool, gray sky.

I was lonely. Incomplete. *Sundered*. I'd felt that way for a long time, I realized, but over the centuries I'd managed to set it aside and focus on whatever was current—on whatever my avatar, my link to the world, demanded. But I often lacked such a link, and in that in between, I found myself longing to be complete. Whole again. Unified. *One*.

I remembered how it had once been. I had been a loop, a circle. Everywhere, all across the world, things Began and Ended. The two were so intertwined, so closely connected, that they existed not as two halves, not as two beings, but as a commingled one. Lives Ended, and lives Began. The mewling of every infant was countered by the last sigh of the now departed. Arguments Ended, followed by the Beginnings of peace. Storms Began, expended their rage, and Ended, only to be reborn elsewhere in the world. Crops were harvested, Ending the lives of those plants, only for their seeds to Begin new life in the fresh, fertile soil. A perfect cycle of starts and finishes.

When those special beings, the ones who had come here so long ago, the ones who had belonged here since time immemorial, called to me for magic. I spilled it into the world for them to use. I sat at the center of it all, wrapped in my arms and legs: the Earth and Sky, the Sea and Flame. As the purest of magic flowed through me and out into the world, they colored it.

But then, the Fracture. My arms and legs were pulled away—chained and sequestered. I split in twain, each half longing desperately for the other.

I gasped, a sharp dagger of pain knifing my mind and pulling me away from the Axis. Aron, using this power.

But what had I seen?

I'd seen the Axis, its own memories, its own awareness, unvarnished by the memories it kept locked in the Foundation, uncolored by the spirits of my predecessors. I'd seen the past, from the perspective of . . . what?

Magic. From before the Forging. My own Axis—no, more than that. The Origin. Maybe the fairy tales were true. But it wasn't the

place where magic came from. It cycled it, taking it in and coloring it with the elements.

The Axes had all been part of something once. Some *one thing*.

My answers were here. I sensed it. Knew it.

I closed my eyes again, pushing my awareness into the Axis, for once letting it take control.

I'd grown accustomed to my new divided existence. I struggled to draw magic from the world, sending only a fraction back to my special people. My arms, my body—all remained separate, leashed by dozens upon dozens of individuals, no longer free to roam the world and add their unique tint to magic. I had become focused on half of my existence: creating Endings. Each of these, of course, was also a potential Beginning, but my view had grown lopsided, my awareness of Beginnings hazy and indistinct. I missed the delight of Beginnings' semipermanence and had to content myself with the here-and-gone.

Pure, unadulterated energy lay thick in the world, pooling here and there, but my sense of it was vague and indirect. This was the power I'd known for so long. *Pakeitimas*, it was called. Change. The power to subvert the rules of the world's crude physicality. *Dvasia*, some called it. Spirit.

I knew that my special people couldn't touch this power, couldn't even truly detect it, given their frail, limited natures. It saddened me to see them so diminished, but this is perhaps how they wanted it, how they'd made things for themselves. They'd been the ones to divide me so, and if that was their wish, then I'd accept the burden of a fractured self. Of loneliness.

I grunted as another quick stab of pain jolted me out of my communion with the Axis, and I clenched my teeth to stop myself from cursing Aron. He was interfering very little, in fact, but I'd always hated the breaking of my concentration. And I felt like I was

close, so close. I took several deep breaths, cleared my mind, and reached out once more for the Axis's awareness.

It welcomed me gently but reluctantly. I sensed that we'd come to the bad part.

The present.

Agony. Ache. Burning fever, spams of jerking strain. Torment.

Torn. I'd felt sundered before, but that was the separation of a limb from a body. The limb still existed, a phantom connection holding it to the organism. The limb was gone, *but it* existed.

But this?

The limb was burned away. Only not a limb! Half of the self, half the body, half the mind. Previously unseen but still felt, now seared away. My other half, out there all alone now made solid and separate. Not only taken but put into opposition! Half the being fighting the other, a snake swallowing its own tail.

The energy of life, all the power in the world, now rippled with disruption. What little power still trickled through me and into the world was no longer tinged but tainted: poisoned, bursting forth and then receding; spewing out, then curdling in a toxic pool. I vomited power in waves, felt my distant, detached limbs sputter and flare in sympathy.

I was choking on my own bile. My elemental limbs were listless beside me, waving weakly where once they'd gestured to the edges of reality. We were all dragged down, weighted by our own individuality. Our cohesiveness, once strained, was now shredded.

I fell to despair. To hopelessness. The chains that held me, and those of my long-lost selves, chafed especially hard, cut especially deep.

This was what the End felt like. The End of it all.

I mourned for my special, fragile people. All of this was how they'd wanted it. How they'd made it. Or did they not know?

It won't be long, now. Beneath the world, I distantly feel the two moons, preparing to join each other for their journey through the night sky. Tonight, then, might be the last time I see them.

I swam out of the Axis's consciousness—it was conscious!—as inelegantly as I'd swum out of the ocean less than an hour before. I shook my head as my own sense of self began to reassert itself.

This was it, then. The Axis felt its own Ending, felt the Ending of all of us. The Forging of the Fifth had finally pushed it over, finally disrupted whatever delicate, gossamer threads had held magic together all this time. The other Axes weren't merely misbehaving: they were dying. Magic was dying, and I knew before long that all of witchkind would be bereft. Perish because our souls were comprised solely of magic.

And it would happen soon. Tonight.

I could step down and consign myself to the Foundation. The Sixth Axis would still be bound to the Foundation, but maybe the change would be enough. I could hope for that. With the Fifth chained, perhaps the Sixth would no longer Choose another adherent.

But frankly, the thought of being imprisoned in the Foundation was . . . chilling. I hadn't even lived a quarter century, yet I had to contemplate eternal imprisonment.

And there was another matter, one I'd finally have to admit to myself: I wanted to be an adherent. I did. I'd literally been born to this, bred for it, in a way that no other adherent in the world had. I didn't want to set this power aside. Dedicant Ormand's words echoed in my mind, but I couldn't help it: this was who I was, who I was meant to be.

That left the alternative: to End Aron and hope that would release the Fifth Axis and restore whatever delicate balance had existed in the world. But Aron certainly didn't deserve it. Other than the priest in Twynsits, I'd never Ended someone who hadn't asked for it, and Ending Aron would be the definition of untimely, the perfect reason for another fracture to appear in the Tower's Foundation. But the flaw in this plan was even simpler than that.

I didn't want to End Aron.

He was a victim here, as much as Mother had been. Without the

slightest bit of informed consent, he'd been drawn into the schemes of his clan's elder.

How could this be the destiny our families had designed for us? The culmination of all their plans, of all their scheming, of the original Forging of the Axes—how could it all come down to Ending everything? If what Hendrik had said was true, then our families had helped build this world for us, had brought everyone here on their Exodus, had—

Wait a moment.

Our families.

Maybe they did have the answer to this. What if we'd not been proceeding according to plan? What if the Karal had done something wrong? What if using stolen power had made the Forging of the Fifth flawed somehow? What if all this should have worked, but we'd mucked it up?

Could we fix it?

Clenching my jaw and steeling my stomach, I summoned the Axis to me. *Farreach in the North*, I told it firmly. *Safely and with great precision. Take me to the family archive.*

CHAPTER 20

The Family Archive

Nothing happened.

I could still sense the Axis, feel it around me. But it wasn't responding. It was overcome with despair, wrapped in its own thoughts.

It had thoughts. We'd all been so stupid, so shortsighted. All of us, since the Archons and probably even before. The Axes weren't just flavored magic bundled up for us to wield. My Axis *had thoughts*. Since the day I Ascended, I noticed it acting as though it did, but I'd attributed that to misguided anthropomorphism. But no. *The Axis had thoughts.*

But I still needed to get to the archive. "Debesi!" I shouted into the sea breeze blowing around the tower and ruffling through my hair. "I need you!"

I turned toward the whirl of wind behind me. Debesi touched down on the Tower's roof, looking drawn and wan. She steadied herself, arms partly outstretched. "Daniel," she said, a slight catch in her voice. "It's becoming difficult."

