

NaNoWriMo 2020

Crafting a 30 Day Novel

By

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Please keep in mind this is a rough draft and is not intended as a final product. This book was provided for the purpose of accompanying my YouTube series of the same name.

Crafting a 30 Day Novel

Eldarlands Publishing

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Story by Levi Samuel.

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First Draft

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Chapter 1

Eavesdropping

The thumping tick of the old analogue clock echoed in my head, drumming away the seconds. I'd like to say I'd be paying some sort of attention but I cannot. I was too excited. You see, today is my thirteenth birthday!

I'd been waiting for the day since I was old enough to understand the concept of time and birthdays. And considering I'm the last of my friends to reach that milestone, I was just happy to have finally caught up.

In addition to my birthday, another event had me equally excited. Today was the last day of school, which left me in the perfect position. I was going to get to be a teenager for the entire summer. Next year I'd be a wholly new person, with experiences and life lessons unknown to the lowly twelve-year-olds.

An obnoxious bell rang through the intercom, pulling me from my daydream.

"Earth to A-A-Ron!" My best friend's voice echoed in my head.

"What?" He'd called me A-A-Ron since the first time we met in kindergarten. I didn't know if it was because he'd had trouble pronouncing my name or because he was making fun, either way I'd grown used to it.

"Finally! I've only been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes."

Raj was notorious for exaggeration but I liked him. Surely I would have known if he'd been talking that long. "We'll, you have my attention now. What is it?" I stuffed my books into my backpack and started toward the door.

"What time do you want me to come over? Oh, and my mom is ordering us pizza. And how many others are coming? I know Mags has a big game planned out but she said she doesn't want a big group."

"What about me?" Our other friend, Mags, was one of the first in our class to hit teenager status. She was already fourteen and several inches taller than me. Her wavy hair was a mixture of blonde with dark streaks and always captivated me.

"Raj was saying you didn't want a large group for tonight's game."

"He's right. Do you know how many are coming?"

I shrugged. I'd only invited a handful of people but I had no idea who all was showing up. Raj and Mags were obvious. We'd only been talking about the big event for a month now, pretty much ever since Raj's birthday. The truth was I didn't really like anyone but them. The sporty kids were good to get in with if you wanted to be popular, which I didn't. And the smart kids were bullied by pretty much everyone. Then you had groups like ours. We were neither involved in extracurriculars or considered overly smart, despite good grades. We simply wanted to get by without too much attention.

"Well, I'll plan for five. More than that and I can't promise a TPK."

“Good luck.” Raj challenged. “My rogue maxed on sneak and move silently last game. You’ll need a nat twenty to even find me.”

I wasn’t sure if it was sunlight hitting us as we passed through the front doors or something else, but I saw the fire in Mags’ eyes. A smirk came to my lips.

“Do you really want to test me?”

“I—um—no.” Raj lowered his head in defeat. It was an unofficial rule not to challenge the GM. That was a surefire way to get your character killed.

Reaching the bike rack, I quickly twisted the dials on my chain lock and pulled it through the front spokes. Stowing it in the side pocket of my pack, I straddled the seat and waited for them to get their bikes free.

“So what’s the plan?” Raj asked, reminding me he’d already asked one before.

“I guess be at my house around five. I have to go see my Grandpa.”

“That sucks.” Raj added.

“Whatever! I wish I could still go see my Grandpa.” Mags retorted. “I’ll see you guys in a few hours.”

I watched her ride away, disappearing in the mass of students headed for the car line.

“When are you gonna tell her?” Raj asked, failing to hide a smile.

“Tell her what?”

“Duh. That you like her.”

“Who says I do? She’s cool, but we’re just friends.”

“So says you. I know you have a crush on her. You always smile when she’s around. And you never give her crap like you do me.”

“Maybe that’s because she doesn’t do stupid stuff all the time.” It sounded harsher than I’d meant it but Raj proved my point almost immediately. When I went to place my feet of the pedals of my bike, they caught and I nearly fell over.

Raj let out a laugh, instantly telling me he was responsible, though I have no clue how he’d managed to tie my shoe laces together in such a short time.

“Maybe if you paid a little more attention I wouldn’t be able to get so much over on you.” His laughter faded off.

“You just wait. One of these days I’m going to pay you back for all the pranks you’ve played on me over the years.” I fixed my shoes and repositioned on the seat.

“It’ll be a cold day before you get one over on me!” He taunted, jerking the string of the party popper he’d somehow materialized. Confetti exploded over me and his laughter returned.

Shaking my head, I stood on my pedals and began to circle slowly. “Just wait! Anyway, I have to head out. I’ll see you later.”

“Later.” Raj mounted his bike and started the other direction.

I found myself wishing I’d been quick-witted enough to prank him before he got too far away. As it were, I wasn’t. I didn’t even know how I was going to get him back. He lived for pranks. His backpack and pockets were always filled with unnecessary components or tools. On more than one occasion

he'd reminded me that a good rogue was prepared for anything. I couldn't fault him there but I failed to see how expired fireworks and a sock full of dryer lint would come in handy during daily life. Sadly, those were just a few examples of the items he carried with him.

In no time I was off of school property and following the path I'd traveled so many times before. Down the alley, around the back side if the football field, and through the new subdivision to the undeveloped field on the other side.

I'm not sure who or what had made the trail through the waist high grass but I'd grown accustomed to following it. Mostly anyway. I slammed on the brakes and slid to a stop, as I had so many times before.

I stared headlong into the shadows of the forest road at the field's center, unable to move. I wish I could say this was the first time. Unfortunately I cannot. I'd tricked myself so many times prior to this point. Yet every week I made the same mistake again, frozen at the entrance of a narrow path that cut through the center of the scariest patch of woods I've ever seen.

I'd repeated the mistake every week for as long as I can remember. And unless something drastic happens between now and then, I'm sure I'll do it again next week.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the beating in my chest. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, watching it soak into the long flannel sleeve. I wasn't overly fond of the shirt but my mom had set out for me the night before. It was one of those weird times of year where it was cold in the morning and hot in the afternoon. Strange for the middle of summer

but the weather patterns seemed to be about three months off for the past few years.

I couldn't help but recall the haiku my mom had made a habit of telling me, especially when commenting on my clothing choices. I could add as many layers as I wanted but I could only remove so many. I'd learned it was sometimes easier to simply agree with her and be on my way.

Still, extra layers didn't help my current predicament, the predicament I'd found myself in more often than I care to admit.

All my life I've been made to visit my grandfather. When I was a kid my parents would bring me in the car. It didn't take nearly as long that way but the distance by road was much further. And while I'm still considered a kid by most standards, I'm much older and wiser than I once was.

I started walking home when I was ten. My mom decided that if I was old enough to walk home, I was old enough to visit my Grandpa. It wasn't long after I got my bike that I was expected to visit him every week—every week for the rest of my life.

I only mention this because the weekly trip has been cramping my style for quite some time. It's not that don't like my Grandpa. In fact, as far as Grandpas go, he's probably pretty average, though I have no basis for comparison. It's simply that visiting him cuts into the time that I could be doing other stuff and I've always found him a little strange. Kind of like he's always testing me for something I'm supposed to know but never do. My inability to cross the forest path was just another test which I constantly fail.

Honestly, I don't know what the problem is. It shouldn't be a big deal. I can see the trail plain as day. Sunlight on the other side promises warm embrace if only I could reach it. And while the sun is on the fall, I still have a good hour and a half before the street lights come on, the universal sign it's time to be home.

The forest just feels wrong. The tree limbs reach out like wispy fingers, waiting to grab me. Strange noises echo in the shadows, unseen in all ways except for the shaking of leaves and branches when I'm searching. I can't put it into words but it makes me feel uneasy. I start to sweat, even if I'm cold. My heart starts to race. And my brain tells me to run far away and never return.

Still I remain, trying to work up the courage to race through and cut my time in half. Glancing at my watch, I silently cursed myself. Fifteen minutes had passed since my arrival and I hadn't managed to take a step closer.

Lowering my head in defeat, I lifted my Huffy and turned left to begin my ride of shame around the forest's edge. It was still shorter than taking the road but only just.

The late afternoon sun was nearly blinding by the time I crossed the rough field and returned to the world of paved roads and concrete sidewalks. It was just a few minutes longer before I reached my destination, a large parking lot that always seemed empty save for a few cars. The sign out front read Shade Acres Retirement Home.

I'd always found the name strange. Like a typo to what should have been a common enough name. Why had they

replaced the Y with an E? Everyone called it Shady Acres, why not spell it that way?

Truth be told, I'd never been able to understand why my Grandpa chose to stay in such a place anyway. It was boring. There were several brick buildings, all single story with the exception of an old clock tower along the far back row. Not much else could be seen beyond the stone wall that wrapped the property. It felt like an impenetrable barrier, only accessible through the single gate at the head of the parking lot.

I'd been here enough to know everything even without seeing it. There were several concrete walkways that led everywhere. Between them was perfect grass that remained green year-round. My father claimed it was fake but I didn't understand how or why anyone would fake grass.

Beyond the wall reminded me of the playground at school, that is if the playground was much larger and had more than a basketball court and a few benches. This place had a swimming pool with two diving boards, a tennis court, basketball court, and just about every other type of court I knew about. It even had a small golf course that people sometimes played.

Even when people were out, it always felt empty, like they were there for show and little else. I've never talked to any of them and they'd never looked my direction. If not for my ability to see them they might as well have been in another world entirely.

It seems the only people here who every paid me any attention were the staff and my Grandpa. It made me wonder

what it would be like to live here, but I was fairly certain that wasn't something I wanted to experience.

Approaching the guard shack, I slipped the front wheel of my bike into the rack and pressed the black button on the speaker box. After a moment a staticy voice echoed.

“Welcome back to Shady Acres. Come on in Aaron.”

I was always surprised when the disembodied voice knew my name but I should have been used to it by now. They always knew who I was, and I didn't have the slightest clue who they were.

The barred door buzzed and began to open of its own accord. I carefully stepped through and listened to it closed behind me as my shoes echoed off the concrete walkway.

In no time I was at the front entrance, a set of painted doors that reminded me very much of the ones I stepped through at school every day.

Inside I was greeted by the familiar plain walls of the lobby.

Behind a glass window the receptionist offered a warm smile. “Good afternoon, Aaron. Your grandfather is on his way down. Feel free to wait in the lounge.”

“Thank you.” I turned and pushed open the wooden door to my right. It was a large room with a table at the center and eight wooden chairs tucked neatly beneath. Each one held a plump cushion that had been hand made by one of the residence, though it was anyone's guess as to who.

A large TV was mounted to the wall along the left and several empty recliners were placed around it. Smaller round tables were scattered here and there, each one with a partially

completed puzzle or board game awaiting their various, yet miscellaneous players to return to play. It was no surprise the room was vacant. It was always vacant when I arrived.

A long table ran the back wall and was filled with various treats, snack platters, and candy. It had been a few hours since my last meal and I was starting to feel hunger.

I approached the table and helped myself to a few of the bite sized candy bars and a small paper plate which I filled with generous helpings of salami, crackers, and cheese. Without another thought, I made my way to the central table and took my usual seat where I began building mini sandwiches.

I'd barely finished when I heard the door open. I glanced up, seeing my Grandpa step into view. He looked the same as always with his long gray hair and wrinkled skin. He was slightly more plump than most people his age, though truth be told I wasn't sure how old he was. He'd looked the same for as long as I could remember, wearing crescent shaped glasses, red suspenders over a perfectly pressed shirt that was always tucked in, and either beige or gray pants with brown leather loafers. If not for the alternating colors between breeches and shirts I would have imagined him wearing the same clothes every day of his life. There was only one detail that shattered the perfect old man stereotype. He wore golden earrings in the shape of some kind of bird.

"I hear someone has a birthday coming up." Grandpa said, approaching the table.

"Yeah. This weekend."

Reaching the table, Grandpa pulled the chair where he always sat and plopped down. “I’ll tell ya, kiddo, these old bones aren’t what they once were.” He rubbed his knee briefly before staring up at me with a smile. “So, tell me about the party. Big plans? Your mother tells me it’s the big one-three.”

“I have a few friends coming over. It’s no big deal.” I lied. It was in fact a huge deal. I just didn’t want to tell him that. He might want to show up and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for my friends to meet the weird old man I was forced to see every week. Fearing my true intentions were showing, I stuffed a cracker sandwich into my mouth and began to chew.

“I remember my thirteenth. It was a night I’ll never forget. That reminds me. I got you a birthday present.”

I’m not entirely sure how the wrapped box ended up on the table in front of him. He hadn’t had it when he walked in. I’m certain I would have seen it. Yet, here it was, resting between us, the gold foil paper and hand wrapped bow making all kinds of a spectacle in the reflected overhead lights.

“Your celebration of birth isn’t official for another few hours but I trust you can keep this between us? Your mother would kill me if she knew I gave it to you early.”

I have to admit I was curious. I’d had my eye on the new gaming console for a while now and the box was of the approximate size. If my guess was right, my Grandpa might have just climbed from the lamest to the coolest in one move.

Hiding my excitement, I pulled the gift toward me and sized it up. It was heavy. That was a good sign, though it felt

more solid than I would have imagined. Swallowing hard, I managed to speak through the last bits of cracker and cheese clinging to the roof of my mouth. “Can I open it now?”

“I’ll make you a deal. If you can beat me in a game of chess, I’ll let you open it. If not, you’ll have to wait until your party.”

I couldn’t stop the sigh from escaping. There was no way I was going to beat him. Even if I understood the game beyond how each piece moved there was no hope. Ever since I was little he’d used the game as a means of settling disputes. Who does the dishes? A game of chess. Who mows the lawn? A game of chess. He even challenged me once about who was going to throw his smelly socks in the hamper. Needless to say, it was a lost cause. Still, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to escape without seeing it to the end.

The game was over within the first four rounds. I’m not sure how it happened but I found myself in checkmate before I could hope to form a strategy. He usually gave the illusion I was doing good but this time he beat me ruthlessly without an ounce of reserve.

“Well played, Grandpa.” I scooted the chair out and got to me feet. “I need to get going. Mom wants me to do the dishes and take out the trash before she gets home from work.”

Grandpa didn’t say anything, he simply nodded and slid the present closer toward the edge of the table.

“You won fair and square.” I corrected, surprised by the gesture.

“You sure?” He asked, his gaze locked firmly on me.

“Pretty sur—” I paused, staring at the board once again. He’d never announced checkmate or even check for that matter but I couldn’t see anyway out of the position he’d left me in. My king was thoroughly trapped with a straight line to his queen and nowhere to run, much less block. It was then I realized it was my turn and I had him in the exact trap he’d placed me. “Wha—how? Um—Checkmate.” I moved my queen one square to the left, shielding my king and placing his in imminent danger. What was better, his own pieces had him pinned with nowhere to go and nothing capable of blocking. It was my first ever victory and I wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t told me.

Snatching up the present, gave it a shake, listening for loose parts. I didn’t hear any.

“A deal’s a deal. You can open it.”

I started the shred the paper when the door opened and I found myself staring at a rather tall man with dark skin and curly gray hair. He wore a deep red cardigan and thick glasses over his bloodshot eyes. Considering this was the visitor’s lounge I shouldn’t have been surprised, but this was the first time I’d ever seen anyone except Grandpa in here. A part of me believed he was the only resident.

“I’m not interrupting anything am I?” The old man asked, seemingly as surprised to find us as I was him.

“Not at all, Grigori. I’d like you to meet my grandson, Aaron.” Grandpa gestured the old man over.

I hadn’t noticed how frail he looked at a distance yet there was a strength in his eyes I hadn’t seen elsewhere.

“Nice to meet ya, son.” Grigori scanned the chessboard and looked up in surprise. “Did you do this?”

“Ye—Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be. I’ve never seen anyone beat this old coot. You’re somethin’ special, kid.”

I was beginning to get embarrassed. I wasn’t much for praise of any kind. “Thanks. Anyway, I’ve got to run. I’ll see you next week, Grandpa.” Thinking it best to get home before opening the gift, I grabbed my backpack from beneath the table and stuffed the present inside. I was somewhat surprised it fit. I figured I’d have to leave it unzipped during the ride home but seemed to fit as if the two were made for one another.

I reached the door I’d come through earlier and pulled it open just enough to step through. I’m not sure if I paused before or after I’d heard my name, but I found myself just on the other side of the door listening to the conversation.

“So that’s the kid, huh? Does he know?”

“It is. And not yet.” Grandpa responded.

“He’s close. I can feel it.”

“Let him be a kid. He deserves that much.”

“I can’t change what’s already set in motion. You aren’t doing him any favors by waiting. The more he knows the better off he’ll be.”

“I know. I just can’t help but feel like it’s too soon.”

“None of us had a choice. It’s going to happen one way or another. Coddling will only hurt him in the long run.”

Hearing footsteps approach, I pulled the door shut and rushed outside. I wasn't sure what they were talking about but whatever it was I didn't want to get caught listening.

Chapter 2

An Unexpected Surprise

My heart raced and I desperately needed air. Peddling as fast and hard as I could, I felt as if my legs might fall off. I wish I could say it was just from exertion. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Every hair on my body stood on end. I could feel the icy breath of something upon my neck, though I didn't know to what it belonged. Only that it started chasing me the moment I passed the forest path, once again unable to go through.

Mustering the courage to glance behind me, my fear only grew. The sun was beginning its nightly descent though it was far from set. If anything the orange glow made it seem brighter. That was the most unsettling part. As far as I could tell nothing was there. I could have expected that after dark. It was harder to see things at that time. But right now, when visibility was in near peak range, I felt uneasy. There was no place for anything to hide. But it didn't stop me from feeling like I was being chased.

I cut through the park that rested just outside my subdivision when a sudden peace came over me. I was safe for the moment, though I didn't know why. Something had scared my pursuer off. Somehow that felt more unsettling. What could scare something like that away? Then again, it wasn't after me so I decided it was best not to inquire.

I slowed my pace, letting my heart calm. It was the least I could do. For all I knew the chase would resume once I

reached the other side. I needed to catch my breath while I could.

I didn't know how or why but this kind of thing had been happening to me a lot lately. I couldn't recall a single event like it prior to a couple weeks ago. In fact, things were pretty mundane before that. Of course, the events of our game that week didn't help matters.

Mags had taken over as game master and she decided to do a horror storyline. We'd stumbled upon an old crypt and Raj had failed his detect traps roll. Inadvertently, we awoke a nightmare creature and barely escaped with our lives. It was a close one. I'd used every resource I had at my disposal and still only had four hit points by the night's end.

Poor Raj had had to make three constitution rolls before he finally stabilized.

I didn't know if it was the adrenaline of the game blending into real life or something more sinister but I was starting to think I was haunted.

Reaching the park's edge I prepared for the worst. To my surprise I didn't feel any different. Whatever had been following me seemed to have lost interest. I was glad for that. I cross into my subdivision and began navigating the streets home.

I lived in an upscale neighborhood on the western edge of Fremont Hills. It wasn't an overly large town by any means but it had everything I thought a town needed. There was plenty of housing, which seemed to be the only thing it had when we moved in. The school was next to come. Before that

I spent kindergarten at Ridge Lawn Elementary. That's where I met Raj.

Since then they'd built a number of restaurants and stores, reducing traffic substantially. We used to have to go to one of the two surrounding cities for everything. In some ways it felt like we were that dividing line between a rivalry of the two, having to pick who we supported when any major event happened. Now that I think about it, most of the arguments I remember my parents having were caused by differed opinions when these events happened.

Of course, when it came to sporting events we were considered the black sheep, competing with both equally, and hated just the same. This was another reason I never participated. I didn't care for such rivalries and saw no need to get involved.

Turning onto my street, I was taken back. Both my parents' cars were parked in the drive. They looked to be in the same place they'd been when I left this morning. It was unlike them to miss work, though I couldn't be certain they'd remained in the exact same place all day. That was like trying to compare the location of a leave of its branch. It was relatively similar in all ways but there was no guarantee it hadn't moved the slightest bit.

I checked the time, confirming I wasn't running super late. It wasn't quite four yet which told me I wasn't imagining things. They weren't expected home for at least another hour. That meant they either hadn't left, or they were home early. On today of all days, that could only mean one thing.

They were throwing me a surprise party. Why else would my mom have insisted I visit my Grandpa on my birthday? And with all the questions Raj had been asking while we were at school, I should have known something was up. They needed to keep me out of the house to arrange everything.

I swung my leg over the seat and stepped off just as I climbed the slight incline up the drive and past my mom's car. Walking it past the pair, I navigated to the side of the garage where I'd grown accustomed to parking my bike. To my surprise no other bikes were present. Where were Mags and Raj? It was earlier than I'd told them but with the surprise, surely they'd been informed of the actual plan beyond my knowledge. Of course, they could have been dropped off by their parents and were inside, hiding in wait. That had to be it.

Playing along, I made as much noise as possible as I walked around the nose of my dad's car, parked closest to the garage. I hurried to the walkway and approached the front door, jingling my keys as if looking for the correct one. If they were planning to surprise me I wanted to let them know I was home. After all, a surprise wasn't any fun if they didn't know I was coming.

Twisting the knob, I pushed the door open and stepped inside. My entry was met with silence. I waited at the foyer expecting to hear the shouts of 'Surprise!' at any moment but none came.

The sounds of movement at the top of the stairs caught my attention. Closing the door, I skipped up the steps and

rounded the bannister toward my parent's room. I could hear them talking now that I was right outside their door.

"Hello? Mom, Dad?"

"Oh, hey, honey. How was your day at school?" My mom asked, carefully folding a plastic wrapped article of clothing into her suitcase.

"Um—fine. What's going on?" This wasn't right. It was my birthday. They should have been preparing for my party, not packing for a trip.

"Your mother and I have a flight to catch. She has a seminar first thing in the morning. I'm sure we told you." My dad offered, stepping out of the closet with one of his suits in hand.

"Um—No. Nobody said anything about a seminar. What about my birthday?" I wish I could have taken some pleasure in their momentary oversight but I couldn't. I was aghast. How could they have forgotten about me?

"Honey, your birthday is—" My mom trailed off, coming to the realization she'd made a huge mistake. "Um—Well, we'll only be gone for a couple days. When we get back we'll throw you a proper party. Right, hun?" My mom batted at my dad, drawing his attention from the inside of a pair of dress shoes.

"What? Oh—uh—right."

"Unbelievable!" I demanded spinning on my heel and rushing off toward my room. I could hear my mom shouting after me but I wasn't sure what she'd said. It wasn't until my door had slammed and I'd fallen face first onto my bed that I heard her footstep following me.

“Aaron, I won’t tolerate that attitude!” She proclaimed outside my door. I was glad she didn’t just barge in though I knew it wasn’t beneath her. “If you want to have some friends over, that’s okay. Just try to keep it contained.”

This fueled the fire burning within me. My friends had already made the arrangements to come over. This simply confirmed she had forgotten all about my party. I got up and marched toward the door, stomping for effect. Reaching out, I twisted the knob and ripped it toward me. “They’re already coming over. Unlike you they didn’t forget about my birthday!”

I tried to slam the door to make my point but she caught it before I could get it latched.

“Young man, your father and I have to attend this seminar. We don’t have a choice in the matter. I’ll call my father and see if he can come over to watch you but you need to remember you don’t pay the bills here. Until you do, I expect a little more respect.” She glared at me, daring me to say anything contrary.

“Yes, ma’am.” I squeaked, though I wasn’t happy about it.

“Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me I have to finish packing.” She turned and was gone before I could add anything not that I had anything to add.

I grabbed my backpack from the floor where I’d dropped it and closed the door. Plopping onto the springy mattress, I opened the blue fabric with black zippers and stared at the present Grandpa had given me. Maybe, if it was as I’d expected, this birthday could be salvaged.

I carefully retrieved the foil wrapped package and placed it on the bed in front of me. I hadn't noticed prior but there were no seams or folds or tape as far as I could tell. Other than the obtuse ribbon hugging all four corners and chaotically dancing with each movement there was nothing of note on any of the faces. Just pristine paper that encompassed like a rectangle shaped eggshell.

I studied the wrapping, unsure how I was going to open it. I could rip the paper off of course but that seemed so brutish. I'd given up tearing paper a long time ago, settling rather on carefully unsticking the tape and peeling it off in a single sheet like a reverse puzzle.

My dad would then wad it into a ball and throw it in a trash bag which always irritated me. I wouldn't have spent so much time carefully unwrapping if it was just going to be tossed out moments later. But each time I did. And each time it was tossed. It was an uncontrollable compulsion that I had yet to defeat.

I ran my fingers along the package, feeling for any hidden differences. The top, bottom, and left side were firm as could be. The other three however had a little give before they became as equally firm. I had no idea what was inside, but my hopes of a new console were rapidly evaporating.

"How do I open you?" I asked aloud, searching for an extremely well hidden overlap at the edges. Unfortunately, I didn't find one which made absolutely zero sense. There had to be a seam somewhere. How else had Grandpa wrapped it? It wasn't like he could simply place the present inside and

shrink it to fit while removing the opening at the same time. There had to be an answer and I was determined to find it.

On a whim, I tugged at one of the ribbon's tails and watched it unravel into a heap of loose sparkly lace. No sooner than the corners fell free the sides of the wrapping unfolded and I found myself staring at a rather large book draped in golden foil.

The pages were dense and yellow from age. The thing had to be at least four inches thick. It was easily as wide as my arm was long, and as tall as my torso from waist to neck, making it the largest book I owned. Not even my math book was so large. Moreover, it raised a new question. How had it fit into my backpack which was maybe half that size?

Pulling the wrap away I took in its entirety for the first time. It was kind of daunting to gaze upon but I felt intrigued. There was no telling how old it was and if the inside was anything like the cover, I found myself wondering why my Grandpa had given it to me.

The cover appeared to be some kind of ancient leather with strange depictions pressed into it. I had no idea what the words across it said but I felt Latin was appropriate. What else was some mysterious tome going to be titled with?

This had to be some long forgotten spell compendium to a game of which I'd never heard about. Fortunately, I was good at retrofitting outdated PBHs to our system. If this book had anything of use, I could probably have it fully updated and ready for play in a matter of days.

The doorbell rang and I heard my mom's footsteps rush downstairs. I could always tell the difference between the

two. Hers were lighter and faster, where as my dad was heavier and hesitant, like he was in no hurry to reach the bottom.

“Why, hello. He’s in his room. Feel free to head on up.”

A few moments later there was a knock at my door and I heard it creak open. I rolled to my side to see who was coming in. I still wasn’t in the mood to talk to my parents. They’d betrayed me for the last time.

To my surprise Raj was staring through the gap at me. His short dark hair blended with his caramel colored skin, staring at me like a pair of disembodied eyes in the shadows of the opening.