"I know," I said urgently. "The Sixth is ignoring me. It's—no, there's too much to tell. I need to get to my family's archive. It's in Farreach, the one in the north. Can you take me?"

She nodded, although her expression didn't give me a lot of confidence. "I can try. It may not be comfortable."

"I've gotten used to that."

"Where exactly?"

She wouldn't be able to take me directly into the archive. "The lake along the side of the town. In the cliffs. There's a tall pillar of stone, just in the water off the shore."

She stepped forward, taking my arm. "Brace yourself." I clenched my stomach, and we were off.

The experience was markedly better than Gemma's travel magic: Debesi moved so swiftly that the world became a colorless blur. We set down on the rocky shore within seconds and were immediately beset by a raging wind blowing so hard we had to crouch down to retain our balance. It blasted unrelentingly.

"This isn't natural!" Debesi shouted over it, her hair whipping into her face. "And my Axis—I don't think it wants to stop it!"

"Then we have to hurry!" I shouted back. "Follow me! Stay close!"

The air was full of ice particles and grit. I squinted against it, orienting myself, and ran toward the cliffs. I thrust my hands against a particular section of rock and fed a small burst of my personal magic into it.

The absence of wind came suddenly as we entered the hidden space in the stone. Debesi and I fell against the rock wall behind us, the trip jarring. We righted ourselves, and I ran down the short corridor into the main room of the archives.

"What is this place?" Debesi asked as she used her fingers to rake her hair back into place. Her voice echoed in the room.

"A family archive. My family's and Aron's. We were of the same family, if you go back far enough." I'd run to a specific section and began pulling books from shelves. "Or two families in the same clan. I'm not sure. Doesn't matter. Come here, help me."

"What are we looking for?" she asked, taking a half dozen books from me.

"There's a worktable," I said, pointing to the center of the room with a jerk of my chin. "These are the oldest books here. We're looking for anything on the history of magic."

"History?" Debesi sounded dubious, but she carried the books to the table and began flipping through the first one.

I joined her with another stack. "My Axis—I got into its mind. It knows what's happening. It's sentient, I think. It remembers when we came here. Witchkind, that is. All of us." I struggled to recall the exact scenes and feelings that had flashed through my mind so quickly. "Magic used to be stable. My Axis and the Fifth together formed the Origin. But Forging the Fifth broke everything. Something to do with pure magic—witchkind can't Gather it, can't even really sense it." I was babbling, and I forced myself to stop.

"And so we're looking for . . . what?"

"I don't know. Maybe Clan Karal did something wrong when they Forged the Fifth. Their family, my family—they've been plotting to control both Axes since the Archons. Beginnings and Endings. Mine ran a breeding program and created me, someone they knew the Axis would Choose."

"You can't be serious." Debesi had stopped flipping through pages and was giving me a serious, skeptical glare.

"It's all in here!" I said, waving my hands to indicate the books surrounding us. "But we don't have time. I need to find what the plan was supposed to be. Find if we can fix something."

"Stand back, then," she ordered, taking a step back herself. "Let's see if this still works." She lowered her hands to her side, took in a deep breath, and then commanded, "*Dangaus rankos, žodžiai, kurių mes ieškome!*"

A rune flared in the air, visible even to me:



Gusts of air began blowing around the room, kicking up light clouds of dust. They circled rapidly, following the outline of bookcases that lined the circular room.

A few moments later, those gusts died out.

"Nothing," Debesi said, shaking her head. "There's nothing here. The magic worked, but the winds found nothing on the history of magic or the Forging of the Axes."

"But it has to be here! They had to have a plan, this was where they—"

"There's nothing." She looked sad.

I ground my molars so hard I was surprised they didn't shatter. There *had* to be an answer here! If not . . . I was left with Ending Aron. I shook my head. "No. Do it again. The prophecy, this time."

"Prophecy?"

"Trust me."

She repeated her magic, and this time a slim volume slid off a shelf, flipping end over end in the gusting wind until it landed on a table before us. The wind blew its cover open, riffling the pages until it came to one with just four lines of text centered on the page:

Sky and Earth, Flame and Sea
Cast adrift, their center lost
Until a Sixth might come to be
To join them all, or pay the cost

Debesi read it, and then looked back at me. "This sounds like Aron."

"It's been around for a long time, apparently. My great-great-grandmother recited it to me after I was Chosen, but before I went to the island. I thought. . ."

"It was about you."

I shrugged. "Obviously."

"So Aron needs to join them all? All the Axes?"

"Sky, Earth, Flame, and Sea cast adrift. Center lost—that must be the Origin."

"This doesn't mention Endings or Beginnings."

"Does it need to?"

"Daniel." Her voice was both sharp and warm, resonant and sad. I turned from the book to look at her. "You said your Axis has a mind. What . . . what does that mean?"

"The Fifth and Sixth—they aren't just powers. They're the same being, but it's split and dying. Endings and Beginnings were supposed to be one. They *were* one, before the Archons." My voice was small now. How could I have failed? How could the archive not have the answer? I don't want to End Ar—

"Everything was fine up until the Fifth was Forged."

"Beginnings were always free," I said quietly. "When they were, it was enough. The Sixth wasn't . . . it used the word *sundered*. That was enough to retain . . . I don't know. Balance. Forging the Fifth put it in opposition with itself."

Debesi was quiet for a long, long moment, but she never took her eyes off mine. "Daniel," she said very softly, "what if you stepped down? Released your Axis?"

"It won't work," I said, choking back a sob. "I mean, it might help. But the Tower . . . that's how the Sixth stays chained between adherents. It won't truly be released."

She tilted her head very slightly. "And is that all?"

My eyes widened, and a tear fell from one. "No." I shook my head. I wanted to look away, but I forced myself to hold her gaze. "No. I don't want to." I did sob, then, and the tears rolled thicker down my face. "I want to be an adherent. I have so much. I can do so much. They meant for me to . . . Mother sacrificed so much. I—" I was crying now, my nose running as fast as my eyes, my throat clenching with emotion even as a light prick of pain shot through me.

"Please don't cry."

Aron had stepped into the room.

CHAPTER 21

Farreaches

"Aron!" Debesi said, surprise in her voice.

"What are you . . . how did you get here?" I asked, wiping my face on my sleeve. All of my emotions, all of my frustrations, bundled into a neat package named Aron. We'd found nothing, leaving me with one terrible option. I didn't know if I'd be able to do it. My eyes misted over again as I looked at him.

"Farreach," he said simply, his head craning to take in the entire room. "The one in the south. I felt . . . you. It brought me here. What is this place?" His voice was firm, centered, and his expression thoughtful.

"A family archive." I sniffed, still wiping my face. "Our family."

"The woman in the portrait," he said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder. "She looks like Mother."

"An ancestor. But yes, there's a strong resemblance."

He stepped into the room, walking slowly to the worktable, stepping within arm's reach of me. He raised one finger, placed it on my cheek just below my eye, and let it fall slowly down my face. My skin tingled at his touch, and I felt my Axis's attention suddenly return, sharp and curious. "You shouldn't cry." His voice was gentle, his expression concerned.

I let out a choked laugh. It was a wry, hollow thing, tinged with a touch of self-mockery. My eyes were still moist, and my voice quivered as I said, "There's plenty to cry about." *I have to End you*, I thought miserably.

"Why?" The innocence packed into that one syllable all but cracked my heart.

"Magic is faltering," Debesi answered, her own voice sad and soft. "Dying, maybe. When your Axis was Forged, it broke something, and Daniel doesn't know how to fix it." She smiled a tiny, gentle smile that made me want to start sobbing again. "Daniel's always believed he can fix things."

"I know I can't," I choked out, biting the insides of my cheeks to keep myself from tearing up again. There were no answers. The so-called prophecy meant nothing. *This is what the Ending of hope feels like*, I realized as my heart clenched into a tight knot.

"Aron, did you say Farreach in the south?" Debesi asked.

"Mmm-hmm." He turned and began scanning the room again, his attention distracted.

"Daniel," she said to me in a low voice, "we came in—"

"I know. The two places are linked. I don't understand it either. This place sits between them somehow. The north side is my branch of the family, the south his. There are portraits of—"

"Has this always been here? Always this way?"

"I've no idea. I think so. Some of the books are centuries old. They go back to the Forging."

"The stories," Debesi breathed, looking at the door Aron had come through.

"What stories?" I sniffed, wiping my face again in an attempt to get my nose to stop running.

"*Dangaus rankos, žodžiai, kurių mes ieškome*," she said again, her voice much gentler this time. The same rune flared briefly in the air.

"Oh!" Aron said as the gusts of wind once again raced around the perimeter of the room. But this time they handled their task quickly, sliding a book off a shelf, then bearing it to the worktable. They flipped open the cover with a quick puff and riffled the pages to nearly halfway through.

Debesi put a finger on the page, running it along as she traced the words. "Yes, yes. This. This right here."

I wiped my eyes again as I tried to read what she was pointing to. "This is all in the True Language." I squinted as my beleaguered brain tried to translate. "*Nexus, vieta, kur bus sujungtos šios galios. Jis sėdės tarp čia ir ten, tarp susigiminiavusių dvasių, tarp susijungusių vietovių*." I uttered it hesitantly, struggling with the pronunciation. I was accustomed to a word or two in the True Language, but I'd rarely needed to read entire phrases. "A nexus?"

"A place where those powers shall be joined." Debesi intoned. "Do you know the next bit?"

I stared at the words, mouthing them out silently. "Between here and there . . . I don't know that word."

"It's *twinned*," she said. "It shall sit between here and there, between twinned spirits."

"Between . . . connected?"

"Close. *Joined* is better. Joined locations. *Locales* is the literal." She took a deep breath. "A nexus, a place where those powers shall be joined. Between here and there, between spirits twinned, between locales joined."

"Joined," I said, my eyes flicking to the prophecy. My heart began beating faster.

"That was my thought, yes," she said quietly.

My heart beat faster. "What is this book?"

She closed it and ran her finger along the title that was embossed into the front cover. *Pasakos Apie Prižiūrėtojus ir Statybininkus.*

"The Tales of the Keepers and the Builders," I said quietly. Aron giggled softly. "How do you know this?"

"Mesla loaned me a copy once. I'm an avid reader."

"What's it about?"

"It's a fairy tale, Daniel. A collection of them. Written for children. This one is about a man and a woman whose love for each other is greater than any power in the world. Destined to be together from birth, if not before. But they're separated, kept apart by some great evil. But it's prophesied that they will be reunited in some special, secret place. A nexus."

"Does it happen?" I whispered.

"It does, but it makes the story sadder. They sacrifice something for each other. Doing so bonds their spirits."

"Doesn't sound like a fairy tale to me," Aron cooed, rocking toe to heel, his eyes pointed up at the domed ceiling. Then his eyes dropped to the first book, still opened to the prophecy. He ran his finger along the lines as he read them. "Is this about me?"

"We think so," I said heavily.

"No, no, no," he said in his singsong voice. He wandered away from the table, running his hand along the spines of books on the shelves. "I don't think I'm up for that. Or is it down? Perhaps sideways, hmm."

"Debesi, if our families wrote this . . . " I said, ignoring Aron and looking into her eyes.

"There's another story in here," she said, tapping the cover. "A story of a child who was lost in the woods and separated from his family. He was adopted by another and stayed with them for many years. His adopted family wound up doing business with his birth family, and that's when they discovered his true parentage. He was reunited, and they all lived happily ever after."

"Happily ever after!" Aron chirped. He continued walking the perimeter of the room, running a finger over the book spines.

"If the Fifth Axis was the one that was lost in the woods," I said, trying to make the story make sense.

"Then it needed to be taken up by another family before it could return to its own," Debesi finished. "Daniel, there are copies of this book in half the homes of witchkind. Keepers and Builders were just names, though."

"No they weren't," I said evenly. "Statybininkai and Laikytojai. Builders and Keepers. Those were the names of our family branches. From the time of the Exodus."

"But the Exodus is just a—" Debesi stopped, her mouth open but refusing to form the last words.

"Fairy tales!" Aron cried from across the room. "My voices tell me all kinds of them. I like the ones with happy endings."

"The Exodus wasn't just a story," I told her. "Have you heard of *Prisiminimų Saugotojas*?"

"Keeper of Memories. Yes, it's a very old magic. You run across it in some of the oldest histories. It was a credential. When someone proclaimed themselves a Keeper of Memories, you knew you could trust what they'd written. That it was accurate."

"I spoke with one."

"Impossible."

"It was this morning, Debesi. Early." Had it really been that recently?

"Where?"

"Witchhold. Clan Karal locked him up when they thought they didn't need him anymore. His memories go back to the Exodus."

"You can't possibly think—"

"My Axis's Form of Mind, Debesi. I can sense lies when I use it. He was telling the absolute truth."

She blinked at me for several moments. Aron continued wandering around the room, humming softly and off-key. "So the Exodus was real."

"Yes."

"The Keepers and Builders."

"Were real. Were my family."

"This is incredible."

"You're the one who believed in the Origin," I pointed out.

"You've pretty much proven its existence," she countered.

Our attention slowly returned to the book lying on the table. "So this book was their plan?" I asked.

Debesi shrugged. "Or a retelling of it. Or maybe nothing. But you have to admit, it's awfully specific to our situation: a nexus where twinned souls meet in a place of joined locales."

"But what do we do with it?"

"We could dance." I jumped at Aron's voice so close behind me. His expression was serious now, all the mad humor vanished. He took a step closer and embraced me.

My Axis flooded my body then, pulsing warm and strong inside me. I gasped with the shock of it as Aron's embrace continued.

I felt . . . I didn't know what I felt. Pleasant. This was . . . pleasurable, even. But distant. The feeling wasn't coming from me. Was it? "Aron, I—"

"Hush," Debesi whispered behind me. "It's his Axis, Daniel. And yours. Can you feel the Sixth? Right now?"

"Very much so," I said, forcing myself to relax into Aron's embrace. It felt . . . right. I wrapped my arms around him, and my Axis swooned inside me.

"This is the closest they've been, physically, in centuries," Debesi said, her whisper even softer. "Beginnings and Endings."

"The Origin," I whispered back.

"But still in two bodies," Aron said, breaking his hold and pushing me back again. "Or is it three?" He looked over my shoulder at Debesi, his forehead wrinkling. "Nope!" he decided, his face once again filling with madness. "Just the two. Still a problem. A problem for a puppet!" he finished in a singsong voice.

"What do you mean, a puppet?" I asked.

"Me!" His face lit up in delight. "I'm the puppet! Puppet on a string, do what the elders say. Storms here, earthquakes there, Create this, Begin that. Dancing, dancing on my strings!" He giggled again, and this time it felt unhinged.

My Axis spun slowly away, leaving a morose taste of dejection in my mouth.

"But they'll be ever so disappointed, won't they?" Aron asked, gently punching me in the chest. "I hate them, you know," he continued, his voice and expression shifting like quicksilver into heartfelt anger. "Hate them for Mother. Hate them for me." His expression softened. "Hate them for you." He turned away, once again scanning the room as if looking for something in particular. "I've ruined them, you know."

"Ruined who?"

"The elders. The whole clan. Mother and I are clanless now, you know. So I've ruined them. Pergalės!" he yipped. "They'll call them *nesėkmės*, now! *Neturtingas*!"

Failures. Destitute. "How? What have you done?"

"All of their businesses, their precious precious businesses, will all fail. I've Begun a series of events that will devastate them."

"But . . . if it ruins their businesses, isn't that an Ending?"

He turned back to me, cupping my face in his hands, his eyes wide with joy. "Beginnings and Endings, same thing!" He released me and spun a tight pirouette, coming to a rest facing away from me, once again scanning the room.