I broke my gaze on him and glanced to the alarm clock on my nightstand. It was almost five and I hadn’t done much of anything to get ready for my nonparty.

“Don’t just stand there looking at me all creepy like. Come in.” I demanded, curious as to why he’d opened the door but gone no further. With the luck I’d had today he was probably arranging a bucket of water to fall on me when I stepped through or some other nefarious prank to which I would fall victim.

“I was waiting for an invitation.”

“So you opened my door and looked in but decided to wait for an invite?”

“Yes? Was that not already clear?”

A heavy sigh escaped me. It was times like these I was happy to be an only child. “You wanna see what my Grandpa gave me for my birthday?”

Raj flung the door aside and charge in, jumping on the bed beside me. The surface bounced hard, sending both the book and myself into the air. When we landed, the book fell open to a page near the center.

I had no idea what I was looking at but I couldn't look away. Somewhere in the distance I thought I heard my mom yell to stop jumping on the bed but it may as well have been spoken to someone else.

"What is it?" Raj asked, leaning in to get a closer look.

"I don't know. I think it's some early edition spell book but I can't read the name."

"Cool!"

Together we stared at the page, lost in its numerous black lines sprawled out to make the most intricate sigil we'd ever seen. Whoever'd done the artwork was amazingly precise. Each line was crisp and clear, and it appeared tiny scrollwork had been inked in the spaces between.

Finally breaking away from the image, unsure how long I'd been trapped within, I closed the book and turned to Raj. "So, my parents forgot about my birthday."

"No way!"

"Way. They're headed to some conference halfway across the country. They called my Grandpa to come watch me."

"That sucks!"

"I know. And to make matters worse, they act like it's all my fault. Like I'm supposed to remind them when my birthday is. I'm pretty sure they're supposed to keep track of that kind of stuff."

“Maybe they’re trying to make you think they forgot so that can surprise you with something big later?”

“I doubt it. They seem pretty set on leaving tonight. They’ve been packing since before I got home.”

“What about game?”

“I don’t know. I guess it doesn’t change much of our plans. I was just hoping to have a little more party type stuff beforehand. Now it seems like we’re pretty much just having another normal game night. That doesn’t feel like how I imagined my thirteenth birthday party would go.

“I know what you mean. When my Upanayana happened last month, it was nothing like how I’d expected it.”

“That just it. You still had a whole celebration to mark your coming of age. I’m not getting that. My parents are leaving. Like my birthday is just another day to them.”

“We could always do something different.”

“Like what?”

“We could sneak out and go to that new ice cream parlor in the mall. No adults. No responsibilities. Just us roaming the town and doing all the things we’ve thought about but never taken the time to do.”

“What about my Grandpa? I’m pretty sure he’d notice our absence.”

“A-A-Ron, my friend.” Raj paused, shaking his head. He approached and placed his hand upon my shoulder. “What do old people do?”

“Go to work and pay bills?”

“That’s what our parents do. What do our Grandparents do?”

“Sit around eating snacks and talking about ‘the good ole days’.” I rocked my arms for emphasis.

“And after that?” Raj leaned in as if he were hinting at something.

“They— fall asleep?”

“Exactly! We just have to wait for him to fall asleep.”

I wasn't much a fan of Raj's schemes. He was notorious for making these elaborate plans, detailing each and every scenario he was likely to encounter, all the while waiting for the perfect moment to enact any one of them. In fact, he usually spent so much time planning and waiting that he rarely actually got the chance to use them. I figured this was one of those moments. He would likely start making the plans and by the time my Grandpa arrived, he'd either forget all about it or it would take so long to make happen that we'd miss the window of opportunity.

As if my thoughts had triggered it, the door bell rang and I heard my mom answer.

“Hey Dad. Thanks for coming.”

“It's my pleasure. Where's the birthday boy?”

“He's upstairs. I'll let him know you've arrived.”

I stared at Raj, allowing my annoyance to be known. It seemed my night of hell was about to begin.

Chapter 3

Let the Games Begin

Holding the thick curtain aside, I peeked out the window, watching in desperation as my parents loaded into my mom's car and backed out of the driveway. Their taillights were the last I saw of them, turning the corner and disappearing into dusk.

"Have you given any more thought to my proposal?" Raj asked behind me.

I turned to find him lying on my bed, flipping through the pages of my Grandpa's book. "You don't seriously think we could sneak out without getting caught do you?"

"I don't see why not. Besides, we're old enough to take care of ourselves. In the old days we'd be considered adults right now. Even Mags. She'd probably be married already." Raj let out a soft chuckle at the prospect.

I on the other hand didn't find the image amusing. Mags was far too independent to be anybody's wife. Of course, it could have simply been the fact that I liked her that made anybody else unworthy. Though I'd never say that to her face. "How would we even get there? The mall is like three miles away and I don't have any money."

"Duh! We have bikes. It's not like we have to walk. And happy birthday." Raj reached into his back pocket and retrieved a sealed envelope.

I didn't have to open it to recognize a birthday card when I saw one, though that didn't stop me from doing so. I should

have known better. No sooner than I'd separated the flap I heard a seal break and a noxious gas began to fill the room.

I failed about, trying to discard the rancid envelope. It smelled worse than a track and field locker room following Taco Tuesday. I didn't know what all was in the concoction but I could smell skunk, sweaty gym shorts, and what I guessed to be a platter of deviled eggs that had been left to rot in a hot car for a couple of weeks.

My eyes burned but I managed to get my window open enough to throw the card out.

"Wait!" Raj demanded, charging the window. He peered out having suddenly lost his laughter. How he was immune to such stench, I'll never know. "There was twenty dollars in there!"

It took a moment before my ability to speak returned. I suspect it had more to do with the open window than it did adjusting. Whichever the case, I found myself glaring at Raj. "Really, dude?"

"Yes, really. I put the money inside the card. That's what you're supposed to do."

"And were you suppose to hide a stink bomb inside it? What even was that? I've never smelled anything that bad before."

"Oh. That was a new formula I've been working on. Sweaty socks soaked in aged skunk extract. Don't worry though. I diluted it to keep it from absorbing into clothes."

"That was diluted? I'd hate to know what the full dose smells like. And no, that's not an invitation to show me." I saw the idea evaporate from his mind.

“I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t be able to smell anything else ever again. Seriously, I had one of my nose plugs slip out the other day. I can’t smell a thing right now. Anyway, what are we going to do about the money?”

I shook my head. Leave it to Raj to burn out his own sniffer. “I guess we’ll have to go out and get it. Leave the window open. I don’t want to risk that nasty stuff lingering in my room.”

Pulling the door open, I marched down stairs, listening for Grandpa. The TV was on in the front room and I could hear some game show in progress. Rounding the banister, I was surprised to find the living room empty. “Grandpa, you here?”

“In here.” Came a voice to my right.

I followed through the dining room and into the kitchen. Grandpa was standing near the central island with a paper plate loaded high with a triple decker sandwich and a pile of potato chips.

“You boys eaten anything yet?”

“Not yet.” I was impressed. I’d only attempted the triple decker myself a few times and it never went well. There was something about three pieces of bread, double meat, double cheese, lettuce, tomato, and whatever else he’d piled inside that made it a beautiful sandwich. A part of me wanted to try it but a bigger part simply wanted to escape.

“My mom ordered us pizza.” Raj added. “It should be here any time now.”

“I see. Well, if you get hungry before then, you know where the kitchen is.”

I found Grandpa's statement amusing for a couple reasons. One, because we were standing in the kitchen. And two, because this wasn't his house but he was acting like it was. "Thanks, Grandpa. Raj and I need to go outside for a few minutes. We'll be right back in."

"Oh, yeah." Raj added, as if he'd forgotten why we'd come down stairs to begin with.

I shook my head and turned, hurrying to the front door. When I got there I twisted the knob and pulled it toward me.

I was somewhat surprised it wasn't locked. Mom always locked the door when she left the house. It was honestly sometimes kind of annoying because she didn't care if she was going to the neighbor's for a cup of sugar or to the grocery store or even work. If she was leaving, the door was locked.

This was the only time in as long as I could remember that it was not. Of course, she could have expected Grandpa to lock it. Or maybe she had and he unlocked it to watch them leave. There was really no telling.

I stepped out into the night and the feeling I'd had earlier instantly returned. Fortunately it wasn't chasing me this time, at least not yet. But I knew it was there, somewhere, watching me from a distance.

"I think that's it over there." Raj pointed across the driveway to our left, just on the other side of my dad's car, parked where it had been.

I could see something small and off-color lying in the grass though barely just. Even with the full moon I felt like I was standing in total darkness. For some reason beyond my knowledge, most likely Grandpa's doing, the porch light

wasn't on. But what made it even stranger, the path from the driveway to the front porch was lined with solar lights and none of those were on either.

Raj was already on the other side of the driveway and didn't seem to have a care in the world. Me on the other, I had difficulty taking a single step off the porch.

"No, this is just a broken foam cup." He shook his head inspecting the refuse. "I'll never understand how people can just throw their trash on the ground. It's not that hard to put it in a trash can." He stepped out of my view but from the sound I knew he'd approached the blue plastic dumpster resting between the house and garage. The lid clapped shut, telling me he'd tossed the debris inside.

"You seeing the card anywhere?" I wanted to help look but something told me whatever was out there was just waiting for me to step off the porch.

"Not yet. Why am I the one looking for it anyway? You're the one who threw it out the window."

"I'm not the one who laced it with skunk spray."

"Oh, yeah." Raj began cackling a second time.

"What are you losers doing out here?" Mags' voice echoed from the dark momentarily before her fair skin and wavy strawberry blonde hair came into view.

I'd been so focused on Raj that I nearly jumped out of my skin when her voice assaulted me from the right.

I turned, hearing her chuckle at my embarrassment. Her features were barely visible in the low light conditions but I could still make out the freckles crowning her nose and

cheeks. “Raj thought it would be funny to give me a birthday card rigged with a stink bomb. I threw it out the window.”

“It has twenty dollars in it.” Raj shouted from around the corner.

I watched his silhouette come back into view, seemingly hunched over and staring at the ground. “Find anything yet?”

“I wouldn’t still be looking if I did.”

Mags sighed. “Idiots!”

I don’t know if it was my mind playing tricks on me or if it was actually happening, but I could see a dark figure just on the other side of the chain link beyond Raj. It had but to reach out and grab him. I was frozen in fear. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t do anything. He was helpless and I was stuck watching my best friend blindly wander into the clutches of a monster.

“Are—are you okay?” Mags asked, a look of concern blatantly visible on her face as she stepped closer. There was something about her presence that brought me comfort. It almost felt as if a warmth had engulfed me. The world somehow seemed brighter. The lights which had been absent before returned. I could finally see and in that sight I was pleased to realize the dark shadow I’d feared moments before was a shapely honeysuckle bush growing up the side of the fence.

I got my breath under control, though my heart was another story. It was still running away. Finally, I spoke. “Yeah. I don’t know what happened. I guess I got carried away. I felt like I was being chased earlier today. I thought it was back.”

“You should go inside.” Mags offered, studying my features. She pressed her hand to my forehead as if checking for a fever. I have to admit it felt pleasant.

“He can’t go in yet. We have to find the money. And then we have things to do. If we go in, we may not be able to get back out.”

“What’s he talking about?”

“My parents forgot my birthday. They left to go on a trip a little bit ago. Raj thinks we should sneak out and go to that new ice cream place in the mall.”

“Are you guys kidding me? That’s like five miles away. Not to mention you’d be in big trouble if you got caught.”

“I didn’t say we were going.” I pleaded, hoping to escape her wrath. Mags was always the responsible one in our group.

“You didn’t not say we weren’t not going.” Raj retorted, holding up the torn envelope. “And now that I found the money we can pay for it.” He waved it around for good measure.

“Look, I’m not going to tell you guys what to do, but I came over here to game. I’m going inside. If you want to be immature children, continue with this stupid plan. If not, I’ll see you at the table.” Without another word, Mags stepped past me and disappeared inside.

I glanced to Raj, hoping he’d gotten the message. Judging by the fact he was still waving the envelope at me with a stupid grin on his face I suspected otherwise. “Come on, Raj. It’s not like any of us want to ride that far after dark anyway.” I turned to follow Mags.

“But—but—Oh, all right.” Raj crossed the pavement and joined me just as I crossed the threshold.

Mags was already setting up when I got to the dining room. She’s spread a large tiled map across the center of the table and had the GM screen arranged to block her end from the rest of us. A stack of books sat neatly to her left and a pile of purple and gold dice rested to her right.

The map was decorated with various colored lines detailing a rather intricate floorplan to what I could only assume was a keep of some kind. Miniature monsters were gathered in the corner nearest the GM screen, awaiting use, and a row of dry erase markers rested in the order of ROY G. BIV.

She didn’t look up as we took our seats but I suspected she was silently celebrating her victory.

Mags opened a plastic clipboard and retrieved two character sheets, handing one to each of us. “Since we’re gaming here this week, I assume Ananya isn’t joining us?” She asked Raj.

“No. But it’s no big loss. She’d rather rob everyone for their clothes than help up anyway.”

“She’d six. What did you expect her to do?” Mags retorted with a smile.

I liked Raj’s sister as much as the next guy but I had to admit she was kind of annoying to game with. Between the constant clarification of rules, attacking anything and everyone, including our characters, and always making the story about her, we barely got any progress in when she was at the table. But that was the price of gaming at Raj’s house,

and one of the many reasons I was glad when we hosted it here.

“Okay. Game is going to be a little different with just you two. I’ll play Ananya’s character since she’s not here. I’ve also made an NPC to help but I’ve limited it to third level so you guys won’t depend on it.”

“Oh, do I have time to grab the spell book my Grandpa gave me? I think there might be some cool new spells I can retrofit.”

“I’ll need to review them before casting but I’ll allow it. Just remember you only have a few spell slots available.”

I nodded and got to my feet. It only took a moment to grab the book off my bed and return to the table.

“That doesn’t look like any spell book I’ve ever seen.” Mags commented, studying the size of the massive tome. “What game is it from?”

“I don’t know. I can’t read the cover but I know it’s old. Probably a first edition.”

“Whatever. Let’s get started.” Mags waited for me to get seated before she began. “To recap last game, you were navigating the Temple of Carnyth. Ananya found the lever which opened a passage into the catacombs. You disturbed the altar and awoke a dark god who’d been imprisoned there. The dead rose from their graves and you guys ended up fleeing back to the Tavern in Westbrook. We called it a night there. Any questions?”

“Yeah. Did I get my health points back?” Raj asked, studying his character sheet.

“You got a full night’s rest and regained one hit die plus your Con modifier worth of points.”

Raj rolled a d6 and quickly added the numbers.

I did the same only more discretely.

“Both of you awake to the morning sun glaring through the thick glass of the tavern’s dirty windows. The smell of cooking meat radiates from downstairs. It’s a sweet scent, like maple bacon and pancakes. As the visions of the previous night fill your mind, you recall there were only two room available, both even numbers. I need you both make an Intelligence check.”

“Eight.” Raj announced defeated.

“Sixteen.”

“Raj, the smell of food makes your stomach growls with hunger.”

“I get up and grab my things before heading downstairs.”

“Okay. Aaron, you recall the room numbers being staggered from your first visit here. Odd numbers were on the east and even on the west. That wouldn’t mean much except you’re laying in bed trying to block out the light and it occurs to you that you shouldn’t be able to see the sun from this window. Moreover, you know what bacon smells like. This doesn’t smell like bacon.”

“I jump to my feet and grab my pack. Cautiously, I place my hand against the door and feel for heat.”

“It’s hot. Raj, in your hurry to get food you unbolt the door and yank it open. I need you to make a Reflex as flames explode into your room from the burning hallway.”

“Haha, evasion!” Raj demanded, rolling his d20. “Nat twenty!”

“You yank the door toward you, instantly seeing the flames. On instinct you spin behind the door, using it as a shield from the explosion. The heat wave goes right by you, leaving you untouched. You have two rounds before the flame consumes the oxygen in the room and you’ll start taking negatives to rolls.”

“I pull my bandana over my face to protect against the smoke and look for a way out.”

“Okay. Aaron what are you doing?”

“Question, if I were to cast Wind Shield, would it push the flames away from me or cook me like a convection oven?”

Mags thought for a moment. “That’s the one that’s like a small tornado that surrounds you?”

“Yeah.”

“High or low?” She rolled the dice behind her screen.

“Er—low?”

“You haven’t seen the flames yet, but you’re fairly certain if the hallway is engulfed the suction would be more powerful than the force and it would likely pull the heat to you even if it pushed the flames away.”

“Okay. What would I have to do to increase the duration of Gust of Wind?”

“What is it now?”

“One round straight line blast of strong winds. I want to turn it into a concentrated cone so I can get to Raj.”

Mags nodded her understanding. “You think if you empower the spell, your gust might just be strong enough to extinguish the flames in the upstairs hall.”

“Would that clear a path to his room?”

“It should.”

“Okay. I do that.” I calculated the spell points for the empowered spell and marked my sheet.

“You prepare your spell, forcing every ounce of concentration into it. Timing it just right you let it loose and open the door at the same time. The fire swirls violently right outside your room, fighting against the strong breeze. The heat is nearly unbearable and you can smell your skin starting to cook. Just when you think you can’t take anymore, the wind breaks through that the flames implode on themselves with a boom. You stand there, collecting yourself as wisps of smoke gently drift off your robes.

“The hallway is severely charred and several spots are glowing embers but it looks like it’s safe to step into the hall.”

“Do I notice this?” Raj asked.

“Make a Perception check.”

“Eighteen.”

“A deafening roar echoed outside your room. Then, suddenly, a strong breeze blew past you and you heard a loud woof as the flames went out. Most of the fire, at least here, is gone for now but you can still see a few lingering flames and hear the popping of the smoldering wood.”

“I carefully step around the door and go into the hallway.”

“After I’ve made sure my eyebrows are still there I’m going into the hallway too” I added.

“You two see each other, both a little singed but not the worse for wear. I need both of you to make perception checks.”

“Fourteen” I answered, adding my d20 to my perception skill.

“Eight.” Raj pouted, replacing the die with another like it.

“Aaron, you just realized Ananya’s character isn’t with you. You remember her checking into the room with you last night. In fact, there was a huge argument about which room she would be claiming. She insisted since you two were boys you should room together and she should have the other to herself. But you don’t remember anything beyond that point. Quite frankly, you even don’t even remember going up to the rooms.”

“Do I remember this?” Raj asked.

“No. You rolled an eight. You don’t remember where you left your daggers.”

“I do too. They’re on my—” Raj paused, inspecting his character sheet. “They were written right here. Did—did you erase them?”

Mags sighed. “You tried to pry a stone door open with one last game and it got broke. The other you threw at a skeleton and never retrieved it before you fled.”

“This sucks” Raj demanded, resting his head on the table.

“What you kids doin’?” Grandpa asked, carrying his now empty plate toward the kitchen.

“Gaming.” I answered hoping he wouldn’t question it further. To my fortune he continued past and disappeared into the kitchen.

“No out of character talking, Raj” Mags taunted.

I couldn’t help but notice she seemed to take a small amount of joy in tormenting him from time to time. Of course, he usually brought it upon himself with one of his pranks, or schemes, or general tomfoolery if that was still a word people used.

“As you two are standing there, one reflecting on the missing memories of the night before, the other looking helpless with his sudden realization of disarmament, you hear a soft giggle in the air.”

“Like a maniacal giggle?” I asked, imagining some Team Rocket punk taking delight in a momentary victory.

“No. It’s more like a child. Female.”

“Where’s it coming from?” Raj asked, picking himself up.

“You’re not sure. It sounds like it’s all around you, both in the hall and inside your head. No matter which way you look it sounds like it’s directly behind you.”

“That’s creepy!” Raj demanded, looking behind him for good measure.

“I need you both to make a perception.”

“Twelve”

“Twelve”

“You both feel the floor sink a little. If you had to guess, the lower level is still on fire and the braces are about to give out.”

“Finding the nearest window.” Raj exclaimed.

“You step back into your room and notice the flames have climbed the outside wall. There’s no way you’re going to be able to escape out these windows without getting burned or worse.

“Then I’ll pick the lock on one of the closed doors and check the other side.”

“You start to mess with the lock and realize the flame has badly charred the wood. It’d be faster to simply bust the door down.”

“Okay. I kick the door open.”

I sat quietly, observing the story. There wasn’t much my character could do in the ways of physical abilities. I was better at quick thinking and flinging spells at my problems.

“The door groans under the force and starts to fall, having ripped away from its hinges. Make a fortitude save.”

“Do I need to make one too?”

“Are you looking into the room?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes. Both of you need to roll.”

“Sixteen” Raj announced with pride.

“Seven.”

“Aaron, you’re standing there watching him kick open the door. No sooner than it falls you peer inside and find a whole family arranged in the center of the small room. You aren’t entirely sure what’s happened to them as their skin has been peeled away and is decorating the wooden floors with chunks of organ and a thick layer of ichor. You’re unable to do anything as you double at the waist and vomit what little food you had the night before.

“Raj, you’re staring at the grizzly scene and you’re not sure but it looks like these people were used in some kind of ritual sacrifice. There’s an altar at the center of their placement and it looks like their blood was used to mark the sigils on the floor and walls.”

The door bell rang causing me to jump.

“Are you expecting others?” Grandpa yelled from the kitchen. I could hear his voice growing louder which told me he was headed back this direction.

“No one else said for certain they were coming.” I rushed to the door and stole a glance out the peep hole. It was dark as could be on the other side.

Cautiously, I pulled the door open and looked around. It was just as dark as it had been earlier and I was starting to think something was wrong with me. Why was all this creeping stuff happening all of a sudden?

“Are you Aaron?” A voice asked out of the darkness and I jumped ten feet in the air.

The man’s face appeared, wreathed in shadow and I could tell he was trying not to laugh. He was holding a red box of some kind and I instantly knew his purpose.

I took a deep breath to settle my nerves before speaking. “I am.” My stomach growled at the prospect of fresh pizza.

“I was asked to deliver—this!” The pizza guy lunged forward with a large knife in his hand.

I stumbled backward and tripped over my feet, falling to the floor just inside the door.

He howled with laughter, trying to stop himself. “It’s— it’s all right kid.” His laughter continued in spurt. “It’s a fake

knife.” He stabbed his hand with it and the blade retreated inside itself.

“Oh, man. Did I miss it?” Raj asked, coming up behind me. “You were supposed to wait for me to be here. It would have been more convincing.”

“Sorry.” The pizza guy handed the prop knife to Raj and went to work retrieving the pizza from the carrier.

“That’s not funny! How would you like it if some stranger fake stabbed you?” I wasn’t sure who I was talking to. I guess it was more the general assembly. I was just glad Mags and Grandpa hadn’t been in here to see. It was bad enough Raj knew about it. Of course, it sounded like he’d had a hand in its orchestration.

“Don’t be such a wuss.” Raj accepted the pizza boxes and stared down at me.

“It’s okay kid. Happy birthday by the way. They paid me an extra twenty for the prank.” The pizza guy turned, still chuckling to himself and disappeared back into the night.

Climbing to my feet I shut the door and glared at Raj. “No more jokes tonight. I’ve had enough.”

“Okay. I promise no more jokes.”

We returned to the dining room to find Grandpa sitting at the table with a character sheet in his hand. His glasses were narrowly fixed to the tip of his nose and his eyes darted across the pencil written stats listed.

“Um, what’s happening?”

“Your Grandpa was curious about the game. I told him he could play.” Mags dared me to object.

“But—but—he doesn’t have a character. How can he play?”

“He has the NPC I made. Don’t worry. The story will work find.”

“Whatever.” I gave in and plopped to my seat.

Chapter 4

Slipping into Reality

Raj laid the pizza at the center of the table atop the maps and opened the top box. “We got peperoni, sausage, and cheese.” He grabbed a slice of peperoni and took his own seat, snaking the stringy cheese into his mouth before the first large bite.

I grabbed a slice of peperoni and one of sausage and pressed the faces together to form a triangle shaped sandwich. It was the next best thing to rolling one of those cheap personal pizzas into a burrito and eating it that way.

“Okay. Now that the interruptions are over, can we continue our game?” Mags grabbed a slice of cheese and retreated behind her screen.

I nodded, suspecting Raj did as well.

“Good. As I was explaining, the room is filled with bodies that appear to have been sacrificed in a most gruesome manner. Aaron, you’re finally able to pick yourself up but you still feel sick. Raj, you’ve entered the room to investigate.

“Mister Corey, you’ve traveled by horse for several days now, stopping at the various towns and settlements along the way. Your order has had no contact from this region in almost six months and they sent you to investigate. You left last night’s camp just before sun up and have ridden hard for a couple hours. The day is cold and dark, with storm clouds constantly overhead. Make me a perception check.”

“How do I do that?”

Raj leaned over and pointed out the borrowed pile of dice, specifically the d20, as well as the skill tree listed along the lower right half of his page. “Roll that one and add the number the perception skill.”

“Oh, okay.” Grandpa rolled the die and announced. “Sixteen!”

“You notice an orange glow in the clouds ahead of you. What do you do?”

“Um, well, an orange glow usually means a fire. Is there a fire department to call or do I need to handle this light when I was a kid and gather the towns folk to pass buckets of water?”

I sighed. “It’s a medieval setting, Grandpa. There isn’t a fire department.”

“Oh, okay. So, I ride hard in hopes of reaching the town. Considering sunrise happens around six and I’ve been riding for a few hours, I’m going to assume it’s around eight A.M. People should be up and about but just in case I’ll yell fire as I ride through town.”

“You reach the towns edge before you see just how severe it really is. There are several buildings fully ablaze. I need you to make a handle animal check for me.”

Scanning the skill list, Grandpa repeated what he’d done before. “Twelve!”

“Despite your efforts to continue into town your horse just isn’t having it. It comes to a full and complete stop just outside the split-rail fence marking the town’s outer edge. You almost lose your grip and go flying over the horse’s head but you manage to dig your heels in and hold fast. Now that

you're stopped, you notice a smell in the air. Something that doesn't belong."

"What is it?"

"You aren't sure. You can smell the burning wood plain as day but there's something else mixed in. Something sweet but nauseous at the same time. Go ahead and roll another perception for me."

"Nine."

"The smoke is starting to fan out, blocking much of your sight. You think you see people moving about in the distance but it's too difficult to make out."

"I'm going to climb off my horse and hitch him to the fence before walking into town."

"Okay. I'll get back to you in a few minutes. Raj, what are you doing?"

"Eating pizza." He joked through a mouth full.

Mags didn't have to say anything to spur him into action.

"I'm looking for any specific marks or sigils that might say who this sacrifice was to."