"He's going," Debesi said in a low voice behind me. She'd stepped closer. "His mind. He wasn't Chosen for this, and it's breaking him."

"We're all going, Debesi. We're all breaking," I replied. "It's just happening to him sooner."

"What do you mean?"

I turned back to her. "My Axis doesn't think magic will survive the night." Her eyes widened. "The twin moons will rise, and it doesn't think it will see them again after."

"Beginnings and Endings, same thing," Aron chanted.

"But they're not!" I shouted, suddenly overcome. "They should be the same thing, but we've chained them! Chained them, and we can't both exist! " Another sob closed my throat, and I felt more hot tears running down my face. "I can't stop being what I am. I don't want to. I can fix it. I have to."

Debesi took my shoulders and turned me around. She kept her hands on them, standing right behind me. She felt like a cool solidity at my back.

Aron stepped up, running a finger down one of my cheeks again. "We can be together, you know."

I shook my head, the tears coming faster.

"My mind isn't holding well. I know that." His voice was lucid and calm again as he lifted a finger to stroke my other cheek. "I think you should do it."

Then everything faded.

I was floating in a warm, inky blankness, the gentle, relaxed sound of my own heartbeat beating softly in my ears.

Around me swirled two long, glowing ribbons, one a bright, scintillating black and the other a deep, sultry white. They were twirling, spinning, and flowing around me in a complex dance. Whenever one came close to the other, they both shone a dazzling, luminous gray at the point of almost-union. But they never touched.

This void was suffused with the joy of reunion—of being so close again after so long. I watched them for a brief, fleeting eternity, marveling at the grace of their dance, awestruck at how they managed to intertwine yet never make contact.

My left arm jerked slightly—the black ribbon was tied to my wrist in a complex, convoluted knot. It hindered the ribbon only a little, and I smiled as they played, twisting and bending, curving and spiraling.

But then the distance between them yawned. One of the ribbons, the one of creamy alabaster, was pulling away.

My awareness expanded. Far off, in the velvety darkness in which I floated, were points of light. Orange, umber, blue, and teal motes were scattered everywhere, like stars in the sky, and I floated among them. Tinier sparks of gold, far more numerous, were scattered here and there between the larger, more colorful specks. The white ribbon seemed drawn to these points of light, curious about them.

The black ribbon tugged on my wrist again, harder now, more insistent.

I didn't want the white ribbon to leave. I could be its companion now, and the two ribbons could continue frolicking, and we could be together.

Panic struck me, and I grabbed for the white ribbon with my left hand, only to clutch emptiness.

Would you keep it?

Dedicant Ormand's words.

It would be less dangerous if I did. If I even could.

Are you certain?

No.

I grabbed at the white ribbon again and again missed as it twirled out of reach.

Agony. Ache. Burning fever, spams of jerking strain. Torment.

Torn.

Sundered.

I clenched my jaw and thrust my hand into the empty void around me, reaching not for the white ribbon this time but for where it was not.

My hand closed on a fistful of silky white.

My world exploded into a billion shining stars.

The white ribbon knotted itself firmly around my left wrist, and the two ribbons resumed their teasing, interlocking play. But this time they didn't struggle to remain distant: they danced closer and closer, one shimmying against the other, patches of glittering gray appearing here and there.

And then everything—everything—imploded into One.

I was falling backward. Debesi, unprepared to take my weight, was falling behind me. She would land on her back, and I would land on her. In front of me, Aron was falling as well, his arms spreading loosely away from his body as he fell.

Almost without a thought, I righted Debesi and myself, Ending our fall and Beginning a new, firmer stance on the floor. Aron jerked upright as well, his head lolling forward. But he didn't regain his balance as we had. Before his body had even come fully upright, he began collapsing again, falling to the floor in a tangle of limbs, a puppet with his strings cut.

"Aron!" I cried, running to him and kneeling by his side. Debesi was only two steps behind me, and she knelt next to him as well. I shook him. "Aron!" His body was limp. I shook again. "ARON!" His eyes were closed, his lips parted slightly.

"Daniel," Debesi said, putting her hands over mine. "Stop. He's gone. His air has left him."

I stared in shock. "He—" My throat closed and I couldn't finish.

"He stepped down," she said softly, her voice gentler than I'd ever heard it. "He Began a new life . . . elsewhere."

Emotion, too much of it and all raw, boiled up inside me. I

opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. I knelt there, gaping like a fish and choking on my own breath, until Debesi stood, pulling me up with her.

"The Fifth Axis, Daniel," she said. "What of it?"

Ribbons of white and black, playing and twisting around me. "I have it," I managed, my eyes hot and wet. I looked at her. "I have them both."

Her eyes widened. "The Origin, then? You—"

My vision filled with gray light.

I was now floating inside a dazzling gray sphere shot through with loops of white and black. Beyond the walls of the sphere, I could make out all those glowing, multicolored points of light.

Healed. A voice, rich and sonorous, both high and low pitched, filled my mind. *United.*

"Magic is saved?" I asked desperately.

Sad resignation tinged the sphere. *Broken still.*

The darkness beyond the sphere grew lighter and lighter until I could see the entire world spread out before me. It was like a gigantic version of my map table, only somehow more real, more detailed, more immediate.

Pools of white lay thickly here and there, clustered around the larger towns and villages. *Pure magic*, the Origin's voice told me. *Look closer.*

I did and saw a tissue-thin layer of magic. It once covered the world, I knew, and it was filled with thin, swirling threads of color. But the tissue had torn. Large sections of the world were now uncovered, and although the contours of the land looked sharper, they also looked dingier—both more real and less real at the same time.

Heal, the voice said softly.

I inhaled sharply as the family archive reappeared around me.

"Daniel?" Debesi said with concern.

I gasped. "It's not . . . it's still broken." I turned to the table, rudely pushing Debesi aside, and began flipping through the books, moving quickly from one to the other, showing the pages poor treatment in my haste. "Here," I said, pointing to a rune construct. It was a complex structure, full of precise, interlocking lines and delicately rendered symbols.

"This is Old Runic," Debesi said, confusion on her face. "I don't understand."

"Could you empower this? Right now, if you had to? Assuming your Axis was working?"

"I . . . no. I don't think anyone could."

"Why not?" I already knew the answer.

"There's not enough magic in the world. Nobody could Gather this much. Even with the Axis, this is too much."

"But people could, back then."

She eyed me curiously. "What are you getting at?"

"What has changed?"

She sighed. "The Axes, of course. You needn't convince me. The world's power is now bound up in . . . us. Adherents"

"And it isn't healing."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm . . . " I paused, struggling to form a cohesive explanation. Then I shrugged and decided just to blurt out whatever I could. There was no time for precision. "I hold both Axes now. Fifth and Sixth. The Origin. That's what the Origin is. But it's not enough anymore. Magic was pushed too far. Pure magic is welling up, pooling in places, but the Origin . . . I don't know how to describe it. The magic witchkind uses, the power that's been gentled, it—"

"Gentled?"

"That's how it described it. I don't know, this just happened. It's gone too far. Ordinary magic is torn. There are areas with no magic now. There was a cycle. A balance. It's disrupted, and I can't get it back." I paused and looked deeply into her eyes. The Fifth wasn't the only Axis in chains.

"You don't have to convince me," she said quietly.

I bent down and picked up Aron's body, cradling him in my arms. "I know. I need to convince them. But first . . . Aron had a mother."

CHAPTER 22
News

I took myself, still holding Aron, to the tree he'd made. Gemma was sitting outside, perched on one of its massive roots. She looked up as I appeared, her face falling as she saw my burden.

"I'm sorry," I said softly as I knelt and laid her son's body on the soft, fragrant grass.

"How?" she asked, a catch in her throat. She knelt next to Aron and ran a hand over his face, closing his eyelids.

"I'm not certain," I said truthfully. "He knew we couldn't both exist. He told me to—" I stopped as my throat grew tight.

"Your Axes," she said, nodding slowly as she looked at him. "They weren't supposed to be separate. You said—" her voice caught again as the tears began rolling down her cheeks. Her chest began to heave as a low, in articulate moan slipped through her lips.