"Do you have in ranks in Knowledge Religion?"

"No."

"You can roll it but you're going to take a minus four."

"Ha, negative two." Raj chuckled, sliding his d20 back into the pile and grabbing another.

"You've never seen these sigils before. I need both you and Aaron to make reflex saves."

We rolled and instantly I found myself wishing I had evasion. "Nine."

"Nineteen!"

“The floor shifts beneath your feet. You’re fairly certain it dropped a few inches and you can see flames dancing through several gaps that weren’t there a moment earlier. Aaron, the sudden jolt knocked you off balance and you landed on your back. Roll me a d4.”

“I grabbed one of my pyramid shaped dice and rolled it. “Three.”

“You take three points as the burning embers of the wood press against your flesh. You’ll take a d4 every round until you get up.”

“I’m getting up.”

“Roll another d4 since it will take you a round to stand, not to mention you have nothing to grab hold of.”

I roll, releasing a sigh as the die landed on four. I didn’t bother announcing. There was no point. I just updated my hit points, wishing I’d played something with a bigger hit die.

Mags rolled something behind her screen and continued talking. “Mister Corey, you’re cautiously walking through town, searching for anyone to help put out the flames. Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like most of the buildings are going to be able to be saved. But to make matters worse, you aren’t seeing anyone who can help. Each time you think you see someone their silhouette disappears into the ever thickening smoke.”

“Is there anything I can do to make the smoke go away? Or even put out the fires? You said I was a magic using class.”

“A paladin is restricted to a certain type of spells. The closest your character might have is Create Water, but that’s more for drinking rather than fighting a big fire. At your

level, you could create a maximum of six gallons per casting. Since you're new to the game I'll allow you roll percentile to see if your god takes favor on you."

"How do I do that?"

"Roll both of those." Mags pointed at two d10s, one with a single digit and the other with double digit.

Grandpa lifted the pair and rolled them across the table.

"That's sixty-eight. You got higher than fifty percent so your god takes favor on you. You feel an overwhelming sense of dread in your gut. There's only one thing you've encountered which left this kind of feeling. You sense undead all around you. But there's something more. Something much stronger that puts off the same aura."

"What's that?"

Mags suppressed a chuckle. "I can't tell you that. You'll have to find out for yourself."

"Am I on my feet yet?" I was starting to get annoyed. I know Grandpa was just curious about our game but this entire night so far had been a nightmare and he was intruding where I didn't want him.

"Yes. You've gotten back up and are entering the room. Do you have Knowledge Religion?"

"I do." Grandpa interjected, seeing the name in his skill tree.

"You aren't with them currently but if you end up in a place to use it, I'll tell you."

I scanned my skills for good measure but I knew I didn't have it. I was a wizard. My knowledge skills were targeted

toward arcana. Religion was for people not powerful enough to make stuff happen on their own. “No.”

“Okay. Aaron, you step into the room just as the floor begin to buckle. Both of you know it isn’t going to hold much longer.”

“Is the fire raging outside this window?” Raj asked, recalling why they’d come to this side in the first place.

“No. You can see the glow but it doesn’t appear to have reached where you’re at just yet.”

“I’m going to break the glass and climb out.”

I wasn’t seeing much other option. It seemed silly to flee when there was clearly something of importance right here but I didn’t know what I could do. I was on limited time and the only hope of survival appeared to be out the window and away from whatever Mags wanted us to find here. “I’m going to the window as well.” Habitually I flipped through my character sheet and located my spell list. I knew there wasn’t anything that was going to me, and unless Raj found a safe escape we were both going to fall through the floor. That was unless I could find some alternative to prolong our stay and figure out whatever we were supposed to find. With a deep breath I turned to the book Grandpa had given me. It wasn’t much but I felt there was an answer inside.

Flipping to a random page near the center I began scanning the contents. Most of the words were nonsense but a few symbols held just enough meaning for me to get the basis of their intent. *Plasma bolt, energy shield, commune with dead.* I read each to myself thinking over the possibilities. What was more surprising was I had no idea how I was

understanding the words. They were still just as much gibberish now as they were before but somehow I knew what they meant. I paused, thinking over the commune with dead one. If I could use that perhaps I could ask these people what had happened here. But was there time?

“I see you’ve opened your present.” Grandpa said, staring intently. He had a subtle smile on his lips I hadn’t seen before.

“Yeah?”

“I urge you to be careful with that book. Many secrets lay within. I’d hate for you to stumble upon one accidentally.”

“Raj, you break the glass and glance out just as a loud pop echoes all around and the floor starts to break apart. The temperature instantly rises and you feel the flames shoot up and onto the walls of the room. I need each of you to make reflex saves, and be warned, if you fail there is only one more round before the entire place is going to implode.” Mag announced as stern as she could.

I hated when she adopted that demeanor. It usually meant things were about to go bad and she would be the first to say ‘I told you so’. Still, she always had the best of intentions and I couldn’t fault her for it. Even if I acted like I did sometimes.

I hesitated on the commune with dead spell again. That still didn’t feel like the one I needed, though if Mags would allow it I suspected it would grant some answers. But that was provided I had time to cast it, not to mention time to ask my questions. What I really needed was a time stop or some kind of temporal shield to place the area in stasis until I could get the answers I needed.

As if my thoughts had triggered it, a gust of wind appeared out of nowhere and the pages turned of their own accord. I couldn't stop them in time and I found myself staring at the perfect spell, almost like the book had magically known what I was looking for.

"There are two spells I'd like to cast. The first is an instant. The second takes a standard round. First, do I have enough time? And second, will you permit me the use of—." I scribbled the spell in question onto a scrap piece of paper and passed it to her.

Mags scanned my writing and I could see the wheels turning. She was considering my request as I knew she would. That was the danger of it. Even if I used the version straight from the PHB it was a dangerous game that could backfire if I didn't speak the exact combination of words needed to achieve my goal. I wasn't over thrilled with how vague my request was as I knew she'd find some way to twist it, but I also couldn't give her any fuel to out think me before I'd formally made my request.

Her eyes darted up from the paper and a wicked smile formed on her lips. "Yes, to both."

"I cast Contingency with the listed spell, and Time Stop." I rolled my d4, calculating how long the time stop would last.

"You feel the world around you slow to a near stop. The dancing flames cease their flicker. The collapsing floor which was breaking and crumbling into the inferno beneath your feet has halted midfall. To your knowledge, you're they only being in existence able to move freely at the moment. What are you doing?"

“First, I want to steal a glance around Raj. Is there any path or way for him to safely escape without me directly affecting him?”

“You look out the window and see there’s a wooden flower box just outside that one could possibly dangle from and drop to a lower awning. But no, there’s no way to get him in such a position without moving him yourself, which would break your time stop.”

“What? Come on. How am I supposed to escape if I can’t do anything?” Raj pleaded, searching his character sheet for anything he could use.

Mags raised a finger, silencing him.

“I want to cast Clairvoyance to find out what happened to these people and why they were sacrificed.”

“What’s your spell bonus?”

“Bonus or Save DC?”

“Bonus.”

“Eight.” I wasn’t sure where she was going with this. If there was resistance the DC would have been what she needed.

“Aaron, you cast your spell. It’s a little difficult getting around your time stop but you manage. You’re seeing the events of the night, shortly before you awoke. Everything’s dark. You’re seeing nothing but shadows in all directions. Glowing eyes and vicious teeth appear like smoke, only to be wisped away in a breeze. You feel like every pair of eyes is upon you, watching you, waiting for you to let your guard down. They could jump at any moment and tear you to pieces.”

Cold sweat dripped down my spine as the story engulfed me. I couldn't swear it but the room felt darker, smaller, close around me. I could see shadows moving outside the windows, passing straight through the blinds like ghosts made of black smoke.

“At the center of your vision you see the people around you. They're bound and gagged, unable to cry out. Unable to flee their captor. You see the fear in their eyes, the terror in their hearts. A figure appears at their center. You feel a fear unlike any you've ever known. You struggle to back away but the cold white of his face freezes you in place. I need you to make a constitution save as a throbbing, burning pain erupts in your chest.

My heart was racing a mile a minute. I could feel it thumping deep within my chest, threatening to break free and run for the hills. Coming to my senses, I struggled to grab my d20. Palming it, I gave a little giggle and tipped my hand letting it spill out and across the table. It caught on one of its numerous corners and began to spin like a coin on edge. I watched it for a long moment waiting for it to fall. Finally it began to slow and teetered between two numbers that I could see plain as day. One would mean complete success. The other, certain failure.

I watched, helpless against the result. The die balanced near perfect on the edge, refusing to give me an answer. The nineteen wasn't a perfect roll but it was certain to save me from whatever was happening. The one on the other hand was a critical failure and one that was certain to have ill

consequences regardless. Then, as I felt the hours of my life ticking by, it fell and my hopes were shattered. One.

“We have two ways to handle this. You can roll again, and you’ll have to get above a twelve. Or I can roll and you can tell me high or low.”

I appreciated the option. A critical failure was never fun for anyone. It usually meant the worse possible outcome of any situation was about to take effect. The fact she’d given the option meant she was willing to let me claim my own fate. If I let her roll, she had the ability to sluff the result and either save or condemn me. I would never know for certain which. Naturally, I chose to do it myself.

Grabbing my d20 a second time, I rolled again. It tumbled across the table coming to a stop near the center. I could have cried as the number staring back at me was another one. A double critical failure. I lowered my head, fearful of what was to result.

Raj jumped to his feet, staring in disbelief. “Oh, that sucks!”

“Roll again.” Mags prompted.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to. A single critical failure was bad. Two was worse. If I ended up with three I wasn’t sure I could stand it. Hesitantly, I grabbed a different d20 and carefully tossed it, hoping for a better fate than the previous two. It spun and stopped on a four. Not quite as bad but it confirmed the failure meaning I was still going to face both of them when in truth, I wasn’t sure I could survive one.

Mags rolled a handful of dice and looked at me fearfully. “Aaron, the shadowy figure stares intently at you through the

vision. You aren't sure how he can see you but you know he can. His fingers reach inside your chest and you feel him squeezing your heart. You take four permanent constitution damage and another eight psychic damage. You collapse to the frozen ground, losing your concentration on the clairvoyance spell. I need you to make a reflex at a minus four."

I rolled, defeated. There was no way I was going to survive any new damage. I had two hit points left from my original total. The constitution damage was going to lower my total by at least another sixteen points. I only hoped she'd let me keep them until this was said and done. If not, I was already dead. "Six." I shook my head in disbelief and tossed my character sheet toward the center of the table. It was over. There was no way I'd survive whatever she had in store for me.

"In your convulsions you trip over one of the broken planks and fall backward through a gap in the floor. The frozen flames wrap around you, encasing you in an orange hue. The heat is minimal as your body burns away to ash in an instant.

I let out a sigh and sat up in my chair. There was nothing I could do.

"This game is intense." Grandpa announced, watching every action from his small corner of the table.

"You don't know the half of it." Raj added.

"Aaron—" Mags started. "—as the last pieces of your body disintegrate into nothing, you feel a shock, and suddenly you find yourself being pulled up and through the flame, back to where you were moments before you cast your

clairvoyance spell. Memory of your death surges through your brain and you realize your contingency spell took effect, undoing what had been done.”

“What? How? I forgot about that!” I grabbed my sheet from the center of the table, hoping to somehow salvage my dignity. I suspected it was a little too late for that.

“Had you not specified the spell to take effect when your time stop broke, it wouldn’t have happened that way. You’re welcome.” Mags offered, making sure I was acutely aware she’d been the one to save me.

“Thank you.” I quickly scanned through the book, finding the spell I should have cast from the start. “is the time stop still in effect?”

“For the moment yes. But you only have two rounds before it ends and the building collapses in on itself.”

“Will you allow me to use this spell?” I quickly translated from the book onto the paper and passed it to her.

“Aaron, I wouldn’t.” Grandpa offered.

“How many spell points do you have left?”

“Were the spells I casted prior to my death used? And why not?” I asked each in turn. Why was Grandpa suddenly so against me using the book he’d given me? I could see him trying to find an answer but he was taking longer than I wanted to wait.

After a moments silence Mags spoke. “Your spell points were used but the constitution and psychic damage have been reversed as if you’d never seen the figure.”

“Okay.” I quickly recalculated everything. “I have thirteen spell points left.”

“This spell would cost you twelve to cast. So long as you understand that, I’ll allow it.”

“I do.” I went to work sounding out the syllables from the book. Since I was using a spell from it I figured I might as well include the verbal components. Truth be told, I liked the concept. If only more of the modern books contained the same. It would have made playing a caster more authentic. “Evello fila ut encompass magicae circa mundi. Movere sto ubi affectu et desiderio meo.”

I felt a strange sensation rise up inside me. The lights flickered and went out and I could hear a hum in the air. Violent winds swirled around me and slowly my vision went black.

Then, as quick as it had begun, I was standing alone in the last place I expected to be.

Chapter 5

Shad E Acres

Moon beams shone through the heavy overcast night, diffused and shrouding my surroundings in a soft light barely visible through the vast darkness. I heard the grass and leaves crunch under my weight. A light frost had settled on the surface and I was beginning to feel the cold on my bare arms.

I hadn't expected to end up alone and outside. I wasn't even sure how it'd happened. Raj wanted me to sneak out. I knew that much, but how he'd managed to pull off this prank I had no idea. This seemed beyond even his ability. And trust me when I say he's gone to some pretty great lengths for a good prank before.

Still, how did he know I feared this place? I'd never mentioned it to anyone. Not even him. Never mind how he'd managed to pull it off, I was more curious as to how he knew about it.

A strong breeze blew past me, sending shivers down my spine and rattling the leaves. I watched the steam expel from my mouth and rubbed my arms, trying to generate some warmth. If I'd known he was going to pull this I would have at least worn a sweater. But that was one of the things he'd said on more than one occasion. The trick to a good prank, never let them expect it. And for the most part I'd done good to always expect it from him. But not this time. Especially after what he'd had the pizza guy do.

Crunching leaves echoed from within the tree line ahead of me. It sounded like footsteps but I couldn't be sure, neither growing louder nor quieter, suggesting it was neither coming nor going. It simply was. In existence for the sole purpose of creeping me out.

"Hello? Raj, I know you're in there. This isn't funny anymore!" I wanted to be mad but I couldn't find my anger. It was blocked by my sheer terror of what was inside those woods.

I stared down the worn path that I'd never been able to make myself travel during the day. I knew that Grandpa's retirement home was just one the other side and if I could make it there I'd at least have shelter and a phone to call someone to come get me. But who could I call? Mom and dad were gone. Grandpa wasn't at the retirement home. And both Raj and Mags were at my house. Considering Raj had gone through all the effort of stranding me out here, however he'd managed it, everyone had to be in on it. He couldn't simply knock me out and deliver me to the place I hated most without any kind of help from the others. Especially since we were all together what seemed like minutes ago.

The footsteps I'd been listening to trailed off into nonexistence and I suddenly realized there were no other sounds. The wind had stop rustling the leaves. There were no crickets chirping or birds cawing. The snapping of twigs or crunching of leaves was gone. It was silence in the truest form, save for the pounding in my chest that was beginning to feel like war drums threatening to tear me apart.

Cautiously, I looked around. It was pitched black just beyond my surroundings and I came to the realization that every creature that wanted to get me was just beyond sight. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to run, nowhere except for into the forest. The one place I was certain death would claim me.

“Air run.” A melodic voice called from the darkness. It was soft and calm, like that of a young girl calling to a sibling. “Come play with us.”

I had no desire to obey. If anything it made me want to run a million miles in the other direction. “raj, I know that’s you. Quit messing around!”

“Air run, won’t you play?”

“I have a knife!” I threatened, raising my mechanical pencil menacingly. It seemed like the edge of darkness was getting closer, closing in around me. I’d had a good twenty feet of waist high grass and weeds between me and the edge of sight but now it was down to ten. If it got any smaller I knew I’d have no choice but to run. What was worse, game terms popped into my mind.

Each round was roughly six seconds. A regular character could walk thirty feet in a single round. The statistics told me I didn’t have time to analyze this. I had to act now before it, whatever it was, surrounded me.

Before I could blink the shadows closed in. I could feel their cold radiance upon me. They were less than five feet from me, close enough to reach out and grab me. And I was frozen. I couldn’t have jabbed with my mock *knife* if I’d wanted to. There was only one move I had and it was the last one I

wanted to consider. My feet acted of their own volition and I stun and darted into the tree line.

The transition wasn't nearly as I'd expected it. Don't get me wrong, it was still extremely dark but I could see better than I'd thought possible.

What had appeared as an impenetrable barrier from the outside was more spacious within. There were tons of trees all around but they seemed to hold the darkness at bay. My vision had shifted from normal color to more of a grayscale. I could see vertical black lines in varying thicknesses that arced from the ground up into the sky. Between those lines was slightly lighter patches of gray, highlighted from the sparse moonlight overhead filtering through the canopy.

For as scared as I was, I felt a small amount of comfort knowing whatever had been trying to get me out there couldn't follow in here. As wonderful as that feeling was it didn't et me completely at ease for I knew there was something much worse in here. Something that even the unseen monsters outside were afraid of.

I cautiously walked along what I thought was a trail. My sight was limited which left the majority of my navigation to feeling my way around with patches of sight here and there. I had one hope. I needed to somehow find my way to the other side. It shouldn't have been a problem as I'd looked straight through it more times than I could count, but now that I was here I couldn't be certain what or where anything was.

The semi frozen leaves crunched under my feet and numerous sticks and branches clung to me like the thin fingers I'd imagined every time I tried to work up the courage

to go through. I was just glad none had held on when I fought to get free. If they I don't know what I would have done. All I really knew was my footsteps were softer on the areas I thought were the trail. If I got off even a little bit, the crunch became much louder and the sticks became more pronounced.

A dim light filled my vision blocking out all other light. Subconsciously, I started toward it, drawn like a moth to the flame.

I was starting to regain detail. Spider webs and branches that would have clung to my face were able to be avoided. I stepped around a large sinkhole that went down for who knew how far. And the numerous rocks, leaves, and sticks that covered the unkempt forest floor became easier to identify and avoid.

The glow separated into two lights, then three, and before long I realized I was looking at an entire row of lights about chest level. The forest opened and the trees thinned and I realized the crunching leaves beneath me were gone, replaced by thousands of downed pine needles.

I was glad for the change as they were much quieter and softer to walk upon. Stealth was something I could not overlook with my newest predicament.

I was standing at the edge of some strange forest cottage surrounded by a winding stone wall. Each of the posts, save for one, were topped by oddly shaped lanterns that radiated flickering light like that of a candle. The single post closest to me was empty as if awaiting its lantern.

I wanted to approach and see if whoever lived there had a phone I could use. I wanted to seek shelter from the darkness

outside and the things that wanted to get me. I wanted so many things but something told me I would not find any of it here. I knew, even before I took my next step closer and discovered where I really was, that I was in mortal danger and I should have turned around and run the other direction. But where could I go? Even if I managed to get to the forest edge I couldn't go out there. And I couldn't stay here. I was doomed either way.

I took a step closer to the strange hut and realized why the place made me feel uneasy.

The fence I'd thought was made of stone had strange protrusions and looked to me more akin to piled sun-bleached sticks that were rounded at the end. The lanterns were of the same material and I couldn't help but notice the eye sockets and defined cheek structures and loose teeth barely clinging to their sockets. All of it, the fence, the posts, the lanterns themselves were made of what I suspected to be human bones.

It was that revelation that I suspect gave away my presence for in that very moment the cottage jumped in the air and thin stilts that looked eerily like chicken legs sprouted beneath it. The entire structure danced around to stare at me.

I didn't wait to see what it was going to do next. My feet were carrying me over downed logs, and round blackened silhouettes, and through narrow gaps of vines and thorns that tore at my clothes. I had to get away. If I stopped I knew the things in that house, whatever it was, was going to get me and that that filled me with more dread than whatever the shadow creatures had in store for me.

"A-A-Ron?" I heard call through the trees.

“Raj?” I questioned aloud. Had he finally realized this prank had gone too far? Had he finally decided to tell me it was all a joke and laugh of me? I didn’t even care if he laughed this time. I just wanted to get out of here and find the comfort of my friends, even if they were the ones that put me here to begin with.

“Aaron!” Mags shouted somewhere to my left.

I turned and no sooner than I broke through the tree line I crashed into them and we tumbled to the ground in a heap.

“Ugg, A-A-Ron, get off me!” Raj groaned, pushing at me.

I picked myself up though my arms were locked around them. I was never so glad to see anybody in my life. My eyes settled on Mags and even though she looked annoyed she didn’t condemn my holding of her. I suspected she had some idea as to what I’d been through. She patted my arm and I released.

“Aaron, that was a foolish thing you did. You need to be more careful. I didn’t give you this book to misuse the things within.” Grandpa scolded, raising the thick tome for me to see.

I was taken back for a few reasons. First, I hadn’t noticed him until now. Secondly, I’d never heard such a tone come from him. He was always so casual that I suspected being stern was something he didn’t know how to be. And lastly, why was he getting onto me? I didn’t do this. It had been done to me.

“A-A-Ron, did you know?” Raj asked, fueling my confusion.

“Did I know what?”

“Duh—That magic is real!”

“I—Um—What?”

“Of course he didn’t. Look at his face. He’s just as surprised by all of this as we are.” Mags answered. I could see compassion in her eyes. In this moment she understood me better than anyone ever had.

“Children, we don’t have time. It isn’t safe out here.” Grandpa glanced around as if searching the world around them for something unseen. “Follow me.” Without another word he marched straight into the tree line and onto the forest path.

I didn’t want to go back into the forest but with Grandpa, Mags, and Raj I knew it would be okay this time. If nothing else at least I had some company this time.

Mags walked in after Grandpa and I followed her, letting Raj take the tail. I had so many questions and no idea how to ask them.

“How’d you do it?” Raj asked.

“How’d I do what?”

“You know. Get here.”

“I don’t know. I thought you had something to do with it. I still kind of do. For all I know this is some elaborate prank you’re pulling. How else would you guys know where to find me? Though I still don’t know how you thought to bring me to this place, not to mention how you got me here. I suspect some kind of knockout gas.”

“Dude, I didn’t have anything to do with this. We were gaming and all of a sudden you read that spell. The lights started flashing and the wind was blowing, and before I knew

it you were gone. Honestly, I freaked out a little. Mags was freaked out too.”

“I was not. I was concerned. There’s a big difference.”

“Sure!” Raj taunted.

“So how did you guys get here?”

“You Grandpa brought us.” Mags replied, pushing a tree branch aside for us to pass unhindered.

“How? He doesn’t even have a car as far as I know.”

“Haven’t you been listening. Magic is real. He used the same spell you did. Though I don’t know how he targeted it or why it brought us here. Maybe something in the words?”

“Wait, you’re telling me my Grandpa has magic?”

“Yeah. He said it runs in your family and that you’re suppose to be the next wizard but tonight is some important night for your power to come in. That’s why he arranged for your parents to leave. He didn’t want them to get in the way.”

“What? You mean this was all a part of—”

“I think questions are best reserved for when we’re safe.” Grandpa interjected as he stepped through the tree line and into the clearing on the other side.

We were closer to the retirement home than I realized. Of course I’d never been able to take the forest trail to find out where it came out. We were a short distance from an electronic gate I’d never seen before. There were no camera or guard shacks watching over. Just a keypad and card scanner resting beside the black iron bars that tucked neatly into the pristine gray bricked wall.

A small card materialized in Grandpa’s hand. Stealing a glance around, he quickly swiped it before punching in an

absurdly long sequence of numbers into the keypad. The indicator flashed red twice and then let out a long green pulse with beep as the gate began to slide open on its own.

He gestured for us to enter and I could hear it closing behind us.

Once inside the place was much different than I could have ever imagined. Instead of the tennis courts, grass covered hills, and concrete walkways I'd always seen from the front entrance, this place was filled with sights I never thought possible.

We may as well have entered any number of towns straight out of our game. The sky was a light shade of purple and riddled with twinkling stars that seemed much closer than any I'd seen before. The roads were paved with cobblestone and the smaller trails were densely packed dirt. Unlike the concrete or bricked buildings I'd grown accustomed to seeing, all of these were made of old style wood, stone, or some combination thereof. Hooded lanterns were fixed to posts that lined the streets and other hung from chains just outside wooden doors. They had everything from taverns, general stores, blacksmith, stable, and civic center.

Wooden signs dangled over entranceways or were fixed to signposts. Horse drawn buggies rattled by, their occupants unseen save for the coachman atop. Some of them moved with the absence of horse or coachman, yet somehow piloted just as well.

Several brooms were hard at work, sweeping the dust off the streets of seemingly their own accord. And hundreds of

towers, some dark, some light, some somewhere in between shot to the sky for as far as the eye could see.

“Um, Grandpa, where are we?”

“Welcome to Shade Acres. Home for retired witches and wizards.” He extended his hands in greeting with a wide smile on his face. “Now, we need to get some place safe before I answer the numerous questions I’m sure you have.” Grandpa signaled one of the horseless coaches and it came to a stop in front of us. “Corey Tower, please.”

The door opened and Grandpa gestured for us to climb inside.

The inside was just as nice as out. There were two wide seats at each end, each a plump cushion that felt more like a couch than a carriage, and a large wooden chest with golden lock and bindings rested against the wall opposite the door.

No sooner than the three of us were seated along what I considered to be the front, Grandpa climbed in and closed the door behind him. He sat facing us and knocked on the chest. The lid raised up revealing a cushioned interior that could have easily been larger than the carriage itself. Carefully he set the tome inside and pressed the lid shut. The locking mechanism disappeared, leaving me to wonder how we were supposed to open it.

I felt the coach lurch and I knew we were moving. “What’s going on, Grandpa? What’s with this place?”

“Not yet. Anyone could be listening. I’ll answer your questions when we reach my tower.” He offered a reassuring smile but I remained unconvinced.

“Wow. Hey guys, look outside.” Raj held the side curtain open and leaned over, offering us view.

I suddenly felt sick. There were thousands of buildings around us but what I couldn't have expected was to be looking down at their roofs. Some were slate shingled, others in some various wood. A limited few didn't appear to have any roof at all, instead stretching to greet us regardless of elevation and instead of having a front door they had a large landing platform and runway. I'd never flown in anything before but this certainly wasn't how I'd imagined it.

And just as I was beginning to get used to the idea of flying through some hidden medieval city, we landed on one of the many towers that I'd seen from a distance.

Chapter 6

The Plan

The guideless coach came to a stop smoother than I would have thought possible. I'd been in car rides with rougher transitions and this thing had been flying.

"Welcome to my home." Grandpa said, gesturing to the door.