"Gemma," I said softly. She didn't look up. "Gemma, he's not gone. Not . . . entirely."

She looked up at that, her face wet and her eyes reddening.

"It . . . the Fifth, I mean. It's in me now. In a way, so is Aron. I felt . . . it's hard to describe."

Another sob forced its way out of her. "You hold them both now?" I nodded. "And he's with you?" Her eyes begged for it to be true.

"I feel as if he is." And there *was* something more in me. Something distinct, yet whole. A feeling that wasn't of me, but was still me. "They weren't two separate things, Beginnings and Endings. The Archons didn't understand. They wrenched them apart. But the Fifth and Sixth—they're the Origin, Gemma. The elemental Axes are limbs of the Origin, their center."

"And that's . . . in you, now?"

"Yes."

"So is magic fixed?"

I sighed. "There was too much damage done when the Fifth was Forged."

She stared, and I could almost sense her mind working through it. "It isn't enough," she said softly, her eyes welling up again.

I shook my head, my own eyes beginning to tear up.

"So then . . . the other adherents?"

I nodded, my shoulders sagging on what felt like an incalculable weight. "I think so. I'm sure. Yes."

She swallowed heavily. "All of them?"

"Yes."

"Will they . . . I mean, will you have to. . ."

Would I? Would any of them—would *all* of them—lay their power down voluntarily? Would they save me from this? "I'm not sure. I'm going to see them next."

She looked back at Aron. "I can't bury him."

"Is that your clan's way?"

She nodded sadly. "It was. I know it's unusual for witchkind, following the human tradition."

"I can take care of it for you. Here, if you want."

She was quiet for a moment. "Everyone else uses magefire."

"Everyone I've known."

"They're not my clan anymore. Weren't his." She stood, resolve settling into her expression as she looked up at me. "Use magefire." Her eyes were wet, I realized, but she wasn't crying. I wondered how long she'd been preparing herself for this moment.

"I . . . ah . . ." I stammered.

A ghost of a smile skittered across her face. "You don't know how, do you?"

"I don't. With my Axis—"

"Do it your way," she said softly. "You and he were connected. It's right to do it your way."

I looked down at Aron, who looked peaceful for the first time since I'd met him. Sane. I reached for the—no, not the Axis. The Origin. It's two sides, Beginnings and Endings. *The End of his body and the Beginning of whatever is next for him. For all of us.*

Aron's remains sublimated into a cool, pale mist. It swirled around Gemma and me for the briefest of moments before rising into the air and vanishing.

We watched it go and then stood there silently for a long while. "Where will you go now?" I asked, hesitant to break the silence but growing increasingly anxious about what I needed to do next.

"I'll stay here, I think."

"With him gone and with what has to happen, I don't know—"

"If it will remain? It's fine," she said with a small shake of her head. "I should have enough magic to get to somewhere. Have you seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The tree," she said, turning and taking the few steps back to its massive trunk. She looked up and pointed to one of the lower branches. I joined her and looked closely. The leaves were changing. They faded from a brilliant green to orange yellow and back again. "It's been doing this for the last hour or so."

"Our Axes being joined."

She nodded. "I expect so." She turned back to me. "I know you have to go. I'm sorry for what happened."

"I'm sorry about Aron," I replied.

She wrapped her arms around herself, the tears finally starting to trickle down her face. She nodded once, and I took myself to my Tower.

CHAPTER 23

Conclave

I went directly to the Tower's seventh upper level. There was no easy way to summon the senior adherents. Debesi could, and usually did, listen for her name on the wind, but the others had no far-reaching, easily accessed Form of Communication. "Debesi," I whispered, and within seconds, she joined me.

The others I could irritate into paying attention.

More precisely, I could temporarily and lightly interrupt their respective dominions. I'd done so once before when I'd called them together to join me in stopping Clan Karal—a request they'd all roundly declined.

I stood in the circle carved into the floor, Debesi several steps away from me. I concentrated, closing my eyes as I drew upon the Axis of Earth.



Outside, a tall pillar of rock erupted from the ocean, pushing itself into the sky. Mesla would sense this, I knew.

I moved on, focusing on the Axis of Sea.



A wall of seawater leaped upward, forming itself into a tall column. Water poured from the top and down the outside and was refreshed by a constant stream of water that rose in the hollow of the column. Marten would feel this.

Last, I drew upon the Axis of Flame.



A tall gout of fire burst from the sky, rushing down and hissing where it met the ocean's surface. Zmogus would know this was me.

All three elemental obelisks surrounded the Tower, equidistant from one another, and I waited for the adherents to arrive.

Zmogus was first, appearing next to me, opposite Debesi, in a flash of orange flame. I felt Marten's arrival next, and I had the Origin conjure a splash of seawater in front of me. All seawater in the world was as one, and Marten's form emerged from it, a quizzical look on his face. My use of their power was an implicit invitation. Mesla was the last to arrive, rising behind me from the stone floor on which we stood.

I released their powers, and outside the three monoliths collapsed into the ocean.

"Welcome again," I said calmly, turning slowly to meet each one's eyes and exchange a small nod. "I've learned much, and I want to share it with you."

"You've found a solution?" Mesla asked.

"In a fashion."

"You've brought that boy under control?" Zmogus snarled.

I whipped around to confront him. "That boy," I snarled back, "sacrificed himself in an attempt to save us all. I wonder if you will do so much when you are asked."

"Sacrificed?" Marten asked with a frown. "What do you—"

"Aron, adherent of the Fifth Axis, relinquished his power," Debesi said. "I was there."

"So the Fifth is free again?" Mesla asked.

"Or has it Chosen another?" Marten asked.

"Both. Neither," I said. "You've all heard me say that Beginnings and Endings were two sides of the same coin. I was wrong. They were one thing, one *living* thing before the Forging. For centuries, Beginnings remained free, and that provided enough balance for magic to continue working in the world. The Forging of the Fifth chained what the Archons could not."

"So the boy did cause this," Zmogus snapped.

"Shut up," I said calmly. His eyes flashed, but I continued before he could speak. "Aron did not. The elders of his clan did. Elder, actually. One angry old man with designs to rule the world, using power stolen from humans in a monstrous process that, if you will recall, I begged you to help me stop. You all declined, so Karal was able to harvest sufficient power to bind the power of Beginnings into the Fifth Axis. *That* is what caused this—and you all had a hand in it." I turned slowly, meeting their gazes one by one. "In your case, Marten, your predecessor made the poor decision to ignore me."

"You—" Zmogus began in an angry voice.

"Beginnings and Endings are one again," I said, raising my own voice to drown him out. "I hold them, and now the Fifth and Sixth are gone. What remains is their union: the Origin."

Four sets of eyes looked about, then skewered me.

"Daniel," Mesla said carefully in a soft voice, "what are you saying?"

I turned to her. "I am saying that the Origin, what we have always called the source of magic, is real. It consisted of the powers of Life and Death, Beginnings and Endings, Creation and Destruction. Not two sides, but an endless circle. One thing. The same thing."

"And now you . . . what?" Zmogus said. He kept his tone low, but the eternal growl in his voice remained.

"I hold the Origin, just as I once held the Sixth Axis."

"But our problems are not solved," Debesi said sadly.

"They are not," I confirmed, nodding to her. "The Forging of the Fifth broke the delicate flow of magic in the world. The magic that

ordinary witchkind can actually use is running out. By this time tomorrow, it will be gone."

Mesla protested, "But if you hold the Origin—"

"The Origin doesn't produce magic," I said, shaking my head. "Not exactly. The world is still full of magic, but it is too pure—too untamed for witchkind to touch, let alone to use. We have always relied on the elemental powers, which were once part of the Origin, to gentle magic. To tame it. To give it . . . Debesi, what was the word you used?"

"*Lygiavimas*."

"Affinity," I agreed. "But when the Fifth was Forged, more was broken than the connection between Beginnings and Endings. It severed the connection between Beginnings and all of your Axes, all of your elemental powers. Although I've been able to reunite the Fifth and Sixth, your Axes remain apart. Now pure, untouchable magic is pooling everywhere, and none of us can use it. Not in any meaningful way."

"I see where this is going," Zmogus sneered, and I turned, regarding him coolly. "You want all of our powers. You say you've leashed the Fifth—"

A cascade of flower petals rained down around his head, all of them withering into brown dust by the time they hit the floor. "Beginnings and Endings," I said quietly. "But even the Origin's power is limited without its hands. Its limbs. Your Axes."

"Daniel, you can't be serious," Mesla said in disbelief. "What would you have us do? We may be senior among our adherents, but we cannot simply hand you the leash to our Axes!"

"So that you can hold them all, especially! That, I will not stand for!" Zmogus yelled.

"I realize that," I said to Mesla, ignoring Zmogus's bluster. "That is why all of you and every other adherent must step down. All at once before more can be Chosen."

"So that you would then hold all the Axes?" Marten said quietly.

"No." I shook my head. "No, I would as well. I must. *All* adherents must. To free the Axes. To return them to the Origin." I realized

that I meant it. As hard as I'd held to the idea of being an adherent, maybe *this* is what my family meant for me.

No.

This is what I meant for myself.

Aron had seen the truth of it and laid down his power. I could do the same. We all could.

Zmogus, of course, broke the silence. "So that magic can run amok again? Sow chaos and discord as it did before the Forging?"

"That never happened," I said with a sigh. "That was a lie. A justification given to everyone by the Archons. They simply wanted the power for themselves and to further their families."

"I believe he's right," Debesi said.

Zmogus's anger flared at my surprise defender. "And so you would simply step down, Debesi? Let yourself go and counsel all of your adherents to do the same? You're the most numerous of us!"

"I would," she said softly. Her eyes were wet, and I watched a tear begin rolling slowly down one cheek. "But I cannot. I cannot bring myself to do it. And I know none of the others will." Both eyes were running now.

"Because no one sane would step down!" Zmogus cried.

I laughed. A harsh, angry laugh full of irony and pain. "No one sane," I repeated, chuckling as I shook my head. "No, you're right, Zmogus. Righter than you know." I met his eyes. "I couldn't either." He raised an eyebrow. "I couldn't. Couldn't just let it go. 'Don't cling too hard to power.' It's something a very wise man told me recently. But I can't. I can't just . . . let it go. At least, I couldn't. If power must be used, let it be used by those who most need whatever it can provide. I think I can do that. Give it all back to witchkind. Ordinary witchkind. All of them." Then I paused and looked sadly at Marten. "Gilioj did," I amended softly. "He was sane."

Marten nodded, but he didn't look convinced.

"So what are you asking, Daniel?" Mesla whispered.

"To give it up. Not to me. But to them. To your families. Your siblings. Your old neighbors."

"And if we don't?" Zmogus growled.

"Magic will die, Zmogus," I said, letting my voice grow cold. "I won't let that happen to them."

"And now we come to it. You think you can *take* our power?" Zmogus rumbled. His hands clenched into fists, and I felt him gathering the ragged edges of his Axis. I was taken aback by the power he managed. "You round us up, you extort us?" He spat. "You're no better than Pergalės and their Fifth-Forged whelp."

My stomach clenched. He was right, in a way. "Zmogus, you have to—"

"Tell me he's wrong, Daniel," Mesla interrupted, her voice low and dangerous. She started gathering her Axis to her, and I was surprised, too, by the depth and intensity of her power.

"This isn't right, Daniel," Marten said. The salty scent of his Axis's magic filled my nose, again with a wholeness that I hadn't expected.

I sank into the Origin, its view of the world overlaying my own. Magic, tinged with the elemental influence of the Axes, was being pulled toward the Tower, siphoned from the bodies of witchkind—including the junior adherents. Many of them stumbled, not understanding why they were suddenly weak. "Do you not all see it?" I asked them, shaking my head again. "I can now. You're pulling more power. You're drawing it from your adherents. You're leaving them without so that you can have more. Though your Axes feel whole to you, your adherents are faltering. You're drawing all of it to you. Can't you understand your own greed?"

I shook my head, dismissing the vision as I cast the rune that turned the Tower's walls transparent, providing a panoramic view of the sea around us. That sea had grown beyond choppy: huge waves were crashing against the island's rocky shoreline. Balls of fire were raining down, splattering against the island's rocky spires, hissing into the cold, dark ocean. One of the tall spires broke, its tip crashing into the sea.

"Can't you see?" I demanded. "Your selfishness—it's written in the environment around us! All but Debesi," I added more softly, turning to look at her.

Tears flowed openly down her face. "I've always suspected you

were right," she said, her voice wavering. "I won't stop this, but . . . I don't have the courage to confront it."

"Will you step down?"

She choked back a sob and shook her head. "I can't," she cried. "I know I should, but I can't. Forgive me. You'll have to be the strong one of us."

I nodded.

Each of us was an anchor, a means of tying down part of an Axis. But that anchoring part of us wasn't *us*. We weren't born with it; our roles as anchors were imposed upon us when our Axes Chose us.

I'd thought carefully about this. Maybe we didn't have to die. Maybe *we* could continue without the anchors that held the Axes to us.

The Book of Endings, near its very last page, contained a rune for the Ending of an Anchor. I'd seen it as a child but never understood what it was for, and the tiny, handwritten notes suggested it was an experiment, an idea. A notion, nothing more. But perhaps it was a way to end this without the worst.

I held the rune in my mind and empowered it with the Origin, but it wouldn't stay. In my mind, the rune smeared and twisted, falling apart under the Origin's shaking magic.

"What," Zmogus said, his tone low and dangerous, "was that?"

Debesi gave me another sad, resigned smile. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

Our roles as anchors were too deeply embedded in us, then. Or perhaps the Origin simply didn't have enough cohesiveness for such a subtle Ending anymore.

The weather outside the Tower was getting worse, now raging loud enough that we could hear it through the solid stone walls. Fireballs fell thickly, interspersed with heavy rocks and boulders. The waves crashed hard enough to spray the Tower itself with seawater.

"Debesi, join us," Mesla shouted. "I don't know what madness has seized him, but together we can—"

The stone floor split open, and a person began clawing their way out of it. We all stared in horror, the elemental powers drawing back for a moment.

It was a woman, her face covered in grit and dirt. "Mesla," she said, her voice rough and raw.

"Tami?" Mesla whispered.

"Four died, Mesla! Something is attacking us! We need you!"

Tami's power faltered, and the Tower's floor dragged her in, the stone sealing up behind her as if nothing happened.

"What in the Origin's name—" Marten whispered.

"Daniel!" Mesla's eyes snapped back to mine. "What's happening?"

"I told you," I said sadly, shaking my head. "You're all pulling power, but there's not enough to go around. Not anymore. The Origin is disconnected from your Axes, and they from it. You're pulling from the youngest adherents. Draining their magic. Their lives."

Mesla stared at me.

"Debesi," Zmogus ordered, "draw on your Axis! Help us—"

"No," the adherent of Sky whispered. She clasped her hands behind her back.

The room grew hot as Zmogus began pouring the Axis of Flame's power into the air. The waves outside, empowered by Marten and the Axis of Sea, began smashing directly against the Tower.

"Stop," Mesla whispered, her eyes still locked on mine.

Zmogus's attack came first, a searing spear of flame that would have burned a hole directly through me. Almost without thought, I countered, Ending the flame, Ending the heat, and Creating a cool breeze. Mesla's volley followed an eyeblink later, the stone of the Tower's floor splitting open. I didn't even move as the Origin stitched the rock back together and Ended its trembling. Outside, a wave twice the Tower's height rose from the ocean, only to find its End as a cloud of dense, wet, salty mist.

"We can all counter each other," I reminded them as they drew their Axes back for another try. "This is pointless. Look," I added, stretching my fingers toward them and unleashing the dark, rocky spikes that had been the Sixth Axis's Form of Attack.



Zmogus burned his spikes out of the air, and Marten's were smashed to the floor by a conjured burst of water.