As if it were the password, the door magically opened and the metal step at its base unfolded and flipped out the opening awaiting our use.

Raj wasted no time in climbing out. He was utterly fascinated by what he saw. Even from where I continued to sit, I could see his gaze darting to this and that, studying his surroundings like a child in a candy shop.

Mag on the other hand was more reserved. She cautiously climbed out, alert and waiting for something to jump out at her. I'd never see her so unnerved but I have to admit that she was handling it better than I.

I didn't know what to think, or feel, or do. I was just kind of there, floating around like a discombobulated head witnessing all the things happening around me. I wasn't sure I could believe any of it. In fact, a large part of me suspected I was dreaming. At any moment I could wake up, late for the last day of school and all of this would have just been a horribly vivid dream where my mind was running away with itself in anticipation of my nearing birthday. Though on the flip side, I'd had many dreams before and while they often felt

real while I was experiencing them, this felt different. Not so dream like.

I climbed out of the carriage and stepped down onto the smooth bricks that comprised the outcropping we'd landed on. It was larger than I could have imagined, feeling more like a runway than anything. The tower continued up to my right, seeming like a massive wall that went on forever, though we were already so high up I was looking into and over many clouds. Were it not for their cover I had no doubt I would have been able to see for miles. As it were, I could only see the magical town hidden within the retirement home's walls.

"A-A-Ron, you've got to come see this!" Raj was standing near the edge, between two protruding stones that formed protective barrier. It looked more like the blocks atop a castle's wall than anything, serving as protection for archers, but providing the perfect place to land a grappling hook.

I approached, stealing a glance at Mags, who was slowing spinning in circles, surveying the world around her. I was kind of worried. She looked almost as confused as I felt. "What's up?"

"We are!" Raj pointed at the world far below us. What had been full sized or, in some cases, large buildings, they were now little blips of shape and twinkling lights far in the distance.

I'd never had much of a fear of heights but this view unlocked it and I stumbled backward to get away from the edge.

"We need to go inside. It's still not safe here." Grandpa announced as the carriage flew away on its own.

I wasn't sure how he intended for us to go inside. The wall was huge and it curved around for quite some distance but I was still able to see every part that attached to this landing. There were no doors or windows as far as I could tell. It looked like the nearest one was thirty of forty feet up, and that was little more than a sliver in the side wall.

I approached Mags, hoping she was okay. I'd never seen here like this. She was so often the voice of reason. The one who always held it together when things were getting out of hand. And while she wasn't hysterical, I couldn't help but feel she was having trouble make sense of all this. The understatement of the century. "Are you okay?"

She was slow to settle her gaze on me. "Yeah. Just trying to make sense of it all. How can all of this exist and none of us know about it? It's like our whole lives have been one big lie. We were always told magic and monsters aren't real but it turns out they are. Like we're the characters in our game, helpless against the vast unknown."

I nodded. "You're forgetting one thing though."

"What's that?"

"Our characters can't have a story if we don't interact in the plot." I didn't know where that came from. It just sort of spilled out, but it made more sense than anything else happening around us right now.

I placed my hand on her back and prompted her toward where Grandpa was walking. If anyone knew how to get off the landing, I was certain he did. We walked together in silence, both of us unsure what was to follow.

I heard Raj rushing to catch up and he took position between Mags and myself, throwing an arm over each of us. “Guys, this is awesome! Way better than a trip to the new ice cream parlor. I mean, who would have every thought magic was real? It’s just so rad!”

“It doesn’t bother you at all?” Mags asked, throwing his arm from over her shoulder.

“No. Why should it? This is the best thing that’s every happened to me. Why else do you think I game. It’s an escape from normal life. And now we get to live the experience. What’s not awesome about that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. What about the fact that Aaron almost died tonight? He disappeared in front of our faces. I didn’t know what happen to him. And after what his Grandpa told us—” She trailed off.

“Okay, Magdalene. I get you’re scared but this is like a once in a lifetime sort of thing. You should try to enjoy it.”

Mags stopped dead in her tracks. I could see the fury in her eyes. I was just happy it wasn’t focused on me. “Don’t every call me Magdalene again. You know I hate that name!”

“I could say your first name.” Raj taunted.

“You do and I’ll punch you.”

“Whatever Boadicea.”

I’m not certain I’d ever seen Mags move that fast. I heard the pop before I saw her move and suddenly Raj was on the ground holding his chest.

“You hit me!”

“I told you I would.” Mags stepped around him, leaving me with Raj, and approached Grandpa who was just reaching the bricked wall.

I reached down to help Raj to his feet.

“She hit me.” He repeated, rubbing his chest.

“She said she would. What did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” He took my hand and pulled himself up. “I guess I thought she was joking.”

“Mags doesn’t usually joke. You know that.” I shrugged and turned to follow. It only took a moment to catch up with Mags and Grandpa who had stopped at the wall.

Grandpa was standing a few inches from it staring intently into the numerous bricks that compiled the structure. I found it odd considering this was supposedly his home. How could he not automatically know the way inside?

“What are we waiting for?” I asked only to be shushed with a finger. A thin layer of moisture coated everything and moss trailed the tracks between bricks. At a distance the glossy stone looked roughly cut but now that I was here I could see thousands of tiny symbols cut into the hard surface of each and every one. Like the spell book Grandpa had given me, the symbols jumped out and I was understanding bits and pieces, though I knew not how.

“A wizard’s tower is unique to him.”

“Or her.” Mags interjected with a glance from Grandpa.

“Or her.” He corrected. “To enter a tower without permission is to face all of its defenses. When I’m away I ward it against everyone, including myself. There are entities in this world which can adopt not only ones appearance and voice

but their thoughts and feelings. The only defense against such an imposter is by allowing ones self to be tried and tested on the most personal level. Nobody can completely become another in every possible way. My tower is warded to check for such.”

Yellow lights began to glow from Grandpa’s fingers and they traced the gaps around several of the bricks, weaving in and out of the multitude of symbols scattered across the surface. Within a few seconds he’d traced a full circle several feet tall and equally wide. Every sigil within began to glow a vibrant yellow and the wall melded into itself revealing an open doorway.

Grandpa stepped aside and gestured for us to enter.

There was a charge in the air the moment I crossed the threshold. I can’t be certain if it was the warm air that greeted my cold flesh the moment I stepped through or something more sinister, but I felt conflicted. A part of me wanted to get out of this place as fast as possible while the other assured that I would never find anyplace safer.

Judging from the expression on both Raj and Mags’ face, they were feeling the same.

“This way.” Grandpa sealed the entrance behind us and quickly returned to the head of our group. In no time we were traveling long corridors, rounding bends, and exploring what I knew had to be little more than a small percentage of the total estate. We walked for what felt like hours. The walls and floors, which had begun as nothing more than coarse stone, slowly began to transition.

I noticed the ceilings first. Wooden beams and rafters extended far overhead to create a vaulted look that was both elegant and exotic at the same time. The floors were the next to shift, becoming some kind of marble or granite or something attempting to look as such. Honestly, I couldn't say for certain. I wasn't an expert in the subject. And lastly, the walls began to adopt more wood and plaster until eventually the ever present stone was overthrown and nothing but more modern architecture remained.

I wasn't sure which I liked more. The grand castle look was something I'd always been attracted to but it felt so foreign, especially with how the rest of the night had gone. The modern style was more comfortable, a little too comfortable. It made it easy to accept that none of this was real and we were simply having a shared hallucination. Of course the small bits of magic happening all around us made sure we couldn't forget that part but it was an unexpected comfort nonetheless.

We arrived at Grandpa's study, a grand room with glowing fireplace and walls covered in books. I was certain I'd massive libraries that were smaller than this one room.

A long table sat offset to the left and fourteen chairs rested comfortably pressed in. The wooden surface was completely bare, save for a lace cloth and large golden bowl at the center. Along the right was a leather wrapped chair, angled so as to watch the fireplace, and an end table piled with thick books rested beside it.

What little wall space was visible between and above the huge shelves was decorated with odd assortments of trophies,

be it what I guessed to be a dragon head, smaller than I would have imagined, multiple swords and shields and other weaponry, easily accessible but just out of reach to someone of my size.

I couldn't help but notice the open balcony wrapping the entire perimeter of the room. Wooden rails and support beams separated whatever was up there. It made it feel larger than it already was. I was certain my entire school could fit within this one room.

A loud clap drew my attention to the table. Grandpa stood near one end, the book he'd given me resting in front of him, and a small amount of dust drifted from where it'd landed.

"Won't you children join me for a little education. I assure you we're safe here. At least for now."

The way he said it that left me unnerved. If this place was safe to begin with, how could it not be so later? The look on his old face told me he was planning to answer such questions.

With a sigh I approached and took a seat nearest.

Mags took the seat to my right and Raj sat across from me.

Waiting for us to get comfortable, Grandpa took the seat before him. He placed his elbows on the table and interlocked his fingers. Looking over his crescent shaped glasses, a warm gaze fell on me. "Aaron, my boy, I fear this to be a night you won't soon forget."

It seemed an odd statement to make. With everything that had happened, he was simply speaking the obvious. Still, I

could tell he wanted to say more but was searching for the right words. Whether it was an attempt to hold back certain information or to keep from overloading me with a bombardment, I couldn't say. I just knew he was thinking about his next words.

Casually Grandpa reached out and opened the book he'd given me. I didn't know to which page he'd turned but he seemed content it its selection without looking. Sliding it toward me, he spoke. "Can you tell me what this page says?"

I took the book and brought my attention to the multiple scribbles scattered about. As before it was gibberish, only this time it didn't seem to want to make sense. "I—I don't know."

"How did you read the other page?"

"I don't know. I didn't know what any of it meant. It just sort of popped into my head."

He nodded to himself, though nothing changed. He continued staring at me as if he was still awaiting an answer.

"What does it say?" I finally asked, growing tired if this little game. How was I supposed to know what it said? I didn't even know it was a real spell book until everything started happening.

"I can't say. It's not my book."

"But you gave it to me. How can you not read it?" I glanced to Mags and Raj hoping for some backup but they seemed just as confused as I.

"I can read pieces, much the same as you were able earlier this evening. But a wizard's spell book is as unique as the wizard himself. No wizard will be able to fully read and understand the book of any other in its completion. That is

reserved entirely for the wizard of which the book belongs. This book is yours. You have but to claim it. That's why you can't read this page. You haven't claimed it." He tapped on the open page for emphasis.

"There has to be some kind of mistake. I'm not a wizard. I only play one in our game. I don't know how to read spells or use magic."

"You already have."

"He's right, Aaron. You did it at game this evening." Mags corrected.

I wasn't sure how to feel about any of this. On one hand the concept of magic was freaking awesome. But on the other there was no way I was ready for something as heavy as this. I was a kid. I wanted to be a kid. Magic and adventure were things I only dreamed about. Now that they were seemingly becoming a reality, I wasn't sure I wanted them.

"On the night of a witch or wizard's thirteenth birthday he or she will come into their powers. There is no hiding or delaying. It happens to each of us. This is why I sent your parents away. When you visited me earlier today I could feel how strong you were becoming. I've no doubt others could feel it too. Unlike most who go relatively unnoticed until the transition is complete, you are going to be one of the most powerful magicians to rise in several centuries. That presents opportunity for those who would see your ability toward their own end. I couldn't, in good conscious, allow you to face it alone and unsupervised."

"You're saying you made all of this happen?"

“No. I’m saying it was going to happen one way or another. Having felt how powerful you’re to become, I didn’t want you to have to experience it alone.”

It was more than I was able to understand and I could still feel that he was holding back. I wanted to go home and forget any of this had ever happened but I knew that would never happen. Some part of it would follow me no matter where or how far I ran. “Why me?”

Grandpa shrugged. “Why does the caterpillar turn into a butterfly? It’s in your blood. My grandfather had it. And his before him. Every other generation for as long as our family tree can be traced. Of course, magic can prolong your lifespan as quickly as it can shorten it. The gifted generation tend to live around three times longer than most others. Though we have ways of hiding that.

“But if you’re asking if you’re somehow special. Aside from being born of a magical family, no. There’s no hidden prophecy or chosen one aspect to your existence. At least not that I’m aware. Some people are just naturally stronger than others. And when those arise there are some who would seek to manipulate them. That’s the danger you find yourself in right now. Until you’ve claimed your mantle and learned to harness your abilities with control, there are many who will seek to use you. It’s my intention to prevent that.”

“So you’re like a good wizard. You’re gonna protect him?” Raj asked. It looked as if he’d been following every detail so far. At least someone was. I was still hung up on the magic existed part.

“What do we do now?” Mags joined in. I’d never seen her look so concerned and I have to admit I took some pleasure in it. Whether she was willing to admit it or not, her actions suggested she cared about me as much as I cared about her.

“Strictly speaking, a wizard’s first trial is a sacred event. One that I’m not openly allowed to interfere in. I can however offer tutelage and attempt to teach him how to protect himself. Once we’ve covered the basics it’s my hope to petition the Council of Nine for sanctuary. If they grant it his first trial will be considered complete and no other witch or wizard will be legally allowed to influence his decisions.”

“What if they don’t?” A sudden look of worry appeared across Mags’ face. It somehow made her even more pretty in the firelit room.

“If sanctuary is denied we have but one course remaining. Hold out until he learns to protect himself. Only then will outside influences be unable to manipulate him.”

Chapter 7

Training Day

The thunderous tick of the grand clock ratting the seconds was drastically slow. That was just one of many features I found strange about the training room, as Grandpa had called it.

It felt more like a gathering of three long rooms that was joined into one with column supports at the third and two-third marks, though I couldn't say which was which.

The wall furthest from the entrance looked to be the most intimidating with hundreds of tiny flying devices that darted every which way and occasionally into each other. Grandpa warned all of us not to go over there.

The middle area, where I'd spent much of my time was split into three areas itself. The left had a series of doorways that disappeared into long and seemingly boring corridors. Just before that was a pit sunken into the floor with some kind of metal dummy at the center. I never saw it move but it always seemed to be in a different position each time I look upon it.

The right was an outcropping filled with bookshelves, weapons or all types, and what I considered to be an army of suited knights, though I was told they were just empty suits for decoration. That was the first place Mags had run off to the moment we got here. Almost immediately she'd become obsessed with the armor, studying the variations and running

her finger over particularly complex pieces. More than once my attention had drifted to her.

“Aaron, pay attention!” Grandpa snapped for what had to have been the thousandth time. That was one of the things I was learning. The concept of time meant nothing to a wizard. I have no idea how long I trained prior to that exact moment but if I had to guess I would have said weeks. The clock however suggested it had only been about thirty minutes which left me baffled.

Turning away from Mags my mind wondered where Raj had run off to. He’d disappeared almost as fast as Mags’ attention had been stolen by the armors and I suspected Grandpa had placed them under some kind of trance. They were lost in their own attentions, leaving me to train to my wit’s end.

Raj had returned a few times, each time with some new trinket that I couldn’t have cared less about. And each time Grandpa sent him away to return whatever it was to its rightful place, only for him to return again sometime later with something else.

My mind drifted back to Mags. She was fiddling with a glowing suit of armor that rested stoic upon its stand. I have no idea what was going through her head but I could tell she wanted to wear it. What was more interesting, the first time she’d approached it had been well over six foot tall. Now it looked to be of perfect height for her and I desperately wanted to see what she would look like while wearing it.

Mags glanced over at me and blushed. She turned away, realizing I'd been watching here. She hurried over to one of the few chairs in the corner and grabbed a book.

"Aaron!"

I felt the energy before I saw it and a bolt of crackling red energy crashed into the shield I'd formed around me.

"You must keep your focus at all times. A wizard who drops his guard is a wizard who dies. Keep your focus to keep your shield. The shield will hold only so long as your resolve remains intact."

"Come on, Grandpa. We've been at this for hours. How much do you expect me to remember without a break?"

"Time is meaningless. It bends to your will. You do not cater to it!"

I sighed and set my feet once again. Drawing on the twisting feeling in my gut I pulled the white flicks of light from the air around me and locked them together into a large disc that floated in front of me. No sooner than the final piece fell into place the entire thing flashed and became invisible. I honestly don't know if I could still see it or if I could simply feel it so strongly that I may as well have seen it, but I knew it was there and ready for action.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

A solid blast slammed into my shield and I slid backward nearly six inches. My shield held fast though I could feel the crack in it. Another blast like that one and I feared it would fail.

A barrage of energy bolts shot from Grandpa's fingers, imploding against the shield, fracturing it further. The flashes of light were beautiful to look upon, reminding me of some of the fireworks I'd seen during Independence Day. What I found more interesting though was rather than exploding out in a shower of sparks when they hit, instead they sucked into one another and faded away.

Grandpa explained that it was a precaution. We had the ability to cause the massive explosions like you'd see on TV but that would draw too much attention to us. It was safer to make magic look like a natural occurrence. Not that we openly hid from the general public but simply that there was a curse attached to public interactions. The insanity a regular human would feel from witnessing our power would fold back on the caster. I didn't fully understand the reason but he made me repeat it back so I'd remember.

Another large blast slammed into my shield and it broke into several pieces, scattering like glass until they dissolved. I landed on my butt and glared up at Grandpa with distain. "How am I supposed to stay focused when balls of light keep flying at my face? I can only absorb so many before the shield breaks!"

"You must learn to focus. Your clothing could be aflame and you'd still need to learn to keep calm. Nothing beneficial comes from anger. It clouds your mind. Likewise, fear holds you back. It serves to keep you alive by lying to you. Learn to silence your emotions and you'll master every task you set out to accomplish."

“This is stupid. Why do I have to learn how to make a shield? Why can’t I be the one attacking?”

A mild smirk formed on Grandpa’s face. “Well, if you think you can, by all means.” He extended his hands, showing he was open to attack.

I tried to summon the energies like he showed me. That seemed to be the base element of every spell, though the source of those energies seemed to come from different places. These ones were more like bits of static electricity hovering in the air around me. I pulled as many as I could find into a small ball of electric energy crackling between the palms of my hands. It tingled but didn’t hurt. We was troubling though is no matter how much I tried to pull, I couldn’t seem to make it any bigger than about the size of a golf ball.

“Are you going to cast or wait until I die of old age?” Grandpa taunted with a smile.

My entire body, struggling to contain the minute amount of power I’d collected. It was now or never. If I didn’t get rid of it I knew it was going to start shocking me. And if I simply released it I’d have to redistribute the unused energies where I’d found them or it’d shock me. I really didn’t want to get shocked.

Clearing my head as best I could, I drew back and thrust both hand outward, directing my underwhelming energy ball toward Grandpa. It launched as I’d intended but began to fizzle no sooner than it was clear.

I stared helplessly as a little spark traveled across the room toward Grandpa. I could feel he was trying not to laugh,

to which I was glad. I wasn't sure I could handle being laughed at right now.

"Hey, A-A-Ron, look at this!" Raj came running from a corridor to my left and I turned my head. That was a mistake.

I could see my minuscule lightning ball in the corner of my eye. No sooner than it arrived it struck a shimmering golden field that encompassed my Grandpa. I'm not entirely sure what happened but somehow my micro bolt became supercharged and flung back at me with a speed not even Grandpa biggest attack had had. I tried to bring up a shield but the particles didn't get there in time.

I could taste the air. A throbbing pain coursed through my body. When my vision cleared I found myself staring up at the ceiling. Grandpa, Mags, and Raj were standing around me, staring.

"Are you okay?" Mags asked, kneeling to help me up.

"No!" Grandpa reached out and grabbed her arm, stopping her. "He's still charged. He'll be fine in a few minutes but he has to ground first." He had that constant and annoying smirk plastered on his face and I wished I'd been able to knock it off of him.

"Looks to me like he was already grounded." Raj laughed, shaking his head. "Anyway, watch this!" He extended his hands, wrapped in a pair of simple looking leather gloves.

I couldn't see what he was going one about but Mags let out a gasp of shock. "What? What's happening?"

"Look." Raj ordered, nodding the direction he'd come.

I half rolled and strained to find whatever it was I was supposed to see. And when I did I almost wanted to punch

him. I'd been studying for who knew how long in order to learn how to control magic and he was making a pair of swords fight each other without so much a bead of sweat dripping from his head. I turned away in disgust.

"Did you see?"

"Yeah, I saw!" I tried to sit up but my body wasn't having it yet. I could still feel the electricity coursing through me and I wondered how much longer I'd have to wait.

"Young man, I've repeatedly asked you to leave stuff alone. Yet again here you are with one of my many prized possessions, playing with something you don't understand like it's a toy. Please return the gloves to where you found them and leave stuff alone. Any number of the things you'll find around here can break you with the slightest mistreatment."

I heard the swords clank to the floor and the joy that was so often visible on Raj's face had suddenly faded. His head drooped and he solemnly started walking away.

"Don't you think that was a little mean? He's just trying to make sense of all of this in the only way he knows how." Mags defended. It was the first time I'd heard her stand up for Raj. Still, I could understand Grandpa's side. Raj had a habit of getting too comfortable no matter where he was. He'd done the same thing with my stuff on many occasions.

I twisted and got to my stomach. I was tired of lying on the ground and it didn't appear anyone, other than Mags maybe, was going to help me up. Lightning crackled and sparked and danced with each movement, and no sooner than my bare hand touched the floor I wished I'd found some other

way as all that electricity stored in me suddenly shot out and I collapsed face first onto the stone.

“Is he all right?”

I could feel Mags nearing. She knelt along my left side and reached down, her hand hovered inches away, unsure of she could touch me.

“He’s safe to touch. The energy exited him all at once. It’s going to leave him weak for a little while but he’ll be okay.”

I wish I could have gotten up. I was still awake but my body refused to respond, like I didn’t have the strength to perform the simplest of tasks. If I could have gotten up there was one thing I wanted to do. Grandpa’s casual tone made me want to hit him. Truth be told, I was feeling the urge to hit a lot of people lately. That wasn’t something I usually felt the desire to do.

Mag’s hand made contact and I felt a sudden jolt of revitalization. I couldn’t see it but I could feel it. It was as if a golden glow of warmth radiated from her touch and spread throughout my entire body. The longer she remained in contact, the better I felt.

I tested my strength and my arms obeyed. I got them beneath me and pushed off of the cold floor in a pushup pose. Bending my knee I got my legs beneath me and I slowly started to my feet, assisted by Mags who looked more concerned than I’d ever seen her.

“Thank you.” I whispered.

She smiled and stepped away.

I knew now was the only chance I was going to get. Grandpa had been prepared for me last time. This time would

be different. I drew the energies around me and collected them as quickly and discreetly as I could. Whether Grandpa noticed or not I couldn't say. There were no tells as far as I could see.

When the energy bolt was large enough I released it toward him and it shot across the short distance in the blink of an eye.

As before, the glimmering shield surrounding him shimmered and my spell fired back at me. I was ready this time. I summoned my own shield, pulling the puzzle of pieces together faster than I ever had before. They flew into place and locked together and I saw the white haze solidify. Though something happened then I hadn't expected, not consciously anyway. My shield turned gold, like Grandpa's, and the spell hit. It swarmed around me, looking for any crack in my armor. Unable to find one it recoiled with itself and shot out a second time.

Grandpa threw his hand up and the bolt of energy imploded against a weakened shield that was hastily constructed.

As the last sparks of energy faded away his gaze shifted to me and a smile crept into place. "Well done, lad. I knew you could both attack and defend you just needed the proper motivations."

I felt some annoyance with his praise. It was all a test, still. Though I had to make myself stop. Of course it was a test. That's why he'd been teaching me. I didn't know why I was feeling the way I was. I should have been able to accept it and let it go but I felt betrayed on so many levels. My parents

forgetting my birthday. Grandpa coming over to watch me. The existence of magic. My place in it. And now, with my first successful spell. But all of it had been a manipulation. I'd been played from the start and I wasn't quite sure I was willing to be played any more.

Before I could put much more thought into it a strange sensation tingled down my spine and before I could announce it I heard an alarm echo through the tower's long corridors and rooms. Though I couldn't be certain if the sounds were audible or inside my head. It was more like an announcement being made over the intercom at school but much less speaker distortion.

"Giles Corey, The Council of Nine has accepted your request regarding the novice, Aaron Corey and his associates. A carriage awaits your occupancy."

"Time to go." Grandpa stated casually, suddenly wearing a set of white robes that weren't there a moment before.

"What? Where? I thought you said we'd be safe here? Why are we leaving?" Mags asked without giving time to answer.

"Something called the council of nine wants to talk with us." I replied, surprised she hadn't heard the message as I had. It made me wonder if it really was just in my head but then why had Grandpa been able to hear it too?

"Where's the other boy?" Grandpa asked, looking round.

"I'm here." Raj announced from the corridor he'd disappeared down not long before. He had a guilty look on his face and I suspected he was up to something but before I could

ask Grandpa directed us toward the large door at the end of the training room.

We walked back the way we'd come, only I was fairly certain we were taking a different route. Everything looked the same but somehow different and before I knew it the cool night breeze from the landing graced us.

It was a different coach awaiting us this time. The one we'd arrived in was white and horseless. This one was black and accentuated in silver complete with a nine headed hydra, also in silver, embossed on the center of the door. There were two massive sleek black horses at the head of the carriage with long fur sprouted from just below their knees and ran down covering their hooves.

I had to do a double take as it wasn't leather straps and bridle that held them in place but thin wisps of swirling energy that ran from horse to silent coachman sitting stationary atop, refusing to even look our direction as we neared.

Grandpa spoke to the coachman though I couldn't hear what he said. I suspected it was some kind of password or something because the carriage doors opened down the middle and swung outward revealing a intricate curved set of steps that went up into the decorative coach.

Mags and Raj were the first to enter but Grandpa stepped between me and them before I could follow.

"Aaron, I urge you to use caution when we meet the council. They're not forgiving of fools nor are they a patient sort. Speak only when addressed directly and be sure to think beforehand. I don't know if you've uncovered the importance

of this meeting but I assure you if they turn their backs it's going to be a dire evening for all of us."

"I understand." I didn't but I thought saying I did would make it go quicker. Grandpa had a tendency to ramble when he thought I wasn't understanding him.

He stepped aside and I climbed in to sit between my friends.

Chapter 8

The Sanctuary

The coach interior was one of the nicest things I'd ever seen. Even the grand tower where my Grandpa called home was lacking the elegance that I saw around me now.

The cushions were plump and every inch was stitched to display the finest detail. I had no idea what the symbols meant but it was pleasing to look upon, calming almost.

The size of the inside was what caught me by surprise. I hadn't noticed it from the steps. In fact it hadn't set in until I'd crossed the threshold and was fully in that the vastness dawned on me. It reminded me of one of my favorite TV shows called Doctor Who. The TARDIS was always bigger on the inside. Though this thing clearly wasn't some police box time machine and aside from Grandpa there was no one whom I would consider the Doctor.