"This is pointless," I repeated.

"Listen to him!" Debesi begged.

"Marten, please," Mesla begged.

The adherent of Sea turned to her. "Was that real?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Mesla nodded, tears running down her face.

Marten looked back at me. "There's no other way?"

"It is a sacrifice we must all make," I said. "The Archons erred, and now we must all pay their price."

"You want sacrifice?" Zmogus roared. He thrust his fists upward, and a firestorm descended on the Tower. Even through the stone walls, we felt the heat. "I will gladly die if it means taking you with me!"

I shook my head, and the flames simply ceased to exist. "You're hastening your own defeat," I said wearily. "You're drawing it from the world, leaving places bare and empty. Come tomorrow—for I will counter you until then—magic will be too thin to keep it up." I could see it in the Origin, the shape of the entire world, the places that had grown thin and gray from lack of magic. Patches of bright white, pure magic sparkled here and there. Witchkind couldn't touch them. "Remember the two junior adherents in your fortress? The ones who collapsed?"

His eyes widened, and I saw the first signs of doubt in them.

"What would you have us do, then?" His voice was quiet now, softer than I'd ever heard.

Debesi spoke. "Even if we step down, few other adherents would."

Three heads nodded.

"Then Daniel must do it for us," she cried. "In the manner of the Sixth."

"*Never*!" Zmogus roared, his fury back in force. I felt the Axis of Sea rouse itself, but Marten wasn't giving it any orders. Debesi simply stood, tears running down her face. Mesla fell to her knees, staring at the floor.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

I was already standing in the prescribed circle, as I'd known it would—must—come to this. I drew the rune in my mind.



"*Aš sukviečiu demonų minias*," I whispered. "Every adherent in the world," I whispered to it. "Apprentice and ascended alike. Without exception." Cold tears ran down my face. This wasn't an End to the adherents individually. It was an End to *all* adherents. To the very Age of Adherents. A Beginning to magic being free again.

The power that the elemental Axes could not resist, could not even confront in any meaningful way. This was the power of Endings, the power of the new Beginning that would follow. The invocation of the circle of life itself, Creation and Destruction bound into a single, reunited imperative.

The Origin's power stretched out, quickly covering the entire

world. But this wasn't the Demon Horde of Kirmin's story, wasn't the greatest regret she'd had during her time as adherent. This was something new, formed not of Endings but of the entire Origin: Endings and Beginnings both. Its mission was not to kill but to free. To End shackles. To Begin a release.

All across the continent, power spread in a gentle wave that coated the land. As it touched each adherent, I felt their connection to their Axis crumble, felt the extremities of each Axis coming loose. In ones and fives, the adherents of Flamefast were overtaken. My sense of the Axes themselves became stronger as they were freed: the misty salt of Sea, the sharp freshness of Air, the loamy solidity of Earth, the bright heat of Flame.

As each adherent's anchor fell away, so too fell each adherent. As their bodies released their Axes, they crumpled gently to the ground, like puppets whose strings had been cut. As they fell, I felt a release of tension from each.

The Horde's agents moved throughout the world with a sense of purpose free of malice. They were a cleansing fire, a refreshing wind, restoring something that had been stolen and wrongly bound centuries before.

The spirits of my predecessors trapped in the Foundation howled. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad. I sensed the Foundation itself fracture.

The Tower trembled.

The magic of the Beginnings-crowned *demonų minias* spread to the furthest corners of the world first: distant Bryssi and Lastpointe, Farreach in the south. Then it began creeping back, passing through Greensea and Rushford and Fyngershire and Withring. Little Bay, Hook, and Harbsmouth were next, along with a dozen tiny hamlets in between them. When it struck Evermore, my legs almost buckled as I felt the sudden Ending of a dozen adherents and the sudden Beginning of newly won freedom for their Axes. Farreach in the north, Lakewood, Wisding. The Great Schools: Thornwaith's, Disemstoke's, Duocastella's. Then Northsea, Soloton, and Chiton—adherents fell in each. Landshire, Taliesin, beleaguered Twynsits. Baythwaite and

Sowsea. Carvendam. I swallowed heavily as my power closed in on me. Pease. Nworlons. Meadowside.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as the *demonų minias* returned home.

Debesi smiled again as she toppled to the hard, unyielding floor. Marten fell as well, an unexpected look of joy on his face. I heard Mesla crumple behind me. I endured the hatred and pain on Zmogus's face as he fell, his arms stretched toward me, his fingers alight with a power that flickered and died before my eyes.

The *demonų minias* wrapped me in their cool regard, and I gave a final, hard-earned sigh of relief.

CHAPTER 24

Axes and Origin

But I had forgotten something. Rather, I had never properly understood it: the same thing cannot End twice, unless it somehow Begins again in between.

I had moved past my own Ending three years prior when I accepted the mantle of the Sixth Axis and became its adherent.

I couldn't End again.

But I also couldn't remain in the world—the *demonų minias* had been given strict orders. "Every adherent in the world," I had told it. "Without exception."

As my body ceased to function, my soul was gripped by the remains of the Tower's Foundation. I felt my fading consciousness being inexorably dragged into the cracked, glossy black stone. I felt a moment of horror and regret before resignation set in. I'd known this would happen.

The Fifth and Sixth Axes—the Origin—drifted away from me, freed from my grasp. As my mortal vision faded and a new kind of sight began, I could see the broken threads that had once connected the Sixth Axis to the Foundation. The Axis itself was no more, and so the Origin was unchained. A flood of relief passed through my spirit: I'd accomplished that much, at least.

I neared the Foundation, and I could hear the moaning, immortal

souls of my predecessors. They were loud now, singing an eternal lament for their imprisonment.

My vision faded to gray as I sank.

Into the Origin.

It had returned to me, sweeping me within itself, protecting me from the Foundation. The magic of my soul—the personal power that made me *me*—suffused the Origin, becoming One with it. I would spend the rest of eternity here then, and not in the Foundation. Fine: one prison was as good as another. I relaxed into it, preparing my consciousness to dissipate and fade.

But it didn't.

A guide. The voice resonated through me, vibrating my awareness and my spirit. *An avatar, but not physical.*

What do you mean? I thought to it.

The universe blinked.

I was standing in a meadow. It was night, the twin moon bright overhead. The blue-green grass around me caught the glow, sending a dim version of it back into the sky. The flowers of the meadow glowed as well, shining in impossibly deep colors: indigo, crimson, amethyst, cobalt, jade, and more.

The voice spoke again, booming all around me, coming from everywhere and nowhere: "We used to have a form," it said slowly. "A corporeal presence. Not all could see it, not all could sense it, but it led us." It sighed a soft breeze that ruffled the grass and teased at my eyelashes. "But we have been broken too long to recall it. We require a new mind on which to center ourselves. To be a part of us, to guide us." The grass held still, and everything, even the air, seemed to freeze in place. Then, as if the world had exhaled, everything released, blowing softly once again. "We Choose you. If you will have us. There are works to do. Things to acknowledge. This will not be pleasant."

"I accept." It wasn't even a choice for me.

The meadow vanished, and I was back in a world of endless gray, swirled with threads of black and white. Beyond the gray mist, I could make out the world I'd known, see the entire continent at once. *A moment*, I said. *There's a wrong that needs righting.* I felt its assent and focused on the little island that held my Tower. I drove my awareness

down, down, down—further than I'd ever realized possible—until I reached the Foundation.

I Ended it.

As it crumbled, the souls of my predecessors flew out, their low, mournful hymn briefly turning to a bright, hopeful anthem as they were finally allowed to pass entirely from the world.

I reached down and seized the magic of the Veil. I understood its true purpose at once: long ago, it had served as the barrier between this world and another, pierced by magic to allow passage from one to the next. It hadn't served that purpose for millennia. I gathered it to myself, feeding it directly from the Origin's power, ensuring it would continue to protect my people.

I felt a sense of warning and braced myself, drawing my awareness from the island as the Tower of Endings collapsed into the sea.