There were a number of rooms to the rear but it seemed so big and foreign that I didn't want to leave my seat. I suspected Raj and Mags felt the same.

The carriage lunged and I knew we were in motion.

In the center of the opening that comprised the main chamber a long table materialized out of nowhere. It was loaded to capacity with fruits, meat, and bread. I'd never considered what a feast would look like but it solidified my understanding of the term.

Raj was the first to unseat and rush toward it.

I twisted around and stole a glance between the black curtains covering the wall length windows behind me. I knew it had to be an illusion of some kind. I'd seen the carriage from the outside. The windows weren't nearly as expansive as they were in here. But to reinforce my theory, the view was completely wrong. It hadn't been anywhere near cold enough to snow when we were outside, let alone long enough for it to accumulate the several inches that rested on the ground far below us. Moreover, the retirement home while large, even beyond the walls that hid its true visage, was nowhere near as grand as the spanning city beneath. Not even all of Fremont Hills was this big and there wasn't enough open space for us to be approaching one of the larger cities that surrounded it. This was some kind of huge metropolitan in a place I'd never been before.

"Where do you think we're going?" Raj asked, returning to his seat with a mouth full of food and extra in both hands. I hadn't realized how quiet he'd become until now. Usually he talked all the time whether you wanted him to or not. This was the first time he'd really spoken since Grandpa got on to him back at the tower which, while only a few minutes ago, for Raj that was like a lifetime.

"I don't know. I guess wherever the Council of Nine is. Outside doesn't look like any place I've been before but we haven't been gone long enough to go too far. I don't think anyway. But honestly, I don't know much of anything anymore. For all I know we went through some kind of portal and are on the other side of the world right now."

Mags grabbed my hand and I had to keep from blushing. All things considered she was holding it together quite well though I couldn't blame her for being freaked out. I was freaked out too.

The coach landed with a bounce and Grandpa who'd been sitting near the door got to his feet. He turned to face us and gave a stern yet friendly expression. "I need the three of you to be on your best behavior. The council is divided. I do not know if this will end in our favor or against but what I can tell you is we need to be extremely careful. Do not wander off. Do not speak unless spoken to and only if I nod approval. We're likely to have to wait for some time. I understand this will be considered boring to some of you but you must be patient. If we do not explore this avenue there's no telling when or even if the hunt for Aaron will end."

"Wait, who's hunting me?" Was this the first time I was hearing of this? If he'd mentioned it before had I missed that detail. That raised the importance of everything to a level greater than I was prepared for.

"There's no telling who's involved but we need to exercise caution on all sides. More than the shadow is likely to take an interest in you. If employed, you could tilt the scales on either side and that makes you a weapon to both sides."

Mags squeezed my hand before releasing. She picked herself up and started around the large table that ran the center of the main chamber.

Getting to my feet, I sighed and started after her. How could everything get so complicated in such a short time when mere hours earlier I simply wanted to have my birthday

party and hang out with my friends. Now it seemed the very fate of my survival was hanging in the balance.

“Think of it this way—” Raj added. “—at least we don’t have to go back to school Monday.” He smiled and grabbed another handful of food before joining me.

The curved steps emptied onto a glossy cobblestone street at the base of a round dais of stairs. The mounds of snow that collected in all directions seem to be melted from the walkway and little else. All that remained was the moisture where it had been sometime before.

The top of the stairs ended at a towering set of red doors that arched at their peak. They were set into a stone frame that was adjoined to what I could only describe as a castle. It might have been a cathedral or some other similar structure. I wasn’t totally fluent in medieval architecture terms. All I knew was this was easily the biggest building I’ve ever seen and I felt dwarfed in its shadow.

We climbed the stairs, led by Grandpa. I should have counted the steps but I didn’t. All I can say is there were a lot.

When we finally reached the top there were two guards standing on either side of the entrance, facing us. Both dressed in polished plate armor and they held halberds mirrored on their shoulders closest to the door.

“Giles Corey and company here to seek audience with the council.”

The guards showed no acknowledgment of his presence whatsoever but to my surprise the doors began to creak open.

I’d never been in a castle before but the smell that assaulted my nostrils was exactly what I imagined a castle to

smell like. It was musky and stale. There was an odd temperature to the air exiting the growing crack. It was warm yet chilling at the same time, like the mouth of a cave in the middle of winter.

Orange light flickered off the stone floor casting away the shadows that clung to every surface and finally they echoed out a timed crash as they opened fully and stood that way.

Grandpa raised a hand, signaling us to wait.

Footsteps echoed from somewhere inside but I couldn't immediately see to whom they belonged. A long shadow formed on the center walkway and a dark silhouette appeared in the distance, growing larger with each approaching step. In mere seconds a tall man wrapped in a heavy gray cloak with the hood up stopped just behind the threshold.

"Giles, my old friend, how are you?" The man dropped his hood and a gloved hand appeared between the overlapped cloth.

In my opinion he was extremely well dressed for someone wearing a cloak. It wasn't quite the formal attire my dad had worn to some of the events he and my mom attended but it certainly was formal in another era. I'd seen similar clothing worn on stage when my parents took me to see Hamlet. It was quite silly looking to me but as far as I'd gathered that was the fashion back then.

"It's good to see you, Gerald. I didn't know you'd gone to work for these stiffies."

"Times are hard. We can't all afford to retire and live in such luxury." The man, apparently named Gerald, laughed and

released his grip on my Grandpa's hand. "I hear you've asked for council with the nine."

"Yeah. The boy here—" Grandpa gestured to me. "—hit his thirteenth this evening and we're hoping they'll end open season on him."

Gerald let out a doubtful sigh. "Well, come on in. Best not keep em waiting. I don't know how well you'll fair though. The council hasn't been overly forthcoming with assistance to most of late."

Grandpa waved dismissively and ushered up through the doors which began to close the moment we were through. "I'm not too concerned. I've got an ace in the hole. Five to be exact."

"I see."

Grandpa and Gerald continued to talk as we made our way through the castle. I stopped paying attention pretty soon after we got inside. It was more reminiscing of the old days and what each of them had been up to since they last spoke and I didn't see any need to listen to that.

Beyond the entrance corridor it opened into a grand hall. There were stairs to the right and a pillared entrance straight ahead. Voices could be heard from both directions and I had no idea which way we needed to go. Fortunately, Gerald seemed to be on top of it. He turned right and we started up the stairs.

My thought about what this place was were completely changed the moment we reached the top. I'd expected some kind of stuffy structured gathering with a bunch of old dudes who approached the world from a philosophy that things

could only be one particular way and all other ways were wrong. And while I wasn't entirely convinced that's not how things were, I was surprised to see other kids like myself.

They were everywhere. Boys, girls, young, older, and all dressed in similar outfit. This was some kind of school if ever I'd seen one.

I felt like all eyes were on us as we walked through the crowded room. What was more confusing, it was like the middle of the night by this point. Why were all of these people up. If this was one of those fancy schools where people slept in dorms, they should have been in bed hours ago.

Gerald turned left at the top of the stairs and led us through the throng of people filling what I imagined to be the main hall. To the right there were multiple openings into a room with several large tables. It looked be a dining hall. There was another set of stairs with a balcony behind us, and straight ahead another pillared divide into a narrow corridor.

The presence of guards standing at either side of the entrance wasn't lost on me.

"What do you think they're all doing here?" Raj asked, eyeing the other kids who were likewise looking at us.

"Looks like a school of some kind." Mags responded, clearly thinking the same thing I was.

"Yeah, but it's like midnight. What are they doing up?"

"Don't know. Maybe we went further than we thought. Or maybe it's like Grandpa was telling me earlier. Time doesn't mean anything."

"I told you he was a bright one." Grandpa announced, clearly to Gerald but it got my attention and I felt my cheeks

flush red with embarrassment. I wasn't one for receiving compliment.

"He'd better be if you hope to pull this off. I personally think you're wasting your time while tipping your hand."

We stepped into the hallway between the guards and emerged on the other side at an intersection. It ran left and right and two sets of wide doors sat in the wall directly ahead of us.

"Go on in. I'll inform them you've arrived."

"Thanks, my friend. Until we meet again." Grandpa did a weird bow with a hand flourish only to have it returned by his friend. As soon as Gerald was gone, Grandpa twisted the knob and pushed one of the heavy wooden doors open.

Inside felt overly formal. There was an old couch along the wall between the two sets of doors. The right side wall was fully covered by cabinet doors that looked worn with age. A pair of leather wrapped chairs sat along the left wall. And the wall ahead of us had a single set of double doors at the center. I could see the glowing strands of magic sealing it.

"And now we wait." Grandpa took a seat in one of the leather chairs.

Mags, Raj, and myself sat on the couch.

Before I could get comfortable a loud knock echoed from the other side of the magically sealed door and I watched the enchantment unwrap and fall away.

Grandpa got to his feet and signaled me to join him. "You two stay put. We'll be back in a few minutes."

Just as I reached Grandpa's side the doors flew open and I found myself staring into a large round chamber with nine

seats on a high rise. The man at the door was shorter than I'd expected, standing just a few inches taller than me. Most others I'd encountered of late seemed to be towering by comparison, but that didn't make him any less intimidating. He wore gray robes similar in design to the white ones around Grandpa, but this guy had a sword strapped to his hip and a nasty looking scar that ran from his jaw, across his nose, and ended at his forehead.

"Who comes here?"

"Giles Corey, Wizard of the Third Order and Master of the White Arts, Retired, along with novice wizard, Aaron Corey."

"And what be your intention for this audience?"

"I seek sanctuary for the novice until such a time as he masters his ability and can maintain such status for himself."

"Does he possess an arcanum?"

"He does."

"Has he bound said arcanum?"

"He has not."

"Very well. I shall inform the council. Wait until such a time as you are summoned again."

The man took a step back, closed the doors, and knocked a second time, reactivating the magical seal.

"What was that all about?" Raj asked.

"Formality. That's why I asked you to remain quiet unless directly addressed. Any break in protocol can result in delay, dismissal, or offense. We cannot afford any of them at this time."

I started to return to my seat but Grandpa grabbed my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks. “They won’t be long. Best to simply wait here.”

As if he knew what was happening on the other side of the door, another knock echoed and the door opened again. The man reappeared and peered down at me. “The council accepts your petition and is ready to meet.”

He spun on his heel, took three steps inside, turned left, and spun again, inviting us inside.

Grandpa led me to the man’s side where we stopped until he closed and reseated the door.

The room was much larger than I’d initially thought though that didn’t mean I had much room to explore. Truth was, there wasn’t anything to explore. The far half of the room was circular shaped and the floor didn’t extend all the way to the high rise seats. It had little more than a narrow walkway from the door that led to a central circular protrusion that seemed to hover over a huge pit that disappeared into darkness.

The doorman took position in front of us and walked to the center.

Grandpa and I followed him, taking position on either side and sightly behind.

The man summoned a staff out of thin air and slammed its base on the granite floor. It echoed out and flame erupted from the basins mounted on the walls. “Retired Wizard of the Third Order and Master of the White Arts, Giles Corey and novice wizard, Aaron Corey seek audience with the Council of the Nine!”

I felt the ground shake with his rap and the echo of his voice sent chills down my spine. I could feel a tingle in the air and the little sparks Grandpa had been teaching me to look out for began to gather about each of the night seats.

Almost in unison people began to appear, seated and dressed in familiar robes. Three wore white, three wore gray, and three wore black.

As soon as the council presented itself the doorman offered the same salute I'd seen Grandpa give to Gerald and he turned and disappeared somewhere behind us, though I suspected he was still somewhere close.

"Giles Corey, by what rite or benefit do you expect to gain the favor of this council?" One of the black robes asked, though I wasn't certain which one.

"By rite of my status as a magician of the ancient arts, and benefit to uphold the sacred oath each of us has taken at one time or another to not interfere with the balance by manipulation of those undereducated."

"And how may we know that this novice has not already been indoctrinated by such manipulation?"

"By way of a test. Today is his awakening and I don't have to explain to you the threat of the power radiating from him."

"And how do you believe we should test him?" One of the white wizards responded.

"Enrollment."

I heard a few of them scoff at the idea though I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. They may as well have been speaking in riddles.

“Do you think we open our doors for just any novice who happens to wander in?” One of the blacks retorted.

“I do not. However, some of you may recall that I am an alumnus of this institution for higher learning. This novice being of my lineage, he is entitled to admission standards under legacy guideline article two-eighteen, section twenty-three.”

“I’m aware of your record here, Wizard Corey. As I’m also aware of your contributions. However, I would point out that section twenty-five of the same article to which you referred states that Any legacy must first bond their arcanum before the enrollment process can begin. Am I correct in the understanding that the novice has not yet bonded his arcanum?” One of the whites asked.

“You are. However, I urge you to overlook this small detail as his life is in jeopardy. He hasn’t had the opportunity to bond on account of outside influences seeking what is his.”

“Wizard Corey, how are we to know this to be true?” One of the blacks replied. “For all I know this story of pursuit is some fabrication in order to elicit an emotional response and grand early enrollment, and by extension sanctuary. I’m of the opinion this novice does not belong if he’s unable to perform so simple a task as bonding to his arcanum.”

“Aleister, I know you and I have never seen eye to eye but you know be better than to accuse me of laying falsehoods, especially under the watch of the council.”

“Let us hear what the novice has to say on his own behalf.” The black robed wizard known as Aleister retorted.

Grandpa glanced at me and nodded, giving me permission to speak.

I didn't know what they wanted me to say. Truthfully, I wasn't sure what any of this was about and I didn't want to say the wrong thing from a misunderstanding. "Um, can you repeat the question?"

"Do you feel your life is in danger?" One of the grays prompted.

"I—um—well, I don't know what's out there but I've had a bunch of stuff following me lately. It doesn't seem to matter how fast I run or where I go, it's always right there."

"What's right there?" One of the whites asked.

"I don't know. It's always hidden in darkness. Even when it's supposed to be light out. I haven't seen exactly what it is but it's always there, waiting to grab me."

"Obscured! Why would anything or anyone want to snatch a young boy such as yourself? It's preposterous!" Aleister proclaimed.

I was starting to get mad. This guy was accusing me of lying. He didn't even know me. "I'm not lying!"

"Of course you're not." Aleister said sarcastically. "And just how much has your grandfather coached you in this story? Surely he told you to throw in some tears for good measure."

"He hasn't told me to say anything. It really happened. A few times. It happened when I was coming home. And again when I was outside my front door. Then again when I accidentally teleported."

“Excuse me, you teleported? I thought you hadn’t bonded yet?” One of the female whites interjected.

“Yeah. I was playing a game with my friends and I accidentally teleported to the patch of woods just outside my Grandpa’s retirement home.”

“He was reading from his arcanum and accidentally activated one of the spells.” Grandpa added.

“Amazing! Yet, I’m curious how was able to read it if he hasn’t bonded.” She continued.

“It just goes to show that how powerful he has the potential to become. Possibly more so under this council’s tutelage.”

I was starting to understand what Grandpa was pushing for and I wasn’t sure I like it one bit. “Wait, are you trying to get me to go to school here?”

“Yes. Here you’ll have everything you need to learn how to control your powers. And by being enrolled you’ll have sanctuary from anything and everything that might seek to use you.” Grandpa answered as if I already knew all of this.

“No! I don’t want to go to school here. I already have a school.”

“Your school cannot teach you how to protect yourself.”

“But my friends are there. I can’t just leave them.”

“It sounds like the boy’s made up his mind.” Aleister said coolly.

“Giles, wont you and the boy wait outside while the council convenes on this matter. We’ll call you when we’ve made a decision.” The white robed woman suggested.

The door man reappeared and guided us back to the door from which we'd come.

Chapter 9

The Appeal

I was happy to have some time in the small room. It seemed Grandpa and I had some things to discuss and I needed to get it through his head that I wasn't going to change schools. I had things the way I liked them and I wasn't about to let him change it simply because he thought he knew what was best for me.

"I'm not leaving my school!" I demanded, turning to face Grandpa. "All my friends are there and I'm not leaving."

"Aaron—" he started with a soft tone, kneeling in front of me. "—I fear you don't understand the danger you're in. Being a magician isn't all daffodils and rainbows. There are forces at play which would see you enslaved for the rest of your natural born life. Others would have you beheaded or burned at the stake for simply being who you are. The world in which we exist is an imperfect place but that's why we're here. We bring balance. The council itself, as flawed as their ideologies can be at times, is balanced. Three white, three black, and three gray; the good, the bad, and the in-between working in harmony to maintain balance."

"That's dumb. You can't have balance with an odd number!"

"True. But perfect balance in all regards becomes stagnant. That's why the gray wizards exist. They play the middle ground, tilting the scales between good and evil in order to maintain a steady fluctuation between the two."

“I’m still not leaving.”

“Aaron!” Mags called.

I turned to look at her, surprised by her tone. I could see the pain in her eyes but I also knew she believed in what she was about to say.

“Your Grandpa only wants what’s best for you. I don’t fully understand everything that’s happening and I doubt you do either. But I do know that he cares about you and if he feels you’d be safer here then I think you should listen.”

“Yeah.” Raj interjected. “I don’t want to see my best friend get messed up. If these people can protect you, maybe you should consider staying with them. Besides, it’s not like you’d be going away forever. You can learn what they have to teach you and come back.”

I felt betrayed by everyone. Grandpa had orchestrated all of this. My failed party, my parents leaving. Heck, even the fact that I had magic was his fault. And now he was telling me I had to abandon my life to study at some place I knew nothing about, with people who couldn’t possibly care anything for me. All they cared about was the magic floating in my blood, provided that was how it worked. I didn’t actually know. And to make matters worse, Raj and Mags were okay with me leaving. No! I wasn’t going to give up everything I knew just because some unknown threat wanted to use me for whatever end.

My fists clenched and my jaw tightened. I was about to give all of them a piece of my mind when a soft knock echoed from the door nearest the couch.

Grandpa calmly approached and twisted the knob. “What can we do for you, Alice?” He pulled the door open allowing the white robed woman inside. I recognized her as the one who’d been speaking when we were in the chamber.

“I would have word privately, if that’s okay?”

Grandpa glanced at us and signaled for us to turn around.

I wasn’t sure what good it would do as the room wasn’t overly large and turning wouldn’t do much to keep us from hearing, but to my surprise I could barely hear more than a whisper when they began talking.

I noticed almost immediately that both Mags and Raj were focused on me. I’m not sure why but they seemed to be reading my face when all I wanted to do was go home and forget any of this had ever happened. “What?” I finally asked, hoping they’d quit looking at me.

“Are you okay?” Mags asked. I couldn’t help but notice she’d been acting weird lately. Granted, we were all in a weird position. Discovery of magic was inherently a weird thing to accept and she had every right to be a little off, but it seemed like there was more than that at play.

I did the only thing I knew to do. I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not overly happy about you guys telling me to switch schools. I don’t know these people and I definitely don’t trust them. You should have heard one of the guys in there—” I gestured toward the warded and sealed door. “—he couldn’t have cared if I got taken or not. He said I was making it all up. And then you guys say that I should listen to my Grandpa and go along with his ridiculous plan. No thank you!”

“I’m not saying you should just do whatever he says, but I know he cares what happens to you. I don’t want anything bad to happen and I think he feels the same way. That’s the only reason I think you should listen.” Mags had tears in her eyes and I wanted to hug her.

“I think she’s right.” Raj added. “Besides, who would have ever thought all of this was real? You have to admit it’s pretty awesome that we get the chance to experience all of this. Most people could only dream of it and here we are smack in the middle.”

I shook my head. “I just want to go home. Having adventures is all well and good when you can control what happens. But when you can’t—it’s not as fun and I thought it would be.”

“What do you mean, they declined the vote? I demand an appeal, immediately!” Grandpa shouted which caught me off guard. I’d rarely heard him raise his voice and now he was full on yelling.

“Giles, I told you this as a curtesy. You have no right to raise your voice to me!” Alice retorted.

“I know. I apologize. Please, I need you to press the appeal. If they won’t listen to reason I’ll convince them with logic.”

Alice sighed. “I’ll table your appeal but I doubt it will do much good. Aleister is playing everything he can against you.”

“Don’t worry about him. I’ve got it handled. Just make the appeal. I’ll handle the rest.”

Alice nodded and stepped out the door from which she’d entered. “Good luck.”

“Aaron.” Grandpa called, watching the door that Alice had just exited close. He turned to look upon me. “I understand your desire to remain with your friends but I need you to grasp the severity of your situation. You will never be safe until you learn to fully harness your abilities. It should be as second nature to you as breathing. A master wizard is able to think consciously even while sleeping. He can counter any spell cast at him while in his weakest state. Until you’re able to do all of this and more, you will spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, wondering when something or someone is going to lock on to your signature and come for you. Do you want that?”

I thought about what he was saying and while I didn’t like it, I was beginning to understand what he meant. It was a scary world I’d become a part of and I didn’t like it one bit. “No, I don’t want to live that way.”

“Then I fear the only option is for you to work with me to convince them to give you the enrollment exam early. If they agree, you become off limits to anyone and everyone who might seek to harm you. Nobody would dare go against the council. To do so is to sign a death warrant.”

“Is there any way to give up my powers? If I don’t have them nobody can use me.”

“If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, even if you were stripped, they’d just return in time. Magic is as much a part of you as the air you breathe or the water you drink. You cannot survive without it.” Grandpa sighed, showing me a moment of defeat. In that moment my belief in him was stronger than any moment prior. “I fear this is the only

option. You must be granted sanctuary under enrollment. Anything else is a temporary solution and I fear the amount of power radiated from you will serve as a beacon, calling the forces of darkness to you like ships in a storm to a lighthouse.”

I broke my gaze on him and glanced to the floor. I didn't like it but what else could I do? “Fine. I'll take their test. But as soon as I learn to control it I'm gone.”

I would have said more but at that moment a booming knock shook the walls and I watched the seal fall away from the inner door.

“The council had reached a verdict. Would the Wizard and Novice Corey return to garner response?”

Grandpa approached the open door and placed his hand on my shoulder as he had not long before. “Let's see this through.” He guided me inside, only I was surprised to see Mags and Raj come in with us. No one said anything. We all simply walked into the central platform and waited for the council to begin.

One of the gray robed wizards stood and addressed us. “Giles Corey, Retired Wizard of the Third Order and Master of the White Arts, we have discussed your proposal in detail and the council has come to a decision regarding the enrollment, and by extension sanctuary of the novice, Aaron Corey. It is with deep regret that I inform you that at this time the novice is denied admittance for the purpose of performing the enrollment examination. This decision was made by majority rule of the Council of Nine and does not reflect the opinions of any individual member of the council, nor the body of which we govern. I understand that you have been

informed of this decision and will to file an appeal. Is that correct?”

“It is.”

“Very well. I open the floor to statements, recounts, and details you or your company believe may serve to alter this decision in any way.”

“Thank you, Councilor Gavin. I would first like to thank you for your time in this regard. This is an extremely serious issue, one which I believe needs to be measured with the utmost clarity and careful consideration.

“It is true, my grandson has yet to bond to his arcanum. But it’s also true that he was able to not only able to read its contents but passively cast a spell from within by sheer happenstance. I feel I need not mention the strength of power emanating off him even now. He’s the strongest naturally born wizard in over a century and it would be foolish to allow this council to overlook these merits. Why not train him? Why not ensure he safely arrives at his station, an asset to the wizarding world?”

“Yeah, what good is he going to be if something slits his throat in the middle of the night!” Raj added unhelpfully.

Grandpa signaled him to be silent and for once I agreed.

“I know most of you personally. And while some of us may not see eye to eye, all of you know that I’m not one to exaggerate the severity of this situation. I humbly ask you to reconsider your decisions and see that this boy is of greater value as a free thinking wizard in league with the council rather than some pawn in use simply to tip the scales of balance.”

I watched the faces of the men and women silently judging me. Grandpa was getting through to them and while I didn't like the idea of having to leave everything I knew behind, however briefly, I now understood the importance of it. I only hoped he could sway them enough to change the vote.

"Aaron, would you like to say anything?" Alice asked with a smile.

I thought for a long moment trying to find the words. There was so much to say, but where to begin. Moreover, how much was too much and what details were important to speak freely? Surely some needed to be reserved. I'd played chess with Grandpa long enough to know that just because you could make a certain move didn't mean you should. Oftentimes it was best to let your opponent make the first move so you could form a strategy to counteract them.

I found myself wondering if that was why he'd always challenged me. Was he teaching me to think strategically even before any of this had started?

After a long moment's silence, I found my voice. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, council, whatever—My name is Aaron Corey and before today I was just a normal kid. I went to school, and hung out with my friends. I did my homework most of the time, and played games. I liked being normal—simple. I didn't have to worry about much. And if today had gone as I'd intended it, I would still be normal.

"Today was my thirteenth birthday. For most kids my age that means pizza parties, games, and talking about a secret crush when that person isn't around." I glanced at Mags and

turned away when our eyes met. “I had no idea about magic. I thought it was just some silly thing we used in our games to make them more entertaining. And now that I know it’s real I would give anything to get rid of it. I don’t want magic. I want to be a normal kid with my normal life and go to a normal school with other normal kids. But I’m told that’s not possible. I’m told even if I somehow found a way to get rid of it, it’d just come back. And that leaves me in a mighty fine predicament. So, if the only way for me to get this crap under control so I can move on with my normal life is to go to your school and learn to control it, so be it. I’ll do what I have to. But if you think I’m just going to lay back and let whatever is out there get me because of some power inside me that I don’t even want, you’re delusional. So, whether you decide to accept me or not, I don’t even care anymore. I’m going to fight anybody and everybody that comes at me until I can’t fight any more. And if you don’t like that you can kiss my butt!”

“That was a bit much you think?” Raj leaned in to ask.

“No. They needed to hear what was on my mind.” I surveyed their faces to find mixed responses about how I’d expected. The black robed wizards looked angry, like I’d insulted them. The whites were trying not to smile. And the grays appeared indifferent. Even Grandpa was smiling, though he hid it as quick as he could.

“Very well. Are there any other comments?” Gavin asked.

Mags raised her hand, timidly at first, then she fully committed to it.

“Yes, my dear?”

“I’d just like to say that Aaron is one of the most courageous people I know. He usually stands up for what he believes in and while he sometimes can be led astray, I’m happy to call him my friend. You guys would be lucky to have him here.”

Our eyes met and she turned away, trying not to blush.

“Noted. Anyone else?”

Silence filled the room.

“Very well. At this time the council calls for a vote. By show of hands, those in favor of appealing the initial vote and granting the novice wizard, Aaron Corey, the enrollment examination signal using the official voting sign of the council.