I reflected upon the placid waters. Nearly six hundred adherents had died, and I could feel each one's End. Marten, Debesi, Mesla, and hundreds of others I'd never met. I mourned them all, wishing that there had been another way. But the Archons' pride and greed came with a heavy price.

And now, there was work to be done.

I could see the former Axes, their colorful forms twisting through the world, unsure what to do with themselves now that they were unchained. Free. I called to them, and they turned to me, curious and eager. I reminded them of what they once were: extensions of magic that met at the Origin, that extended from it into the world.

They flew back, flew into my hands, swirling around me in excitement.

I fit them back together. Sky to Earth to Sea to Flame. They shone brighter now, a four-armed cross in my hands. I set them down in the precise center of the Origin, and their arms blazed outward, touching all the world, which faded obediently back into view. Pure magic, glowing dully white, pooled deepest near the larger towns and villages. I could see the tattered remnants of the magic witchkind could use, a blanket eaten by moths with only tattered threads remaining.

And then I saw it: the true source of magic.

The pale-white glow of it fountained up from a thousand, a

hundred thousand points in the world. They spilled that raw magic everywhere they were, everywhere they went. They magic's source.

The humans.

I sent the former Axes forward, driving them into the pools of alabaster power. The magic began taking on a slight tint: orange for Flame, indigo for Sky, emerald for Sea, and a deep umber for Earth. As they colored it, the magic thinned, spreading out from its pools to once again cover the world. And cover it, it did! Thicker and more intensely than ever before, coating the continent in a rich, generous blanket of elementally tinged magic.

New motes of light began flaring to life across the world: the people of witchkind, newly empowered for the first time in over four thousand years. They drank from the dense flow of magic, Gathering it into themselves more effortlessly than any alive had dared to dream. And still the magic flowed, replenishing itself at the fonts of humanity.

I swept my awareness across the continent, satisfied.

I could feel the iron in the world now. They were like its bones, threading everywhere in deeply buried seams. They conducted magic, kept it even in the world, and grounded it when it grew too strong in any one area. The humans had plundered those bones and brought far too much of it to the surface. I considered it carefully but saw nothing I could do to correct the situation. Witchkind and humans would have to figure it out themselves.

Something new caught my attention.

In the eastern corner of the Great Northern Wood, an ancient, sleepy magic untinged by elemental color shined its own pearlescent amber. It, to my surprise, held the tail of the Veil. There was a different magic there, one that had withstood the diminishing of magic throughout the world. I considered it for a long while—I wanted to learn of it—but decided to leave it be. Ikwity had demanded that much of me, and I'd made an oath. Until the wood-witches called, the Wood would stand alone.

With another quick glance, I saw a number of other good works I could undertake. Rivers that could be redirected, fields that could be made more fertile. I started to reach out to make the world better,

when I felt resistance. I held for a moment and then relaxed. The Origin was right. I would not become the human god, staring down from the sky, casting down judgment, handling problems so that no one could ever learn or grow. I couldn't fix everything. I probably shouldn't fix *anything*.

I relaxed further, letting my consciousness dim and spread. The Origin surrounded me, and I felt a wash of hope. My connection to it strengthened, and the separation between our awarenesses thinned.

I was no longer alone.

In fact, as I concentrated—rather, as my concentration faded—I could feel the souls of the adherents around me. Every adherent that had ever lived, ever left their mark on the world, ever wielded the awesome power of the Axes. They weren't conscious, but their energies had become one with the world, one with the Origin. With me. I felt lighter as the crushing grief I'd forced myself to ignore was lifted. Yes, they were no longer part of the world, but they had been Chosen. They would persist differently than the rest.

As my consciousness began to fade, the company of those spirits gave me comfort.

The seas, calm and quiet, lapped against the shore.

The winds, cool and gentle, slipped through the trees.

The earth rumbled softly to itself.

A flame, kindled in a stove, burned with a bright, happy warmth.

A man of many decades closed his eyes with a final satisfied sigh.

A baby cried loud and lusty as it came into the world.

I closed my eyes.

Epilogue

The end? Yes, for my part of it at least. The—oh, I see. The End. *Yes, very funny.*

No, only you. As I've mentioned, not many can hear me as I am now.

You're welcome to share. I don't know how many people will believe you, though.

It does give one a unique perspective, sitting in the middle of it all, yes.

Oh, I'll be right here. You have your own story to live, and I'm quite interested to see how it goes.

Also by Don Jones

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The Fifth Axis

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Acknowledgments

I'd very much like to thank some of the folks who support me on my Patreon, at https://patreon.com/donjoneswrites. For a very low monthly donation, which helps offset the literally thousands of dollars that professional editing and cover design cost, these folks get every new chapter as I write them, along with print or ebook copies of every new novel I publish.

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Characters and Pronunciations

ADHERENTS OF THE SIXTH

These are presented in order of their ascension.

- Galas (GAY-lass) End-Bringer
- Skriaudikas (skree-OWD-ih-cuss) the Abuser
- Plaktukas (PLACK-tuck-us)
- Vandens (VAN-dens)
- Gailest (GAYLE-est)
- Kirmin (CUR-min)
- Daniel (DAN-yell) Scratch

OTHER ADHERENTS

- Arun (air-OON) (Earth)
- Cyril (SEER-ill)
- Debesi (deh-BEZ-ee) (Sky)
- Essa (ESS-ah) (Earth)
- Gilioj (GILL-ee-ojh) (Sea)
- Lanna (LAH-na) (Sea)
- Mali (MAH-lee) (Sky)

- Mesla (MEZ-lah) (Earth)
- Mica (MY-kah) (Earth)
- Nuvilnijo (noo-VILN-ee-yo)
- Tomas (TOW-mahs) (Sky)
- Vėjas (VAY-jahz) (Sky)
- Zmogus (ZMO-gus) (Flame)

OTHERS OF NOTE

- Andreas (AHN-dray-us)
- Erškėtis (AIRS-kit-iz)
- Gemma (JEM-ah)
- Garybion (gare-EE-bee-on)
- Ikwity (ICK-witty)
- Laikytojas (Lie-KEET-oh-ess)
- Roze (RAH-zay)
- Statybininkas (stat-ee-bin-IN-kuss)
- Stevas (STAY-vahs)
- Sylphis (SILL-fiss)

THE TRUE LANGUAGE

My real-world inspiration for the True Language is Lithuanian, mainly because, to American eyes, it's an exotic-looking language. Any language with that many diacriticals simply *has* to be magical. But I've taken some liberties with translations and even spellings in order to better fit my needs, so not every word of the True Language translates perfectly in real-world languages. Now, within the story itself, the characters have no concept of Lithuanian—to them, it's just their True Language. The story isn't set on Earth (there are two moons!), and it isn't in any time period we've ever known. As such, the True Language doesn't necessarily have the same pronunciation as Lithuanian. But if you'd like to sound out the words (mentally or aloud), find yourself a Lithuanian pronunciation guide on the internet and give it a whirl.

Below I've provided a few of the more common or notable words

I've used, along with my heavily Americanized pronunciation of them. You'll note that I largely ignore any diacriticals, as English lacks them, and I'm using English phonemes for the letters—even though in some cases, actual Lithuanians assign different phonemes to these same letterforms (there's a good list at http://mylanguages.org/lithuanian_alphabet.php/). Regard the following pronunciations as only an approximate guide—from the lips of the characters, they'd be much more nuanced and lovely, I expect.

And hey—if you've already come up with pronunciations in your own mind, please keep using them!

- *driežai* — dree-ESS-aye
- *kavos* — KAH-voze
- *teisėjas* — tee-ISS-ee-us
- *ramunėlių* — ram-OON-el-you

If you're *truly* wondering, "Don, why Lithuanian when there are plenty of other languages with exciting diacritical marks?" then you simply must read *Clara Thorn, the witch that was found,* and its three sequels.

About the Author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed novels now span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters. He lives in Las Vegas.

Connect, get five (!) free novels and two collections of short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by joining the author newsletter at DonJones.com.

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