A few hands went up. I counted all three whites, and two grays, one of them being Gavin. If I was understanding the process correctly, it was five against four. That was majority which meant victory, did it not? It was for this reason I didn’t understand when Gavin spoke again.

“Those opposed?”

A total of five hands were raised, all the blacks and two of the grays, including one who’d already voted.

“Eliphas, you voted for both.” Gavin said, directing his attention to the gray wizard on the furthest left.

All eyes fell on the man. He sighed heavily, staring at the floor. Finally, he slowly raised his hand and spoke, refusing to meet anyone’s gaze. “I vote against. Novice Corey is denied asylum.”

“What?” Grandpa shouted.

The council chamber broke into a roar of chatter. It seemed everyone but me was yelling. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to feel. If this was the only way for me to remain safe what chance did I have now? I was lost. I was numb. I didn't know what to do and everyone around me was busy in a shouting match.

"Silence!" A deafening voice boomed through the round shaped room, shaking the walls and floor. It didn't take a genius to realize it was magically altered.

The voices died down and once again the room was quiet, save for one voice who refused to obey.

"Clearly he's been tampered with. Why else would he vote for both and then change it last minute? I demand immediate replacement and a revote!"

"Wizard Corey, please. We'll get to the bottom of this." Gavin assured.

"There's nothing to get to the bottom of. We voted and the appeal failed. Why are you wasting our time with this nonsense?" Aleister interjected.

"I've heard enough. This council used to stand for order and justice but clearly it's fallen to corruption. I'll not stand idle by and allow its ruin to spill over into the lives of the people I care about! Come on, children." Grandpa started toward the door.

"Giles!" Aleister yelled. "Interference applies to both sides. Remember that before you step in and do something you'll regret."

Grandpa barely waited for the door to be opened before he shuffled out into the waiting room, and in moments we

were gone, materializing back in Grandpa's tower though I had no idea how we'd gotten there.

Chapter 10

First Blood

It took a few moments before I realized where we were. I looked around the cool yet comfortable stone palace Grandpa called home. We were standing in the study once again just a few feet from the fireplace that crackled and sent an orange glow dancing across our feet.

“Um, Grandpa, if we could just teleport or whatever, why did we take the carriage in the first place?”

“Two reasons. First, they sent the carriage for us. It would have been rude to decline which wouldn’t have helped our case, not that it did any good anyway. And secondly, magical travel to the council chamber is strictly forbidden. Leaving on the other hand is less troublesome. Besides, after all that I doubt they would have provided us a carriage back.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“What do we do now?” Mags asked, showing more concern than any of us.

“There isn’t much we can do. Aleister made it clear that I’m not to interfere. It’s a gray area. He wants me in this position. If I train Aaron some could claim I’m influencing his decisions. If I protect him, I’m doing the same. It leaves me with a difficult decision. I either have to abandon you three and hope that Aaron can figure things out on his own, or hold my ground and potentially face the council’s wrath.”

“What does their wrath look like?” I was fairly certain I already knew the answer but I couldn’t help but ask. Either way I knew things were about to get much more complicated.

“They would first issue an arrest order. Once I’m apprehended, they’d place me in a dampening collar to strip any ability I’d have of using my power until a criminal trial could take place. Then, depending on the outcome of the trial, which having seen the council’s corruption I take to be least favorable, I’d likely spend the remainder of my days funneling my magic into an arcane bank until I had nothing else to give, at which point I would eventually die.”

“What are you going to do?” Raj joined the conversation. He was starting to understand the dire circumstances we were in and it showed.

“That’s easy. Retired or not, I’m a wizard of the third order and master of the white arts. I’ll not be bullied into inaction by Aleister or any other. We have limited time before they infiltrate this place. I suggest we use it to the fullest.”

“How’s that?”

“We need to get you trained and bonded. I may not have the resources that the council does but I’ve acquired enough knowledge over the years to at least get you a decent start. Beyond that it’s up to you.”

I knew this was one of those moments where everything was about to change. I could feel it in the air. I could see it the numerous sparks that danced and fizzled around me. And I could also smell it. It was a strong musky scent, like in a forest right after a heavy rain. Something big was about to happen. I just didn’t know what. “Where do we begin?”

“Honestly, I’ve always found the best way to begin anything is with research. We don’t have time to go completely in depth and since you’ve already touched on the history of magic, I would recommend starting with the eight schools of arcane. Each has its own characteristics. Once you can identify them individually, you’ll have a better understanding of how it all ties together and you’ll have a firm grasp to their utilization. You’ll find book on the subject right over there.” Grandpa pointed to a series of book shelves behind his lounge chair.

“What about us?” Raj asked, clearly wanting something to do.

“You two can help me build an obstacle course in the training room.”

“Awesome!”

Raj and Mags followed Grandpa out of the study, leaving me to my solitude. I have to admit it was a little overwhelming being left to my own devices but in a way I thought it would be easier for me to focus. Up until this point I’d been in the company of others. Even if they weren’t talking, I still felt like I was being watched which didn’t help when it came to doing anything that could potentially be embarrassing. I just needed to remember not to read anything aloud. The last thing I wanted was to get teleported again.

I spent what felt like the next few hours reading little passages and some of the more enjoyable chapters, learning everything I could about the various schools of magic. I was surprised how much of it crossed over from my character in our game. The schools were named almost the same with

minor differences, but each of them did about the same things. For instance, between my joint knowledge from our game and these books I was able to know that to date I've used magics, intentional or not, from the Abjuration, Conjunction, Divination, and Evocation schools. And since I knew how to identify them, I now knew which energies to pull on when I wanted to use them.

Setting the book aside, I focused on a ceramic mug that had been resting on the end table beside Grandpa's chair since we'd arrived. Gritting my teeth I pulled at the little orange specks lingering around it and slowly forced them into the material. Little by little they took the shape of the coffee mug and just as the final one fell into place, they disappeared and what had been a white mug was not transparent glass.

I sat up in success having performed my first transmutation spell.

"Very good. But can you do that while someone is trying to kill you?" Grandpa asked from the study entrance.

"Just let me have this one!" I snapped unintentionally. I was a little tired though I didn't know if it was because I'd been up all night, because I'd been doing so much reading, or if it was because of the spellwork exhausting me. If it was anything like in my game there was likely only so much casting I could do before I'd simply be out.

"Sorry." I said, realizing I'd bitten a little too hard over something so simple. "I'm just getting tired. Where's Mags and Raj?"

"They fell asleep in the training room about thirty minutes ago. I thought it best to let them sleep. There isn't

much they can do right now anyway. As for being tired, it's understandable but I'm afraid you can't sleep until you've learned to protect yourself while consciously unavailable." Grandpa started walking toward me with another coffee mug, one that I hadn't turned transparent, in hand.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Have you ever heard of lucid dreaming?"

"What, like controlling my dreams?"

"Yes, but it's so much more than that. By learning how to lucid dream you can take control of not only your dreams but you can control your physical body while in a dream state. It becomes more like astral project where you exist in multiple places at the same time. From this state you can protect yourself while allowing your body to recharge."

"And how am I supposed to learn this if I'm not allowed to sleep?"

"You can't. Lucid dreaming is a practiced skill, one which takes months to master."

"So what, I'm not going to be able to sleep ever again?"

"No." Grandpa extended the mug. "I'm going to help you. Drink this."

I eyed the murky concoction suspiciously. It had some loose leaves floating in it and it smelled like tea. "What's in it?"

"Just a few herbs that will put you into a lucid state. I'll join you as soon as you're out."

I wasn't sure how this was going to help. If I wasn't allowed to sleep because I couldn't protect myself, why was he giving me something to put me to sleep?

My mind began to wander and I couldn't help but think this was some kind of test. Or worse, what if one of my enemies had somehow infiltrated the tower? "How do I know you're you and this isn't some kind of trick to get me to let my guard down?"

Grandpa smiled. "I'm glad to see you're starting to think strategically and I'm proud that you're suspicious of such. To prove my validity, when you beat me in chess earlier today, your queen trapped my king in what's called a Fool's Mate on position H4. It was the first time you've ever beaten me."

I didn't know much about illusion magic but I suspected there was no way to mimic memories in such detail without first planning such, and since Grandpa wasn't currently channeling some divination spell, I believed it was really him. "Okay." I brought the cup to my lips and tipped it back.

I was standing at the edge of a lake, looking out into the water. Trees swayed in the distance and an inverted rainbow pointed to a pot of gold at the center of a small island.

A part of me wanted to go to the island but I knew the leprechaun would chase me if I went near it. Instead I simply watched from where I stood, waiting for the behemoth creature in green to lose interest and go back to sleep.

"Aaron." A familiar voice called from somewhere far away. It drifted in and out on the breeze and I didn't bother to look for it.

"Aaron." The voice repeated, much closer this time. I turned to the right where my Grandpa was standing, looking at me. He had a funny expression on his face and I wondered if he'd always looked like that or if it was a new development.

The world around me changed in an instant and I found myself standing in the visitor's lounge of his retirement home. The chess board was set up with a Fool's Mate on the board and all three of the TVs were displaying a static image and no sound.

"Aaron, you're dreaming." Grandpa said. He was sitting at the table and I found myself sitting across from him as I always did.

"Listen to me, lad. Remember what I told you. You're dreaming. Take control of the dream."

"What?" He wasn't making any sense.

"You're dreaming. You need to take control."

"That's silly. I'm not dreaming. I'm wide awake. See?" I pinched myself but to my surprise it didn't hurt. Actually, I couldn't feel it at all. "Weird."

"Listen to me. You need to take control of the dream. You have to protect yourself."

Flashed of memory filled my mind. I remembered the dark forest and the council. I remembered the shield spell that I'd used to counter my own energy bolt. Faster and faster pieces filled my mind and I shot up from my chair with a sudden and immediate purpose. "I'm dreaming!"

"Yes. Now, don't wake up yet. I need you to open yourself to the world around you."

I closed my eyes, trying to focus. The dream world was hazy, like I was staring through a fog bank.

"That's it. You're almost there. Keep going."

I strained, trying to find myself. Somewhere in the hazy I spotted a thin green thread. It had a minor glossy reflectivity to it.

“Be careful with that. It’s your life line. Any time you find yourself lost in an astral state simply find that line and follow it back to your body. But make sure you protect it. If it ever gets cut you won’t be able to find your way back.”

I gently pulled on the line, guiding myself through the fog like a boat coming to shore. After a few short moments I saw myself, lying unconscious in the chair I’d been sitting. My head was drooped to the side and I had a mild amount of drool running down my cheek.

“Good. Now I need you create a shield like you did earlier. Lock it around your body so that no one can harm you while you’re asleep.”

I found the white energies and began pulling them together into a sort of cocoon that wrapped around my body. No sooner than the last piece settled in, the entire thing glowed brightly and held fast. I knew I’d done it. I’d managed to shield myself while unconscious.

“Good. Now wake up.”

I opened my eyes feeling completely refreshed. I had no idea how long I’d been out but it felt like a full night in the comfort of my bed. The only problem was I was in a chair in Grandpa’s tower.

The memories of my dream state rushed to the front of my mind and I remembered every detail. I looked around to find Grandpa standing where I last remembered him. “How do I do that without someone telling me I’m dreaming?”

“It takes time, but the easiest way is to do exactly what you did that time. Create a tell that you use every time you’re unsure. You pinched yourself which triggered the realization. If that works for you, great. Some people use a spinning top. If it falls over, they’re awake. Some people spin a coin. It doesn’t matter what it is, you just have to find something that’s unique to you. If you use it every time you suspect you’re asleep, it’ll tell you the truth.”

A loud crash echoed from somewhere in the distance and the tower shook so hard I nearly fell out of my chair. Catching myself, I stared up at grandpa who looked just as concerned as I was. “What was that?”

“They’re here.”

“Who?”

“Those who want you. It could be the council. It could be anyone.”

“I thought you said this place was safe.”

“I was but no place can hold indefinitely. Go, wake your friends if they’re not up already. I have a few counter measures to prepare in the event they get through.”

I jumped to my feet and broke into a sprint. I immediately wished I’d paid a little closer attention to direction the last time I’d passed through these halls as they were all looking the same. I turned left, then right, then left again. I passed large rooms, small rooms, rooms inside other rooms, and each was filled with a wide assortment of knickknacks and gadgets to which I could even guess the function. And after what I suspected was numerous wrong

turns I found myself in a familiar room. I was back in the study.

“Um, Grandpa, which way is the training room?”

He looked up from some large paper that was trying to roll up on him. “Take the third left and go down the stairs. From there, it doesn’t matter which door you go through, they’ll all take you to the training rooms.”

I turned and started down the hall a second time when another blast hit hard and knocked me off my feet. I slammed into the wall and dropped to the floor. It would have hurt but fortunately the shield I’d placed around myself held. Picking myself up, I continued on, following the directions Grandpa had given me. And sure enough, at the bottom of the stairs, I found a series of doors, all leading to my destination.

Mags was standing near one of the small port windows trying to look outside when I arrived. “Aaron, what’s happening?”

“Someone’s trying to get in. Grandpa told me to come get you guys. Where’s Raj?”

“I don’t know. When I woke up he was already gone.”

“Okay. Hold still. That last blast was pretty hard. I’m going to put a shield around you in case it knocks you off your feet.” I placed my hands on Mags’s arms and began to focus. It was coming much easier this time and the pieces fell into place almost on their own. I watched the shield solidify, and checked to make sure my own was still active at the same time. Content in our protection, regardless of how minor it was, I pulled her and spun, hoping to find Raj before he got himself into any trouble.

We ran through the hallways and rooms. He was nowhere to be found.

“Raj!” I yelled, hoping he’d answer. There was no reply. With a heavy sigh, I stopped and turned to face Mags. “I don’t know where he is and we can’t spend the rest of the night looking for him. I was reading up on the various types of magic. Do you think it’s possible for us to summon him?”

“Aaron, that’s a big risk I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking. What if we made a mistake? You know the rules. We don’t know where he is or where he’d appear. What if we put him halfway inside a wall or something like that? Or worse, what if we summoned the wrong him. Like an older or younger version, or maybe a Raj from some other dimension if such a thing exists. There are too many unknowns and you don’t have enough experience to try it.”

I nodded agreement. I was glad to have her here. She was always the most logical among us and I knew I wouldn’t have made it this far without her. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I need to start thinking of things like that first.”

“It’s okay. This is new to all of us. It’s going to take some time getting used to.” She smiled and squeezed my arm.

The tower shook a third time and I heard stone crumble. Considering the walls and floor didn’t shake like they had before I knew the tower had been breached. That meant the enemy was inside.

“We need to get back to grandpa now. Hopefully we’ll find Raj on the way.”

Mags and I followed the path we'd taken back to the training room and just as I was about to enter the stairwell, Grandpa appeared in front of me.

"There you are. We need to get out of here. The tower's defenses have been defeated. Where's your friend? The dark haired one?"

"We don't know he wasn't here when I arrived."

"Damn!" That was the first time I'd heard Grandpa cuss. He let out an exhausted sigh before perking up with a new idea. "We'll find him. Until then we need to buy some time. Hurry. To the other side of the obstacle course."

We moved along the left side of the training room to the third section where the flying swarm darted around us. How nothing hit us, I didn't know but I felt a few close calls. I just hoped my shield would protect against it if it did.

We hunkered down behind what looked to be a large padded dummy, and Grandpa turned to us.

"Stay right here. I'll be back in a moment." And with that, he was gone.

I laid there, half holding Mags, half worried about what was going to happen next. I'd learned a little, sure. But was it enough to fend off whatever had the power to blast its way into the tower? Before I could spend a second longer on the thought, a booming voice tore through the air and I had to shield my ears to block it out. Even then it helped minimally.

"Attention all occupants, be they intruder or guest. The tower has fallen. Surrender yourselves now by placing your hands above your head and reciting the words, 'I give up.'"

Any occupant who fails to adhere to this simple task will be met with deadly force!”

I recognized Grandpa’s voice though it was amplified greatly. A part of me wanted to do what the message had said. I suspected it was some kind of compulsion spell, though I hadn’t learned enough about them to know for certain.

Mags started to raise her hands and I had to fight to pin them down. “I half to, Aaron. It’s a simple task that will be met with deadly force if ignored!” She demanded, struggling to get free.

That solidified my theory. There was no way she would have spoken the exact words of the message if it hadn’t been part of a spell. Still, I had to keep her from doing it. I didn’t know what would happen but I didn’t want her to find out, especially after grandpa had told us to stay here.

Unfortunately she was so strong that I was having trouble overpowering her. That left one option. I had to break the compulsion by other means. I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. She struggled for a moment and then gave in, holding me for the briefest moment that felt like an eternity. And when I pulled away she didn’t fight me any longer.

“What was that?” She asked as if suddenly awakened from sleep.

“I—um—you—you were under a spell. I had to do that to break it.”

“Sure.” She said with emphasis, trailing off with a smile. “I bet you just wanted to kiss me.”

“Nuh uh” I blushed and turned away so she wouldn’t see.

Grandpa appeared where he'd been a moment before and he had Raj with him.

"Where have you been?" Mags snapped.

"I went exploring. I found a room full of telescopes and a bunch of crystals. It was cool."

Without hesitation, Mags reached out and punched him in the arm.

"Ouch. Stop doing that!"

"I will when you stop doing stupid stuff. In case you haven't noticed, we're in danger. And we could have been better prepared for it by now if we didn't have to stop and find you."

"I'm sorry, okay. I just wanted to see what else this place had."

I kind of felt bad for Raj. He was always the one to wander off, and usually it got him in trouble. Why was now any different? But on the other hand I could see Mags' point as well. We didn't know what was coming and those precious moments we spent looking for him could have been used elsewhere.

"I'm here now. What's the plan?"

"We didn't have enough time for Aaron to learn everything I wanted to teach him. That leaves us few options. They were able to overcome my defenses. That means they're likely smart enough to place antitravel sigils around the perimeter before they ever started. That eliminates most traveling spells. There are a few that could still get through but they take some time to cast. That's why I brought us here. The obstacle course was designed to test Aaron in every way.

A master magician won't have near as much trouble with it but it will still take at least a few minutes to navigate. I'm going to need all three of you to help me cast this spell." Grandpa retrieved a scroll from out of nowhere and began unrolling it.

The parchment was thick and brown from age. It looked like the slightest movement might make it crumble into dust, and the ink that had soaked into the fibers glowed an almost blue hue that brought renewed strength to the otherwise worn out page. When it was fully stretched out it was nearly seven foot long and about two foot wide.

I had no idea how we were supposed to read it. Even if Raj and Mags knew what it said, they weren't magical. What was their participation supposed to do?

As if Grandpa had read my thoughts, he began to explain. "You may be wondering why I need all three of you. The simple answer is all of us need to escape. Therefore all of us need to read it. The more complex answer is a matter of numbers. An antitravel sigil is no different than any other spell. It can be overpowered by a more powerful spell. A single caster is unlikely to possess enough power to do this but two casters in cooperation with two assistants can easily overpower such a sigil."

"Giles Corey, I know you're in there. Surrender yourselves and I guarantee most of you will survive." I knew that voice. It had been the last voice I heard before we left the council chamber.

“Aleister.” Grandpa said with distain. “I knew he had to be involved. He’s the only dark wizard on the council with the power to pull off something like this.”

A bolt of red energy flew across the room and exploded on the stone wall behind us. I thought it strange considering most evocation spells imploded, but a few, specifically of the fire variety had a tendency to explode.

Another whizzed past and I felt the heat off it.

“What are we gonna do? I don’t think we have enough time to read this.” Mags asked, ducking as another firebolt flew past.

“We fight. They still have to get through the course before they can reach us. We may as well make it harder on them.” I prepared myself, taking a mental note of the obstacles and places to seek cover. It wasn’t much of a plan but it was better than waiting to be barbecued.

Grandpa started to object but stopped himself as a firebolt clipped his scroll and it disintegrated in his hands. With no escape, fighting was the only option remaining.

“What about us?” Mags asked, looking helpless. It was a look that didn’t become her. She was never helpless and I didn’t much like seeing her that way. I closed my eyes and envisioned my desire. I don’t know how I knew what to grab, just that it belonged to her. She’d marked it already, I was simply retrieving it for her.

Blue hues of energy began to materialize around Mags and in no time the golden suit of armor she’d been studying was fixed to her, perfectly contoured to her form. She had warhammer in one hand and a medium sized shield in the

other and I somehow knew it was all magical and would protect her, though I couldn't explain how I knew. It was more of a feeling than anything.

"Wow!" She smiled and I felt a sudden relief. She was as safe as I could make her and that made me happy.

"But what about Raj?" She asked, turning her attention to him.

"Don't worry. I've got it covered." Raj reached into one of his many pockets and retrieved the familiar pair of gloves he'd found earlier. Slipping his hands inside, he smiled victory and took position behind one of the wooden devices on this end of the course.

"I thought I told you to put those back." Grandpa scowled, though it quickly turned to a smile. "I suppose it's a good thing you didn't listen. Just be careful with them. You've discovered one function but they do so much more than you realize."

"Like what?"

The lights dimmed and several other spells flew overhead like a prismatic meteor shower, telling me there were multiple enemies here now. I just hoped we could hold out until either they gave up or we found an alternative way out. I didn't know which was more likely, though neither had good odds.

"We don't have time to get into that now, but I'll show you everything they can do if we survive this." Grandpa assured with a serious tone. "The best option here is an initial all out assault. If we all attack at the same time we'll stand a pretty good chance of taking down at least one. But don't linger. Fire your shot and get to cover."

I nodded my understanding but I was struggling with the butterflies in my stomach. This was my first real fight of my life and it seemed it was also the most serious fight of my life. One wrong move and it could end in a flash. I wondered if the others felt the same.

I looked to Mags who was hunkered down beside me. She was confident in her shining armor and weapons of war. It inspired confidence in me.

Raj was just as ready with a wide smile on his face. He looked as if he'd been waiting his whole life for this exact moment.

I had no idea what Grandpa's initial plan was but seeing my friend so ready gave me an idea. There were numerous plans I'd either used or thought about using during our game and I was desperate to give them a try. I focused on my target and began collecting the energies required to make it happen. I just hoped it would work as I envisioned.

"Three—two—one!" Grandpa popped up from his spot and launched a series of rapid burst bolts from his fingers. They shot through a cloud of what looked to be black smoke and a figure at its center collapsed.

Mags spun around and pointed her hammer. Ward our attackers. I don't know how or why it happened, whether it was luck, or if Grandpa had had something to do with it, but I was impressed. Unfortunately, it didn't appear to hit anyone but it sent a few of them running which was just as good in my opinion.

Raj struck a small red lighter and a short fuse began to burn away. He threw the firecracker over the obstacle course

and almost immediately reached out with his gloved hand. The tiny explosive slowed and drifted between the waist band and flesh of one of the guys. He started dancing around and let out a howl as it exploded in his pants.

Taking a deep breath, I released the energies I'd been gathering. I watched a ring of blue energy form on the floor under Aleister. It solidified and flashed and suddenly he fell through. A moment later, an identical ring appeared on the ceiling and he fell out only to fall into the first ring again.

I didn't know how long I could hold the portal open but I hoped it was long enough to deal with the rest of these guys. Moreover, I didn't particularly want to kill him, which I had some fear over. If the discussions on the tactic were correct, he'd gain speed each time he passed through and after about five or six passed he'd reach terminal velocity and either suffocate from inability to breath or he'd splat against any obstacle that he hit.

A part of me wished I'd thought about that before I'd placed him in such a position, but then again he'd already threatened death upon us. Was it really so wrong if my actions resulted in his demise? I wasn't sure and I hoped I wouldn't have to opportunity to find out. I just needed him out of the way for as long as I could keep him there.

Chapter 11

The Cost of Admission

The floor in this part of Grandpa's tower looked to be more of the same gray stone I'd seen in other parts of the expansive fortress. It was worn flat with time and the grout lines were thin and nearly impossible to see. Were it not for the collected dust changing their color I had no doubt they would have been all but invisible.

I was wedged in a corner between one of the stone walls, more defined than the floor beneath, and a collection of wooden barrels that provided some measure of shelter.

Bolts of red, blue, green, and just about every other color of energy flew over my head. One tiny miscalculation and popping up at the wrong time is all it would take to end my existence.

I glanced over at Raj and Mags. They were pinned down just the same as I was and I desperately hoped neither would be so foolish as to risk it. We'd made a decent dent in our initial assault that was for sure, but it hadn't been enough. There were more of them than any of us could have expected.

Some looked like ordinary people, dressed in what I would have considered normal clothes. Others clung to the old style and were dressed in robes of black or gray, though far more of the former than the latter. A few were strange looking creatures that I could only guess at. There were vicious looking beasts, some covered in thick mangy fur,

while others had wispy thin coats that revealed spotted, speckled, and sometimes scared skin beneath.

And probably the most terrifying of all was the shadow creatures. They looked like a vaguely humanoid shape of thick dark smoke with sharp talons of ivory that appeared and disappeared faster than the eye could see. Thus far I'd only seen one of them go down and what was left was a jelly looking mass that hissed and bubbled as it disappeared between the minute cracks of the stone floor.

We'd woefully underestimated our opponents and now we were paying the price for it. The only wild card was Grandpa. He hadn't given so much as an idea since our first attack and he hadn't really done much but throw shields over us anytime an untimely blast came a little too close for comfort. If he were to ever fully unleash, I wondered what he'd be capable of.

And of course, there was Aleister, still trapped in my pitfall, though I didn't know for how long and I was somewhat afraid to let him out.

"Grandpa—" I shouted. "We can't stay here. There's too many of them."

"I'm working on that, just keep your heads down!"

I counted down in my head, timing their shots. It was a risk but I still had my shield up. If that couldn't absorb at least one blow, what good was it?

I lunged out and fired off a lightning bolt. It struck one of the black robed wizards in the chest and sent him flying back. The arcs shot to two others but it didn't appear to do much

more than daze them. That was enough. I just needed the distraction.

I rushed out from my cover, forming a disc shield atop my wrap and deflected two blasts that would have hit me center chest. Dropping to my knees, I slid into a better spot between two of the targeting dummies Grandpa had arranged for me. I hadn't noticed it originally but since all of this had started I saw them fire back a spell from time to time. Considering it had been designed for me, they probably were anything worth bragging about but something was better than nothing.

I moved to the edge of my cover and ducked low, peeking under one of the makeshift legs. I could see four guys within view, and who knew how many more that weren't.

"Aaron, brace yourself." Grandpa yelled over the constant barrage of spellfire.

I felt the air around shift. It began to get warm and tighten, and then I saw the blue sparks and I realized what was happening. Grandpa had somehow found a way to transport us out of here.

I crashed into the cold floor of a dark room that still felt remarkably like stone.

"Um, grandpa?"

"Yes?"

"Are we still in the tower?"

"Yes. The antitravel sigils have us locked in but that doesn't mean we can't move within the confines. We were stuck where we were at. I simply moved us to a new location."

About that time light flared up and my vision went white for the briefest moment before equalizing out and I could see again.

“Where are we?” Raj asked, looking around at the multitude of barrels, crates, and shelves filling the dank room.

“My storeroom. I apologize we don’t have nearly as much space in here but anything component we might need is readily available. That may prove useful once they find us again.”

“How are they going to do that?” I asked, fearing I already knew the answer.

“The same as they found us last time. They followed your power. And they’ll continue to do so until you learn to properly shield yourself.”

“I thought I already learned that part? I’ve been doing great in that department. They’re getting to the point that I’m not really even having to try anymore.”

“That’s good, but you still have a long way to go. Shielding yourself means more than simple creating a barrier to stop damage. It means blocking all trace of your existence to anything you don’t want to find you. You need to master yourself. Everything you do should be a reflex. Only then will those who know about you back off. And those who don’t won’t be able to read you.”

“Um, guys—” Mags trailed off, pointing to a rather mysterious ring forming on the wall beside us.

“What’s that?” Raj asked, reaching out to touch it.

“Don’t!” Grandpa near yelled. “They’ve already found us. As soon as the circle finishes forming they’ll be here and I don’t have time to ready another teleport.”

“What can we do?” I asked, looking for any defense or method to slow them down.

“Put as much stuff in the way as possible. I don’t care what it is. Block the entrance and as soon as it opens, push as much through as you can. With any luck a few of them will get spliced.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s where the magics of the dimensional tunnel fuse you with anything in the way.” Grandpa clarified.

“So, so like a dim door into a wall. Got it.” Raj smiled approvingly and took position to the side of the nearly complete circle. Tilting one of the filled barrels, he rolled the bottom edge right in front of the wall and started to grab another.

A zap echoed the moment the portal finished and a heap of bloody meat, bone, and barrel fragments spattered on the floor.

“That’s disgusting!” Raj demanded, though the smile never left his face.

Mags buried her face in my shoulder and wrapped my arm around her. It was nice though I wish it would have happened under better circumstances. We’d just inadvertently killed someone and I didn’t know how I was going to live with that.

Grandpa clapped his hands together and began contorting his fingers in an intricate weave. I wasn’t sure what he was

doing since none of the spells I'd worked thus far required such silly rituals. It was more or less just thought and focus, making the various energies obey my command. I wondered what doing such strange movements would do for my casting. Would it make them more powerful? Or was it simply something more powerful spells required?"

Of course, I could have asked the same thing about verbal spells. I'd only used one so far and that was when I ended up at the forest's edge. Even then I didn't know if it was the verbal command or the accidental discharge that made it happen. I didn't remember pulling any of the colored sparks, but then again I couldn't see them prior to that.

Forcing the thoughts from my head, I watched several of the barrels explode into pieces of curved planks, metal rings, and a wide assortment of whatever contents had been in them. They lifted into the air with Grandpa's gesture and began to fire into and around the portal like a roman candle that refused to run out of shot.

"Go for the door!" Grandpa strained, sweat beading on his forehead. I could see he was getting visibly weaker and I suspected this was what happened when someone was running out of power. If that was the case, I feared what would come next.

Raj reached the wooden door and lifted the latch keeping it shut. He pulled the barricade toward him and stepped into the hall.

Mags was right on his tail, her glimmering armor reflecting the torchlight outside the tiny room.

"Aaron, go! I can't hold it much longer."

I didn't want to leave him. For all I knew they'd kill him on sight and I wasn't ready to lose my grandpa just yet. He had so much more to teach me. But he'd told me to go. I didn't know if I could obey that command. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. It's you they're after."

I didn't like it but I ran.

It took only a few seconds to catch up with my friends. We followed the winding corridors, straying away from the clatter of boots and random booms that continued to echo throughout the tower. It sounded as if enemies were everywhere, still fighting, though I didn't know what. I was under the impression that the tower's defenses were already down so who were they fighting with?

We rounded a corner and found ourselves back in the study. I didn't know if that was a wise choice or not. Sure, it had a lot of books, but we didn't have time to read them. More importantly, it seemed every time I got turned around, I always seemed to find myself in the study, as if it was the center of the tower and all roads led to it. If that was the case, it seemed the bad guys would just as easily do the same.

Still, Mags seemed to regain some of her confidence in the firelit chamber of open balconies and walls of books.

That gave me an idea. "Guys, we need to go up there." I pointed to the balcony. "It's a perfect ambush position. We can blast anyone who comes through any of the doors. More importantly, when we were up there earlier, I didn't see any connecting doors which means they'll have a harder time sneaking up behind us."

“What if they open another one of those portal things?” Raj asked, unsure if any plan was going to be good enough.

“I don’t think they will. That last one was probably a tracer spell. They could only use it because that’s how we escaped. Had we not used magic, I don’t think they would have been able to follow us so easily. Not with magic anyway.” It was entirely a guess but it seemed reasonable enough to me. And it placated Raj, which was all I really needed at the moment. The loss of Grandpa had shaken all of us and we needed to remain calm if we were going to make it through this.

I started for the central stairs that led to the right side balcony and was pleased to find that both Mags and Raj came with me. I wasn’t sure they were going to, but at the same time I suspected all any of us really wanted right now was for someone to take charge and give commands. It was all I wanted but nobody else had done it so I had to.

No sooner than we reached the top, I spun around and began weaving the energies required to form a shield over the entrances to both of the main doors, as well as the stairway we’d just marched. I wasn’t sure if it would keep people out. It seemed to prevent damage of all kinds but I didn’t know if it would do anything against someone simply walking through. After all, physical contact didn’t seem to be affected but I had personal experience that it protected me from a fall. That made it worth trying at the very least. And if it didn’t work I’d know better next time, if I got a next time.

We huddled next to the wall right above the entrance doors. That seemed to make the most sense. We would be

protected from sight until someone reached near center of the room. And anyone coming through the doors would be pelted from the moment they appeared until long after they reached the stairs. And if they made it that far, there was a fairly long trek from the stairs to where we positioned.

Raj went to work grabbing the largest books he could from the shelves.

“What are you gonna do with those?” I asked though the question answered itself the moment it vocalized.

“I’m going to throw them at anyone who come through that door.”

“I see.”

Mags stayed close to the wall, silently forming a plan. All he had was her warhammer and shield and we both figured it unlikely she’d get lucky with another lightning blast again. Afterall, it supposedly never struck the same place twice.

I stood there waiting in anticipation. I didn’t know how much magic I had left in me. I was still new at this and I’d never run out before. I was exhausted, sure, but I felt like I could still sling a few spells. Though I wasn’t sure if it’s be just one or a hundred and one. With nowhere to go I figured I’d just fight until I couldn’t anymore.

I heard footsteps in the hallway just outside the study and I prepared myself as best I could.

A blast of energy slammed into my hastily built shield and I watched it fracture. Another blast sent it scattering into pieces of glass-like energy that evaporated before it hit the floor.

Three men and one of the shadow beasts came walking through the door and we opened fire.

Raj began pelting them with books and firecrackers and stink bombs.

I flung the least taxing spells I could think of, simple plasma bolts that rained down over the entrance like a hailstorm. It appeared useful at the beginning but after the first few landed the wizards threw disc shields up and the bolts crashed harmlessly into them.

The books fared little better but the miniature explosives and stink bombs seemed to be having a much greater effect.

Raj crouched down and began working his gloved fingers like he was tying a knot.

Out of nowhere one of the normal clothed wizards tripped and fell. I heard his chin slam to the floor and he didn't get back up.

Searching for anyway to be effective, Mags closed her eyes and began whispering to herself. It took me a moment to realize she was praying which caught me off guard as I'd never known her to be the religious type, but I can't deny that it inspired a renewed burst of energy. I suddenly felt like I'd slept again. All the fatigue I'd suffered had faded away and I felt like I could blast these guys to oblivion if only I knew how.

She opened her eyes and for the briefest moment I could have sworn I saw a golden flash. Mags smiled at me and she raised the warhammer overhead and a pillar of golden light shot from it and exploded atop the shadow creature. It hissed

in pain and burned away to a pile of ash that drifted harmlessly through the air.

“Wha—how—how’d you do that? Did you know you could do that?” I was shocked.

She chuckled. “No clue. I prayed for help and it just popped into my head. I figured I’d give it a shot and somehow it worked. Must be a magic hammer of some kind.”

“Must be.” I agreed, surveying our remaining foes. There were two of them left and to my displeasure one of them was Aleister. I couldn’t help but wonder how he’d escaped my trap. I thought for certain I’d killed him. But then again, he was a master wizard and I barely knew how to make a shield.

It was time for me to do something cool. So far both Raj and Mags had done something useful and here I was, the one with magic and I hadn’t even slowed them down. The first guy was nearing the stairs when I got an idea. “Hang on to something!”

Drawing on the blue energies, I gathered as many as I could and created a swirling vortex. It took little more than a thought and they began to spin on their own. More and more joined the fray and a moment later a spinning tornado began to tear through the study sucking up books and furniture, and thankfully the guy nearest the stairs right as he was attacking my barrier. I didn’t know where it was spitting them out at but it wasn’t hear and that was all I cared about.

Unfortunately a green glowing field around Aleister kept him from being sucked away. He walked right through it as if it was nothing.

Books went scattering, drawn into the vortex. I could tell Raj and Mags were both shouting at me but I couldn't hear what they were saying. The roar of the wind was too loud.

Entire shelves were sucked up and disappeared in an instant and still Aleister kept walking toward us. He waved his hand and dismissed my pathetic excuse for a wall like it was nothing. Up the stairs he went, casually approaching without a care in the world.

Raj strained to keep his grip on the railing but even that was pulling free under the force. Mags reached out to grab him but it was too late. The entire section broke free and he disappeared into the swirling mass. It happened so fast that I didn't have time to do anything but watch him plead for help.

Mags spun and grabbed hold of me, burying her face in my chest. I held her tight, knowing the pain she was feeling.

Something hit me and I stumbled back catching myself against the wall. I could feel a trickle of blood running down my forehead but before I could do anything about it a book fell to the floor in front of me. I recognized the cover. It was the book grandpa had given me. Of all the books in the study what were the chances that particular one would hit me?

Careful to keep hold of Mags, I bent at the knees and retrieved it. Aleister was less than ten feet away from us now and I could see a victorious smirk on his face.

I stared at the book, unsure why it had come to me, then a dark red dot splattered on the cover. I had just a moment to see it before it soaked into the binding.

As if it had a mind of its own it flew open to the entry page, the ones Grandpa had asked me to read so long ago. And

this time, rather than strange and unfamiliar symbols, normal English writing that was strangely similar to my handwriting appeared in its stead. With no other options, I read what it said.

Whosoever binds this book shall Walk the Night, Calm the Night, and Control the Night, but not be Of the Night. For a wizard of this stature is among the rarest stock. He shall claim dominion of wills and the soulless will march upon his command. For his home is death for so long as he lives.

I had no idea what any of it meant but I felt a strange sensation come over me and before I could do anything about it a warm robe appeared in place of my clothes. But to the surprise of both myself and Mags, Aleister stopped in his tracks with a curious expression on his face.

His head cocked to the side and he suddenly looked unsure of himself.

That was my change, though I did it without meaning to. Black tendrils reached out from me and wrapped around him. They squeezed tight and I could see a green energy being sucked from his body.

The tendrils released and he collapsed to the floor as bits of dust broke away from his once preserved face and piece by piece he was sucked into the whirlwind.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head and I felt my knees grow weak. I started to fall but Mags caught me as I blacked out.

Chapter 12

Witch, Please

I was standing at the edge of a vast lake. A magnificent rainbow arched across the sky, ending in a pot of gold on an island at the center. The giant leprechaun kept pacing the perimeter, ensuring no one reached the island.

I froze. This all seemed eerily familiar to me. Words whisper at the edge of my cognitive though they were too far away for me to make out what they were. I knew them though. I'd heard them before.

"You know the words, you just have to say them."

I turned finding Grandpa standing behind me. "Do I?"

"Of course."

I nodded in agreement. Of course I knew the words. So why were they being so elusive?

A spinning top dropped to the long table in front of me. I was in the visitor's lounge at Grandpa's retirement home. The three TVs were bussing static though no sound could be heard.

Grandpa looked at me with eyes more tired than usual. He smiled and glanced at the top, still spinning.

Where had I seen that before?

"You know the words, you have but to say them."

Grandpa repeated.

I heard it in my head again and recited it back, hearing it aloud. "This is a dream."

“Of course it’s a dream. What else would it be?” Grandpa moved one of the chess pieces and looked to me, awaiting my move.

I slid my queen to H4. “Checkmate.”

“Well played, lad. But don’t you have something more important to do than sit here playing games with an old man?”

“I think so. But I don’t remember what.”

A loud clap echoed on the table and my book appeared in front of me. I my head bleeding and a few drops landed on the cover.

“I remember this.”

“Oh yeah? What happened?”

I tried to recall. It was all so hazy. And still the top continued to spin. “I think I bonded.”

I watched the blood soak into the cover and I opened the book revealing the red and black written pages just inside the cover. The message that had been reserved for me was there, plainly visible.

“I don’t know what it means.”

My clothing shifted and I was wearing black robes. “Does this mean I’m evil?”

“Not at all. Good and evil are simply perceptions. Does the deer think the wolf evil because it must devour it? Does the bug think a car evil when it spatters on a windshield? No. Magic is a tool, used by many for any purpose. Some abuse it. Some praise it, and some fear it. But just because it can be used for evil does not make it inherently evil.”

“But my robes, they’re black.”

“So they are. What of it?”

“I thought black robes were worn by the bad guys.”

“Have you learned nothing? It doesn’t matter what color your robes are. It’s how you use it that matters. Your magic simply comes more naturally from the dark. You are a part of the balance that much be maintained, as we all are.”

“But what about Raj? He got sucked into a tornado because of me. And I killed Aleister. These black tendrils squeezed him and sucked the life out of him.”

“Aleister was a bad man who abused the powers he was given. Who’s to say it was you who killed him. Remember when you sent that weak lighting bolt at me? Remember how it recoiled and shot back at you tenfold? When the magics are abused they tend to take their own vengeance. Even if it was your magics that ended his life, he was on a dangerous road that would have claimed him sooner or later. The best you can do is accept it and move on.

“As for your friend, I think I know someone who can help with that.”

“Who?”

“You’ll find her with an old associate, the same way you did before. But be cautious as she’d crafty, and beware the toothy door.”

“A rhyme, really?”

“Yes, really. You can’t expect me to spell it out for you all the time.”

I shook my head, wondering if this was really grandpa or some aspect of myself that was talking his form.

“Oh, and in my study, provided it’s still there, you’ll find a set of horns on the wall. Be sure to take them with you. You

never know when a good horn will come in handy. Now wake up.”

My eyes shot open and I could hear sniffing somewhere near. Slowly I stirred and sat up to find Mags sitting beside me with her face buried in her hands.

“Are you okay?”

She jumped and looked at me startled. “I thought you were dead!” She threw her arms around me and hugged tight. I have to admit I liked it.

“No, not dead. Not yet anyway. What happened?”

“I don’t know. We were trapped and that guy was coming for us. Then Raj got sucked away and you started floating. Those robes appeared and then then next thing I knew both you and that guy, Alistair I think, dropped. He turned to dust and disappeared and you weren’t breathing. Then the tornado just stopped and I’ve been here ever since.”

I recalled most of the story but there were a few details I remembered differently. “Well, the good news, I think I know someone who can tell us where Raj is. The bad news, I can’t guarantee they’ll help us.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know for certain. I just have a hunch.” I looked around the ruined study in search of the horns Grandpa had told me about. Sure enough, there was a set of three hollow steer horns arranged from smallest to largest hanging near the fireplace.

Picking myself up, I grabbed my arcanum and helped Mags to her feet. I had to step over, and sometimes climb over topples shelves, busted rails, and a wide assortment of debris,

including hundreds of books that were scattered about the floor. I had a feeling Grandpa was going to throw a fit when he saw it all, but then again I could just blame it on Aleister.

After what seemed like a journey to climb Mount Everest, I finally reached the fireplace. The flame had been extinguished and smoldering embers and ash were all that remained. I reached up and grabbed the bottom horn, the largest of the three.

“What do you need that for?”

“I don’t know. Grandpa told me to take them. He said they’d come in useful.” So I was paraphrasing, but I didn’t want to tell her my hunch was based on a dream that I couldn’t prove was real.

I stretched a little further and dismounted the middle horn, and used the length of the large horn to dislodge the smallest.

They were all three of identical shape, hollow in the large end and a small hole was drilled into the small end. I nested them together and slung the pair over my shoulder by the leather strap that was fixed to both ends.

Opening my book I found the page I needed. It came almost naturally. Like the book knew what I wanted from little more than a thought. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“To go see if we can find Raj?”

“I guess. But if you’re going to teleport, I thought those antitravel things stopped us.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t explain it but I knew they wouldn’t work. “I can do this.”

“Okay.” She stepped close to me and wrapped her arms around my chest.

I felt her soft lips press against my cheek and she kissed me. “For good luck.” I blushed and turned my head to hide it.

Reading the words on the obscure page, I recalled the last time I’d uttered them and felt the energies swirling around me. The wind picked up but nowhere near to the extent that it had been moments before. Lights flashed and all of a sudden Mags and I were standing at the edge of the forest trail in the dead of night with little more than a full moon to illuminate our path.

I didn’t know why but I wasn’t afraid any more. It felt more like whatever was in there was hoping I’d command it. That was wholly different from when I felt like it wanted to eat me.

“Are you sure about this?” Mags asked, clinging to my arm which I found somewhat amusing. She was dressed in full plate armor and carrying a warhammer and shield. And I was a thirteen-year-old kid dressed in black robes with a book in one hand and a set of horns slung around my chest. We made quite the pair.

“Yeah. It’s okay. There’s only one thing in there that I can’t feel. And I’m willing to bet that’s who we have to talk to.” With a deep breath I walked through the tree line and let my eyes adjust to the lowlight.

It was much easier to see than I remembered. The contrast was more defined. Shades of blacks and grays were all around us but the grays were reflecting the moonlight to the forest floor.

I picked my path and stepped off the trail that cut through the center. We passed evergreens, maples, oaks, and just about every other assortment of tree knew, though I couldn't identify most of them due to lack of sight and those I could were unique, even in the lowlight.

I would feel the eyes upon us, more curious as to our presence than anything but my fear remained absent. I'd changed. I was no longer the terrified little kid who'd struggled to even step into the forest. I was now something more, still a kid, but I was a teenager. I'd learned some things, and I was no longer defenseless. I could protect myself.

The path I was following curved around and I saw the sparse flickering lights I'd been searching for. We passed the thick row of evergreens that formed the perimeter outside the fence and I felt the ground go soft from pine needles.

"We're here. Try not to be scared. If anything happens, I'll teleport us out." I hoped I could still do that. I'd only done it twice now and both times I'd read it in the book. I hoped the concept was relatively the same for doing it the way Grandpa did.

The skull topped posts illuminated a short radius, revealing just enough detail to make out the bone fence, and of course there were now two that were absent their lanterns.

Off to the left there were three strange looking horses grazing in the foliage, though they didn't appear dangerous. If anything they looked more lean and swift than a standard horse.

And at the center of the spectacle was the stilted house that looked like it was dancing on chicken legs.

“Hey, you, house. Look at me!”

“Aaron, what are you doing?” Mags whispered, trying to hide behind me.

“It turned to look at me last time. I don’t want to be accused of trying to sneak. We’re here for a purpose. I don’t want anything getting in the way of that.”

Before he could finish his words it jumped and spun, and a narrow doorway face them. It arched at the center and the top ridge of the door pointed slightly their direction as if inspecting them.

After a moment the door burst open and a large gangled woman with bony legs and arms and a bulbous midsection stood in silhouette. Her face was elongated and a crooked and pointed nose angled awkwardly toward the ground. She stepped out the door and hobbled toward the pair of trespassers, whispering inaudibly.

She was mere steps away, highlighted in the lantern light when she stopped to survey the children. "Fie, fie, that childish smell was never heard of nor caught sight of here, but it has come by itself? Are you here of your own free will or by compulsion, my good youth?"

I couldn’t help but notice the reflection of her teeth and I suspected they were made of a metal of some kind. Behind her, an old-style broom swept tirelessly, removing her footsteps from the dirt. “We come of our own free will, but compulsion carried up. We seek a lost friend and I was told you might be able to help.

“See, see, I know not of lost companionship, for I’m but an old woman. But a price you may pay for my sightly eyes to seek.”

“And what price is that?”

“Thrice the horns round thine neck. They were once mine when a tricky young lad flew away on the firebird’s back.”

“You want the horns?”

“Yes, yes.” She pressed her gnarled fingers together and her disfigured tongue flickered with excitement.

“And if I give them to you you’ll tell us where our friend is?”

“Yes, yes. Give them to thee!”

“Okay.”

“Aaron, wait.” Mags whispered with urgency. “Make her deliver first. If she gets the horns there’s no guarantee she’ll tell us what we want to know.”

“Clever little girl.” The witch stepped forward and sniffed the air vigorously. “I’ve not tasted such a fresh morsel in so long.”

I took a step back, shielding Mags from her. “You heard her. Tell us where our friend are first. Then I’ll give you the horns.”

“Thrice”

“Yes. All three.”

“Very well. Follow thee.” She turned and started back toward the dancing hut only to stop most sudden. “Would you get out of thy way!” The witch pushed the magical broom to the side. I nearly toppled over and then picked itself up and

immediately fell in behind her once again, dusting her steps away.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Mags repeated, keeping a weary on not only the witch but everything around them. This was the stuff of fairytales and she didn’t want to end up in the witch’s oven.

“It’s too late now. We have to see it through.”

“I supposed you have a point there. Mags sighed and fell in behind him.

A few steps from the hut, the witch stomped her scrawny foot and pressed her hands upon her wide hips. Clearing her throat, the hut stood fast and the doorway was nowhere to be seen. She let out an irritated sigh before bellowing into the night. “Turn your back to the forest, your front to me!”

The hut spun around and the door was in the perfect location for their entry, though in a different spot from where it’s been earlier.

A sly grin crept to my face. I knew I’d made the right choice.

The wooden door looked simply in all ways but one. The keyhole was unique. I knew I’d see it before which was what brought me back here this time. Rather than a metal plate with tumblers, this keyhole was a wicked mouth full of jagged needle like teeth.

The witch reached out and twisted the knob and the door came open. She stepped aside and gestured for us to enter.

I was careful to squeeze past her. There was no trust in this relationship. It was a simple service. Information in exchange for the horns. If she tried anything else I was

prepared to do to her what I'd done to Aleister, though I didn't want to think about it.

I waited for Mags to join me just inside the door before I continued deeper.

It was a simple hut, large enough for most but the bulbous witch took up far more room than I felt was necessary. I had no doubt her lengthy arms could reach from one corner to the other, though there was no need to test it. She was almost as tall as the ceiling and I found myself wondering why she didn't live in some place a little bigger. It had seemed a decent size from the outside but inside was the opposite of the Doctor Who effect. It was much smaller.

"You give thine horns now, yes?"

"No. Not until you tell us where our friend is. He was pulled through a magical tornado and disappeared."

The witch cursed under her breath and hobbled over to a shallow basin resting atop an overturned crate. She snatched up a handful of clacking tiny slates that looked eerily of bone and tossed them. Her pointed finger scratched inside the basin and she tossed a few more. On the third toss, a toothy smile stretched from drooping ear to drooping ear and she spun around to face us.

"I see thine companions, one blood and one bond. They slave in a house of stone. A place of reprieve. The sanctuary."

"Does that mean—"

"The council has them." I finished.

"Thy deed is done. Give us the horns!"

I started to take them off when I remembered that I didn't have any idea how to get to Sanctuary and something

told me they weren't about to send another carriage. "How do we get there?" I asked, the horns raised but still very much secure.

"Not part of our deal, tricky boy. Give us the horns, we won't ask again."

"Do it, Aaron." Mags pleaded. I could tell she had some kind of plan brewing but I didn't know what.

I removed the horns and handed them to the witch. She bounced with glee in a manner that should have been impossible for someone of her size though it seemed not to phase her.

"It's a shame you won't tell us how to get to Sanctuary. I'll bet we would have both happily done some chores in exchange for the directions."

"What? No, I don't wan—" Mags elbowed me in the ribs, silencing me.

The witch ended her joyful dance and raised an eyebrow toward Mags. "Thee would willingly perform chores?"

"Oh yes. We, the two of us, love doing chores." Mags shook her head in displeasure. "But since you won't tell us how to get to Sanctuary I guess we'll just have to be on our way." She started toward the door, only for the witch to step into her path.

The crooked nose seeped a slimy green substance as the witch nodded vigorously and she began mumbling as if bargaining with some unseen force. "Yes, yes. I can take you to sanctuary. But only after you do the chores." She raised a finger, emphasizing that detail.

"Okay. Where would you like us to start?"

The old crone glanced toward the ceiling and the tip of her nose nearly touched it. Her lips curled as she thought for a moment. “The stables. Yes, yes. The stables will do nicely. Clean the stables and work up a nice sweat. That’ll bring out that childish smell.”

Mags nodded her understanding and stepped around the witch to reach the door. I followed. It would have been stupid not to.

Once we were outside and clear of the witch’s ear, I leaned in close. “Do you mind telling me what all that was about?”

“I think I know who she is. I remember reading about her. She has a near obsessive compulsion to make her visitors do chores in exchange for services.”

“Who is she?”

“Baba something. It’s been a long time since I read it. We have to be careful though. If I’m right, she’s a trickster. We’re going to have to outsmart her.”

“And how are we supposed to do that?”

“Well, the last person who cleaned her stables stole one of her horses and got away. They’re supposedly incredibly fast. And the horns you gave her. Another traveler used them to escape on the back of some kind of bird.”

“Firebird. She told me that when she saw the horns.”

“That confirms it then. We need to find a way to escape, but only after she’s told us where to go.”

“Sounds each enough.”

I was wrong. It wasn’t easy at all. I was glad grandpa taught me how to control time. Had he not I have no idea

how long we would have worked making that stable good as new. My back was killing me from raking the soiled straw and laying a fresh bed.

Mags got the easy job of brushing all the horses down and cleaning their hooves. She informed me that she used to spend the summer working at a stable and all of this was fairly simple labor but I didn't buy it. I suspected she was just telling me that to make me feel better.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead. I had no idea how anyone did any kind of work in such thick cloth. The robes were fairly comfortable all things considered but they didn't breathe very well and I was hot.

"Psst!" Mags signaled behind me.

I glanced back seeing an old dirt covered tarp covering something on the back side of the wooden pens.

Mags continued brushing the last horse down as she worked her way toward me. "If that's what I think it is, it can take us to Sanctuary without her help."

"What do you think it is?"

She didn't respond, instead made her way back toward the horse's head.

I heard a voice just outside stables and saw the witch come into view.

"The children completed their task and another to ask. Yes, another to ask. You straighten the thistles before morning light, and then breakfast." She commanded and disappeared the direction she'd come.

"I'm not straightening the thistles!" I declared just loud enough for Mags to hear. "I don't even know what a thistle is."

“I think it’s a type of thorn.”

“Why does she want us to straighten the thistles then?”

Mags shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s a trickster, remember. We need to leave now. I’m pretty sure she had a thing about eating children.”

“You couldn’t have said that part sooner?”

“You didn’t ask.”

I shook my head and stalked forward to make sure the witch wasn’t outside. I caught glimpse just as she crossed the threshold and closed the door. Now was as good a time as any. “She just went inside.”

“Let’s go check it out.” Mags laid the horse brush where she’d found it and slipped between two of the runs that had rotted away. She snatched her armor and weapon off the ground and quietly slung them over her shoulder. Unlike me, she was smart enough to remove the excess baggage before getting started.

We slipped closer to the ragged tarp and carefully pulled it aside to reveal what looked to me like an extremely large stone bowl with an equally large wooden club inside it.

“Please tell me that’s not what you were hoping it was.”

“Honestly, that’s exactly what I was hoping it was.” She handed her armor and weapons to me and climbed over the lip, disappearing inside.

“What are you doing?” I asked as loud as I dared.

“Come on. Get in. We need to leave now.”

I sighed and handed her armor to her. She set it down inside the bowl and extended a hand to pull me up. In no time

we were both inside the large bowl for reasons I didn't understand.

"This is a fantastic plan you had here."

"Shush. I just need to figure out how to operate it." Mags grabbed hold of the large club and rolled it toward her.

The bowl lifted off the ground and began to hover gently along the stable fence.

"Yes! See I told you I had a plan."

"I stand corrected. Get us out of here before she comes back."

Mags fiddled with the club and suddenly we were flying through the forest faster than I thought possible. Trees were whipping past and I could see the clearing just ahead.

I loud shriek echoed behind up and we both knew our escape had been discovered.

Mags pulled on the wooden club and we lifted higher and higher until we were flying level with the clouds.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"I guess we keep going until we get there."

"That sounds a little too philosophical, even for you."

She chuckled which was nice to see. "This is a mortar and pestle. She uses it to fly around and go places. I only remember it from one story but apparently it can take you to the place of your heart's desire. Right now I desire to find Raj."

Chapter 13

Sacrilegium

A mixture of blue and orange scattered across the morning sky. We drifted through the clouds like a ship at sea, gracefully sailing across the silky vapors. From up here it didn't feel like we were moving fast at all but each time we broke the surface everything beneath was little more than a blur.

We'd traveled for what I guessed was about an hour before the strange vehicle began to slow and familiar sights came into views.

Mags was right. The mortar took us straight to Sanctuary in about the same time the carriage had. Of course teleportation was much faster, but as grandpa had said it was forbidden to arrive by, even if I knew how to get here.

We landed a few blocks away. I didn't have any idea what was going on inside and I didn't want to risk being swarmed the moment we touched down. But that raised a new issue. How were we going to get inside without being seen? The guards were still posted at the front door and I didn't know enough about this place to even consider another entrance.

I turned to Mags who was fastening the final piece of her armor into place. "Any ideas on how to get inside?"

She looked me up and down and glanced at herself. "Well, we could always try the infiltration approach. You look

like a dark wizard and I look like a guard, though they're silver and carry halberds and I'm gold and had a hammer."

It wasn't a bad idea. We could possibly pass at a distance but I feared anyone who bothered to get close would immediately tell the difference. "Let's table that one for now and keep brainstorming."

We were both silent for a long moment before Mags nearly jumped with excitement.

"I've got one! But hear me out. It's kind of crazy."

"Okay?"

"Okay, so, you know magic, right?"

"Um, a little, I guess?" I found that a strange way to start the concept.

"I'm seeing a few ways we can play this but none of them are going to work. It's an impenetrable fortress full of people who want you, right?"

"I suppose."

"What if you surrender? You walk in and say 'Here I am', only when they take you it's not really you. It can be me, or better yet it can be an illusion. It creates a distraction that we can use to sneak in another route."

I thought about it for a moment and while it had some merit I didn't think it was a good idea to announce our presence, fake or not. And I wasn't about to let her go in there alone. "I still don't think we're there yet."

"Why don't you guys just take the crypt entrance?" An unfamiliar voice suggested from the alley beside us.

We both jumped. "Whoa, who are you?"

“Me? I’m nobody. Just someone who’d been down on his luck for quite some time and happens to know a thing or two about that building you’re thinkin’ bout sneakin’ into.”

“With all due respect, that doesn’t sound like a nobody to me. That sounds like trouble.” I hated the fact that we’d so carelessly been discussing our plans out in the open. Now we had another threat to deal with.

The figure shrugged. “Eh, do what you like. It’s your funeral. All I’m sayin’ is the crypt entrance is the only way in or out of that buildin’ without a constant guard. It empties into the old courtyard. Been off limits to students and faculty for years. Nobody goes there anymore, which makes it perfect for sneakin’ around.”

“I apologize but I’m having just a little bit of difficulty believing that you’re a nobody with so much intimate knowledge about the place.”

“I didn’t say I was always a nobody. Bout thirty years ago I was the Archmagus of that school. Magehound assassins came in the dead of night and barely got outta there. The next day my job was replaced by the council. I’ve been keepin’ a close watch ever since. Don’t get me wrong, the council’s done a lot of good that I never had to stoness for. But I knew somethin’ like this would happen eventually.”

“Something like what?” Mags asked, moving close in the hopes of seeing his face.

“The uprisin’. You can only keep a status quo for so long. Eventually someone’s gonna learn how to play the system and take advantage of it.”

“And why haven’t you done anything about it?” I wasn’t sure if I could trust this guy. It seemed a little convenient that he just happened to show up when we needed him to. But unexplained things had been my life lately. Maybe it was something in the magic trying to balance itself against all odds.

“I burned that bridge a long time ago. But if you’re wantin’ in that school, the only way is the crypts. I’ll even show you the entrance if you want.”

“I don’t know if I can trust you.” I said flatly, but it was Mags who surprised me.

“You can. He isn’t lying.”

“How do you know?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I just feel it. He’s telling the truth.”

I took a deep breath. I wouldn’t have survived this night had it not been for Mags. I wasn’t about to start doubting here now. If she said I could trust him, I’d listen. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t prepare for the worst. “Fine. Show us the entrance.”

The sun was nearly risen when we arrived at the stone mausoleum. Our guide retrieved an iron keychain from beneath his stained overcoat and cycled through the keys until he found the one he was searching for. He inserted it in the lock and twisted and the iron grate creaked open.

The tunnel’s behind the third tomb on the left. It’ll swing out. Once inside just keep goin’ straight. It’ll take you straight to an identical tomb on the other side. You’re on your own from there.”

“Thank you.” Mags offered though I remained silent. I’d give thanks once we were safely back on this side of the gate with Raj and Grandpa in tow.

We entered the mausoleum without issue and located the tomb he’d mentioned. Sure enough, it was on subtle hinges and swung out without issue.

I was slightly unnerved by how relaxed I felt in here. Somehow beyond my comprehension I knew there were just over three thousand bodies buried nearby and I could feel each and every one of them. It was almost like they wanted me to give them a command but I couldn’t bring myself to obey. It was too weird.

The tunnel itself was much larger than I’d expected. I guessed it had been built as an emergency escape in the event the castle itself had been breached. That was the only explanation I could see for the comfortably sized tunnels which were large enough for seven to eight people to walk side by side without crowding, the hinged door which was remarkable similar to the surrounding tombs, and the fact that the ex-headmaster—arch magus—whatever he was called possessed the keys. And if he was telling the truth, it was entirely likely that the council knew nothing about this tunnel which meant it would be the perfect escape route as well. Provided we weren’t discovered somewhere along the way.

We emerged on the other side with no difficulty whatsoever. Gate wasn’t even locked on this side which I was happy about. Raj was our resident lockpick and he was missing in action.

When we reached the courtyard I was taken back by just how gloomy it felt. The grass and weeds hadn't completely overrun the place but it was far from kempt. There were statues everywhere. Some of powerful looking men. Others were odd winged creatures with animal faces, or sometimes it was a combination of them all.

At the center of the courtyard a stone fountain with three tiers sat dry and hundreds of coins from unknown times and places rested at the bottom, untouched for who knew how long.

Three sides were wreathed in towering walls and decorative columns that bridged the surrounding buildings, but to my surprise there were no windows in sight. It was as if this place was a secret to the rest of the grounds.

Mags continued on head, pausing at the iron gate that separated the quad from what appeared to be an old abandoned garden complete with hedge maze.

I hurried to catch up and suddenly I realized why she'd stopped. The gate was locked.

"I don't think I can squeeze through but you're pretty skinny. Can you?" She asked. I found the concept silly. The only thing that would have stopped her from squeezing through would have been her armor.

"Probably but I want to try something." I closed my eyes and imagined the inside of the ancient lock. It was rusted but appeared to be in relatively decent condition. I pulled the sparks around it and funneled them into the device and a moment later it clicked but the lock held fast.

I bit my bottom lip in frustration. “It worked. I felt it work. So why didn’t it open?”

Mags raised the flat side of her warhammer and gave a firm whack and the lock popped open. “Just needs a woman’s touch.” She smirked.

“And maybe a nice smack from a hammer?”

“Just a little.”

We opened the gate just enough to squeeze through and looped the lock back where it had been, though we didn’t seal it.

Stepping into the hedge maze, we froze, realizing this was going to be more difficult than it looked.

“Which way?” I asked. I couldn’t see anything other than the walls of overgrown vegetation in every direction.

Mags glanced all three options and exhaled softly. She hesitated for a moment and then pointed to the right. “That way.”

We went right.

The sun was nearly cresting the top of the foliage when we found the exit and for the first time since our arrival we could hear the sounds of movement. Something big was happening. It sounded like a thousand man army marching just on the other side of the wall but they were far from in step and it was far too spread out any kind of formal march. Maybe a herd of cattle? But I didn’t recall cattle wearing shoes.

We ducked behind the nearest corner and waited for the shuffling of feet to pass.

It went on forever and finally it became too much for me. I had to take a look and see what was happening. For all I knew a bunch of people were walking in circles. That was not the case.

I crept forward and poked my head around the corner just enough to see what was happening. A freakishly long line of uniform wearing children were stacked three wide and who knew how many deep. They were being ushered by wizards in black robes to some place I could have cared less about. And the tail of the ground had to be back there—somewhere. It really didn't matter to me. I just wanted them to get on their way so I could get on with mine.

Mag leaned out beside me to take a look. "Where are they taking them?"

"I don't know but I don't remember things being this controlled when we were here last night. I'm guessing there's been a change of power. That's the only thing that makes sense.

"Do you think we should sneak into the line or wait for them to pass?"

"I think we should wait. It can't go on much longer now, but then again I thought the same thing five minutes ago."

Eventually the line of children ended and we darted out into the open. The place was starting to look familiar now that the walls enclosed around us and the ceiling covered our heads. It was still a gargantuan castle but people mean common areas and that meant we were close.

Mag's led the way insisting that she could feel the correct way and I followed. She hadn't been wrong yet.

We found ourselves in a curved hall that seemed to be angling downward. I could feel something magical drawing near but I didn't know what could be so strong as to call to me like that. I suspected it was the same feeling Grandpa said I was giving to others, the thing I needed to control. I only hoped I'd figured that out by now. It would have sucked to come all this way just to have my enemies waiting for me.

The hall began to plane out and I could see light up head. There were three doorways all along the right wall. That would have been the inside of the circle.

Cautiously we neared the first opening and peaked around.

The room wasn't overly wide, maybe twenty-foot radius. It had a simple stone floor and the round walls. And there, shackled in a standing position was Grandpa, Raj, Alice, the other two white wizards I'd seen during my hearing, and about five others I hadn't met.

What was more interesting was the odd device at the room's center, resting on a pedestal. A cube shaped box with glowing purple sides and triangle blades protruding from it was humming gently.

I could feel it pulling at me but that was nothing compared to the colorful sparks it was draining from everyone in the room except Raj. He was simply dangling there with his arms chained overhead. This had to be the arcane bank Grandpa told me about.

"Mags, will you smash this thing when I tell you to? And fair warning, it might explode."

“Okay.” She took position over the top of it and readied her hammer.

I moved over to Raj and began directing the energies into his shackles to unlock them. It took a little longer than I liked with the box stealing from me but I finally got enough to make it happen.

Raj collapsed in my arms but the sudden movement woke him.

“A-A-Ron, you came for me.”

“Of course I did. I couldn’t leave my best friend to rot. Even if he is a pain some times.”

He smiled.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just a little tired and I’m a little sore.”

“Do you think you can put your lockpicking skills to use and get these other people free?”

Raj glanced around the room at them. “Yeah.”

“Okay. You start working on that I’m going to free my Grandpa. Once we have them all down I want you to smash that thing.”

“Got it” Mags confirmed.

I went to work unlocking not only the chains holding Grandpa’s arms but the collar around his neck. It took everything I had to keep my focus. I wanted so desperately to get rid of the box now but I couldn’t risk the council finding out until we were all ready to fight.

“You can’t—” A raspy voice whispered to my left.

I turned seeing Alice, conscious and trying to talk to me. “What?”

“You can’t open the dollar with magic. It has to be done manually.”

“Great.” I turned to Raj who was moving slower than usual. He already had one of the white wizards released and was now working on the collar. “Raj, I’ll handle the shackles. You focus on the collars. We have to get as many of these guys free as fast as possible.”

“Okay.”

In about ten minutes we had all of them down and their collars removed, though that part took longer than I liked.

“Mags, go for it.”

She brought the hammer down and the glass sides exploded out and all kinds of magic released into the air. A fair amount found its way into the people around me but more went someplace else and I feared we were on limited time now.

“Come on. We need to move quick. There’s a secret passage we can use to escape but it’s a bit of a walk.”

We filed out and Mags took the lead since she was the one with the uncanny ability to choose the correct direction each time. I followed close behind her, ready for the moment when I’d have to react fast and hope I made the right decision.

Raj had taken position somewhere near the middle of our group and I assumed Grandpa was near the rear but I honestly couldn’t say. Once I freed him I moved on to the next person and did everything in my power to keep a distance between us. He’d tried to talk to me a few times already but I had more important things to do at the moment. He could ridicule me

for my black robes and for leaving him later but for now our escape was the primary objective.

We made out was up the winding corridor and through the numerous halls we'd taken to get here. I'd never thought I'd be happy to see the hedge maze but I was. There was just one little problem.

Alarms sounded and rushing footsteps weren't far off.

"Quickly, this way!" I darted into the maze and hoped the others could follow quick enough to lose out pursuers somewhere along the way. We just had to make it to the crypts. If we could get there we'd have an ambush position to fight from, and those who couldn't fight would have an escape.

"There's a faster way!" Grandpa demanded, squeezing to get around the others. When he got to the front, he held his hand outstretched and began channeling. The vines that composed the towering walls began to unravel and separate and within a few heartbeats we had an opening that traveled ahead of us and closed behind us. It was perfect.

In a fraction of the time we found the iron gate. Mags opened it and stepped aside for everyone could get through. No sooner than the last one passed, she pulled it closed and slammed the lock shut.

We were home free. Just a little further and we'd be at the mausoleum and gone forever. Or so I thought.

Chapter 14

Acceptance

A deafening boom echoed behind me and I watched the ground spilt open. I heard one of the white wizards scream all the way to the bottom which nearly churned my stomach.

The sky was riddled with streaks of orange glow as flaming brimstone rained down upon us. The air was charged and bolts of lightning crackled past me.

If I hadn't know about magic I would have thought we'd stumbled into the apocalypse. People were screaming and the temperature jumped rapidly.

There was no telling how many were on our tail but judging from the noise I suspected a lot.

We ran for all we were worth and I feared it wasn't going to be enough. The only thing that could have made it worse would have been if archers had taken position on the walls surrounding us. We were in a kill box with one way out and we were nowhere near it.

I pumped my legs as fast as they would go, hoping to get just a little closer. I could see the mausoleum but it still so far away. How did they swarm us like they did?

I dodged a bolt and began wrapping my shield around myself. There was too much happening around me too fast and I was completely defenseless.

I heard the energy blast long before I felt it. It stuck me in the back and I toppled face first into the overgrown grass. I could smell burning flesh and I suspected it was mine.

I wish I could say it hurt but it really didn't. It happened too fast to hurt.

My vision blurred and my hearing faded. It was like everyone around me was moving in slow motion and I was helpless but to witness it.

I turned my head to see Mags kneeling beside me. She was flailing at someone but I couldn't see who. I did see the tears in her eyes though.

If only I'd been able to feel, or understand, or to do anything really I might have been able to comfort her.

Someone snatched me off the ground and I felt like I was floating. We bounced harmlessly across the courtyard, headed for the statues. I found that an odd choice. We needed to go to the crypts.

Got tossed roughly behind one of the strange winged creatures and I landed on my backside. Again, it wasn't so bad. I couldn't feel it. But at least now I could see what was going on.

Bolts of energy shot through the air, firing this way and that. Bits of the statues rained down upon me and I was once again reminded of Independence Day. In fact this was more like it that my last remembrance. That one just had the pretty lights all over this place. This one had the sky and raining debris. That was more like what I expected.

A pair of gloved fists grabbed the front of my robes and yanked me to the right. It was Raj. He was trying to tell me something but I couldn't hear. The silence had been replaced by a high pitched squeak that rang in my ears.

I wanted to tell him it was okay. That seemed like the right thing to do. He looked scared though of what I didn't know.

I'm not sure when it happened but it was getting harder to breathe, like my chest wasn't moving the way it was supposed to. It made me want to be scared too, like Raj and Mags were, but I simply couldn't. I didn't remember how to be scared. I was just a head, floating above my body.

Sound snapped back to me and I could suddenly hear again. Dirt and bits of stone exploded all around. Bright flashes of light. Reds, blues, greens, yellow. They zipped past me like I wasn't standing here and I remembered we were running from something—someone.

I turned around to look upon the enemy. They were everywhere, outnumbering us almost four to one. Maybe that's why they hadn't gone into the crypts. They overpowered us and cut off our escape.

I glanced around hoping to find Mags. She was hunkered down behind one of the humanoid statues on the other side of the field. Her warhammer was gripped so tightly her knuckles were turning white and she had the shield positioned on her right arm. Her face was covered in grit and sweat and tears but she looked mad as well.

I couldn't help but smile, seeing her twist out from behind her cover and raise her hammer. The golden light exploded in a beam from the sky and sent one of the black robed wizards flying through the air. She ducked back almost as quickly as a blast of red energy ricocheted off the side of the statue where she'd been seconds before.

My attention drifted across the field, inspecting the damage. Alice was lying face first in the churned dirt, refusing to move. A couple other appeared to share a similar fate, though they seemed to have made it a bit further than she. One of the gray wizards who'd been chained up was holding his left arm and I could tell there was no saving it.

Grandpa appeared to my right. He launched a volley of small yet powerful blasts that sent several of the attacking black wizard running for cover. The few bolts that targeted him bounced harmlessly off his shield and imploded into nothing.

And here I was, standing at the center of the battle and not a single person seemed to notice me. I found that odd but stranger things had happened. Stranger things like the thousands of dead calling out to me for instance, Alice among them.

It seemed wrong to answer their call but I didn't know if I could ignore it. I didn't know if I should ignore it. We were drastically outnumbered and we needed all the help we could get.

The black tendrils outstretched from me and tethered themselves to the fallen. I was simply the vessel by which they rose. But it wasn't just our people. A few of the black wizards rose too. The tendrils were trying to expand beyond my control and go into the crypts but I didn't let them. Those dead were already buried. I didn't want to risk waking them. But in total I had upwards of twenty servants ready to answer my call.

“Attack!” I shouted and the bodied began to climb to their feet. They were slow and a little clumsy at first but I expected they’d get back into the swing of things. I was always a little disoriented myself when I woke up in the mornings.

Movement caught my attention across the way and I saw two if the wizards sneaking up the back side if the wall, behind Mags. What was worse, she was so focused on what was ahead of her she couldn’t see them.

“Mags, look out!” My hand outstretched as if I could reach over than grab them, and somehow I did. It wasn’t the tendrils but some kind of ethereal hand that only I could see. It grabbed other of her attackers at the same time and drew the life out of them. They were dead before they hit the ground and what I found more disturbing, I didn’t feel bad about it.

Grandpa’s voice rang out and I could hear him casting one of his vocal spells. I turned just as he released and a swirl of energy rose into the sky. Lightning bolts danced from the cloud, striking here and there seemingly at random.

I twisted to avoid a wispy green substance that looked vaguely similar to a spider web. I instantly wished I hadn’t.

As Grandpa was lowering his arms, it smacked him in the face and began wrapping itself around him. His shield didn’t even attempt to block it with I found odd. What kind of magic could bypass a shield?

It tangled around his face and Grandpa struggled to get free. It seemed the harder he fought the more if engulfed him. I wanted to help I just didn’t what to do. I knew it was an

enchantment but my experience with them was limited. How was I supposed to break a compulsion without a sudden shock to the system. That was a different problem. I didn't even know what would shock Grandpa's system. He was laid back about pretty much everything. But maybe I could take out whoever was casting it on him.

I turned and searched the field. My creations were spread near and far, engaged with the enemy. And each one appeared just as confused as the next. I knew it couldn't be any of them. Even if they'd found some way to come to terms with my army, they were too distracted to cast.

I continued my search. I found a few flinging plasma bolts, fireballs, or the occasionally lightning blasts but it couldn't have been any of them either. Like those before, these were all engaged. Whoever had targeted Grandpa had to have a clear line of sight on him. But more importantly, a spell like that required constant channeling. Afterall, that was about the only way I could see anyone getting past his defenses.

My eyes darted this way and that and finally I locked onto my target. A familiar gray wizard was cowering at the edge of the hedge maze. I recognized him immediately. Eliphaz had his head just barely visible and he was chanting with a straight line of sight.

I nodded my approval, letting my emotions flow freely. I felt like a rabid dog ready to tear him apart. This was personal. Eliphaz may not have been the one to start of all this but he certainly had a major role in it. Especially as far as I was concerned. And now he was fighting against us? I couldn't let

that stand. It was his altered vote that send us down this twisted and jarring path. I could have let that go. But now that he was actively fighting against us, and he was hiding like a coward and targeting my grandpa? No, he was going to pay dearly!

I focused all my energy onto the squat cowardly man hiding in the weed. I was going to hurt him, but that wasn't enough. I had to do more than just hurt him. I had to destroy him. I had to take away everything that would make him a person. Hurt him in the manner which would hurt the most.

My hands shook with range as I outstretched toward him. They sail across to distance in the blink of an eye. He had line of sight on Grandpa and I had line of sight on him.

I could feel his life force waning against my necrotic touch. I wanted to desperately to rip him from his body and be done with it. That would have probably been kinder. But I wouldn't take his life. I wouldn't kill him. Not in the traditional manner anyway. In fact, I wanted him to live. The longer he lived, the worse his punishment would be.

I felt him struggle against my unseen grasp. He was helpless to escape. I already had him he just didn't know it yet.

My talons gouged out his eyes and shredded his tongue. They tore off his nose and pierced his eardrums. And it all happened so fast. Faster than he could comprehend. With the wave of my hand I'd rendered him deaf blind and dumb.

He collapsed in a heap, unable to cry through the blood. He was unable to hear his whimpering form helpless against my power. He'd never see, taste, smell, or hear anything every

again. But I allowed him to feel. In fact, I wanted it. I needed him to feel. That was the punishment after all. He would feel the pain of the damage he'd caused for the rest of his life. I'd destroyed everything that made him a person, everything that allowed him to connect to the world. It was all gone in the blink of an eye and he'd never experience it again. I needed him to feel.

I turned to check on grandpa. He was still encased in the web but he was fading rapidly. In just a few moments he'd be free of it and back to his old self. But until then he needed protection. I sent two of my newly risen creations to guard him until he regained his bearing.

One by one the enemy wizards fell, only to be raised moment later. Each senseless death bolstered my ranks. In a matter of minutes the bloodbath had concluded and my friends were once again safe.

I glanced around checking on them once again. Mag's was okay. I'd just checked on Grandpa. Raj was somewhere. I turned to find him and when I did I was shocked to see something I either hadn't noticed or had somehow forgotten.

My body on the ground bleeding out. There was a hole in my chest about the size of a grapefruit and the skin around it was charred and blistered.

A realization came to me. If I was on the ground that meant I was in some other state. Recalling what Grandpa had taught me, I found my focus and located the green line that connected me to my body. Somehow I'd slipped into my astral form, though whether it was from a need to survive or due to immense pain, I couldn't say.

I grabbed my life line and inspected the ethereal tether. It was faint but still very much alive. That was a good thing but it raised a new question. What would happen if I returned to my body? I was a little nervous about that.

Mags got up and ran across the field to where I lay. She hugged me tight and I could see the tears free falling. They had that hint of gold in them she sometimes got.

And then I felt myself being sucked back into my body and I my eyes opened. It hurt so bad that I could hardly move let alone talk, but my chest was pulling itself back together.

“Aaron?” Grandpa knelt beside me and inspected the healing wound. “I’ll be—that’s some talent you’ve got there girly.”

Mags didn’t say anything. She was too busy holding tight to me, which I didn’t mind.

I waited for her to release before I tried to move and I hated myself for it but I knew I had to get up. My creations were getting restless and I needed to give them something to do before they caused any trouble.

“Sleep!” I commanded and the army dropped to the ground where they stood, never to rise again.

I could feel the eyes on me and I knew from this day forward people were going to be scared of what I could do. But not my grandpa. He smiles wide and patted me on the shoulder. “I see you bonded.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I can’t say I know much of anything about your natural talents. We’re on different paths which makes what I can teach you limited but I’ve had a long career and I’m happy

to teach you whatever I can. Just always remember, a black robe doesn't dictate the kindness of your heart. So long as that remains white you'll be okay."

"Guys—" Raj called. "I'd had about enough of this adventure. I'm ready to go home and sleep for a few days. Then I want to get back to our game and leave the real magic to the professional."

The End